



K O I N Ō N I A

... together on the journey

THE CONFERENCE OF GENERAL SPIRITUAL ASSISTANTS OFS-YOUFRA

2021-4

Year 28

N. 112

SECULAR FRANCISCAN LEADERSHIP

FRATELLI TUTTI: SOCIAL FRIENDSHIP AS A WAY OF EVANGELIZATION FOR THE OFS

Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM

Introduction

We are living in a period in which individualism has become the “modus vivendi” and, consequently, the value of safeguarding the brother no longer makes sense. The other or the others no longer count anything; everyone cares only about their own interests by living according to the motto: “Each one for himself and God for all”. This way of conceiving life has the consequence that often, both in the social and in the religious sphere, those who do not share the same opinion or the same belief are no longer seen as a friend who has a different idea from mine but as an enemy to fight or/and to exclude. In the context of OFS and, specifically, in what concerns the belonging to a fraternity - generally defined as “my fraternity” – this expression is often used only to indicate one’s own local fraternity, seen however not as a unit of the Order but as a reality in itself. It almost seems that fraternity is reduced to a purely theoretical term and not concretely real and practical.

Now, more than ever, the world needs to re-evaluate its attitude towards the values of brotherhood and sharing, of living together in peace and in harmony.

How is it possible to evangelize in such hostile environments, where everything seems to be focused on one’s ego? Speaking of social friendship is a very difficult task. However, I will try do my best to highlight some points that, in my opinion, are fundamental when it comes to social friendship as a way of evangelization for the Secular Franciscan Order.

Friendship: a human sentiment

A true social friendship must be based on the fact that we all recognize that we belong to the same human family without distinction of ethnicity, creed, nationality or political choice. Human beings have always needed friends, because friendship is essential for personal life and is beneficial for the whole of society. In every area of life friendship is necessary so that love can develop, be it fraternal or social. It must not be limited to a single type of bond (blood, creed or political affiliation) but must extend to the awareness of a common identity: that of humanity. Children have the natural ability to express this human

behaviour and easily enter into a friendly relationship with each other without any effort, prejudice or scruple. They have a natural propensity to be together, to express and live the feeling of brotherhood and closeness. Unfortunately, the adult world does not feel the need to learn from children. In fact, their friendly and innocent attitude towards the unknown could be a lesson for everyone, reminding us to re-evaluate the understanding of the important fact that we all belong to the same human family.

Friendship must never be an old or merely religious concept but must be a human concept which, for this reason, is always relevant. Where there is love there must be friendship because love pushes us to go out to meet the other. It is not necessary to be a Christian to feel the need and the duty to love and to recognize the right of every human being to be respected. However, we cannot ignore that Christians should be more inclined to love and relate to everyone in the awareness and in the joy of being children of the One God. Christians know this well and discern that they are children of God. Even those who say that they do not believe have the same dignity. Certainly, Christians will have a clear understanding and a positive approach towards social friendship, since, thanks to their faith, they know that they have been loved, chosen and called by Jesus not as slaves, but as friends¹.

All human beings can enjoy the friendship of God through the love of other men. In loving one another, we share in the infinite love of the Father who revealed himself to humanity through the gift of his Son, Jesus. With this gift God has shown us His closeness and the totality of His love, so great that He gave the life of his only Son. Therefore, only with love and in love can we embark on a journey of life based on friendship and brotherhood. In realities where these two sentiments are present and alive, people easily commit and collaborate to carry out the life of fraternity. Only where there is a deep sense of friendship and brotherhood does each member feel the moral obligation to contribute to the well-being of the fraternity. Certainly, without a true and pure human attitude of friendship and love, everything will be based on the selfish interest of a few and on exploitation.

Secular Franciscans, who find themselves in the “dark clouds of a closed world”² that often underestimates the importance of friendship and fraternal love, run the risk of withdrawing into local fraternities. Due to this closure, collaboration and cooperation with higher level fraternities (from regional to international) may fail and at times a disconnect is felt between the national and international fraternities. It must not be forgotten that friendship and love also strengthen co-responsibility in working together for the good of the whole Order and of all humanity. There are fraternities that face the problem of sharp decline in the number of their members but, despite this, struggle to enter into collaboration with another fraternity preferring to close or withdraw in to themselves because in the past they have not had or experienced relationships of friendship or love with other fraternities; therefore, they do not understand the need to get out of that closed attitude which ultimately is hostile to the idea of belonging to a universal Order and to the world.

The joy of brotherhood

The true joy of feeling like brothers or sisters of the whole of humanity, unfortunately or fortunately, is realized when the prerequisites of brotherhood are pursued by all and for the good of all. This condition is essential for the satisfaction of both humanity as a whole and of single individuals. The human being still has much to do to find the joy of feeling part of a cosmic family, that is, part of a fraternal relationship in which the individual feels responsible for safeguarding the creation, the work of God, in its totality, nature and humanity, without excluding anything.

¹ Cfr. Jn 15:9-17.

² Cfr. Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* on the Fraternity and Social Friendship, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican 2020, n. 9.

The world seems to have sunk, more than it was in the past, into the abyss of individualism and selfishness. Members of modern society are hardly aware of the fact that belonging to a collective environment, where everyone has equal dignity despite their personal opinion, religion or political affiliation, is and must be a cause for joy. Of course, I could also be wrong, but I am of the opinion that the cause of this behaviour has to do with the fact that a large number of people have excluded God from their lives. Even among those who still believe in our Trinitarian God, whose three persons are the image of perfect fraternity and who therefore often refer to the “joy of brotherhood”, there are also people who are withdrawn, fearful of announcing to everyone the Gospel. Thanks to the Gospel the true meaning of being brothers and sisters in Christ is clarified, the fraternal relationship is valued and appreciated as a real interpersonal dimension that generates mutual love for one another.

I think it is right to remind the brothers and sisters of OFS of the need to examine their sense of belonging and the interpersonal dimension towards the Order and the world to which they belong. During the journey towards the unity of the Order, following the promulgation of the Pauline Rule, some Secular Franciscans and their Spiritual Assistants struggled to accept this idea of Unity, the concretization of the expression of the joy of brotherhood with the world, which went beyond the sphere of the local fraternity or Obedience within which they were assisted or established. It was a test concerning their understanding of the unavoidable reciprocity and inter-subjectivity that presupposes the personal relationship which Francis of Assisi appreciated so much. He showed it by his way of being and by his famous expression, ‘the Lord gave me of the brothers’. There is no greater joy than feeling a friend and brother of Jesus. It is from Christ and in Christ that we can bring this joy of brotherhood to others, even to those who do not share our faith, our views and who do not belong to our tribe and nation.

The Franciscan Secular Order and the Gospel

When brotherhood and friendship are lived as fruit of listening to the Gospel, which exhorts us to “love our neighbour as ourselves” (Mk 12: 31-33), the life of every Secular Franciscan, like that of all Christians, should manifest the true expression of human and evangelical values by witnessing them in daily life, adapting it to that continuous renewal of the style that it requires, to the continuous “realization that some things may have to be renounced for the common good”³. In the Gospel we meet Jesus who approaches the Samaritan woman, who sits at table with sinners, who heals the sick, who dies on the cross for the salvation of all humanity and not just for some. The Gospel presents Jesus who becomes a neighbour for the marginalized, for the forgotten of society and for those who, for others, are considered strangers and enemies. His is an attitude that prompts us to reflect on his beautiful words that we find in the passage which states: “every time you did these things to one of these least of my brothers, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40); these are words that help us to value others because in them we can still see the trampled face of Jesus.

Secular Franciscans live in a world in which human and evangelical values are no longer values appreciated by all. But in the face of this indifference and confusion with respect to that path which for centuries has led all nations towards a human, cultural and religious civilization, the seculars have no choice but to continue to let themselves be carried away by the power of the Gospel which they promised to live by announcing it in the world of secularization and deviance.

I am sure that these times of the pandemic, beyond the suffering and despair they have brought, have been an opportunity for the OFS to ‘deepen, in the light of faith, their values and choices for gospel living according the Rule of the OFS’⁴. It has been understood in a more profound way that we must be

³ *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 221.

⁴ Cfr. General Constitutions of the Order of Franciscan Seculars (GG.CC.), art. 8.

open to the requests that come from society in a state of need, anguish, loneliness and from ecclesial realities, for example those deriving from the closing of churches, from the condition of not being able to exchange fraternal hugs of Peace, of not being able to participate in the funeral liturgies of brothers or sisters of the fraternity, of not being able to approach a family of friends in mourning. Certainly, there have been many challenges for which the members of the OFS have been forced to re-evaluate their lives as Christians and as members of the OFS and at the same time as members of a civil society that needs to experience the evangelical values that give meaning and value to life. Human values without the evangelical ones deprive society of the desire to try to reach out to one's neighbour, that neighbour who, at times, does not share the same thought, but who nevertheless deserves to be included in that fraternity of which we are all part in order to form a single human family.

Humanity, in addition to being a group of individuals, is a fraternity, united by the same values and the same dignity; only the Gospel can awaken the responsibility of loving the other despite his peculiarities, differences and ideologies. Pope Francis calls everyone to avoid falling into the trap of individualism which does not make us more free, more equal, more fraternal. Rather, it makes us a mere group of individuals who seek their own personal and selfish interest, sometimes at the expense of the life of the other. Therefore, the mere sum of individual interests is not capable of generating a better world for the whole human family⁵.

The Pandemic has somehow awakened the theme of fraternity and social friendship, forcing the men and women of today to rethink the interpersonal and global relationship, making it come to a common root, that is, that all human beings must never be deprived of fraternal love. Fraternal love is not based on speeches, but on concrete and tangible actions, indispensable in today's world, where the dark cloud of uncertainties launched by the pandemic still hovers over us and where individualism continues to haunt everyone's hearts, and it is right there where:

“Secular Franciscans are called to make their own contribution, inspired by the person and message of St Francis of Assisi, towards a civilization in which the dignity of the human person, shared responsibility, and love may be living realities.

They should deepen the true foundations of universal kinship and create a spirit of welcome and an atmosphere of Fraternity everywhere. They should firmly commit themselves to oppose every form of exploitation, discrimination, and exclusion and against every attitude of indifference in relation to others”⁶.

Some members of OFS and YouFra went beyond their insecurities and tried to help others, offering themselves to go shopping, to sew the masks and to give them to those who were unable to buy and, in this way, they continued and continue to proclaim the Gospel through simple gestures of love and brotherhood.

Secular Franciscans in the Evangelization

Effective evangelization depends on the total understanding of the personal responsibility entrusted by Jesus to the baptized to proclaim the Gospel to all. Like Christ, “When Church summons Christians to take up the task of evangelization, she is simply pointing to the source of authentic personal fulfilment”⁷.

Unfortunately, when we speak of evangelization, most Christians often do not feel included in this mission. They usually see themselves as recipients of this mission and not as a propositioning part of it.

⁵ Cfr. *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 105.

⁶ GG.CC., art. 18. 1-2.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 10.

Therefore, it is the duty of the Spiritual Assistants to help all members of OFS to understand better what their mission is and to be aware of the responsibility of being bearers and heralds of the Gospel in order to instil in all peoples the values of working for the common good and the interest in improving everyone's life.

The Spiritual Assistants must generate a fraternal attitude supported by an evangelization proposed with a community (Trinitarian) dimension in which the baptized feel the need to announce and present the love of God and his Kingdom in all parts of the world, to all people without exclusion, "woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel" (1 Cor 9:16-17).

The Secular Franciscans as members of the Body which is the Church and whose Head is Christ, according to their abilities, must contribute to the well-being of the Body. There are various methods that can be used for the spread of the Gospel. Unfortunately, however, the members of OFS often forget the fact that they have been "called to worker together in building up the Church as the sacrament of salvation for all and, through their Baptism and Profession, made "witnesses and instruments her mission" Their preferred apostolate in personal witness in the environment in which they live and service for building up the Kingdom of God within the situations of this world"⁸.

In these terrestrial realities where every Secular Franciscan must 'live his/her own mission in first person and take responsibility according to his/her own ways'⁹, always seeking the face of Christ in his/her brothers and sisters regardless of their nationality, race or creed. The evangelizing mission must above all find its foundations in the love of Christ through which every Secular Franciscan is urged to go "to the encounter with sacred mystery of the other, to universal communion with the entire human family, as a vocation of all"¹⁰.

Conclusion

We live in a time in which the challenges are enormous, but we must never think that it is impossible to face them with an evangelical attitude: that of love, hope and understanding faith, certain that, after darkness, there is the light of Easter. It seems appropriate to reiterate that the Secular Franciscans have many challenges to face. However, they must not be afraid because fear only brings paralysis in the Order and some of these conditions are already present in different levels of OFS. For example, at the national level it is easy to see that some fraternities are flourishing while others are dying. Social friendship must have its roots on a personal level but for the benefit of others. How can Secular Franciscans have an impact on these themes of evangelization if within their leadership there is no friendship, no spirit of dialogue, openness and the will to develop a spirit of service towards fraternity and the world? How many times does a simple piece of information that should be shared among all the members of OFS stop within the circle of the members of the national council? Pope Francis in his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, in chapters III and IV speaks of the value of thinking and generating an open world; a heart open to the whole world. On the thrust of this encyclical, the time has come for the Secular Franciscans to better evaluate their evangelizing efficacy in the Church and in society, their openness to the various questions posed by how to find adequate ways to ensure that everyone can experience the love that breaks all kinds of division and discrimination.

⁸ GG.CC., art. 17.1.

⁹ Manual for the Spiritual Assistants to the OFS and YouFra, 146.

¹⁰ *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 277.

Germany – FPV and National Elective Chapter

The National Fraternity of OFS in Germany had the Fraternal Visit of Ana Fruk, member of the CIOFS Presidency and the Pastoral Visit of Br Alfred Parambakathu, OFMConv., General Assistant. The Visits took place from 6-8 October 2021 at the OFM Exerzitienhaus in Hofheim am Taunus, near Frankfurt. The visitors met the entire National Council and the National Spiritual Assistant, Br Hermann Josef Schlepütz, OFM. They also had a video meeting with Br Andreas Murk, Provincial Minister of the Conventuals and Br. Cornelius Bohl, Provincial Minister OFM. They visited the Church of Our Lady of Frankfurt, which is run by the Capuchin Friars.

The National Elective Chapter was held on October 8-10 in the same place. Of the 28 Capitulars, 23 were present at the Chapter. Ursula Clemm was elected National Minister for the second consecutive term and Matthias Petzold was elected International Councillor. The National Chapter also decided to establish a new member of the Council for the Apostolate of Youth and the Family, and Edelgard Curd was elected to this post. The new National Council was installed during the Holy Mass on Sunday, presided over by Br. Hermann Josef Schlepütz, OFM. Br Alfred preached the sermon during the Holy Mass. Both the Visitation and the Elective Chapter were well organized and conducted in a very fraternal manner.

Denmark – National Chapter

The National Fraternity of OFS in Denmark met on 22-24 October 2021 in Maribo to celebrate its National Chapter. The Chapter members gathered in the chapel of the Monastery of Santa Brigida, in the presence of Tibor Kauser, Minister General OFS. They began the National Chapter with the celebration of the Eucharist presided over by the National Spiritual Assistant Fr. Stephen Innes, OFM Conv.

After a fraternal dinner, the report of the outgoing national minister, Gilda Suárez de Nielsen, began. She thanked the OFS in Denmark and its outgoing council. Saturday 23, begins with the Eucharist followed by a good fraternal breakfast. At 9.15 Tibor Kauser opened the working session with some edifying and encouraging words to all the members of the Chapter. In the afternoon, in the presence of Kauser and Fr. Carlos Ginés Campos-Julve, TOR, as witness and representative of the CAS, the elections of the new Council were held, during which Sister Hellen Zielke was elected as National Minister.

The day ended with a moment of fraternal prayer and the recitation of the Franciscan rosary. Sunday began with breakfast followed by the closing Eucharist presided by Fr. Carlos Ginés Campos-Julve, TOR, during which Tibor Kauser installed the new National Council for the Franciscan family in Denmark.

French-speaking Switzerland – Regional Chapter

On October 24, 2021, the Swiss Romandie Regional Fraternity celebrated its first elective Chapter in which 25 Capitulars from 12 local fraternities participated. During the previous Chapter, celebrated in March 2018, not having the necessary quorum, the delegates of the Minister General of the OFS and of the CAS had appointed the Council which remained in office for this three-year period. The present Chapter was presided over by Attilio Galimberti delegate of the Minister General of OFS, Tibor Kauser and by Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM, as witness and representative of the CAS. Fr. Pierre Hostettler, OFM Cap, Spiritual Assistant, who ended his mandate with this chapter, led the opening prayer of the Chapter.

The prayer was followed by the reports of the Minister, the treasurer and the Spiritual Assistant.

The assembly approved them unanimously. Gérard Carpataux as Minister and Edith Rowedder as Vice-Minister were elected. The Chapter concluded with the presentation of the new Regional Assistant, Fr. Joseph Madanu, OFMCap, and with a moment of celebration marked by a toast with the excellent Valais wine.

Portugal – Fraternal and Pastoral Visitation (FPV)

The fraternal and pastoral visit of the national fraternity of Portugal was carried out from 28/10 to 01/11/2021 done by Silvia Diana, OFS – delegate of the OFS General Minister and Br. Tomás Ginga Suva, OFMCap., representing the Conference of Spiritual Assistants (CAS).

The visit was carried out in accordance with what is foreseen by the GG.CC. OFS art. 94 and 95 and the Statute of the SAC, art. 17.3. The visit (FP) was an opportunity to know the national fraternity referred to in its strong and weak points, and especially how the recommendations of the last visit (FP), carried out in 2014, were put into practice.

The visit was indeed a moment of grace, learning and blessing; therefore, we give thanks and bless God for the gift of the Franciscan vocation and fraternity. In short, we consider relevant, important and full of challenge the words dictated by the two Provincials (OFM and OFMCap.), in what they hold of the OFS in Portugal: “the OFS is the future of Franciscanism in Portugal”.

Presidency CIOFS

From November 6-13, 2021, the Presidency of the International Council of the OFS (CIOFS) went to Collegium Seraphicum for the meeting before the General Chapter. The Minister General Tibor Kauser welcomed the new Spiritual Assistants General, Br. Carlos Ginés Campos Julve, TOR, and Br. Tomás Ginga Panzo Suva, OFMCap.

All the members of the Presidency were present and some came with their copies for the meeting. The whole week was devoted to the presentation of the different themes such as the approval of the report of the General Minister, the financial report; the status of all the National Fraternities as Present, Emerging or Constituted; the handover to the next Presidency; proposal to launch a project of historical research of the origins of the CIOFS from 1950 to the present day and the vote on the various documents that would be presented to the Chapter and other various themes. Saturday morning was a free day and the afternoon was a reception for all the Chapter members.

General Chapter 2021

The XVI General Chapter and the VII General Elective Chapter were held at the Collegium Seraphicum in Rome from 13 to 21 November 2021. The Chapter was attended by the International Councilors representing 56 of the 70 national Fraternities of the OFS and the International Councilors of the Franciscan Youth and the outgoing Presidency Councilors together with the General Spiritual Assistants. All four Ministers General of the First Order and TOR came to preside at Holy Mass on both days of the Chapter. The Capitulars also had a private audience with Pope Francis. During the elective session, presided over by the Minister General Massimo Fusarelli, OFM, the new Presidency Council was elected: Tibor Kauser from Hungary was re-elected as Minister General and Mary Stronach (USA) as Vice-Minister General for her first term. The whole Chapter took place in a very fraternal and joyful atmosphere.