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CONFERENCE OF SPIRITUAL ASSISTANTS GENERAL
OFS – YOUFRA (CAS)

KOINONIA

... together on the journey

“FRANCISCANS IN THE CELEBRATION OF JUBILEES”



THE NATIVITY SCENE IN THE CHURCH

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<https://ciofs.info/en/news/koinonia/>

As we adore the birth of our Redeemer;
we acknowledge that with it we celebrate our origin.
Indeed, the birth of Christ is the origin of the Christian people,
the head's birthday is also the body's birthday.

Saint Leo the Great



Introduction

In this last issue of Koinonia 2023, we would like to present to you “The Nativity Scene in the Church,” thus bringing to a close the four themes in which the general topic was developed: “Franciscans in the Celebration of Jubilees.”¹

The Nativity scene is one of the pivotal points for understanding the story of Salvation, which is revealed through the mystery of the incarnation of the Word of God, who „though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be

grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (*Fil 2,7*).

It recalls and updates the event that occurred more than two thousand years ago: the birth of the Baby Jesus in the stable in Bethlehem.

It is the crib, a word that means manger. “This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” (*Lk 2:12*).

The newly born Jesus is thus placed on a manger, a simple structure used to feed animals, but which symbolizes the paten and the Eucharist, from which our spiritual nourishment is fed.

I want to invite you, dear brothers and sisters, to direct your gaze towards the people who make up the Crib, in the light of what the Holy Scripture and tradition show us, and above all, in the light of the two Jubilees whose anniversary we are celebrating this year: the 800th anniversary of the approval of the Rule and the Crib prepared by St Francis in Greccio.

¹ The 800 years of the Franciscan Order's Later Rule (29 November 1223) and of the Christmas of Greccio (25 December 1223). Rule and Christmas at Greccio have an intimate and profound bond, because the Rule is the way of living the Gospel of the One celebrated at Greccio, our Lord Jesus Christ. In Francis there is a perfect coincidence between Gospel and Rule, paraphrasing Gianluigi Pasquale in his book: *San Francesco la risposta alla domanda che nessuno pone*, ed. La Fontana di Siloe, Torino, 2019, 228.

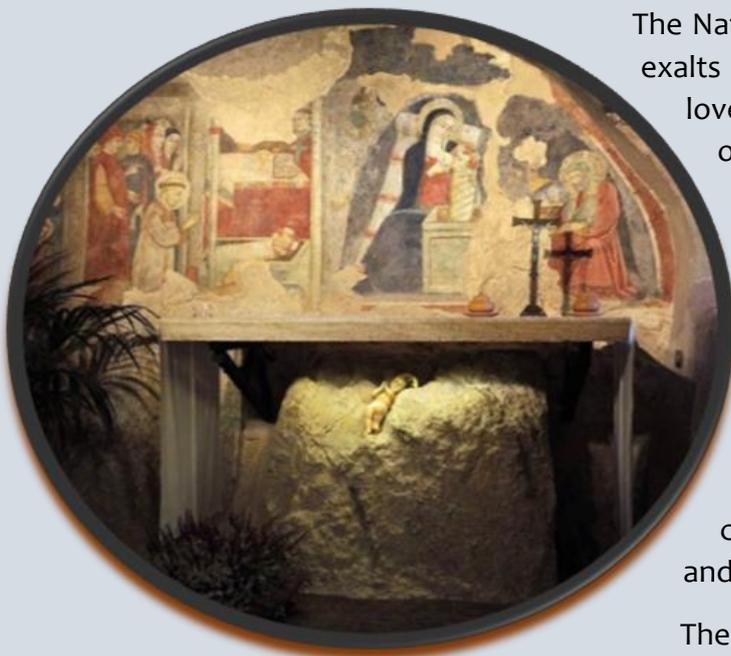
These two Jubilees challenge us to renew our baptismal commitments, to have more love and truth for our vocation, and to be ever more committed to our mission as Franciscans.

Starting from the Rule to arrive at the Manger of Greccio is the same as saying start from the Gospel to arrive at the Rule.

So let us see who the people who make up the scene are, what their role in the history of the economy of Salvation is, and what their relevance is today in our lives, our communities (fraternities), and society at large. What are they promising us?

The Nativity scene is the representation of the promise made by God in the Church and for the Church² to send his Son: “He who became man in order to meet every man, and to discover that he loves us so much that he joined us so that we too could join him.” This union with Him is a concrete commitment that must be realized in the daily life of all the baptized.

1. What significance does the Nativity scene have in the Church?



The Nativity scene has a salvific significance: it exalts the greatness of God's unconditional love, revealed in his mercy by sending his only Son into the world to save it. It is the actual encounter between man condemned by sin and redeemed by grace, which restores his dignity as a beloved creature. In Jesus, man receives the divine sonship that incorporates him into the community of the redeemed. The birth of Jesus indicates the beginning of a new creation, which has Christ as the firstborn and the foundation of our faith.

The Nativity is an act of love from the Father, a love in which “all men must realise that God has become one of them in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.”³

² POPE FRANCISC, *Admirabile Signum*, 1.

³ RUFFO R., *Parole profumate. La lettera ai fedeli di San Francesco d'Assisi*, Ed. Messaggero, Padova, 2022, 32-33.

For us Christians, it means the solid foundation of our Christian faith, as Pope Francis said, speaking of the Incarnation of the Word: “and this is the truth, this is the revelation of Jesus: this presence of Jesus incarnate. And this is the point”.

And we Franciscans, as part of the Church and incorporated into it in an institutional and charismatic way, are challenged even more to witness with our lives and example what Francis of Assisi felt and experienced that night in Greccio in front of the Crib, namely, to contemplate the simplicity, poverty, and humility of God, manifested in his son Jesus. Poverty, simplicity, and humility are truths that we find in the scene of the Lord's Nativity and that the Seraphic Father takes as values for himself and proposes them to his present and future brothers and sisters.

Therefore, the Nativity scene in the Church has a special significance as it incorporates immense narrative details of the life of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and St. Joseph, represented in pictorial and sculptural forms to rekindle our memory of faith, hope, and charity.

2. Who are the characters represented in this scene?



When we talk about the characters that make up the Nativity scene shown in churches and other places of worship or at cultural and religious events, we refer to the actual people whom the Bible and Christian tradition speak. These characters have significance for the Church, the 'mystical body of Christ' represented by each of us who are baptised, which has Christ as its head and guide (cfr. LG 7).

The Infant Jesus is at the centre of the scene. The Son, born in Bethlehem, is presented by the New Testament and defined with many images, such as true Man; he became like men (*Phil 2:6-7*), “gate of the sheepfold”; “bread of life,”⁴ the Christ, “two names referring to the one person: Jesus means the Lord saves (*Mt 1:21*) and Christ means «anointed», «consecrated».”⁵ Jesus of Nazareth, as we find him in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of St Paul (*Acts 2:38; Rom 1:6-8*), is the One through whom “God grants salvation to mankind (*Acts 4:10-12*).”⁶

At Jesus's side, kneeling, is Mary in an act of maternal love: the biblical references we have on Our Lady are from Matthew and Luke, who tells us of her keeping everything in her heart, of her Fiat when she received the angel Gabriel's message (*Lk 1:26-38*); of her who «in the course of time, images have filled in the bare facts of the New Testament (...))»⁷; of her who has “become an object of devotion”⁸, venerated in the Church under various titles; of the Woman who agreed to conceive in her virginal womb the only-begotten Son of God; of the Mother whom we invoke each time we recite the Rosary.



On the opposite side of Mary is Joseph, the putative father, mentioned for the first time in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (cfr. *Mt 1:19; 2:13; 2:19; Lk 1:5-20; 1:26-38*) as the spouse of the Virgin, a righteous man, born of the lineage of David, a carpenter, the guardian of Jesus and to whom Jesus wanted to be subject as a son to his father. He is a

⁴ Cfr. L. Ryken – J. C. Wilhoit – T. Longman, III, *op. cit.*, 596-597.

⁵ B. Maggioni, G. Vivaldelli (ed.), *Piccolo dizionario biblico: una guida essenziale*, ed. Ancora, Milano, 2011, 39.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ L. Ryken – J. C. Wilhoit – T. Longman III «ed.», *I Dizionari San Paolo, le immagini bibliche: Simboli, figure retoriche e temi letterari della Bibbia*, Ed. italiana «ed.» M. Zappella, Ed. San Paolo, Milano, 2006, 850-852.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

personage about whom not much is said but who plays a great role in the life of Jesus and Mary. St. Joseph teaches us about running a family and being a true father and guardian.

Then, there is the Angel: etymologically, the word angel means envoy/messenger. Angels appear many times in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, and are presented as beings “superior to humans” at the service of God (*Is* 6:2-6; *Eze* 10:1-5; *Gen* 16:7-13; *Ex* 3:2; *Lk* 1:11-38; *Mt* 25:41; *Acts* 12:7-11).

Finally, we have the donkey and the ox, two animals that we often find in representations of Nativity scenes. «In fact, both the ox and the donkey are extraneous to the canonical texts, but their presence represents a symbolic value to which various meanings have been attributed to it, originating from a very ancient tradition recounted in the prophet Isaiah “the ox knows the owner and the donkey the master's manger, but Israel does not know, and my people do not understand” (*Is* 1:3). It was later taken up by the apocryphal Pseudo-Matthew, where the ox is said to symbolise humility while the donkey symbolises conscience. Origen makes the two animals the symbols of the Jew and the Gentile».⁹

Obviously, the symbols representing these animals (the ox = humility and the donkey = conscience) are what should interest us most; namely, how can we implement these noble values in our lives as Christians, as Franciscans, and as citizens?

The Bible gives us some characteristics of those who are humble. So, the humble person is one who: *knows how to thank God; accepts to make mistakes; apologises* (*James* 4:8-10); *understands that he needs God; does not seek his own glory* (*Matthew* 6:2-4); *seeks to serve; loves and respects other people* (*Rom* 12:16). Whereas conscience, symbolised by the donkey, is what, according to the Bible, helps us to distinguish between what is right and what is not. Everyone has a conscience, but it can be distorted by sin. “The conscience needs to be guided by God”¹⁰.

These two animals in the Nativity scene are also tools for us today to learn about the values and challenges the world presents to us today.

3. What significance do the figures of the Nativity scene have today?

Reflecting today on the figures of the Crib means identifying with each one of them and making their example a model for one's own life, which takes place in the various spheres of existence: family, work, social, religious, cultural, etc. Even today, they are spiritual references that inspire the virtues of an authentic Christian life.

For Christians generally, and for us Franciscans particularly, looking at each of the Nativity figures means enrolling in the school of understanding the mysteries of God, to

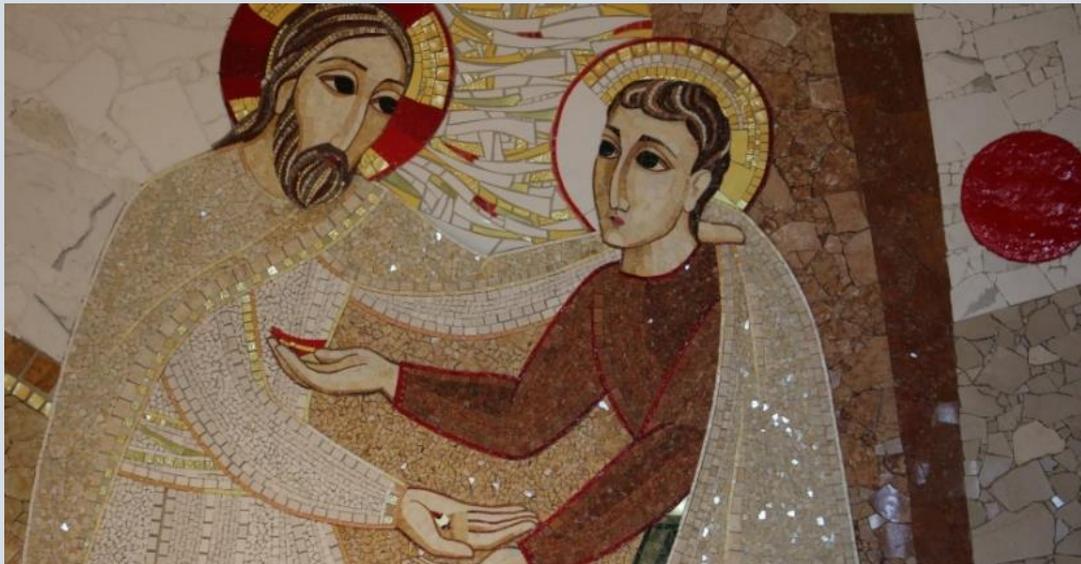
⁹ GREGORIO NAZIANZENO, *Discorso* 38,17, (m.390). Sono due animali, che entrano come influenza della tradizione.

¹⁰ Cfr. <https://www.respostas.com.br/o-que-e-a-consciencia-segundo-a-biblia/>

learn to live in joy, simplicity, poverty, and humility, as St Francis did, imitating the virtues of the Holy Family.

In Christian, and implicitly Franciscan, spirituality, these personages have a special place and function, converging in Christ, the Incarnate; this is evident in the Rule, the Constitutions, and Franciscan Sources.

But do the Nativity figures still have something new to teach us today? Of course, they do! In fact, this is one of the reasons why the Church has been offering them to us as points of reference and models for our living in Christ to build a more fraternal and just world.



As Franciscans, we should be much more challenged by the 'scene' of the crib because that is what our Seraphic Father strongly desired and asked for when he set it up in Greccio. We are recognising in this way and attributing to the individual characters the credit that each of them had in Bethlehem and continues to have in the Church.

The message of the Nativity scene is always relevant, and it can still be a plausible solution to many of the current problems our society is currently facing, such as wars, social injustice, inequalities, fears, prejudices, supremacies, antagonisms, and selfish exploitation, loss of moral and spiritual values, etc.

Thomas of Celano tells us how St Francis, in Greccio, wanted “to see with the eyes of the body the hardships in which he found himself for lack of the things necessary to an infant.” The Son of God was born in an environment lacking in any comfort, namely poverty. Those conditions reflect the situation of many of our brothers and sisters today.

We Franciscans are called to see with the eyes of the body and the spirit the conditions in which so many children are born and live in our society; sometimes, we pretend not to see and do not even want to see. We can't be indifferent to these problems, and we are called to act according to the best of our abilities.

4. St Francis and the Greccio Crib: implications for our life today



Thomas of Celano tells us of the feelings that pervaded Francis' soul on that Christmas night in 1223, in front of the Crib: "He sees that everything is arranged according to his desire, and he is radiant with joy. Now the manger is set up, the hay is placed there, and the ox and donkey are brought in. In that moving scene, evangelical simplicity shines out, poverty is praised, humility is recommended. Greccio has become like a new Bethlehem"¹¹. So, how do we feel when we visit a Nativity scene during Christmas time? What strikes us most? What are the feelings that are invading us?

All these questions are waiting for our answer as individuals but also as a fraternity; the answer can't be given only with words, but also with concrete deeds that reveal our true adherence to Christ and by assuming our responsibility to bear witness to him in the Church and in the

world.

We may not have the same sentiments that flooded the soul of Saint Francis. Still, we are called brothers and sisters and look to discover the values of simplicity, poverty, and humility in the Gospel, to make them the "coat of arms" of our fraternal life, vocation, and mission in this present-day.

The missionary witness of each of us will bear much fruit if we know how to propose these values, which we find in Greccio, and they are also present in the Rule, living them with truth and authenticity.

We are all encouraged by the novelty of Greccio to live the Gospel of Christ with greater vigour in our fraternity, the Church, and the world.

800 years after the celebration of the Crib of Greccio, so fervently desired by Saint Francis, we are questioned today, more than ever, about the profound motivations that drove the Saint of Assisi to propose to his friars and the people of his time an actualisation

¹¹ 1Cel 85; FF 469.

of the mystery lived and celebrated in Bethlehem. Namely, to make a fact of the incarnation of the Word (cf. *Jn* 1:1-9) through the birth of the Child Jesus (*Lk* 1:11-14).

The nativity of Jesus is not a fact of the past, but a realisation of it every day in the life of the Church, through the celebration of the Eucharist, and in the world, through every child who is born and suffers the same vicissitudes of fortune experienced by the family of Nazareth on that day in Bethlehem.

St Francis, in proposing and creating the nativity scene of Greccio, does not only want to commemorate the past, but he wants to actualise it, to make it a historical fact of his time and one that continues to be real today, in our Church, in our society and especially in our families and fraternities. The Child Jesus continues to be born today in the lives of men and women who accept his plan of salvation and believe in the fulfilment of his promises.

The Nativity scene of Greccio, in its message and through its figures, still represents for us Franciscans the key to understanding what it means today to live the Gospel, the Rule, and the Constitutions in “joy, simplicity, poverty, and humility,”¹² in an outgoing Church and in a world confronted with so many challenges.

For this reason, celebrating the Nativity in the Church for us today is a restitution of the gift received through faith and the sacraments in the Church, as well as the gift of the vocation of each one of us who are called to live and bear witness to the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ in words and deeds.

With only a few days before the celebration of the Lord's Nativity, we too can experience and feel, in our hearts, what our brothers and sisters were feeling in front of the crib in Greccio, as Thomas of Celano tells us: “The gifts of the Almighty are multiplied there, and a virtuous man sees a wondrous vision. For the man saw a little child lying lifeless in the manger, and he saw the holy man of God approach the child and waken him from a deep sleep. Nor is this vision unfitting, since in the hearts of many the child Jesus has been *given over to oblivion*. Now he is awakened and impressed on their loving memory by His own grace through His holy servant Francis. At length, the night's solemnities draw to a close, and everyone went home with joy”¹³.

May this experience be a concrete commitment to bear witness in our present world to the values and novelties that the Lord's Nativity offers us each year.

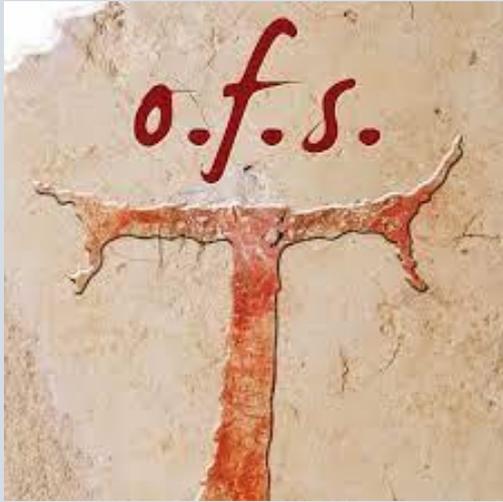
Best wishes for a happy and holy Christmas to all you Franciscan brothers and sisters of the world.

Peace and good!.

¹² 1*Cel* 85; FF 469

¹³ 1*Cel* 86; FF 470

MEETINGS, PRESENCES AND CHAPTERS



Presidency CIOFS

The International Presidency Council (CIOFS) of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) started on Saturday 4th November 2023 at the Seraphicum, the convent of the Conventual Friars Minor. The agenda was very rich and the work demanding.

Among the many topics addressed, we recall some: Formation of the Presidency (practical, juridical, spiritual), Acts of the 2021 General Chapter, Secretariats, Legal Office, Commissions, Projects, National Fraternities, Reports/updates on

Congresses and other events, Chapter of Mats, General Chapter 2024, Franciscan Centenaries 2023-2026, Upcoming Congresses of the SFO and Franciscan Youth.

The joy of meeting and working together prevailed and accompanied us throughout the week, even if tiredness made itself felt from time to time. The work of the Presidential Council ended on Saturday 11th at 12.00 and the members of the Council returned to their countries.

Cape Verde – “Tempo forte” for the Conference of Spiritual Assistants (CAS)

From 1 to 9 December 2023 the General Spiritual Assistants had their annual evaluation and planning meeting for the year 2024 in Cape Verde, in the city of Praia, at the Capuchin friary in San Filipe.

It was a very busy week, although we found time to pay a courtesy visit to His Eminence Bishop of Santiago, Arlindo Cardinal Gomes Furtado. We also had the opportunity to meet with the local SFO Council, and the online conversation with National Minister Orlando, who is now residing in the United States of America in the City of Pawtucket, to discuss the way forward (for the implementation of the national elective chapter in the coming months) regarding the election of the new local, regional and national Councils that have not been renewed since the last decree on the continuation of the Council at the end of the Pandemic. It was a very fruitful meeting, and we are optimistic that the National Council of Cape Verde will take the necessary steps to regularise the situation of the celebration of the national elective chapter.

The CAS examined how to carry out spiritual assistance to the OFS/YouFra more effectively, how to strengthen formation and communication with the National Spiritual Assistants, and how to ensure that the SFO have adequate assistance.

Then finally we had a time to share and plan the commitments for the coming year where each assistant will do his best to conduct a formation course during the elective chapter or a fraternal and pastoral visit to different countries.

The meeting concluded on Friday, 8 December with a day dedicated to reviewing the final draft of the annual report to the Conference of the Minister General of the First Order and TOR.

The CAS was very grateful for the hospitality and generosity of the Capuchin Brothers, especially for their willingness to accompany us to different places for meetings and to take us to and from the airport.

CIOFS Christmas Greetings

The traditional Christmas dinner was held on December 11th, 2023, in Rome, at the Secretariat of the International Council of the Secular Franciscan Order (CIOFS). It was organised by the General Secretary of the OFS, with the aim of exchanging Christmas and end-of-year greetings with some chosen guests. Thirteen people attended this year's dinner, including the presence of Minister General Tibor Kauser and his wife, Mrs Agnes, brothers Benedetto Lino, Lucio Monti and Giovanna Monti, and the four General Assistants: Fr. Carlos Gines, Fr. Tomas Ginga, Fr. Stefan Acatrinei, and Fr. Pedro Zitha.

The moment was preceded by Midday Prayer, held in the small refectory, and concluded with an exchange of Merry Christmas greetings and gifts prepared by Isabella and her team (Roberto, Isa and Ms. Renata) and Tibor and his family.

It was a fraternal moment of sharing and celebration of Franciscan joy as we gathered as a Franciscan family, praying and eating together. The occasion was also used to wish Fr. Carlos, TOR, as rotating president (2024-2025) of the Conference of Spiritual Assistants (CAS), a good start in his service.

Malta – National Elective Chapter

The National Chapter of Malta took place on November 24 and 25. It began with the fraternal meeting with the Provincials and the national Assistants of the First Order who have a presence in the country. The meeting was held in a climate of fraternity and willingness to continue working with the OFS.

The national Chapter was held at the San Antonio Convent in B'kara of the Conventual friars and was presided over by the international Councillor Noemí Paola and from the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants, Fr. Carlos Ginés, TOR was present as a witness.

The Chapter had the participation of 11 electors and several observers who joyfully elected Tony Vella as the new National Minister and Anna María Debono as International Councillor. The event took place with joy, hope and faith in the Lord for the future of OFS Franciscan life in the country.

Egypt – National Elective Chapter

The emerging national fraternity of St Thomas More in Egypt celebrated its elective chapter from 7 to 9 December 2023 at Al Mugattam in the city of Cairo.

The chapter was presided over by Noemi Paola Riccardi, OFS, delegate of Minister General Tibor Kauser, OFS, and witnessed by the representative of the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants, Fr. Milad Goda, OFM.

The theme of the chapter was "Service in the OFS". It was a theme that interested all 18 capitulars, 7 observers and 1 religious. After reflection on the theme of the Chapter, the capitulars elected Habid Shehata as the National Minister and International Council for the next three years. The elective Chapter ended with the installation of the new Council during the Holy Mass presided over by Fr. Milad Goda, OFM, on 9 December; it concluded the whole celebration, which was characterised by a fraternal spirit of joy and enthusiasm.

Uganda – National Elective Chapter

The national fraternity of Uganda had its first elective chapter after 120 years of existence. After Franciscanism was brought to Uganda by the Little Sisters of St Francis, who despite the long absence of the First Order and TOR, saw the need to start the Secular Franciscan Order. For about 30 years there has been a unified collaboration of the OFM and OFM^{Cap} and in 2014 the CIOFS officially constituted this reality into an autonomous national fraternity, that of Uganda.

The celebration of the elective Chapter was held from 14th to 17th December, at the "Ulrika guest house", a facility belonging to the Reparatory Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in the Wakiso district, the Entebbe region. The Chapter was presided over by Eremenciana Chinyama, delegate of Minister General Tibor Kauser, and witnessed by Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM, who represented the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants.

Present during the Chapter were the three National Spiritual Assistants, Fr Aimable Bizimungu, OFM, Fr Micheal Muhasa, OFM^{Cap}, and Sr Margret Kubanza, LSOSF, as well as the Regional Spiritual Assistant, Sr Leonie Kindilci, LSOSF. Both the Capitulars and the CIOFS delegates thanked the Little Sisters of St. Francis for their many years of service and for founding and accompanying the Secular Franciscan Order.

The first day was dedicated to the presentation of reports, followed by their approval, while the second day was reserved to the election of the new National Council and the International Council. Christopher Ojambo was elected as the National Minister. The Chapter concluded with the installation of the new Council during the Holy Mass presided over by Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM, and concelebrated by Fr. Michael Muhasa, OFM^{Cap}. A fraternal lunch followed.