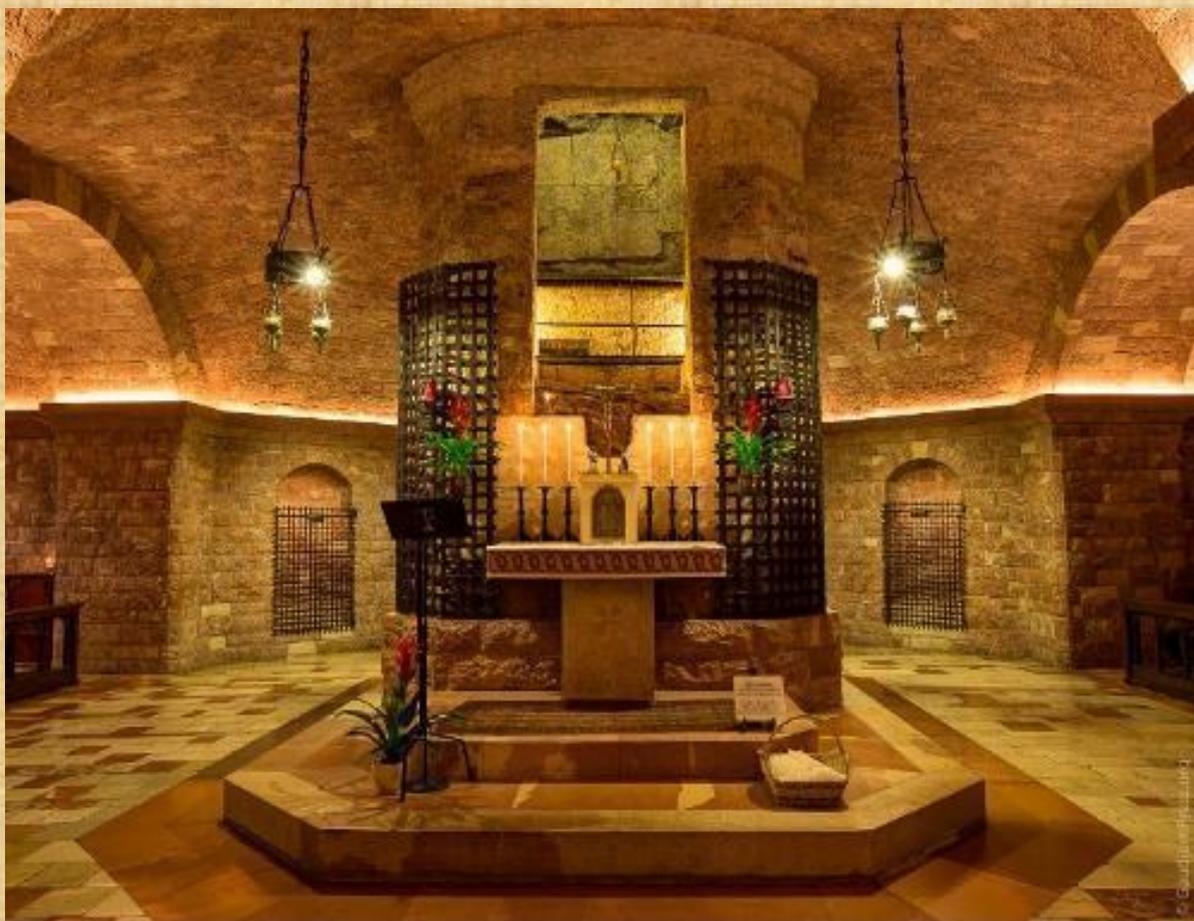


CONFERENCE OF GENERAL SPIRITUAL ASSISTANTS
OFS – YOUFRA (CAS)

KOINONIA

... together on the journey

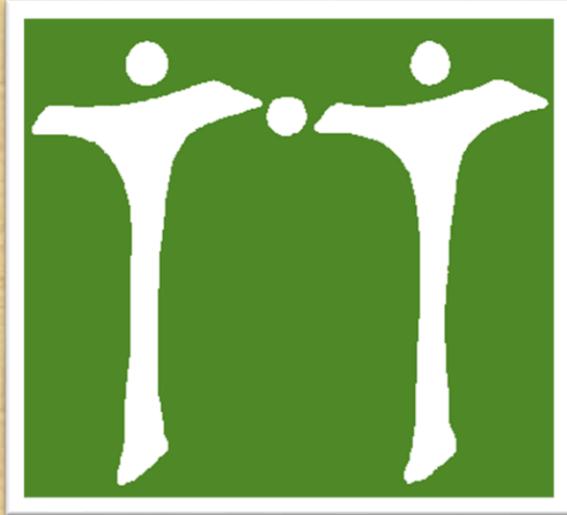
“The journey of the Secular Franciscans in the Synodal Church”



Communion: a challenge of the Gospel life of the OFS

Br. Carlos Ginés C. Julve, TOR

*“By divine institution Holy Church is ordered and governed with a wonderful diversity.”
“For just as in one body we have many members, yet all the members have not the same function, so we, the many are one body in Christ, but severally members one of another.”
(cfr. LG, 32 – Romans 12, 4-5)*



Introduction

“The path of synodality is the path that God expects from the Church of the third millennium”, Pope Francis tells us. Indeed, synodality, he underlined, “is a constitutive dimension of the Church”, so that “what the Lord asks of us, in a certain sense, is already all contained in the word “Synod”¹.

Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium*,¹³, expressed the desire to stimulate participatory processes “following the ideal of the first communities, where believers had one heart and one soul. (cf. Acts 4, 32)”; and from there stimulate processes of change and conversion, both personal and common. *Evangelii gaudium* makes a journey so that the entire baptized community reflects on faith and its consequences within the Church.

The episcopal conferences have focused their attention not only on the exercise of the episcopal ministry and its historical structure, but also on the horizon of the ecclesial community present in their dioceses. The expression “synodality” is not just a simple journey together, it must be a strong provocation to build together the parish community with the criteria of the Gospel and with a spirituality of journeying, that is, one that sanctifies day by day. It means that being Church is synodality and without synodality the Church cannot live.

Today the Church is urged to enter the path of communion and participation. Not having assumed the humanitarian crises with a vision of the Church has left unfavourable consequences. Today it is very important to reflect on what Saint John Chrysostom wrote: “Church and Synod are synonyms...”. This is the Christian “we”; a “walking and building together”. It is from here that our Franciscan charism is nourished, from a life in community. We were chosen by the Lord to live in community in order to walk as brothers, with weaknesses and strengths, but walking together.

Francis of Assisi understood the meaning of brotherhood and lived in this way. His whole life is a “walking and building together”. His conversion revolved around this: putting aside his ego to enter in a “we”. But what was it that motivated him? Where did he find meaning in this “walking and building together”? All this he found in the Gospel. He became a Good Samaritan at that moment and standing there he exhorted that this is the way of life of the followers of Christ. Personal and community prayer were his sources, from where he not only quenched his thirst, but also ate and drank to have strength along the way (1Kings 19:7).

¹ AAS 107 (2015) 1139.

He let himself be conquered by the Gospel and took it to those who were discarded in society because of their illnesses or demonic possessions. The “other” was not a stranger for him, but a brother. The attractive force of the Gospel in his heart was reflected in what history shows us when at that moment of prayer the Lord invited him with those words: “Francis, repair my church; do you not see that it is sinking?”²³

I. THE CHURCH IS COMMUNION BECAUSE IT IS SYNODAL

Although the Second Vatican Council did not use the term synodality with reference to the totality of the People of God, it did point out how substantial it is in the very life of the Church⁴. “Synod” is an ancient word highly venerated by the Tradition of the Church, whose meaning is associated with the deepest contents of Revelation and indicates the path that the members of the People of God walk together⁵.

“And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, pastors and dispensers of mysteries on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ. For the distinction which the Lord made between sacred ministers and the rest of the People of God bears within it a certain union, since pastors and

the other faithful are bound to each other by a mutual need”. (LG 32)

Synodality, in this ecclesiological context, indicates the specific way of living and working (*modus vivendi et operandi*) of the Church-People of God that concretely manifests and realizes its being communion in walking together, in meeting in assembly and in the active participation of all its members in its evangelizing mission⁶.

The nature of synodality is the communion of the entire People of God. Ecclesial communion is not the fruit of good coordination or management. The difference between an NGO and the Church is the communion and participation that moves human promotion and a call to holiness from daily life.



² Cfr. J.A. GUERRA (editor), San Francisco de Asís. Escritos. Biografías. Documentos de la época. Vida Segunda, nn. 593-594, Ed. BAC, Madrid 2003.

³ Cfr. J.A. GUERRA (editor), San Francisco de Asís. Escritos. Biografías. Documentos de la época.

Vida Segunda, nn. 593-594, Ed. BAC, Madrid 2003,

⁴ Cfr. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, n.3

⁵ Cfr. *Ibid*, 6

⁶ Cfr. *ibid*

The Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in 1985 offered for the first time the fundamental guidelines on what communion is in order to understand what synodality is. It is about the intimate relationship with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. This communion is held in the Word of God and in the sacraments. Baptism is the gateway to the communion of the Church and the Eucharist is the source and summit of all Christian life (cfr. LG 11). The communion of the Eucharistic Body of Christ makes possible this intimate communion of all the faithful with the mystical body that is the Church. For this reason communion cannot be reduced to mere matters of organization or questions of powers. (cf. 1 Cor. 10, 16ff)

Communion refers to the Trinity that comes out to meet the person. That is why baptism is not only the gateway to the dimension of communion but the path of sanctification. The reception of this sacrament makes us enter into an intimate life with the Trinity, which is a model of community that has its perfection in the Eucharist.

II. THE DIVINE COMMUNION: KEY TO SYNODALITY IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

Pope Francis has aroused great interest with his speech on the occasion of the commemoration of the *Motu Proprio Apostolica sollicitudo*, with which Saint Paul VI created the Synod of Bishops in 1965.

Among other things, Francis said: “the path of synodality is the path that

God expects from the Church of the third millennium”. Already in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* of 2013, he expressed the desire to stimulate participatory processes “following the ideal of the first Christian communities, in which the believers were of one heart and one soul” (Acts 4, 32 - n. 31).

The pontiff expresses the desire that we discover our essence as baptized. The Church becomes the mysterious extension of the Trinity in time. She is a community to the extent that she forms part of and lives from the union of the One and Triune God Himself. Tertullian expressed this affirmation thus: “where the three, that is to say the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, there is the Church that is the body of the three”. The communion of persons in God is the origin and the end. For this reason, the Church without communion in the One and Triune God is barren of the divinity that comes from God. The communion of the Church is sustained by the communion of the Trinity, which is a communion of life. This communion of life entered our history through the mystery of the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is our faith revealed by Jesus Christ, our faith in the Triune God who is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8) and who has entered our history to rebuild broken communion. This is the communion that we aspire to and wish to live as Christians, allowing ourselves to be inspired by the life of Saint Francis. “In each one the Spirit is manifested for the common good” (cf. 1 Cor. 12, 7). Therefore, Trinitarian communion is God’s way of being and the way of realizing ourselves as brothers.

Divine communion is our reference and is essential to deepen ecclesial communion.

The ecclesial communion that flows from the Trinitarian communion does not exclude, cannot distance itself from anyone, from any member of the people of God (cfr. Mt 25, 31-30) because, the same fluid of the vine circulates through all the branches. In other words, there can be no dead members in a living church, in a church of communion.

III. OUR FRANCISCAN EXPERIENCE HAS ITS ROOTS IN THE COMMUNION

Francis of Assisi gradually assumed the meaning of communion. It seems that he lived the three steps to which the Church is invited to authentically live synodality. The first of these is an encounter with Christ. Christ met him in those continuous experiences of peace and motivation to change. The second one is a dialogue. He spoke with Christ from heart to heart. That prayerful dialogue led him to the third of them, the community. He was not called to live alone. He entered the mystery of the brotherhood. Being a brother was the strength of his life. But can one look at the life of Saint Francis and understand synodality?

The life of the saint of Assisi is wrapped in two important experiences: that of God and that of life in community and from there he has become a model of life for other realities, including other

confessions of faith. From this experience, he lives and discerns his vocation in the Church and not outside or against it. That is why in the year 1209 he goes to Rome to submit to Pope Innocent III the project of a new Christian way of life⁷.



The call to repair the Church in San Damiano is carried out in and for the Church. He does not feel like a messiah or saviour, he feels invited to work with God and with his brothers.

When Pope Benedict XVI spoke about the life of the saint of Assisi, he said: *“Go, Francis, and repair my Church in ruins”*. This simple occurrence of the word of God heard in the Church of St Damiano contains a profound symbolism. At that moment St. Francis was called to repair the small church, but the ruinous state of the building was a symbol of the dramatic and disquieting situation of the Church herself. At that time the Church had a superficial faith which did not shape or transform life, a scarcely zealous clergy, and a chilling of love. It was an interior

⁷ Cf. GUERRA, J.A. (editor), San Francisco de Asís. Escritos., Ed. BAC, Madrid 2003.

destruction of the Church which also brought a decomposition of unity, with the birth of heretical movements. Yet, there at the centre of the Church in ruins was the Crucified Lord, and he spoke: he called for renewal, he called Francis to the manual labour of repairing the small Church of St Damian, the symbol of a much deeper call to renew Christ's own Church, with her radicality of faith and her loving enthusiasm for Christ"⁸.

Seeing the life of the Saint of Assisi illuminates our reality in order to authentically live synodality-communion. Pope Innocent III, having heard about the life testimony of Saint Francis, feels that the dream he had with the saint is a confirmation of the need for a renewal and, in turn, to make the Church enter the path of renewal.

Pope Benedict XVI clarifies how St. Francis walked in communion with the Church because the "Poverello" was never seen outside her. It is this communion born of the Holy Spirit that makes St. Francis a humble ecclesial reformer. He understood that the Church cannot be renewed without full communion with her: "in 1207: Pope Innocent III's dream. In it, he saw the Basilica of St John Lateran, the mother of all churches, collapsing and one small and insignificant religious brother supporting the church on his shoulders to prevent it from falling. On the one hand, it is interesting to note that it is not the Pope

who was helping to prevent the church from collapsing but rather a small and insignificant brother, whom the Pope recognized in Francis when he later came to visit. Innocent III was a powerful Pope who had a great theological formation and great political influence; nevertheless, he was not the one to renew the Church but the small, insignificant religious. It was St Francis, called by God. On the other hand, however, it is important to note that St Francis does not renew the Church without or in opposition to the Pope, but only in communion with him. The two realities go together: the Successor of Peter, the Bishops, the Church founded on the succession of the Apostles and the new charism that the Holy Spirit brought to life at that time for the Church's renewal. Authentic renewal grew from these together". (...) "Furthermore, he knew that Christ was never "mine" but is always "ours", that "I" cannot possess Christ that "I" cannot rebuild in opposition to the Church, her will and her teaching. Instead it is only in communion with the Church built on the Apostolic succession that obedience too, to the word of God can be renewed". (...) "He always knew that the centre of the Church is the Eucharist, where the Body of Christ and his Blood are made present through the priesthood, the Eucharist and the communion of the Church. Wherever the priesthood and the Eucharist and the Church come together, it is there alone that the word of God also dwells"⁹.

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience on January 27, 2010 in https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-

[xvi_aud_20100127.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100127.html) (referred on 7 March 2022)

⁹ Cfr. Ibid

IV. WE ARE FRANCISCANS OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

Communion includes all the members of the Church. The Franciscan family is to “be-communion” and therefore, reciprocity is vital, where no member is a spectator or only a receiver. A church of communion cannot exist if her members are isolated or become simple spectators; because it would be contradictory. A Secular Franciscan must experience in his/her heart the encounter with Christ from prayer, deep dialogue from his faith and cooperation with the Church to walk as brothers/sisters. He/she cannot only admire. He/she has to contemplate and find out his/her missionary action in the Church.

Following leads to testimony of life. That is why the Secular Franciscan, inspired by God, must complement the dream that God inspires the Pope and the hierarchy. The Saint of Assisi understood that all the gifts and charisms that God gives must always be placed at the service of the Church, which is the Body of Christ. Communion requires paying attention to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, praying, asking for and discovering the gifts and charisms that the same Spirit arouses in the Church, in each one of the members of the people of God, and nourishing oneself and participating in an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

Synodality is a call to co-responsibility and the participation of those who make up the great People of God. It is an invitation as a member of the People of God to live in this way. The God of St. Francis is not the result of speculation or a studied theology, but he is the God revealed in his life, felt as a saving force, light, life, love, an unprecedented and always attractive reality. The unceasing prayer of Saint Francis is based on the certainty that God is the supreme good, all good¹⁰.

The synodality-communion to which Pope Francis invites becomes a pastoral challenge for the Secular Franciscan Order to contemplate St. Francis more deeply in order to take initiatives like him. This leads us to rebuild church-communities, to be available, to have initiatives that take us to the Muslim world and to the marginalized, initiatives that involve us in the formation of priests, initiatives that lead us to speak and listen to the bishops and the Pope. Initiatives that lead us all together to live the dream of God, One and Triune. It is a challenge not to leave the world but to enter more and more into it and from there to make God’s dream possible: synodality is witness to divine life.

Questions for reflection: How would you specify some of the challenges presented in this reflection? What other challenges do you think we have as a church? What do you think is the dream that God is inspiring Pope Francis about you?

¹⁰ Cf. Vicente Valtueña, Juan. M. Revista Seminarios, Volumen 55 – año 2009.

Informal meeting with the OFS Fraternity of Palma de Mallorca, Spain

On Sunday, March 6, the General Assistant Br. Carlos Ginés, TOR, had an informal and fraternal meeting with the brothers of the OFS of Mallorca, Spain, on the occasion of the annual Conferences on Raymondo Llull that the TOR organize every year and to which the OFS fraternity of the island participates.

It was a day of joy and encouragement where the Eucharist and food were shared. It should be noted that the brothers and sisters of the Secular Franciscan Order have the desire to re-establish the historic Province on the island.

Formation course in Ghana

The Franciscan presence is quite small in Ghana. The Conventuals have a Custody with 6 Friaries and 38 friars in solemn vows. The OFM and the OFM Cap have one Friary each. Instead the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Mary (FMM), a Congregation born in India, has a very strong presence in Ghana with 12 Convents. The presence of the Secular Franciscans also is almost nominal. In 1984 the Italian Conventual Friars working at Cape Coast had received the profession of some Seculars, but then there was no follow-up. So, the Conference of the Franciscan Major Superiors had decided to begin anew the Secular Franciscan Order.

Now, from 21-24 March 2022, a course of Formation was held in St. Francis of Assisi Retreat Centre of the Conventuals at Saltpond. The course was meant for Spiritual Assistants and future leaders/formators of OFS. There were 14 seculars coming from the parishes of Three Families of the First Order, 5 Conventual friars and 2 Sisters of FMM. During the course Fr. Alfred presented the following themes: Who is St. Francis of Assisi; 800 years of the history of OFS; Our vocation in OFS (prepared by Tibor); Present Rule of OFS; Spiritual Assistance in OFS; Financing among the Secular Franciscans; How to begin OFS Fraternities. At the end of the course it was decided that they will begin the formation, as a case study, in the parish of St. Francis of Assisi at Accra. They will begin the formation on the First Sunday after Easter. They are already in contact with Chinyama Eremenciana, the General Councillor for English Speaking Africa.

Presence at the OFS National Chapter of Bolivia

On the afternoon of 12th March, 2022, the National Elective Chapter of Bolivia began. This event of grace was held at the San José de Tarata Spirituality Centre near the city of Cochabamba. The motto that illuminated the event was: “In fraternity let’s repair our Church”.

The meeting began with a theme for reflection by the Assistant General, Br. Carlos Ginés C. Julve, TOR on Synodality in Franciscan Life that ends with the Eucharist presided over by the delegate of the National Assistant Br. Jorge Fernandez, OFM.

On Sunday the 13th, after the reports presented the day before, the elections for the new National Council began, presided over by Silvia Noemi Diana, General Councillor of the Order, and Br. Carlos Ginés C. Julve, TOR, Assistant General.

The chapter elected Sister Mariane Loayza as National Minister and Brother Carlos Salazar as National Vice Minister. The capitulars, giving thanks to God with the Eucharist presided over by the General Assistant Br. Carlos Ginés, TOR, concluded the Chapter with a fraternal meal.

Local Fraternity Chapter of OFS in Bethlehem

The fraternity of Bethlehem is still in the direct responsibility of the International Council of OFS. The elective Chapter of the local fraternity in Bethlehem took place on March 13, 2022, at the Casa Nova Palace, Bethlehem.

The elective session of the Chapter was presided over by Noemi Paola Riccardi, member of the CIOFS Presidency, delegated by Tibor Kauser, General Minister of OFS, and Fr. Sandro Tomašević, OFM, Delegate of the Conference of General Assistants witnessed the celebration of the elective Chapter.

There were 25 capitulars present for the Chapter. Fadi Gedeon was elected as local minister. The new Local Council was inaugurated on 13th March. The celebration went very well and all members were delighted with the outcome of the chapter.

Presence at the OFS National Chapter of Chile

The national elective chapter of OFS in Chile was held from 18 to 20 March 2022 at the San Damiano Convent of the Friars Minor. It was presided by Silvia Diana, Councillor of the Presidency delegated by Tibor Kauser Minister General OFS and Br. Nicolás Andrea Alfaro Varas, OFM, Delegate from the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants. 36 capitulars and 2 observers were present and for planning reasons and in consideration of the Covid-19 measures, none of the major superiors were able to be present. William Tapia, was re-elected both as National Minister and International Councillor. The atmosphere during the chapter was fraternal, calm and transparent.

Presence at the OFS National Chapter of Romania

The National Elective Chapter of OFS in Romania finally took place from 24 to 26 March, 2022, at the Monastery of the Carmelites Luncani in Bacau. It was presided by Noemi Paola Riccardi, Councillor of the Presidency delegated by Minister General OFS, Tibor

Kauser, and Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM., Representative of the Conference of Spiritual Assistants (CAS).

On Thursday afternoon, the opening Mass of the elective Chapter in the Romanian language was celebrated by the Custos of the Capuchin friars, Br. Leon Budau, OFM^{Cap.}, And afterwards there was the presentation of the members of the CIOFS Presidency, followed by meditation in linguistic groups that is Romanian and Hungarian. Present were the National Assistants Br. Cristian Blajut, OFM^{Conv.}, and Br. Imbrea Laurentiu, OFM^{Cap.}, and 34 Capitulars from the various regional fraternities.

On the second day of the Chapter, the Holy Mass in the Hungarian language was celebrated by the Provincial of the Friars Minor in Transylvania, Fr. Erik Urbán, OFM. This was followed by the presentation for some modifications in their National Statutes, questions regarding the juridical and factual status of the National seat of OFS and then on the need to increase the personal contribution of the OFS. The proposals were voted on.

Saturday 26 morning was dedicated to the Elective Session of the new National Council in which National Minister Penu Tibor SZILARD was elected and Vice Minister of the Moldova area elected is Danu SLAVU and Vice Minister of the West Transylvania area elected is Celina FRANCU and the international councillor is Kinga NAPHEGYI. During the concluding Mass celebrated by the Provincial of the Conventual Friars Br. Damian Patrascu, OFM^{Conv.}, the new Council was installed by Noemi Paola Riccardi. The chapter was marked by the Spirit of Serenity and fraternal joy.

Presence at the Fraternal and Pastoral Visit of the OFS in Austria

The fraternal and pastoral visit to the National Fraternity of Austria took place on the 25th and 26th March in Vienna, in the Convent of the Friars Minor "Franciscans" so called there. He was preceded by Attilio Galimberti, OFS, former Councillor of the Presidency during the last three years, delegate of the Minister General Tibor Kauser, OFS, replacing Dina Shabalina – Councillor of the Presidency, absent due to the current armed conflict in Ukraine, where she resides; and by Br. Thomas Ginga SUVA, OFM^{Cap.}, representing the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants (CAS).

The National Council was represented by four members who attended: the Vice National Minister, the Treasurer, the Formation Officer and the Secretary; the National Minister and the International Councillor attended virtually, as one of them was Covid 19 positive and the other was ill. Also present during the two days of the visit were the two National Assistants, Br Leszek Nocun, OFM^{Cap.}, and Br Stefan Kizmuller, OFM. A Conference of Assistants has not yet been established, but there is a desire to work together to make this a reality in the future.

On the second day, the delegate of the Archbishop of Vienna and Vicar for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life and other lay movements of the diocese, Fr. Gerwin Koma, SJ, accompanied the meeting. On the same day, two Ministers

Provincial of the First Order were also present: Erich Geir, OFM Cap., in a letter sent by his Vicar Provincial in view of this visit.

The visit took place in a serene and fraternal atmosphere, full of hope in the Lord and in the future of the presence of the OFS and YouFra in this territory; although there are still many challenges to face TOGETHER as an ecclesial community and especially as a Secular Franciscan Order, perhaps as a Franciscan family in general. Thus, regarding the challenges in terms of spiritual assistance, the five regions that make up the territory of Austria and South Tyrol have a regional assistant, although there are still some local fraternities without a designated assistant, albeit a very small number. At the end of the visit there was a round table discussion in which the participants asked questions to the visitors and consequently received answers and clarifications based also on the experiences of other realities in the world. It was truly a moment of sharing joys, sorrows, problems and challenges seen with a "global view".

The visit concluded with a mass and a meal. The Holy Mass was presided by Br Stefan and concelebrated by Fr Fitzer, Leszek and Fr Tomas Ginga, in which some members of the local fraternity of Vienna also participated.

Presence at the OFS National Chapter of Portugal

The XIV Elective Chapter of the OFS Portugal was held from the 25th to the 27th. The place chosen was the Biblical Centre of the Capuchin Friars in Fatima. The motto of the Chapter was: "We are all brothers".

The Chapter was well attended by the capitular friars and was presided over by the Minister General Tibor Kauser and by the Assistant General Br. Carlos Ginés C. Julve, TOR acting as witness. The Chapter was accompanied and animated by the three National Assistants of the First Order.

On Saturday 26th March the Chapter elected again for a new three-year term 2022-2025, with a very good majority of votes, brother Rui Jorge Silva as National Minister and brother Pedro Coelho as Vice-Minister. Both brothers begin a third and last period in the above-mentioned ministries of the OFS in Portugal.

The Chapter concluded with the Eucharist presided over by the emeritus Bishop of Viana, Angola, Dom Joaquim Lopes, OFM Cap. and a joyful fraternal meal.