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CONFERENCE OF SPIRITUAL ASSISTANTS GENERAL
OFS – YOUFRA (CAS)

KOINONIA

... together on the journey

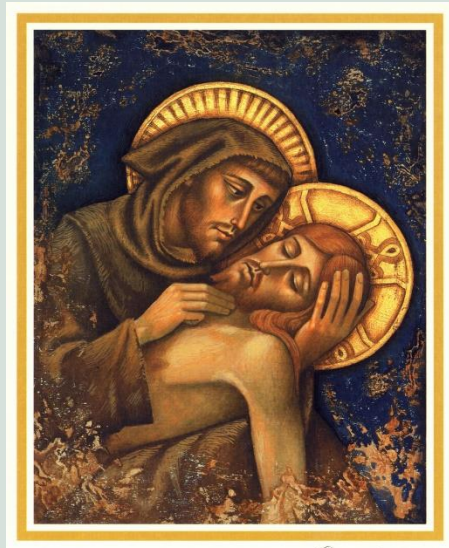
“Jubilees that reinvigorate our Franciscan being: Stigmata”



FRANCIS MARKED BY THE LOVE OF CHRIST

Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM

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



The Spiritual Itinerary of St. Francis

The spiritual journey of Francis of Assisi begins and finds its roots in the Gospel. It all began in the humble and disused church of San Damiano where he heard a voice coming from the Crucifix. The voice not only moved him to action, that of repairing the church, but it also engraved an indelible mark on his heart. In this first encounter with the Lord, Francis was marked spiritually by God's love, later manifested physically on his body with the stigmata, when his love for God and his creatures had reached its peak. "From that time on, compassion for the Crucified was impressed into his holy soul. And the wounds of the sacred Passion were impressed deep in his heart, though not yet on his flesh"¹.

As he proceeded, with fervour and fidelity, in the search for God in every creature and everything, he also confirmed how his desire progressed in other ways. This was demonstrated through his virtue, a life of prayer and personal austerity shown through love of poverty, and hard penances. It could also be seen through daily conversion he sought in humility and obedience.

Francis' love for Christ was real, manifested in his actions and not through empty words. "The power of love had made him a brother to other creatures;"² His love for God was genuine and boundless. Francis' life was immersed in God's love, even during his conversion journey, and he deepened this love of his as time went on.

It can be said that Francis had allowed himself to be seduced by God's love just as it had happened to the prophet Jeremiah who stated: "You seduced me, Lord, and I was seduced; you were too strong for me, and you prevailed" (Jeremiah 20,7). For Francis, God had not only prevailed in seducing him but had given him a new vision of life and shown him a new path to follow. God had allowed Francis to have a personal encounter with the crucified Christ. an encounter that can be described as "corresponding to the three paths, those of purification, illumination, and mystical union."³.

The path of purification: the encounter with the leper.

"The Lord granted me, Brother Francis, to begin thus to do penance."

"The Lord led me among the lepers."

¹ 2 Cel, chapter VI, n. 10

² Ibidem CXXXI, n. 758 (172)

³ <http://www.franciscanstudies.files.wordpress.com> - Noel Muscat, OFM., Francis of Assisi and Bonaventure's theology of the Cross. Pag 5.

The path to illumination: the decision to abandon everything and follow Christ.

“Francis, go repair my house, which, as you see, is all in ruins”

“Immediately, exultant with the Holy Spirit, he exclaimed: this is what I want! This is what I ask for! This is what I long to do with all my heart!”

The path of mystical union: through prayer and fasting Francis enters fully into a moment of intense mystical union.

“O God, be propitious to me a sinner!” Little by little he felt in the depths of his heart flooded with ineffable gladness and immense sweetness.

“Therefore, guided by the Holy Spirit, he went up a mountain with two companions and there, fasting on bread and water, dictated the Rule, according to what the divine Spirit suggested to him during prayer.”



Francis had immersed himself in a spiritual journey of self-discovery, allowing Jesus to make that path free of roughness and point toward Him. The compass that guided Francis on this journey was the Gospel. In fact, his life made sense only because it was unified with the Gospels and was nourished by them. Francis constantly desired to put himself in the following of Christ sine glossa. It is therefore not unsurprising that he was later marked with the stigmata because he had lived this discipleship with joyful dedication and witness, with a readiness, to share the love he had received from God by giving his time in the service of others and, in particular, by assisting lepers.

Zeal and ardent love for God

Francis' love for Christ was not only manifested in his zeal in following the command to rebuild the church, but it gradually became real and deep. As a result, Francis sought to achieve total abandonment of himself, to imitate Christ, and to live for Christ in encountering and serving the poor, lepers, and nature. During the early days of his conversion and as he embraced the lifestyle of the Gospel, Francis sought Christ in anything and everywhere. From the moment he heard the voice of Christ speaking to him from the crucifix of San Damiano onward, he started to understand that Christ's passion was lived for humanity and that it manifested a true and transformative love. He felt touched and marked by this understanding as if it were a seal. Francis' heart found itself immersed in a transformative dynamism that affected his whole life, from the period of his vocational discernment until the end of his days.

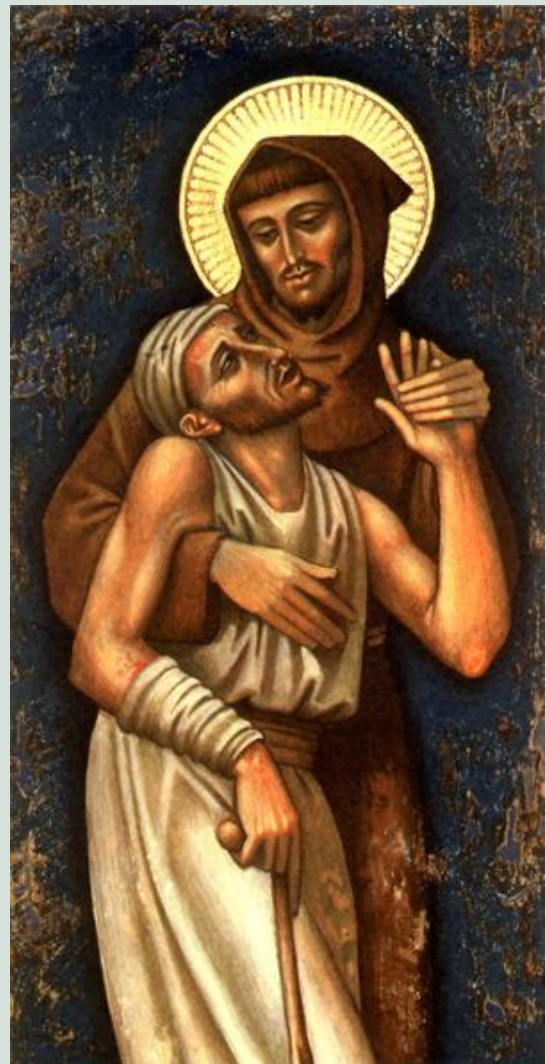
Having heard the voice of the crucified one and meditating on the cross, Francis discovered a new life and experienced the power of God's love that transformed him. Without a doubt, Francis' lifestyle qualifies him as the saint who “became like the one he loved. If the Cross was instrumental in his initial conversion, it was also formative for his daily life and was uniquely represented by it at the end of his earthly journey.”⁴

Francis contemplated the Crucified One and heard his voice, met a leper, and, again, heard the voice of Christ urging him to get off his horse and kiss him in the person of the leper. In this encounter both, Francis and the leper were transformed by God's love. Francis no longer feared the leper and the leper, who was stunned by Francis' gesture, felt both recognized as a person and of being loved. Both were marked by an inexplicable force of love.

Francis, recalling this episode in his Testament wrote: “when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I *showed mercy* to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body”⁵. Francis, not only had the joy of embracing the Gospel, but he was ready to take the path of love, to walk with God, and to make it his own, He now entrusted his whole life to Christ and willingly spent it for him.

A life finally confirmed by a powerful Sign of love.

The spiritual itinerary is a journey that requires perseverance in prayer, steadfastness and concentration during contradictions and misunderstandings, and a heart open to listening to what God wants from you. These were the characteristics of Francis' life in those short 20 years. From the moment his life changed and matured into his vocation, to the time of his death. he always relied on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to direct him in the new way of life he had decided to live.



Even as the number of friars increased, Francis maintained direction and was always able to handle the different voices or ideas of those who manifested different visions and intentions for the growing Order. He always remained humble and understanding and

⁴ <http://www.franciscanmedia.org>, Daniel P. Horan, OFM., St. Francis and the Cross of Christ, May 10,2020

⁵ Test 1-3.

wholeheartedly followed the directives of the Lord God. As the number of friars grew the challenges grew, but Francis was determined to lead the flock, that the Lord Himself had entrusted to him, according to the original plan of the Lord Himself. “And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel” (Test 14).

His contemplative lifestyle became a source of strength to face those difficult moments of active life. Francis always knew that the active life without a contemplative dimension could easily become empty and meaningless. Thus, he steadfastly set aside precious time to occupy himself exclusively with God. He knew that his mission would not succeed unless he first allowed God to fill his heart with the love that he would then give to others. Even at times when he might feel disappointed and tired, he knew that the best refuge was that provided by solitude lived in contemplative prayer.

He took with him only a few companions-who knew his holy way of living better than others-so that they could shield him from the interruption and disturbance of people, respecting and protecting his silence in every way. After he had been there for some time, through unceasing prayer and frequent contemplation, he reached intimacy with God in an indescribable way. He longed to know what in him and about him was or could be most acceptable to the Eternal King⁶.



Francis was a man of prayer. As such, he thought it appropriate that the contemplative dimension of the Order should be a true and authentic reference for inner renewal. For him, this contemplative dimension should be the way to give birth to the spirit of prayer and devotion as ways of following the Gospel way of life. This way of life would mirror that of Jesus, who also had both an active and contemplative life.

As a good father and brother, Francis saw fit to recommend to the friars, both those of his time and those who would come over the years, this contemplative aspect of life. It was and remains an aid to living the Gospel way of life to the fullest. By living as shepherds who must shepherd the flock, but at the same time allowing Jesus, the true good shepherd, it nourishes them in turn through this contemplative life.

⁶ 1Cel 91.

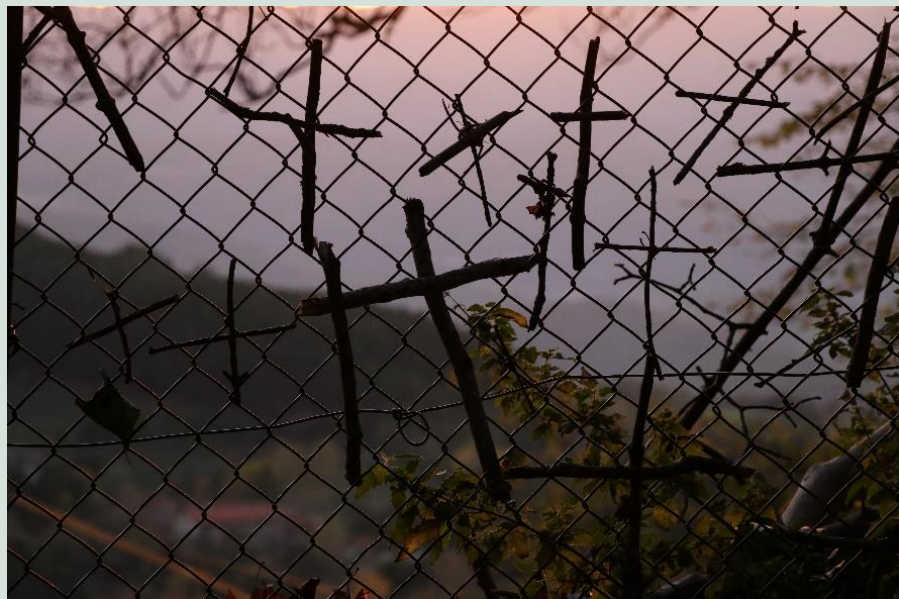
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From the Voice to the Signs of Love

For Francis, everything changed the moment he had his deeply personal encounter with Jesus. He not only heard Jesus' voice but also felt the profound depth of his love. This transformative experience convinced Francis to alter the course of his life. As he grew older, Francis' spiritual journey became increasingly marked by contemplation. And in a remarkable turn, it was no longer just Francis who listened to and cherished the Lord's voice - Jesus himself affirmed that Francis had faithfully fulfilled the mission entrusted to him.

This divine confirmation was sealed with the stigmata, which became a physical reality on Francis' body. These sacred wounds served as a tangible testament to the Saint's profound inner love for Christ. In fact, some biographies refer to Francis as “Alter Christus”, or “another Christ”.

The stigmata imbued Francis with unimaginable spiritual power and zeal, enabling him to continue witnessing to the gospel despite his physical frailty. The stigmata bring to light another dimension of the Saint that which in “The Treatise of the Miracles Thomas of



Celano calls a new miracle from which all the other miracles performed by the saint during the last two years of his life and after his death derive.”⁷.

Undoubtedly this is a new miracle since, although his body was already extremely weak, this physical weakness did not limit his spiritual zeal and strength to continue and do what God still wanted him to do. Despite the physical pain, Francis continued to be

⁷ <http://www.franciscanstudies.files.wordpress.com> - Noel Muscat, OFM., Vita di San Francesco d'Assisi, 2003, Pg 89

inspired as never before. The stigmata were like a fire from the Holy Spirit that spurred him on with his mission to evangelize, even at a time when he realized that the Order was somehow getting out of hand.

The stigmata became not only a physical approval of God's love for Francis but also became an inner illumination that restored his “overcoming of his concerns regarding the future of the order” and reinvigorated his physique and enthusiasm to praise and worship God. It was during the last two years of his life that Francis, still inspired by the Holy Spirit, composed the Canticle of the Creatures and also performed several miracles related to the stigmata. Finally, he miraculously found the energy within himself to write his spiritual testament, which he left as a gift to his friars.

The stigmata are thus a sign of divine power over Francis, and their effect continued to prompt him to begin again to love the One who first loved him. It is undeniable that Francis' love for God was genuine and unquestionable. For him, living an evangelical lifestyle meant responding to divine love was a way to allow God to transform his life to make it similar to the One he loved with all his heart, Christ. Thus, the stigmata would be nothing more than an outward manifestation of a pure mystical relationship and the transformative power of God's love for Francis. It was this love, that made him so passionately attached to God, we hear echoed in another of his famous compositions, the one that sings the praises to God Most High and the wonders of his creation.

The memory of the Stigmata of St. Francis for us

In our baptism, we have been marked and incorporated into the life of Christ and thus have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to begin an itinerary of faith as St. Francis of Assisi did in his time. This itinerary of faith requires zeal and a burning love for God and neighbour.

The Jubilee of the Stigmata not only allows us to admire the life of St. Francis, but it is also an inspiration to imitate the Saint's life. It is a guide toward a holy life that Christ himself calls every Christian to: “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mathew 5:48)

Christianity is based deeply on love. God himself is the perfect love and the true lover. We cannot be true Franciscans unless we learn to love, to be in love, and to be guided by love. Francis himself was aware that he could do nothing unless he was immersed in love for the crucified Christ. The stigmata, Rule and Constitutions of the OFS can only make sense if each member learns to love and be loved for God and others.

The Stigmata takes us to the other level of love Francis had for Christ and vice versa. A level in which the meaning of love for others becomes clearer. The love that requires every Christian to let himself be wounded, to get his hands dirty in the service of others.

In our world full of indifference, self-centeredness, individualism, closure, fear of those who are different, members of the OFS are called to show the world that Christ's

love is still relevant. Our reflection on the Stigmata of Francis should lead us to a fervent love for the Crucified Christ we encounter in the marginalized of today's society. The celebration of the Jubilee can lead every Franciscan family to desire to love Christ more, to let their lifestyle be motivated by love and sealed by love for Christ.

Peace and good!



MEETINGS, PRESENCES AND CHAPTERS

NIGERIA: National Elective Chapter

The Emerging National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) of Nigeria held its elective chapter at the friary of Capuchin friars in “Okokhuo Ovia Northeast L.G.A. UGBOWO” in Benin city, EDO state on Saturday, April 6, 2024. The National Fraternity of Nigeria is a smaller entity but very enthusiastic about living the Franciscan charism despite the economic circumstances of the country.

The capitulars had arrived on Thursday to begin the presentation of reports and voting, while they waited for the CIOFS delegates who for logistical reasons arrived on Saturday after a long and tiring journey from the airport to the headquarters. Finally in the evening they began the elective chapter, which was presided over by Vice-Minister General, Mary Stronach, OFS, delegate of the Minister General and Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM, representative of the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants.

After a brief presentation by the CIOFS delegates, the 17 capitulars began the elective session in which Lilian-Rita I. AKUDOLUF was re-elected National Minister and International Councilor. The Chapter concluded the next day with the installation of the new Council and a fraternal breakfast followed by the meeting with the new Council.

TOGO: Fraternal and Pastoral Visitation

The pastoral and fraternal visitation of the national fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) of Togo was held at the St. Francis of Assisi Schoolhouse of Philosophy in Adidogomé-Lomé from April 8 to April 11, 2024. The visitors (Mary Stronach, OFS and Br. Pedro Zitha, OFM) were welcomed by the National Council and were taken to a restaurant for a welcome lunch before going to the Provincial's house for the pastoral visit, where they thanked him for making spiritual assistants available to all 10 fraternities. It was an opportunity to not only listen to the Provincial but to also share our concerns about the

need for adequate formation of spiritual assistants before and during their term of service at the OFS.

We later went to visit the Archbishop of Lomé, Monsignor Nicodeme BARRIGAH-BENISSAN, to whom we assured and renewed the OFS's commitment to be faithful to the Church and its ecclesiastical authority, and reassured of the OFS and YouFra's continued desire to collaborate with the bishops in whatever service they are asked to render in the local Church.

The following day we had a meeting with local, regional and national spiritual assistants to thank them for their tireless service to the OFS and to encourage them to continue to strengthen their relationship with the OFS and YouFra as part of the Franciscan family. It was also an opportunity to clarify some issues related to the role of the assistants and the need to better understand the difference of the OFS structure in terms of a national fraternity within an OFM Province that has an amalgamation of many countries that are part of it. The visit continued with a meeting with the entire national, regional, local council and the YouFra in which some recommendations for the next 6 years were made. The visit finally ended with the celebration of Holy Mass followed by fraternal agape and farewell of the visitors.

BOLIVIA: The Third Formation Course

The city of Cochabamba hosted the first formation course for formators of the Secular Franciscan Order and YouFra in South America. The meeting was held from 1 to 5 May 2024, at St. Francis of Assisi friary in Tarata of the OFM Franciscan Friars.

Participants of this formation course were warmly welcomed by OFS Bolivia, Franciscan Youth and the Friars Minor of the city of Tarata. The formation course brought together more than 50 participants, including national ministers, national and regional formators and national and regional spiritual assistants of the Franciscan Family: OFMConv, OFM, OFMCap. This meeting brought together brothers and sisters of the OFS, YouFra and spiritual assistants from different nationalities: Chile, Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Colombia and Bolivia.

The meeting was chaired by International Councilor (CIOFS) for South America, Silvia Diana, OFS, by Diego Ventura, member of the international YouFra formation team, and by Fr. Carlos Ginés, TOR (CAS), Assistant General of OFS and YouFra. The formation course had full agenda of activities, conferences, reflections, group work and group presentations on the importance of formation in light of the Constitutions, as well as the importance and necessity of a formation meeting for spiritual assistants in the Ibero-American region for the year 2025. The course recalled and reviewed past agreements and proposed new challenges to work on in the future so that they can be addressed for the next Formation course to be held in Lima, Peru, in 2026.

ITALY: National Elective Chapter

Domus Pacis, at the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels, hosted the National Elective Chapter OFS Italy from May 2 to 5, 2024. Around 7:45 p.m., it began with institutional greetings, including one from the mayor of Assisi, Stefania Proietti, then continued with a welcome dinner. The 145 capitulars and around 15 spiritual assistants enjoyed, after dinner, the musical performance by the group “Nuova Civiltà”, with the theme “The welcome... and then - Journey between words and music”.

Friday morning was given over to reports while the afternoon was dedicated to a penitential pilgrimage to the Shrine of the Spogliazione (Striping of St Francis), where a time of prayer and formation with Bishop Vito Piccinonna, Bishop of Rieti, took place. Holy Mass was presided at 6 p.m. by Msgr. Domenico Sorrentino, Bishop of Assisi.

Saturday's Mass was presided over by Fr. Stefan Acatrinei, OFMConv. From 10 a.m. two lectures were presented on the theme of the chapter, “OFS in a Changing Time”. The first was presented by Tibor Kauser, Minister General OFS and the second by Fr. Stefan Acatrinei OFMConv, General Spiritual Assistant. From 12.00 noon until 1.00 p.m. the two lecturers answered questions addressed to them.

The elective part of the chapter began at 15:00 p.m. and was presided over by Tibor Kauser, general minister OFS, and witnessed by Fr. Stefan Acatrinei, OFMConv, representative of the Conference of general Spiritual Assistants (CAS). The 45 voting chapter members re-elected Luca Piras as national minister for a second term. The new national council that will serve the 1033 OFS fraternities of Italy for the next three years was also elected. The new council was installed immediately after the election.

Sunday's Mass was presided at 8:30 a.m. by Bishop Francesco Savino, vice president of the Italian Bishops Conference (CEI), and from 10:30 a.m., the same Bishop spoke about the challenges of the times we live in. The chapter concluded with lunch. They were days of grace and fraternity fully enjoyed by all participants.

SLOVAKIA: Fraternal and Pastoral Visit

The OFS National Fraternity of Slovakia conducted its pastoral and fraternal visit from May 2 to 5, 2024. On the first day of the visit, the visitors were hosted in the Franciscan friary in Bratislava, where they met with the Greek Catholic bishop, Msgr. Peter Rusk, head of the Council of Lay and Apostolic Movements and member of the Social Subcommittee of the Theological Commission. He praised the Secular Franciscans in Slovakia for their dedication and cooperation in the local Church and at the diocesan level. After almost an hour, the Bishop took us to his Cathedral where he explained the beauty of the Greek Catholic rite.

We later returned to the Franciscan friary where we continued our pastoral visit with the major superiors, Fr. Juraj Mihály, OFM, Fr. Martin Mária Kollár, OFMConv and national spiritual assistant, Fr. Josef Kong, OFMConv, delegate of the Capuchin Provincial. The

provincials pledged once again to continue to provide spiritual assistants and to reconsider the issue of ongoing formation of spiritual assistants for all friars in the future.

The following day the visitors, together with the National Council, left for Spišská Kapitula to meet with Bishop František Trstenský who, being himself a devout admirer of St. Francis of Assisi, appreciated and was thankful for our visit.

After the meeting with the bishop, the visitors met with the National Council and National Spiritual Assistants to listen and discuss the way forward, and for proper organization and coordination in all OFS regions in Slovakia in order to better live the Franciscan charism. Other members of the OFS then arrived to attend the presentation made by Fr. Pedro on the theme, “The importance of prayer must be a source of our ministries”, followed by an open discussion and the celebration of the concluding Mass.

CROATIA: Fraternal and Pastoral Visit

The fraternal and pastoral visit to the Croatian National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) took place in Zagreb-Dubrava-San Leopold Bogdan Mandić from May 17-20, 2024.

The fraternal visit was led by Noemi Paola Riccardi, Presidency Councilor of the International Council of the Secular Franciscan Order (CIOFS), who began the visit by going through all the financial records, archives of the secretariat, and other documents of the OFS. After that a meeting took place with members of the Franciscan youth of the local fraternity of Kaptol and the local fraternity of Siget at the Church of the Holy Cross.

Pastoral Visitor, Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM, met with some Major Superiors of the First Order and TOR, along with the national assistants expressing their gratitude for the service rendered by the Provincials in appointing spiritual assistants in almost all the fraternities.

The meeting with the Major Superiors was once again an opportunity to reevaluate and bring new ideas on how to carry on the service of spiritual assistants despite some daily challenges. The meeting was greatly appreciated by all four national spiritual assistants, namely Fr. Goran Malenica, OFM, Fr. Ivan Bradarić, OFMConv, Fr. Goran Rukavina, OFMCap, Fr. Zvonimir Brusač, TOR, who also represented his Provincial. The two major superiors present, Fr. Milan Krišto, OFM and Fr. Miljenko Hontić, OFMConv., expressed their gratitude as well.

In the afternoon Holy Mass was celebrated in Siget Holy Cross Church and was followed by a meeting with the brothers and sisters of the local fraternities of the Blessed Aloysius Stepinac Regional Fraternity. The following day the National Council meeting began with the celebration of Holy Mass in Dubrava, St. Leopold Bogdan Mandić, at the Capuchin Friary, followed by the National Council meeting with the Executive Council.

On the last day, the Visitors went to Fiume/Rijeka to the Shrine of Our Lady of Trsat where they began the visit with the celebration of Holy Mass, followed by a fraternal lunch with the OFM brothers and then a meeting with members of the regional fraternity. It was also

an occasion to pay a visit to the homeless shelter founded by the OFS where we met with OFS leaders who explained how they care for men and women in different conditions. The visit ended with a delicious dinner at a restaurant. After dinner we returned back to Zagreb to conclude the visit with a meeting with the Archbishop of Zagreb Monsignor Dražen Kutleša to whom the OFS renewed their commitment to collaborate with the local church and at the diocesan level. With gratitude and appreciation for the hospitality and fraternal affection towards the OFS and YouFra fraternities, the visitors give glory to God for the Franciscan charism found alive in all the brothers and sisters they met during the pastoral and fraternal visit.

PERU: Extraordinary pastoral and fraternal visit

The pastoral and fraternal visit to the OFS of Peru took place from 23 to 26 May, mainly in the city of Lima. The main place of the Visit was the Franciscan Convent of the Saint Francis Solano Province of the Order of Friars Minor (OFM). The fraternal visit was presided over by the International Area Councilor Silvia Diana, OFS and the pastoral visit by Br Carlos Gines, TOR.

In Peru there are brothers of the First Order (OFMConv, OFM, OFMCap.) and of the TOR. All offering Pastoral care to the OFS and some to the Franciscan Youth.

The Visitation began with a fraternal meeting with the Archbishop of Lima, Mgr Carlos Castillo, who received the Visitors in his private residence. The meeting served to present the OFS to the bishop and to get his point of view on a specific problem that a local fraternity of the OFS in the diocese of Lima is going through. The meeting was fruitful and encouraging.

In the following days, the respective books were examined, several brothers, local and regional councils of the OFS were heard in private. In addition, the Visitors also had a fraternal dialogue with the OFM and OFMCap Provincial Ministers. The OFMConv and TOR brothers were not present. Peru has two OFM Franciscan Provinces, an OFMCap Province, an OFMConv Custody and a TOR Commissariat.

A meeting was also held with the National Spiritual Assistants and some Regional Assistants who expressed their concerns and worries about the relational difficulties that have arisen within the OFS. In Peru there is no Conference of Assistants.

On Sunday 26th, at the last meeting of the National Council, four of its members resigned, causing the termination of the national government of the OFS in Peru. The Visitors drew up their respective minutes, leaving the Fraternal Visit open until new elections are held as soon as possible in accordance with the Constitutions.

Philippines: Fraternal and Pastoral Visit

The Manressa Retreat House of the sisters Daughters of Jesus in Quezon City, Metropolitan Manila, Philippines, hosted the formation course for the Secular Franciscan Order and Spiritual Assistants, from May 24 until May 28, 2024, titled “Wisdom of Love”.

The course began on Friday, May 24, at 4 p.m., with a welcome greeting addressed to the participants by the organizers and the opening Eucharistic Celebration. Augustine Yoon former CIOFS (Council International Order Franciscan Secular) councillor presented at 6 p.m. the topic: “Updates on National Fraternities of Asia and Oceania”.

Each day's program, except the last, began with Holy Mass at 6:00 a.m. and presentation of the themes at 8:00 a.m.

On Saturday morning May 25, two lectures entitled “Wisdom of Love” were presented by Fr. Stefan Acatrinei, OFMConv General Spiritual Assistant. Between 11 a.m. and 12 noon, participants had the opportunity to discuss and share their ideas in group work on what was presented. Work resumed at 2 p.m. with the presentation of each country's report on the OFS formation experience in Asia-Oceania, followed by the talk “Thematic Guide for Formation” offered by Augustine Yoon. The day ended with the presentation of the summary of the group work, followed by recreation, entitled “Franciscan Joy”.

On Sunday, May 26, the following topics were presented: “Franciscan Centenaries”, “Leadership of Service in the Writings of St. Francis and St. Clare” by Fr Stefan Acatrinei; “Fraternal Animation: a Challenge and a Commitment” by Grace Garlene JOSE and Lucy ALMIRANÉZ; and “CIOFS Communications - International Statutes” by Francis Park, CIOFS Councillor. The evening was dedicated to a cultural performance.

On Monday, May 27, there was a pilgrimage to the St. Pedro Bautista Shrine and a visit to Tagaytay. On Tuesday, May 28, the final document was presented and approved as a summary of the work of these days, followed by a fraternal dialogue between the participants and CIOFS councillor Francis Park and Fr. Stefan Acatrinei OFMConv. The course ended with the Eucharistic Celebration at 11 a.m.

In addition to the topics presented, the course offered participants (38 OFS, 1 YouFra and 12 Spiritual Assistants) from 12 countries the opportunity to consolidate mutual knowledge, share the challenges of their national fraternities, exchange ideas and training materials, as well as enjoy the beauty of being together as brothers and sisters of the great Franciscan Family.

Philippine: Formation Course

On May 22 - 23 and May 29 - June 1, 2024, the Fraternal and Pastoral Visit to the national fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) of the Philippines took place, led by Francis Park delegate of OFS Minister General Tibor Kauser, and Fr Stefan Acatrinei OFMConv, representative of the Conference of Spiritual Assistants (CAS).

The first part of the Visitation was held at the “Manresa” retreat house of the Sisters “Daughters of Jesus” in Quezon City, Metropolitan Manila.

The Visitation began on Wednesday, May 22, at 9:30 a.m., with the presentation of the Visitors and the National Council and continued according to the established program: presentation of the regional fraternities, their activities and their apostolate; followed by a dialogue between the Visitors and the members of the National Council.

On the second day, on Thursday, May 23, the Visitors reviewed the documents and discussed the formation program and materials provided for that purpose. In the afternoon, the Visitors met with Minister Provincial OFM Fr. Gregorio Redoblado. After dinner at 7 p.m., Fr. Ștefan Acatrinei met with National Spiritual Assistants Fr. Wilfredo Sasan Benito OFM, Fr. Basil Matias, OFMConv., and Fr. Allan Samson, OFMCap.

The visitation, which was interrupted due to the formation course, resumed on Wednesday afternoon, May 29, when the Visitors met with the local fraternity of San Antonio in Las Pinas, Metropolitan Manila, at its headquarters, where some representatives of the fraternities from the same region were also present, namely the fraternity of San Andrea in Parañaque, the fraternity of San Bernardino in San Pedro Laguna, and the fraternity of St. Augustine in Parañaque.

The Visitors, together with some members of the National Council and 5 OFS sisters from Singapore, left on Thursday, May 30, for the province of Quezon. On Friday, May 31, the Que-Mar regional fraternity enjoyed a special day, meeting with the Visitors and other guests, in Lucena City on a private property, called Rivo Torto, owned by an OFS sister. At 7:30 a.m. activities of the local fraternities were presented. Regarding the apostolate, everyone was wonderfully surprised to learn that the Sariaya fraternity has a free clinic. It has been offering free specialist medical checkups, and also medicines for the poor, every Saturday for more than 50 years.

Fr. Ștefan Acatrinei celebrated the Eucharist at 8:30 a.m., which was animated with much enthusiasm by more than 60 OFS members. At 9:45 a.m. Francis Park presented the theme “animation of fraternities”, while Fr. Ștefan Acatrinei spoke on “Challenges of St. Francis and the Franciscan journey of our times”. Between 11:30 a.m. and 12 noon there was fraternal dialogue with the Visitors. The meeting concluded with lunch. In attendance were 5 local OFS fraternities from 4 cities: Lucban, Sariaya, Lopez and Lucena, plus the Boac fraternity from Marinduque Island. Around 3 p.m., the Visitors departed for Manila where, on the following day Saturday, June 1, the Visitation ended with the meeting of the Provincial Custos of the Immaculate Conception and Blessed Bonaventure of Power in the Philippines Fr. Emmanuel Giva, OFMConv.

COLOMBIA: Pastoral and Fraternal Visit and OFS National Chapter

The Visitation was held with great joy from 28 May to 2 June in the city of Bogotá. The venue of the Visit was the house of the local fraternity “La Tercera”, which also has a beautiful religious shrine more than 300 years old. The OFS local fraternity dedicate

themselves to heritage conservation and liturgy together with the Friars Minor, who are their spiritual assistants.

After the greetings and fraternal welcome, the Visitors met the regional Ministers and some of their councillors. The Visitors also spoke with several brothers and sisters from different Fraternities.

The Visitors visited the new national headquarters and also met some provincial Ministers and Custodes. In Colombia, there is a Franciscan religious presence of the Order of Friars Minor (2 Provinces), OFMConv., (1 Custody) and OFMCap., (1 Province).

The meeting with the Franciscan Family of Colombia and the National Assistants was held in the same national headquarters. We can say that there is a Conference of Assistants in Colombia.

Subsequently, on 31 May, the National Chapter began in the city of Santa Marta. The venue for the Chapter was the San José Seminary which belongs to the diocese. At this event, the Capitulars once again elected Gloria Ribero as National Minister.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: National Elective Chapter

The OFS National Fraternity of Bosnia and Herzegovina celebrated its sixth national elective chapter in a picturesque location at the shrine of Our Lady of Mercy in Rama. The chapter was presided over by Tibor Kauser, minister general of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS), and witnessed by Fr. Stefan Acatrinei, OFMConv, representative of the Conference of the general Spiritual Assistants (CAS). Although a young national fraternity, it has nearly 2,000 members and is very vibrant; it has already given 12 friars to the OFM.

On Friday, June 7, 2024, the capitulars were welcomed to the retreat house, beginning at 12 noon. The opening Holy Mass was preceded by the recitation of the Holy Rosary at 5:30 pm. After dinner, at 9:00 p.m., Tibor Kauser presented to the capitulars and members of the YouFra National Assembly on “The Meaning of the OFS in a Changing World”.

The various reports of the OFS national fraternity were presented Saturday morning while the YouFra national assembly conducted its work in another hall. The election of the new council took place in the afternoon. The 26 capitulars present, from a total of 32, elected Mirela Barbarić as national minister and Ivana Vidović as international councilor. During the Eucharistic celebration at 6 p.m., the new council was installed. The minister general and the CAS representative met with the new council at 8:30 p.m.; then everyone enjoyed a splendid fraternal evening, wonderfully animated by the two regional councils and the national council of young Franciscans (24 YouFra).

On Sunday morning, June 9, the chapter, chaired by the new national minister, met at 9 a.m. to vote on the priorities for the new triennium. On the other hand, OFS General Minister Tibor Kauser and Fr. Stefan Acatrinei, OFMConv, were invited by YouFra National President Petra Bračić to participate in the conclusion of the YouFra National Assembly. The national YouFra of Bosnia and Herzegovina has 2944 members and is very vibrant;

among its many activities it is worth noting that, for 25 years now, it has organized the annual Franciscan youth music festival, awarding prizes for the best compositions. The contribution of the OFS national fraternity and the YouFra of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the last 10 years, to the First and Second Order, is truly significant: 3 Poor Clare's sisters and 15 friars. This is also due to the excellent spiritual assistance offered by the First Order.

After 3 days of work, prayer, sharing and interchange between the OFS and YouFra fraternities, the chapter (as well as the YouFra national assembly) concluded with lunch. The wonderful experience of these days as well as the beautiful, serene and joyful atmosphere will accompany all the participants of this event for a long time.

NETHERLANDS: National Elective Chapter

The National Elective Chapter of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) of the Netherlands was held at the Franciscan Sisters' Convent in Denekamp, St. Nicolaasstichting, from 7 to 9 June 2024.

The Chapter was attended by 27 brothers and sisters, of whom 13 were capitulars with voting rights. The National Minister of Germany, Sister Ursula Clemm, also participated as an observer, accompanied by the National Spiritual Assistant, Fr. Roland Putman, OFM, and the Provincial Minister, Fr. Theo Van Adrichem OFM. In addition, the Chapter benefited from the presence of the delegate of the Provincial of the Capuchin Friars, Fr. Kenny Brack, OFM Cap, and the former National Spiritual Assistant Fr. Wim Pot, OFM who came as the delegate of the Provincial Minister.

The evening of the first day was devoted to the discussion of the report of the National Council on the past three years, followed by the vote, and the morning of the second day of the Chapter was opened by a moment of assembly in which the topics and suggestions that will be the outline of the work of the council for the next three years were discussed and voted on. Before the election session, the candidates for election were presented.

In the afternoon, the new National Council was elected, chaired by the delegate of the OFS Minister General, Dina Shabalina, OFS, who began by explaining the procedures of the elective session. The Conference of General Spiritual Assistants (CAS) was represented by Br. Pedro Zitha, OFM.

Theo Reuling, OFS, was re-elected as National Minister and International Councilor. The elective session concluded with the celebration of the Holy Eucharist and the confirmation of the newly elected Council. This was followed by dinner and a relaxing time with a performance by Peter Vermont on Elizabeth of Hungary. On the last day, after the celebration of Sunday Mass together with the Franciscan Sisters of Denekamp, the CIOFS delegates shared international news with the Chapter participants followed by the fraternal agape with farewell.

GUATEMALA: National Elective Chapter

The OFS brothers and sisters joyfully gathered at the Diocesan Retreat House to celebrate the National Chapter. The chosen venue was the Retreat House of the Diocese of Jalapa, located more than 200 kilometres away from the capital.

The 13th National Chapter of Guatemala was very joyful because being together as brothers and sisters is always a celebration. The days were lived in an atmosphere of fraternity. The capitulars welcomed with joy and gratitude the presence of the visitors who presided over the Chapter: Ana María Raffo, International Councillor of the CIOFS and delegate of the OFS General Minister and Fr Carlos Ginés, TOR, General Spiritual Assistant on behalf of the Conference of Spiritual Assistants (CAS). The Chapter was also attended by the National Spiritual Assistant, Fr Celso Ventura, OFM.

The 52 Capitulars elected Felipe Vasquez as the new National Minister and International Councillor and Candelario Hernandez as Vice-Minister. This and the other services of the new National Council were confirmed by the International Delegate of CIOFS during the Mass presided over by the bishop of the diocese.

The Chapter ended with a celebratory meal and party due to the event of celebrating a new fraternal Chapter.

HONDURAS: National Elective Chapter

The National Chapter was held in the city of Comayagua, Honduras, on 15 and 16 June. The Capitulars met at the Santa Nazaria Ignacia Retreat House of the Congregation of the Crusader Missionaries of the Church.

The elective Chapter was presided over by the International Councillor of CIOFS Ana María Raffo, delegate of the OFS General Minister, and the General Spiritual Assistant Fr Carlos Gines, TOR.

The OFS of Honduras, due to various internal problems, has not had its own National Council for several years. Since 2018, the Order in the country has been under the direct responsibility of the CIOFS.

The Chapter was also attended by the OFM National Spiritual Assistant, Fr Javier Lemus. In addition, the Provincial Definitor Fr Alfredo Estrada, OFM, of the Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe, was present at the elective chapter.

The Capitulars elected María Ardon as National Minister and International Councillor, Carlos Mejía as National Vice-Minister, Nelson Lizardo as Secretary, María Maradiaga as Bursar, Martha Mayen as Formator and María Castillo as YouFra Fraternal Animator.

The new National Council was joyfully installed during the Sunday Eucharist, where the General Assistant encouraged them not to lose faith and trust in the future and in the great things that God can accomplish through them.

AUSTRIA: National Elective Chapter

The elective Chapter of the national fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) of Austria was held in the retreat house of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood in Salzburg. The OFS national fraternity of Austria has 761 members divided into 5 regions.

The chapter was opened on Friday, 14 June, at 2 p.m. with a welcome greeting addressed to the General Minister OFS, Tibor Kauser, to the representative of the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants (CAS), Fr. Stefan Acatrinei, OFMConv., and to all those present. The chapter was moderated by the Mother General of the Franciscan Sisters of Amstetten, Sr. Franziska Brucknen. The planned programme was followed with the presentation of various reports, dinner, an hour of adoration from 8 p.m. until 9 p.m.; then, recreation concluded the first day.

The Chapter work resumed on Saturday, 15 June, at 8 a.m., with Morning Prayer, followed by Kurt Nöhmayer's lecture "OFS - Quo vadis", and then group work. In the afternoon, two lectures were presented: "The Three Great Temptations", by Tibor Kauser, and "The Mission of St Francis and the Charism of the Franciscans", by Fr Stefan Acatrinei, OFMConv.

The twenty-seven capitulars present (from 29 with voting rights, plus 20 observers) elected the new minister Franz Knapp and the national council; the new international councillor is Christine Walder. The new national council was installed during the Eucharistic celebration, presided over by the provincial minister, Fr. Fritz Wenigwieser, OFM, at 6 p.m.

Fr. Stefan Acatrinei, OFMConv., met at 8 p.m. with the spiritual assistants present: Fr. Stefan Kitzmueller, OFM, Fr. Valentin Solomon, OFMConv, Fr. Marek Krol, OFMCap, and Fr. Leszek Nocun, OFMCap. With this occasion the Conference of National Spiritual Assistants of Austria was created. Then at 9 p.m. was the meeting with the new National Council.

On Sunday, 16 June, after Morning Prayer, the capitulars met at 9 a.m. to set priorities for the new triennium. The closing Mass was presided over at 11 a.m. by Fr. Stefan Acatrinei, OFMConv. The capitulars bid farewell after lunch and joyfully returned to their fraternities.