

GUIDELINES FOR OFS COUNCIL MEMBERS

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Preliminary notes

In the Church, the OFS is a public association of faithful, of an international character in which, at all levels, the Fraternity has juridical personality and a **collegial** “government” structure which is exercised by the Chapter and by the Council.

The collegial structure of the Council’s “animation and guide” service (art. 21 Rule; art. 31.1 GGCC), at all levels, is consistent with the nature and mission of the OFS.

The ministry of service cannot be understood if one does not start from the basic concept of Franciscanism: the Fraternity, which necessarily implies fraternal relations and, with regard to the subject matter of this document, interaction between different people temporarily called to pursue a common purpose that is the animation and guidance of brothers and sisters.

Chapter III of the Rule is not randomly entitled “*Life in Fraternity*”: Articles 20 to 26 of the OFS Rule speak of fraternal life, which also concerns the organization of the Order. With the profession of the Rule the Secular Franciscan accepts the gift of the Fraternity, which requires a new way of dealing with people according to the style of the “minority” which Saint Francis indicates. This is even more true and fundamental for those who are called to carry out a service office.

I. Finality

These guidelines are intended to help members of the OFS Councils at all levels, but in particular local Councils, to better understand and deepen the meaning and practical implementation of the service in a Council office; the importance of exercising this service responsibly and proactive, having an open gaze to the needs and demands of the Fraternity and a "prophetic" vision of God's plan, fruit of the life of prayer; subsidiarity between the levels; activities of an administrative nature to be carried out: in summary, how to implement Chapter III of the Rule and the corresponding Chapter III, Titles I and III (art. 28-33; 46–75) of the General Constitutions.

II Meaning of service Office and role of Councillors

With the Profession we are all “animators” or, at least, called to “animate” the Fraternity.

Art. 21 Rule (recalled by the corresponding art. 31.1 GGCC) establishes that at all levels the Council, in particular, is “soul and guide”: this means that it’s a human and christian instrument of service, exercised with love for the good of the Fraternity and of each member.

Its members are committed to carrying out with creativity the project established by the Chapter of the Fraternity and to perform the functions specific to each office, striving to always be proactive for the good of the brothers and sisters.

Even though the OFS has a hierarchical structure and collegial governing, the higher level does not correspond to a superiority “power”, but each local, regional, national and international Council has its own specific functions that cannot be exercised by anyone else, except in the case where there is no legitimate elected Council (art. 31.1 GGCC). In fact, for the “subsidiarity principle” «*A Council of a higher level is not to intervene in what can be satisfactorily dealt with by a local Fraternity or by a Council of a lower level. Let them encourage and respect their vitality so they can fulfil their duties properly*» (art. 33.2 GGCC).

The offices of service within the Council are ecclesiastical offices: each of them is fundamental for the animation and guide of the Fraternity and as a whole (Council) is called to exercise the assignment in a co-responsible way (art. 51.1; 63.1; 67.1 and art. 74.1 GGCC), it being understood that the office of Minister specifically exercises the functions of representation and coordination.

Since the Council is made up of various ecclesiastical offices, those who are elected to carry out their functions must be suitable (can. 149 CIC) and free from impediments deriving from ecclesiastical and state legislation.

Art. 21 of the Rule explains the meaning and characteristics of the animation and guidance service:

- **temporary**: one is elected for a fixed period and there may be further consecutive elections, but one should be able to leave the post (art. 32.2 GGCC);
 - **commitment to availability**: councillors must be aware of and convinced that their task is not one of facade or honour, prestige or command, but is a concrete service;
 - **responsibility**: of the Council as a whole and of each individual in relation to fraternal life, to the initiatives and needs of brothers/sisters and the Fraternity regardless of the specific task that each member holds within it.
- a) The Council's task: to stimulate and encourage observance of the Rule and fraternal communion, as well as ecclesial activity; implement the actions and acts provided by the GGCC; respect subsidiarity because a higher level should not do the task of the lower level.
- b) The task of each Council member is to perform the duties as a member of the Council and those for which one was specifically elected. Each one should express one's own opinion and take decisions based on that.

To this is added the **gratuitousness**: the service must be carried out freely and generously, without asking anything in return and without “*taking over the situations*”¹.

The OFS GGCC help us to understand how to act when we are called to serve the Fraternity and Chapter III, Title I gives general guidelines.

It is important to reiterate that each elected is also an **animator**, in so far as he/she is called to animate and is **responsible** both for the aspect of fraternal life entrusted to him/her in a specific way and for the activity of the entire Council as such.

The Council is always and in any case the executive centre of the project established by the Chapter and the legal entity in charge of every ideation, decision and practical implementation of the same, as well as having other specific tasks depending on the level. Implementing the project established by the Fraternity / Chapter does not mean being a mere mechanical executor. The Council, at every level, must enhance the talents

¹ Pope Francis, homily 2014/11/11 Saint Martha

of each member to identify the most suitable ways to make concrete the guidelines received, but it also has the duty not to carry out a contradictory and / or objectively unachievable project. In addition to this, through prayer and meditation on the Word, it must know how to read the signs of the times in the Church and in society and promote initiatives in the various aspects of fraternal life or suggest them to the Fraternity / Chapter, also in the light of the experience gained. The service of and in the Council is not static but dynamic: each Councilor (not just the Minister) is directly called to be proactive not only in his/her area of service, but in every sector for the good of the entire Fraternity.

It is not in accordance with the secular Franciscan spirituality and the Rule that a Councillor acts autonomously without ever involving the Council which has entrusted him/her with that particular service; it fails to the concept of co-responsibility, referred to in art. 30.2 GGCC, which “*requires*”(is the term used by the norm):

- Personal presence (living the Fraternity and the Council). It is a fundamental requirement at all levels: whoever accepts to be elected to a Council, even more so if above the Local level, must first of all be a professed who participates fully in the life of his/her own Fraternity as well as that of the Council.
- Testimony (putting into practice rather than preaching);
- Prayer (always fundamental because it constitutes the fuel of serving);
- Active collaboration according one’s possibilities in all expression of animation and guidance (each member of the Council must take an active interest in all areas of service);
- Any commitments to the animation of the Fraternity, that is, the concretization of that area of fraternal life entrusted to each member of the Council

Since the service offices are ecclesiastical offices, a lack of co-responsibility or a non-compliant exercise of functions has the direct consequence of the applications of the provision of removal (art. 84 GGCC), if dialogue and fraternal correction have not been successful.

The following artt. 31, 32, 33 GGCC clarify what is **the service office of Councillor** (and Minister/Vice-minister):

- It is a fraternal service of an elective nature;
- It is a commitment to feel available and responsible for the realization of each brother/sister so that the Fraternity may be a true ecclesial community, actively present in the Church and in civil society;
- It requires perpetual profession; conviction of the validity of the plan of Secular Franciscan life; attention to the life of the Church and the society; openness to dialogue; willingness to give and receive help and collaboration;
- It has a temporary nature;
- Is carried out for the good of the brothers/sisters and the Fraternity (not for personal glory), whose talents must be highlighted.

III How to carry out a service office

Carry out a service office means, first of all convert the heart every day, every moment; to free the mind from its certainties to accept the Holy Spirit and act according to His will.

Our Rule and General Constitutions suggest us concrete ways to perform well any service office:

- help and collaboration: readiness to carry one another’s burdens;

- good example and coherence of life that require continuous conversion and renunciation of one's own "I";
 - dialogue/communication: listening and desiring to understand one another;
 - trust and esteem, which flow from the recognition of the value of the brother/sister as the image of God;
 - acceptance and tenderness: the ability to open up to the brother/sister;
 - sincerity and loyalty: they are fundamental to a life focused on the Gospel, especially when exercising a service office;
 - fraternal correction, which is not the judgment of the other, but loving concern;
 - forgiveness and mercy: we must always put them into practice first of all with the brothers and sisters that God has given us and placed at our side, especially when this costs us effort;
 - active participation: the absence hurts the brothers/sisters, denies the essence of my profession and puts in difficulty the council of which I am a member;
 - co-responsibility, I am called in the first person to work for the good of the OFS and to be interested in every aspect of fraternal life, regardless of the service office covered.
- The style of service in the Council is that of the "washing of the feet" (Jn. 13, 12-17), which is the biblical foundation of service, in the "minority".
- To do this we need a large "openness of mind and heart", or at the very least, a willingness to try continually reminding us always that:

- ✓ the first Law is the Word, the "Holy Gospel": Rule, GGCC OFS and particular Statutes (International and National) are the help to put it into practice in the style of Francis of Assisi;
- ✓ the OFS is based on fraternal relations and dialogue is the absolute priority, especially for those who exercise the ministry of service;
- ✓ first comes the brother/sister and then the norm, which must always be read in the light of the Gospel and the general sense of OFS own right, never as a phrase in itself;
- ✓ tenderness and mercy are the first precepts to be put into practice, but when necessary firmness must also be used;
- ✓ norms are not sharp swords with which to stifle the life of the Council or with which to strike the brothers/sisters, but tools to live responsibly the service office and being Secular Franciscans;
- ✓ the norms and decisions must be respected and applied: a Councilor cannot do his/her own thing because this creates confusion, division but above all suffering in the brothers and sisters of the Council and of the Fraternity;
- ✓ techniques can help but must not prevail on the fraternal path and distort the sense of each service;
- ✓ who is called to be "soul and guide" of the Fraternity has the task of knowing how to recognize and value the talents of each for the good of the OFS and of the Church;
- ✓ continuing formation: a member of the Council who is not formed and is unaware slows down the life of the Council.
- ✓ any office in the Council is an expression of service to the OFS and to the brothers/sisters. Who thinks in terms of power, betrays his identity and belonging and is like the tares in the wheat field.
- ✓ The office of Minister cannot be compared to the office of President of any civil law association: it has the function of coordination and representation, it has specific tasks but does not have "power" prevailing over the other members of the Council.

Pope Francis stressed that, like Jesus, we must serve without asking for anything and has restated that it is not necessary to take possession of the service “*transforming it in a structure of power*” .

IV Life in the Council: in particular, the duties of the Local Council

Since the function of “government” in the OFS is collegial in nature, it is the Council, as a multi-personal body, which must exercise the “animation and guide” service, carrying out responsibly the tasks indicated in the Constitutions and in the National Statutes for each level; to achieve this, all members are called to actively collaborate on every aspect and issue addressed.

The Council of the Local Fraternity has the greatest responsibility within the Order, because it has the task of discerning in order to make decisions on vocations and taking care of the life witness of the professed.

The Local Fraternity, indeed, is the “*first cell of all the Order*” (art. 22 Rule); it has juridical personality in the Church and, sometimes, also in the State; its Council is the legal entity responsible for animating and guiding it (art 21 Rule) on the basis of what the Chapter has resolved on life and organization (art. 49.2 GGCC).

The organization may involve the same composition as the Local Council, whose **minimum and essential** offices are those indicated in the art. 49.1 GGCC, but the elective Chapter may decide to add further service offices based on the project established for the following three years (for example: family ministry or justice, peace and integrity of creation) or as a result of the work done in the completed period (for example, the establishment of a local YouFra Fraternity and, consequently, the need to activate the OFS representative office for YouFra according art. 97.4 GGCC).

The tasks of the Local Council are exactly indicated in art. 50 of GGCC and are distinguished between:

- a) promotion and increase of formation and concrete apostolate (n. 1);
- b) specific responsibilities in the apostolic field related to “animation and guidance” (n. 2) which require "concrete and courageous initiatives, appropriate to the situation of the Fraternity".

While within the unity of the Order, the service of animation and guidance must be adequate to the reality of the Fraternity: it is unthinkable that photocopy Fraternities exist, because each has its own characteristics and peculiarities which the Council must take into account. This also applies to the Regional and National levels.

In particular, the tasks listed in art. 50.2 GGCC are real obligations that the Council **must always exercise collegially**, so that the decisions taken and related acts are valid, and which cannot be ignored as they are an expression of the “animation and guidance” of the OFS, in particular of the executive and administrative functions.

Let’s analyse them individually:

- a) “*to decide on the acceptance and admission to Profession of new members*” according to what is established respectively by Artt. 39.3 and 41.1 GGCC. It’s the specific duty of the Local Council to scrupulously respect the stages of the initial formation path: initiation; admission; temporary profession (where deemed necessary), perpetual profession as indicated in the National Statute or, if not yet present, in the GGCC. It cannot exempt an aspirant from the time of initiation and / or admission only because he is a presbyter /bishop / has participated in the meetings / is teacher of religion etc. for years, much less can shorten the formation time foreseen by the National Statute or by the GGCC. It is the Council that makes the decision: NOT the Minister or the Formator, let alone the Assistant. The minutes of the secret vote must be

drawn up on the register of the Council or in any case in one of the registers of the Fraternity.

b) *“to establish fraternal dialogue with members who find themselves in any particular difficulty and to adopt any consequent measures”*. Fraternal dialogue is fundamental in the OFS and permeates every aspect of the Order’s life. Dialogue must be effective and concrete, with personal meetings, not simply “formal” or “on paper”;

c) *“to accept any request for withdrawal and to decide on the suspension of a member of the Fraternity”*. The Council, through mainly the Minister and the Assistant, **MUST ALWAYS** seek concrete dialogue with the brother/sister in difficulty (art. 56.1) or affected by a possible sanctioning measure (art. 56.2). In the event of suspension, the Council must also establish the duration of the measure and the decision must then be included in a decree which must be communicated directly to the interested person in writing or by reading in front of two witnesses, if he/she is illiterate;

d) *“to decide on the establishment of sections or groups in conformity with the Constitutions and Statutes”*. The need for the Council to evaluate the possible establishment of sections or groups may rise only when the number of professed of a Fraternity is high (and perhaps the Chapter has established some pastoral priorities). In this case, it must keep in mind the programmatic address given by the Chapter to identify the thematic areas of the sections and / or groups and the opportunity to set them up, taking care to ensure fraternal meetings between all the professed;

e) *“to take decisions concerning the disposal of available funds and, in general, to deliberate about the financial management and the economic affairs of the Fraternity”*. It is the specific responsibility of the Council to deal with the ordinary economic administration of goods of the Fraternity, with regard to the general direction, and ensure compliance with the purpose of the OFS patrimony, which is of a community nature (art. 11 Rule): solidarity with the most needy; generosity with the Church and with the members of the OFS; support for fraternal initiatives and activities. To this end, it must help the members of the Fraternity to understand the meaning and importance of the economic contribution of each members for the life of the Order (art. 25 Rule; art. 30.3 GGCC), also making known the activities of the higher levels and the nature of the service of the brothers / sisters. The task of carrying out what is established by the Council is the Treasurer’s;

f) *“to assign tasks to the Councillors and other professed members of the Fraternity”*. When the National Statute provides for the block vote of the Councillors, the Council has the duty to identify the individual service offices and to entrust them to each member (as soon as possible if it’s not already established in the National Statute), so as to ensure continuity in the animation and guidance of the Fraternity in the various aspects of fraternal life. Furthermore, for the good of the Fraternity, it has the duty to identify the brothers/sisters who can help the Council in the various aspects of the service such as, for example, formation, family ministry, active apostolate or YouFra (as fraternal animator, art. 97.2 GGCC);

g) *“to ask the competent superiors of the First Order and Third Order Regular for suitable and prepared religious as Assistants”*. Article 91.1-2 GGCC specifies what the Local Council must do: ask for the appointment of the Assistant and then agree with the Major Superior on the person deemed suitable and prepared for this delicate and important service. It must help the Major Superior to understand that the assistant should be appointed in the spirit of mutual vital communion;

h) *“to perform any other duties which are required by these Constitutions or necessary to achieve their goals”*. Other duties under GGCC are:

- 1) To carry out the decisions of the Fraternity’s Chapter;

- 2) To perform the necessary acts to acquire the civil juridical personality of the Fraternity, when deemed useful (artt. 29.2 and 54.1);
- 3) Putting the decisions of the higher level Councils into practice, starting with the International one; implement their programs adapting them, if necessary, to their local reality (art. 33.2);
- 4) To decide on any exemption from the initiation time (art. 38.3). For YouFra members this exemption is possible;
- 5) To prepare an adequate formation plan for the various formative stages, with specific meetings and courses (as well as for initiates and admitted), for the newly professed and those in temporary Profession (art. 44.2) and for permanent or ongoing formation (art. 44.3), which involves the whole Fraternity;
- 6) To approve the annual report drawn up by the Minister to be sent to the higher level Council (art. 51.2.b);
- 7) To express consent to request fraternal and pastoral visits (art. 51.2.d);
- 8) To constantly check the participation in the life of the Fraternity by the professed members; to declare those who for valid reasons of health, family, work or distance are prevented from participating in community life in practice and take all useful initiatives to keep contact with them alive (art. 53.3);
- 9) Before the end of the mandate, have the financial and patrimonial situation checked (in case the Fraternity administers or possesses goods) by an expert person or by the Fraternity's auditors, if existing (art. 54.3);
- 10) To decide on the request for the transfer of a professed incardinated to another Fraternity to his own Fraternity (art. 55);
- 11) In cases of "dismissal" and "declaration that the person has ceased to be a member of the Order" to establish a fraternal dialogue and offer help to the professed member concerned; to acquire and examine the documentation and all necessary information; to ask the higher level Council to dismiss the professed or to collect the proof that the person has ceased to be a member of the Order (art. 58.2 and 3);
- 12) To implement the decrees of the higher Council which contain the decision of a hierarchical recourse (art. 59);
- 13) In case of vacant office: to elect the Vice-minister from within (art. 81.2); to proceed with the replacement of the Councillor office in the manner prescribed by the National Statute (art. 81.3);
- 14) To reflect; to evaluate and – if deemed appropriate – to accept the resignation of the Minister (when not made in the Chapter) or of a Councillor; to send the communication of the Minister's resignation to the Minister of higher level for his confirmation (art. 83);
- 15) Fraternal dialogue and subsequent information to the Council of higher level in case of non-fulfilment of the duties of the Minister; fraternal dialogue and decision of removal of the other offices of the Council, by secret vote (artt. 84.1 and 3);
- 16) To promote the establishment of children's groups and the youth vocation with initiatives, first of all sensitizing the Fraternity on this specific responsibility of apostolate (artt. 25 and 97.1);
- 17) To care for good relations with the diocesan bishop and to ensure that the professed members respect the pastoral, spiritual and normative provisions

given by the same (Art. 101.2) by the Diocese, which do not conflict with the proper law of the OFS;

- 18) To cooperate and collaborate with the local and diocesan Churches and with the groups and movements present in them (artt. 102 and 103);
- 19) To decide, in the first meeting after be elected or within the terms provided for by the National Statute (if such a rule exists) for the handover, about authorizations to some current tasks of the Council (example; who can access bank accounts, who can sign specific type of documents of the Council, who can receive documentation addressed to the Council, etc.);
- 20) To send a presentation letter to some organizations related with the Fraternity (higher levels, Provincial of First Order - TOR, Parish, etc.) about the election of the new Council.

This list is not exhaustive of all the other duties which fall to the Council, but indicates the majority.

The spirit with which this service must be carried out in community is that of “*washing the feet*” (Jn 13,14; IV Admonition).

In addition to what is specified above, each office (Minister, Vice Minister and Councillors), at each level, must carry out the specific tasks that fall to it, as indicated in the Constitutions and in the National Statute.

V Practical suggestions

1. Know your service

When elected to a Council, the members, both individually and as a Council, study and deepen together in the Rule, GGCC and the National Statute, in particular:

- the duties of the Council as a whole;
- the duties of each individual Council member in relation to the specific service office covered;
- the way decisions are reached;
- the official contacts with the higher level;

2. Communication

It is important to be clear in your communication, inside the Council, and to the other members.

Ask the opinion of the other members before making important decisions.

Communicate your decision clearly to the other Councillors.

It's necessary that communications to the Fraternity and to the brothers is written in a clear, understandable way for all and contain all the elements useful for understanding the subject of the communication.

This is even more important when it comes to informing a professed member of a provision that concerns him/her: in this case it's necessary to use even more fraternal and respectful language.

3. Registration/verbalization

It's important that:

- a) All the Fraternity's activities, the Chapters and the meetings of the Council are recorded in the appropriate registers;

- b) The convocations of the Council and the Chapter/Assembly are made in writing, with the indication of the day, time and place as well as the agenda, so everyone can prepare themselves adequately for the meeting;
- c) The annual report to the higher level Council is prepared in time by the Minister, with the contribution of the various offices involved (Secretary, Treasurer, Formator, etc). The report to the Chapter by the Minister is shared, discussed and approved among all Council members before its presentation;
- d) It would be useful to prepare a monthly "Bulletin" for the Fraternity, in which to insert the calendar of fraternal meetings with the annual program; the communications of the members of the Council on the work done for each aspect of fraternal life they deal with; an update by the Treasurer on economic aspects; news relating to higher-level Councils; notices; news relating to the Parish and the Diocese; the Minister's report on his/her participation in Regional Chapters, meetings with other local Fraternities or parochial and / or diocesan realities. In addition to the communicative function, it would also be a useful tool for having historical memory of the life of the Fraternity.

4. Make your need know

The Council or its individual members should not hesitate to ask for help if they need it. When in difficulty, it's appropriate to ask for help from a member of higher level Council as well as from some brother/sister whose preparation and experience in that specific area of fraternal life is known. This is particularly important when it comes to juridical issues that affect the life of a professed member.

Always evaluate the suggestion received to understand if it is correct and if it relates to the situation you are dealing with (it is not said that the higher level is more prepared than you!).

VI Conclusions

These guidelines have tried to explain:

- the nature of the OFS;
- the finality and modality of the service in the Council;
- the characteristics and attitude of those who accept to serve;
- the specific tasks in particular of the Local Council, so as to have clear all the activities that belong to the same and that must NOT be done by other levels except in the exceptional case in which there is no Local Council.

The method chosen to write the document is both theoretical/formative and technical/practical: welcome it; study it and use it as an instrument of help for the service of brothers and sisters, the OFS and the Church.

SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER

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