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CONFERENCE OF SPIRITUAL ASSISTANTS GENERAL
OFS – YOUFRA (CAS)

KOINONIA

... together on the journey

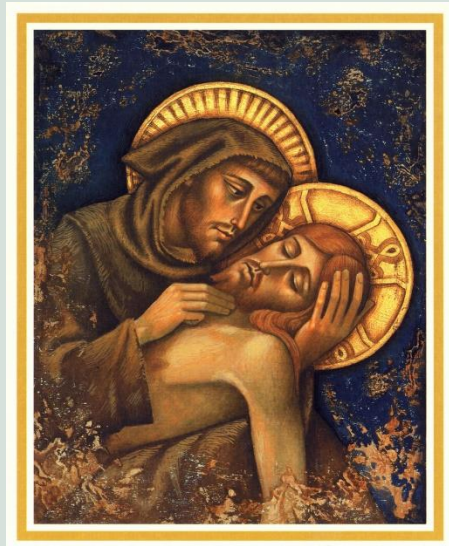
“Jubilees that reinvigorate our Franciscan being: Stigmata”



***The Stigmata: Passion for Christ and
compassion for men***

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



"I bear the stigmata of Jesus on my body" (Gal 6:17)

With these words, the apostle Paul speaks of his sufferings, tribulations and illnesses endured because of Christ. Paul is happy to boast of these marks imprinted in his flesh with those who seek to glory in the sign of circumcision, a sign also that marks the flesh of those who receive it. This passage from Paul refers to "the metaphorical impression of the permanent character left by baptism in the soul of the believer."

Instead, the stigmata of Jesus imprinted in the body of Francis of Assisi have, yes, this metaphorical and spiritual sense mentioned in Galatians 6:14-18; but they go beyond this interpretation because they are real signs imprinted in Francis' body and for this reason they are real stigmata. They represent his deep passion for Christ and are concrete signs of the merciful love that the living God has imprinted in his body and which, of course, become an invitation to compassion for the people whom Christ came to redeem by his passion, death and resurrection. You cannot have passion without compassion, because one is proportional to another, like two sides of the same coin.

Documentary and traditional accounts of this revelation, rendered especially by Thomas of Celano and St. Bonaventure, make us understand that his companions (Brother Leo and others), in addition to reading and understanding it in a spiritual key, gradually realized that it was instead "flesh and blood, with real wounds divinely impressed on Francis' body." It was therefore a process of stigmatization. The wounds that this process generated are signs, seals of the love of the living God, which Christ manifested to Francis through the Seraphim, and for them Francis gives thanks to God for the benefits granted to him by composing the famous prayer *Praises of God Most High* "after the vision and words of the Seraphim and the impression of the stigmata of Christ in his body"¹ (cf. FF 262; LegM XIII,10: FF 1235-1236) of which we find the manuscript in the famous *scroll-chartula* that has come down to us. Concerning the wounds that appeared in Francis' flesh, St. Bonaventure wrote: "thus witnessed those who saw and touched and kissed: they swearing by the Gospel that thus it had been and thus they had seen, confirmed us with fuller certainty" (*Legenda minor* VI, 9: FF 1383).

For Francis of Assisi, the stigmata are a gift, they are signs of that love of Christ Jesus that he had contemplated and carried in his heart since his experience at San Damiano that marked the beginning of his conversion and his spiritual journey characterized by the daily search for the Lord's will. Francis desired this gift, asked for it ardently and insistently to the point that, as Celano, his biographer, tells us, "Francis was really very busy with Jesus.

¹ F. ACCROCCA, Living the Centennial: *The Encounter with the Beloved* in "St. Francis" Magazine, no. 7 July 2024, p. 41.

Jesus always carried in his heart, Jesus on his lips, Jesus in his ears, Jesus in his eyes, Jesus in all his other limbs" (*Life*, I, c. IX 115: FF 522). It is important to understand that the stigmata "are not wounds that Christ caused Francis, because God does not wound man: on the contrary, he heals and heals us."²

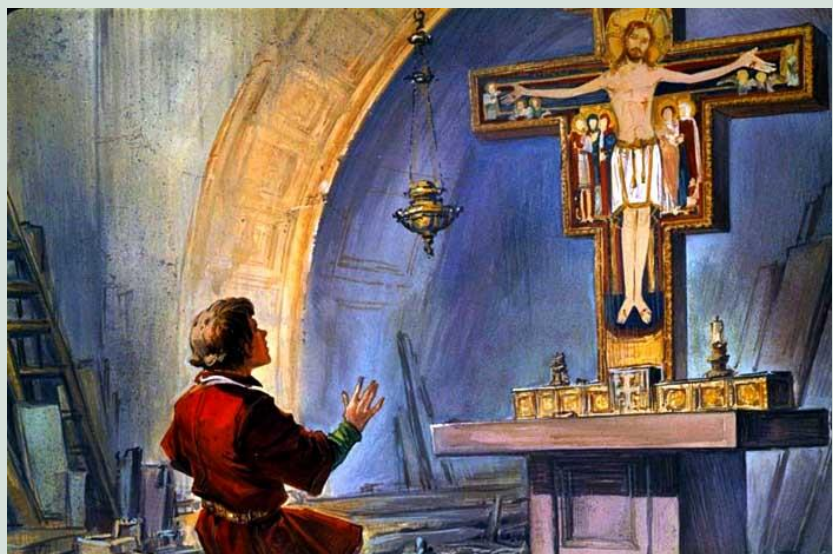
Passion for Christ and compassion for men

First, let us try to understand what the two terms mean: **passion** and **compassion**. **Passion**: from Latin *patio*, to suffer endure.

Passion of Christ (Sl 22; 31:34;35 and 69) consists of the events of Holy Week: from Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to the day of his death and burial. From a human perspective Christ's passion highlights extreme injustice. He suffers torture, gratuitous cruelty, experiences abandonment, betrayal, sadness, is insulted, mocked. As the Gospel texts that speak of the Passion tell us (Mt 26:36- 44; Mk 14:32-41; Lk 22:39-45; Jn 11:45-53) Jesus, for the sake of a cause that surpasses all endures, suffers and endures physical and psychological suffering that reaches its climax in his death on the cross because of the sins of the world.

By surrendering himself to such a death Jesus offers himself to the Father by accepting his will; Christ's passion, therefore, is part of the divine plan and confirms his adherence to the mission the Father has entrusted to him (cf. Mt. 16:21; 17:22; 20:17).

Compassion: feminine noun derived from Latin *compassio, onis*. It means a feeling of pity toward those who are unhappy, toward their sorrows, their misfortunes, their faults; participation in the suffering of others.³



The example that Francis of Assisi offers us at La Verna can be taken as a current and effective proposal to begin a journey of conversion and renewal in the spirit, both on a personal and community level, in growing in the school of fraternal love.

Passion for Christ is a commitment that should drive us to reach out to our brothers and sisters who suffer in so many ways; it is a way not to remain indifferent to Christ's passion,

² G. CESAREO, *Corporally to tell of the stigmata: in the body what happens in the heart*, in "Saint Francis" Magazine, no. 7 July 2024, p. 59-59

³ See Vocabolario Treccani, Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 2nd Edition, Rome, 1997, p. 875.

made present and evident in the lives of so many children, elderly, young people and adults scattered throughout the world and wounded in body and spirit by attitudes of (non)-compassion, attitudes that reveal the "dictatorship of indifference," wounded by injustice, wars and so many other evils that manifest a lack of knowledge of God's love lack that, at the same time, leads to a coming to a lack of love for one's neighbour (cf. 1 John 4:7-10).



Indeed, passion for Christ is a key to understanding compassion or love for people in that "brotherly love comes from God and makes one abide in God." Therefore, those who love or use compassion toward their neighbour are regenerated by God in that they fulfil the commandment of the Lord who says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn. 15:12).

The celebration of the gift of the stigmata of St. Francis, therefore, should commit us to live and to arouse a love for Christ and a compassion for our brothers and sisters, for in this way we will bring to life what the evangelist John writes in his first letter, "If anyone says, 'I love God' and then hates his own brother, he is a liar: for he who does not love his brother whom he sees, cannot love God whom he does not see. Therefore, a true passion for Christ, also becomes a true compassion to men or to one's neighbour, so that "(...) he who loves God may love his brother also" (1 John 4:21). Passion for Christ and compassion for men is the same reality of commitment to the love of God (passion for Christ) and love of brother (compassion for men), and again,

as St. John the Evangelist says, "brotherly love comes from God and makes one abide in God" (1 John 4:7).

For us Franciscans and Franciscan women, especially today our involvement and commitment to the school of the Gospel and the new commandment of Jesus (Jn. 15:12), are a charismatic imperative that requires us to give back, by proclamation and by life, what the Lord, throughout history, has given us and has continued to give us in the person of so many blessed to saints belonging to our great religious family, some of whom were also marked with the stigmata of Christ. In addition to St. Francis, in fact, we know that St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina and St. Veronica Giuliani received the gift.

The example of our saintly brothers and sisters should be, for us, a stimulus that challenges us and invites us to a more serious commitment of our living in Christ as Franciscan fraternity in its three branches (First Order, Second Order and Third Order or Secular Franciscan Order), without forgetting the wounded neighbour (man, woman, child(ren), elderly/young person(s)) to whom the stigmata of Jesus continue to bleed in their suffering and pain. Therefore, we cannot fail to be passionate for Christ without sharing compassion for the men and women of our time, stricken by so many wounds and in need of the healing and "new life" that comes from God's unconditional love experienced in the encounter with His Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ crucified.

Speaking of the stigmata of St. Francis Thomas of Celano wrote, "the stigmata shone outwardly from the flesh, for within it his root reached very deep into his soul" (2Cel 211: FF 800) so that our gaze at the cross of Jesus, a mystery of love (passion) and sorrow (compassion), may be illuminated by the Spirit, so that, our eyes may see and our hands may work in caring for the stigmata of sickness, poverty, injustice and war, loneliness and hunger, and non-sense that mark the flesh and spirit of so many of our brothers and sisters scattered throughout the world.



In short, this year dedicated to the celebration of the anniversary of the stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi must become an occasion to thank God for the gift he bestowed on the person of the seraphic father, a gift that must become alive in us to kindle the flame of faith, hope and charity. We are invited to return the gifts received from God with concrete works of compassion, working and promoting justice, peace, fraternity, and respect for the creator.

In conclusion, the stigmata of Francis as presented by St. Bonaventure are "a miracle of the manifestation of the divine economy, determines its leading role in the religious history of the Church, and presents it, finally, as the term and fulfilment of the interior life of Francis of Assisi, a follower of Jesus Crucified" (*Life*, prologue, 1; FF 1020).⁴

Peace and good!

⁴ E. LONGPRE, *Francis of Assisi and his spiritual experience*, Ed. Biblioteca Francescana, Milan, p. 207.



MEETINGS, PRESENCES AND CHAPTERS

Ukraine: National Elective Chapter

The national fraternity of Ukraine was supposed to celebrate the national elective chapter in 2022 but due to the war it was postponed indefinitely. This important event was finally celebrated, under special conditions, on Saturday, August 31, 2024, at the “St. Wojciech” retreat center in Gwardijkie, Khmelnytska region. The 10 a.m. Eucharistic celebration marked the opening of the chapter.

Despite the exceptional conditions under which the Chapter was celebrated (due to the complications of the situation related to the war in Ukraine, many were unable to attend in person), the atmosphere among the present participants was full of peace and joy. The presence of national spiritual assistants (Fr. Marian Melnychuk, OFMConv, Fr. Dobroslav Kopysterynskyi, OFM, Fr. Volodymyr Protsko, OFMCap) and some local spiritual assistants (Fr. Simon Baydacki, OFM, Fr. Viktor Dyshuk, OFMCap.) was very welcomed. The meeting was edifying, and the OFS brothers and sisters made their choices responsibly.

Because of the difficult times the national fraternity is going through (caused by the war), the chapter ended on the same day.

Sweden: National Elective Chapter

The Chapter of the National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) of Sweden was held a few kilometres away from the city of Stockholm. The retreat house Marielund Ekero of the Holmia diocese hosted the Franciscan event that took place on Sept. 6-8. This is the only diocese of the Catholic Church that has existed in Sweden since the Protestant Reformation. Sweden's Catholic population is 1.5 percent of the approximately 10 million inhabitants. Members of the Protestant Church predominate.

The Chapter was chaired by Michel Versteegh, member of the OFS Fraternity of the Netherlands, delegate of Tibor Kauser, Minister General OFS. The Conference of General Spiritual Assistants (CAS) was represented by Fr. Carlos Gines, TOR. General Spiritual Assistant. Fr. Mikael Bergstedt, TOR, and Fr. Witold Mlotkowski, OFM, also attended the event. The 4 Franciscan Orders are present in the country; the Capuchin Friars do not accompany any OFS fraternity.

After the presentation of the reports and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, the election of the new OFS National Council in Sweden began. After prayer and invocation of the Holy Spirit, to elect the new SFO National Council in Sweden. Filip Bertilsson was elected as the new National Minister and Maurice Devenney was elected as International Councilor. Fr.

Carlos Ginés, TOR, encouraged the assembly to be faithful to the Franciscan vocation in their daily lives.

Angola: National Elective Chapter

The National Elective Chapter of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) of Angola was held in the city of Luanda, the country's capital. On Sept. 13, 14 and 15, at the St. Francis of Assisi friary of OFM friars. The event brought together chapter brothers and sisters from all over the country. In Angola there is a strong presence of the Franciscan family accompanying the SFO, especially by the OFM and OFMCap friars of the First Order.

Tibor Kauser, Minister General OFS, delegated International Councilor Eremenciana Chinyama to preside over the elective chapter. Fr. Carlos Gines, TOR, from the Conference of Spiritual Assistants General (CAS), was present as a witness.

The Chapter began with the welcoming of the chapter members and a delicious and fraternal lunch, followed by the presentation of the guests and the greetings of the National Spiritual Assistants: Fr. Antonio Joaquin Ribeiro da Costa, OFMCap, and Fr. Laerte de Farias dos Santos, OFM.

After giving a reflection, according to the program, the various reports of the outgoing National Council members were presented. Then it was time devoted to discussions, comments, questions and concerns.

The following day work resumed, and the elective session began. Adriano Mateus dos Santos was elected as the new National Minister and Antonio Manuel José as International Councilor. This session concluded with the Eucharist. The Assistant General, Fr. Carlos Ginés, TOR, encouraged the OFS assembly to live and move towards future with faith and courage, bringing their own contribution to the whole Franciscan family and the Church of Angola.

Several events were celebrated on the Feast of the Stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi: temporary and perpetual professions, and several OFS brothers and sisters renewed their promises. The celebration was animated by Franciscan Youth (YouFra) of Luanda.

Puerto Rico: National Elective Chapter

The national fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) of Puerto Rico has around 280 members in 16 local fraternities. It gathered from September 13 to 15 to celebrate its national elective chapter. The place chosen for this event was their retreat house "Portiuncula," located on the outskirts of Utado, a city located in the central mountainous region of Puerto Rico.

After the warm welcome of the 27 capitulars and two observers on Friday afternoon from 3 p.m. until 5 p.m. by the outgoing national council, the assembly met at 7 p.m. before the Blessed Sacrament for an hour of prayer. At 8:30 p.m., the outgoing national council met with Ana Maria Raffo, CIOFS councilor for North and Central America, and Fr. Stefan

Acatrinei, OFMConv., representative of the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants (CAS) for a fraternal discussion in preparation for the celebration of the chapter.

The second day of the chapter, Saturday, began at 7:00 a.m. with the Eucharistic celebration, then proceeded with the established program. The morning was devoted to reports: from the minister, treasurer and national formator. The reports were followed by discussions, then they were approved.

Chapter work resumed in the afternoon at 1:30 p.m. with the presentation of the priorities of the OFS national fraternity for the next three years. Fr. Stefan Acatrinei, OFMConv., presented the lecture “The Stigmata of St. Francis, as a gift of his attitude of thanksgiving”.

The elective session of the chapter was presided over by Ana Maria Raffo, delegate of Tibor Kauser. OFS general minister. Efrain Velázquez was elected as national minister and international counsellor. Although the temperature and humidity of the place were high (24-31°C and humidity between 80-100%), the freshness of Franciscan characteristics, joy and peace, accompanied the chapter work.

The new council was installed during Sunday's Eucharistic celebration, presided over by National Assistant Fr. Jose David Maldonado, OFMCap. The chapter concluded after lunch.

Nazareth: Elective Chapter

The local fraternity of Nazareth of the Annunciation is a very small reality that still stands under the direct accompaniment of the International Council of the Secular Franciscan Order (CIOFS). Before the elective chapter, the Nazareth fraternity had the joy of celebrating the Profession of new members. Noemi Paola Riccardi, delegated by Tibor Kauser. OFS General Minister accepted their professions at the Annunciation friary, on September 13, 2024.

The Elective Chapter was celebrated in the same place, on Sept. 14. The theme of the chapter was: “Fraternity and Elective Chapter”. The chapter was presided over by Noemi Paola Riccardi, delegate of CIOFS, and witnessed by Fr. Carlos Gabriel N. Molina, OFM, delegate of the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants (CAS). He also presented the theme: “history of the local fraternity”. There were 10 chapter members, 2 friars and 1 observer present at the chapter. The chapter members elected Gosayna Karam as the local minister and as the contact person to CIOFS.

The Chapter went well despite the last-minute change of the CAS delegate. Fr. Carlos G. Molina is to be thanked for his flexibility and understanding in accepting the responsibility of witnessing the Chapter.

Ivory Coast: National Elective Chapter

The National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS), St. Bonaventure in Côte d'Ivoire had the joy of celebrating its National Elective Chapter in the suburb of “Ebimpe,”

at the Sisters' Convent of "Jesus au Temple," September 14-15, 2024. The celebration of the Chapter began with Holy Mass at 6:30 a.m., together with the sisters residing in the Convent; it was presided over by National Spiritual Assistant Fr. Paul Zikpi, OFM, and concelebrated by the representative of the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants (CAS) Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM.

After the Holy Mass, the Chapter session followed. It was moderated by the local Spiritual Assistant Fr. Michel Atameklo, OFM. Then, the National Minister welcomed, introduced and greeted the representatives of the OFS International Council (CIOFS), Adolph Assagba, the delegate of the Tibor Kauser, OFS Minister General, and Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM.

The Chapter then continued with a presentation by Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM, on "Authority and Minority in the Secular Franciscan Order." This was followed by the presentation of the national report by the outgoing national minister, who raised positive and inspiring comments about Franciscan Youth (YouFra) in relation to the OFS. The National Treasurer presented his report, which raised further questions from the chapter members and from some members of the National Council.

The afternoon continued with reports from the fraternity commissions (spiritual life - life in the fraternities - formation and vocation and economic life). Then followed recommendations from the National Council. After that all chapter members had the opportunity to respond to the recommendations and study together the way forward to implement and adopt these recommendations.

This session also saw the arrival of other national assistants Fr. Zacharie Kolantrin, OFM Cap. He clarified some points regarding the procedures for voting for International Councillors. He also pointed out the importance of including in the national statute of Côte d'Ivoire the same recommendations in a clearer and more detailed way. After all the deliberations, finally, the following day, the Chapter members began the elective session. Ludovic Dah was elected as National Minister and as International Councillor.

The new Council was installed during the concluding Mass presided by Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM, and concelebrated by Fr. Paul Zikpi, OFM, and Fr. Zacharie Kolantrin, OFM Cap. The Mass was followed by a fraternal lunch and farewell. The Chapter was celebrated in a true fraternal and listening spirit.

Lithuania: National Elective Chapter

The National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) in Lithuania has 383 (solemn professed) members in 20 local fraternities divided in 3 regional fraternities. The eighth elective chapter was held at Annunciation Friary, OFM, in Kretinga Sept. 27-29, 2024.

The Holy Eucharist, presided by fr. Evaldas Darulis, OFM, Provincial Minister, and concelebrated by the national spiritual assistants and some of the local spiritual assistants, on Friday at 10:30am, marked the opening of the chapter. After the approval of the Chapter's schedule, Dina Shabalina, OFS, CIOFS Presidency Councillor, gave her talk on the

meaning of the *Secular Franciscan vocation*. Fr Stefan Acatrinei, OFMConv., representative of the Conference of the Spiritual Assistance general (CAS), gave the talk: *The gift of St. Francis' stigmata as determination to serve*. The chapter proceeded according to its schedule with the presentation of the reports. The first day concluded at 9:30pm, after one hour of prayer in front of the blessed Sacrament.

Chapter work resumed on Saturday at 8:30 a.m. with Morning Prayer. While the Chapter members continued their program, Fr. Stefan Acatrinei met with the two OFS national spiritual assistants and the 4 local spiritual assistants present who came for the Chapter. In this way, finally, the Conference of OFS National Spiritual Assistants was established. It has Fr. Antanas Grabnickas, OFM, as president and Fr. Piotr Strocen, OFMConv., as secretary for the next two years.

The holy rosary, prayed at 2pm, preceded the elective session. This session began at 3pm in the chapter hall and was presided by Dina Shabalina, OFS, CIOFS Presidency Councillor, as delegate of Tibor Kauser, OFS minister general. The 26 capitulars present in the chapter hall elected Jogilė Teresa Ramonaitė as National Minister and Virginija Mickutė as international councillor. The new National OFS Council was installed during the Mass celebrated at 6 p.m. at the Poor Clare's sister chapter. The second day concluded with a fraternal evening.

After devoting the entire Sunday morning for planning the new triennium, the Chapter concluded with Mass celebrated at 2:30 p.m. in the Martyrs' Chapel. The Chapter was very well prepared and beautifully celebrated. The chapter members worked, prayed and enjoyed every single moment lived together.