



# PLENARY COUNCIL OF THE ORDER

## PRESENTATION OF PROPOSALS ON HOW TO ACCOMPANY

### THE DEGROWTH AND TRANSFORMATION OF ENTITIES

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The objective of this presentation is a reflection on the topic of the numerical decline and the consequent transformation of some Entities of our Order. It is a phenomenon that has become important, especially in some parts of the world, since about fifty years<sup>1</sup>. According to the official statistics of *Acta Ordinis*, the highest point of numerical development of the Order was in the 1960s (years of the Council): until 1960 the statistics were growing. From there a decline began: the most noticeable was in the decade 2000-2010 (minus 17.5%) but it remains important to this day (about 15%).

We cannot undertake here a reflection on the reasons for the numerical decline, common to all the great male and female religious institutes, even if in different proportions. This is a very obvious fact, which in any case should be analyzed at least with geographical references: the numerical decline, in fact, began 50 years ago in a part of Europe and in North America, then extending to all of Europe and today it has also spread to some countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa. We can say that today it is a global phenomenon, although to a different extent: I mentioned Asia and Africa, where the overall numbers in the continent are growing, but where some individual countries are registering a significant decline.

A first part of my speech will be of a "historical" nature, exposing what has happened and what has been done so far, while the second part would serve to help pose questions.

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<sup>1</sup>According to the *Acta Ordinis*, the total number of brothers with novices in the decades from 1950 until now is as follows:

1950	24,993		
1960	26,511	In the preceding decade	an increase of 1,518 (+ 5.7%)
1970	24,054	“	a decrease of 2,457 (- 10%)
1980	21,119	“	a decrease of 2,935 (- 14 %)
1990	19,214	“	a decrease of 1,905 (-10%)
2000	17,064	“	a decrease of 2,150 (-12,5%)
2010	14,525	“	a decrease of 2,539 (- 17,5)
2020	12,660	“	a decrease of 1,865 (-15%)
2024	11,881		





## *Awareness in our legislation*

Our current legislation has adapted only belatedly to this phenomenon, which was not provided for by our Constitutions and our general Statutes, which provided only for an optimistic transformation in the sense of growth (from Foundation to Custody to Province) but not the transformation of the opposite sign, in decline. Only in the last General Chapter of 2021 have some rules been inserted regarding the process of decline, with articles 125-126 of the General Statutes, which I will briefly summarize immediately.

Article 125 lists the situations in which to initiate a “suppression process”. They are the following: "the small number of friars, the advanced age of most of the members, the real inability of government and formation, the lack of candidates for several years, the lack of the necessary vitality in living and transmitting the charism in dynamic fidelity, in evangelization and in economic sustainability". This is a fairly realistic description of the situation of some Entities.

It is interesting to note the relationship with the requirements listed a few articles before, in art. 120 and 121, to erect a new Entity of the Order: these qualities "positively" are "the possibility of leading the life and mission of the Order, with the necessary requirements for formation, government, collaboration and economic sustenance", together with a minimum number of 40 friars and 6 Guardianates to become a Province and a number of 25 friars and 4 Guardianates to become an autonomous Custody. This correspondence between these articles seems logical: the same requirements that on the one hand are those necessary to erect a new reality, on the other are those indicated to suppress it, when they no longer exist.

Article 126 indicates a kind of procedure to implement a transformation of the "status" of the Entity: it starts from the Canonical Visit, where the Visitor is entrusted with the task of verifying whether the Entity possesses the prescribed requirements, in order to then give the Minister General, on the basis of the Visitor's report and with the opinion of the General Definitory, the possibility of officially requesting that the Entity itself formulates a proposal in the three-year period to face the difficulties identified and also giving the Minister general the possibility of intervening directly, if no congruent proposals were received from the Entity.

As you can see, this article does not establish what the Entity must do: it prescribes that the same government of the Entity "is required to prepare, within the three-year period following the Visit, a proposal for a solution to be submitted to the approval of the General Government regarding the type of Entity they intend to constitute". It means that there is not a single solution, that therefore discernment is necessary and that this discernment is entrusted in the first place to the interested parties, who must present "a proposal for a solution".





It seems to me that the objective of this article is above all to give the Minister General an opportunity to intervene in those situations in which those concerned go ahead as they have always done, without realizing (or perhaps, preferring to ignore) that there have been important changes in numbers and forces and that it is no longer possible to proceed as usual. Until 2021, the interventions of the Minister General did not have a specific legal basis and were generally based on his role of governing and of animation of the entire Order: after the introduction of this norm there is a sort of guide to the Minister's intervention.

I thought of starting my speech from here, since the title assigned to me is: "presentation of proposals on how to accompany the degrowth and transformation of Entities". Articles 125 and 126 of the General Statutes, in fact, are the most significant proposal that we have found, only for a few years, in our legislation.

## *Mergers and transitions to Dependent Entities*

Let's now move on to a brief history of how we have moved in the last thirty years in the face of the numerical decrease. I anticipate right away that the most common way of dealing with this phenomenon was that of the merger or the transition from an autonomous entity to a dependent entity. The data are arranged in chronological order.

- France-Belgium: after contacts in federative forms, a two-phase process took place: in 1996 the five Provinces of France and the one French-speaking Belgian province became two and in 2013 they went from two to one.
- Austria-Italy-Switzerland: in three stages: in 2001 the merger of the Provinces of Tyrol and Bolzano; in 2007 the merger of Tyrol (stronger numerically) and Vienna (weaker) in the current Province; in 2009 the Swiss Autonomous Custody became a custody dependent on Austria, as it continues to be today.
- Hungary: in 2006 the two Hungarian Provinces, one of which is numerically more fragile with respect to the other, merged into the new current Province, under pressure from the General Curia.
- Germany: in 2010 the four German provinces (Bavaria, Saxony, Cologne and Thuringia) became one, after a collaborative journey that began in the late 1990s.
- Italy: in 2011, after a three-year path of integration, the Province of Sardinia, numerically reduced, became a dependent Custodia of the Province of Assisi: after another 12 years, in 2023, the Custody was integrated into the Province.
- Belgium-Holland: in 2013 the Province of Saint Joseph in Belgium (Flemish language) becomes the Custody of Saint Joseph, dependent on the Province of Holland, to then become a single Entity.





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- Argentina-Paraguay: in 2014 the Province of Asunción absorbed two other numerically reduced Entities, one in Argentina and one in Paraguay, with a process of only two years, by decision of the General Curia.
- England-Ireland: in 2014 the English Province, numerically reduced, became a Custody dependent on Ireland, under pressure from the General Curia. In 2023 the Custody was integrated into the Province.
- Albania: in 2014 the Province of Albania became a Custody dependent on the Minister General.
- Spain: in 2015 six Provinces (1. Salvador de Horta, Cataluña; 2. José, Valencia; 3. Gregorio Magno, Castilla; 4. de Cartagena-Murcia; 5. de Granada; 6. Bética (Andalucía, Extremadura) and the Custody of S. Francisco Solano, in Peru, united in the new single Province of the Immaculate.
- Italy: after a process that began in the 1990s, in 2016 the six Provinces of Northern Italy (Turin, Genoa, Milan, Bologna, Venice and Trento) of very different numerical consistency, became a single Province.
- Italy: in 2017 the Provinces of Abruzzo (more fragile numerically) and the Roman (stronger) became a single Province, at the urgent invitation of the General Curia.
- Canada: in 2018 the two provinces, French-speaking and English-speaking, respectively, merged into a single province.
- Papua New Guinea: In 2019 the Autonomous Custody of Papua New Guinea becomes a Foundation dependent on the Minister General.
- USA: in 2023 five US Provinces (Holy Name, St. John the Baptist, Assumption, Sacred Heart, Guadalupe) merged into one, with the substantial but not formal adhesion of that of S. Barbara (California).
- Croatia: in 2025 the Province of Zadar became a dependent custody of the Province of Zagreb.

From this quick overview it emerges that there were two types of reaction to the numerical decrease: the decidedly most widespread was the merger between different Entities, while more rarely, in four cases, there was a decrease in the grade of the Entity, permanently passing from autonomous reality to dependent. Sometimes, in three other cases, this transition to the dependence of another Entity was a transition step towards a merger.

One can observe that some of these processes were chosen by the protagonists, and were usually longer and programmed, while others were suggested, requested or even imposed by the General Curia, with a greater speed of execution.





Finally, to have an objective look, we keep in mind that in the last 40 years 26 new Provinces and 8 Autonomous Custodies have also been born, plus some Foundations: I point this out so as not to give the impression that the only process in progress is that of the numerical and institutional decline. There is therefore also a growth, which must be kept in mind: in fact, between mergers on the one hand and the creation of new Entities on the other, the number of Entities of the Order is more or less the same. However, if the number of Entities remains constant while the general number of brothers falls, as we saw at the beginning, it means that the Entities remain the same in number but each becomes smaller numerically.

### *The evaluation of these processes of merging*

After briefly recalling the facts, let's move on to an attempted evaluation.

Each of the Entities that were involved in unification processes was recently sent a letter, in early 2025, asking to highlight highlights and shadows of the lived experience, along with some perspective for the future. Of the twelve Provinces asked, ten responded; starting from these answers, I now provide some emerged assessments.

First of all, the difference in the paths emerged with regard to the accompaniment of the process: while in some provinces there was a companion Delegate of the Minister General, in most cases this seems to have been missing or was not mentioned in the responses. Where the Delegate was present, his contribution was judged positively. In one province, external professional consultants have also been used, while in most cases no; in another case it is stated that it would have been useful.

Usually, for almost all Provinces, interprovincial collaboration began in the field of formation, at both the initial and permanent formation levels.

In some Provinces (not many), in the years immediately preceding the merger, a Council was created to coordinate the steps towards the union: a Council of Cooperation (formed by Ministers, Vicars and a Secretary), or a Council of Ministers, often accompanied by an Assembly of Definitors, etc.

One Province gave itself as an instrument a "Portiuncula Project" approved by all the provincial Chapters as an operational guide and basis of consensus, while others experienced Chapters of Mats and meetings of the Definitors as moments of confrontation, but often considered insufficient.





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From the answers the strengths highlighted in the answers were:

- a growth in fraternal relations; in particular, someone pointed out that the "mixed" Fraternities (that is, with friars from different Provinces) are more sensitive to formation proposals, more creative and available for change.
- a strengthening of the Franciscan identity, both as a charismatic quality and as a greater sense of belonging to the Order.
- an optimization of human resources, with savings of personnel for roles of responsibility and more efficient employment of the available personnel.
- an improvement in economic management, with common criteria and greater transparency, coming out of consolidated negative practices over time.
- an enhancement of formation, both initial and permanent.
- an improvement in evangelization, with the possibility of opening new paths or revitalizing existing ones.
- an improvement in institutional communication, with more effective information initiatives.
- greater opportunities for renewal, with the definition and resolution of problematic personal and community situations "frozen" for years, with new mission opportunities and the possibility of thinking more ambitious projects.

In the face of these positive sides, several critical issues have been highlighted:

- some logistical challenges, given the width of the territories of the new Entities and the difficulties of communication.
- administrative challenges, given the complexity of regional bureaucracies and the different situations of the Entities, differently organized and not always administratively updated.
- a certain defense of previous identities, with poor identification in the new Province and glances turned to the past, with the concern of protecting one's previous Entity.
- a poor mobility of the friars: only a certain part (according to a Province, a quarter) have agreed to leave the borders of their former Province.
- cultural differences have emerged, depending on different factors: The different regional origins, the different mentalities of the previous Provinces, with different visions of the Franciscan charism, the prevalence of personal projects for the absence of a culture of the community project.





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- the disappointments of expectations about the distribution of the friars: the naive hope that the merger would have solved all the personnel problems of the old Provinces turned out to be fallacious. A first provincial said: "The merger of four retirement homes does not create a youth hostel".
- disappointments regarding vocational growth: several Provinces hoped to solve or at least address with the merger the problem of vocational decline, but the union did not solve this problem, which persists.
- the shortcomings in the accompaniment of change: either in the initial phase, or because of the lack of a Minister's Delegate, or because of the lack of clarity of objectives and methods, and because of insufficient cultural preparation for the change taking place in our society, and because of the delay in starting the process, Both for the lack of a refoundation of Franciscan life.

From these answers also emerge indications, both for the Entities that have already achieved a merger and for the future unification processes.

It is recommended to the already united Entities to implement strategies to strengthen the common identity through ongoing formation, the care of the spiritual life of the friars and the development of shared projects, especially in evangelization. From a structural and organizational point of view, the need for a simplification of structures and the care of the balance between new and old presences is indicated, adding some indication for the unified provincial Definers, in a balance between the consolidation of unity and the management of diversity.

For the management of new merger processes, long-term planning is suggested, with clear and verifiable steps; an attention to people, with the enhancement of differences and the creation of interprovincial fraternities; an effective management of change, taking care of the communication and participation of the friars in the ongoing processes. For the necessary accompaniment, the importance of the support of a Delegate of the Minister General and also of professionals who are experts in these processes is emphasized, balancing the charismatic and institutional dimensions, avoiding a simple corporate reorganization as well as a disorganized and devotional reliance on Providence.

The General Curia is also invited to better support these processes, with a reflection that is expressed in accompanying protocols, in the preparation of expert Delegates and in a promotion of the exchange between Provinces.





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I conclude this part, inspired by the response of the Provinces, with two questions formulated by a Province, which seem interesting to me:

- Are the current mergers perhaps only preliminary phases of even greater mergers?
- Can the Conferences in the future become legally defined spaces of cooperation without abandoning or reducing the regionality and identity of the Provinces?

After this first part somewhat “historic”, of description and evaluation of what has been done so far, we move on to the second part of my speech, which tries to formulate some reflections and above all many questions starting from the data collected.

## *Reflections on the model applied so far*

As we have seen, since 1996 the mergers of Entities have begun or their transition from autonomous to dependent: it seems that this has been the prevailing model of response to the numerical and resource decrease.

After almost thirty years, I think we have to ask a question: is this the only valid model? And perhaps another question can be added: should we go on like this, thinking that even the Entities that have already implemented a merger must, in some cases, prepare for another broader merger? It seems to me that this proposal does not arouse much support, especially if we think of the type of merger used so far, which reproduces the model of Province that we know.

The problem is not only theoretical: it is arising, today, among some Provinces of COTAF, who are wondering how to look to the future, with a further numerical decrease.

A hypothesis that is emerging is to identify, on the territory of the Provinces concerned, a small number of fraternities that can have prospects of life in the coming years, creating a federation among them and investing in it the best energies present, accompanying the rest towards sunset. It is a project that for now is only sketchy and therefore we are not able to say much more about it.

On a general level, I think we should ask ourselves if a paradigm shift is possible compared to what has been done so far. Perhaps a change is needed with respect to the fundamental assumption, which is the structure of the Province as we know it. So far we have moved by joining Provinces that have become too small and forming larger Provinces, which nevertheless reproduce unchanged the same model of Province. Perhaps the time has come to change this model.





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A first level of change is the one that concerns the structure of the Province, with the institutional roles required by our laws. Is it possible to think of a more agile institutional structure? In addition to the key figures of the Minister with his council and with a provincial economist and a Guardian with an economist at the local level, perhaps it is possible to rethink everything else, in particular the structure of the Secretariats (formation and evangelization), the GPIC office, and the other provincial bodies, which create a consistent list of names in our files. Obviously, such a rethink would require new legislation, but that could be born, according to the principle that the law serves life, and not the other way around. In this regard, I point out that in some provinces a second thought has begun, also asking the appropriate dispensations of the Minister General: in fact, if you try some different experience today you have to be dispensed with our laws, which ask for the current structure. Obviously, before changing the laws, it is better to proceed with dispenses *ad experimentum*, and then try to reap the fruits of these experiences.

It is therefore a matter of thinking of a "lighter" Province, according to the indications of the last General Chapter which asked for "a global revision of the structural organization chart of the functioning of the Curia and the Order, starting to simplify it and activating a circularity capable of expressing our charisma today in a more concrete way" (Orientation 29). It seems that the key words of this process should be "simplify and lighten".

Another level of reflection, required by the need for a change in view of more agile structures, concerns the Order model. Today we think of it as consisting of friars inserted in Autonomous Provinces and Custodies (with the Entities dependent on them), which, however, are not simple administrative distributions of the single Order, but the true reality in which a friar feels inserted. In fact, today, a friar feels primarily belonging to a Province and only secondarily to the Order.

This is a characteristic feature of our Order, along with some others, and differentiates us from other religious Institutes (male and female) where the religious is aware of entering the Institute, feeling less important his belonging to one Province or the other; this belonging is sometimes determined by the General Superior and can change in the periods of life. A line of rethinking for us could therefore start from the slogan: more Order and less Province.

Let me note that, for us Franciscans, it would mean a return to the early years of *Fraternitas*, before 1217: it is only from this date, in fact, that the friars have been structured into Provinces. They, however, were thought differently from today, ascribing a great authority to the Minister General, who appointed the provincial Ministers and who moved the friars from one Province to another. This centralized structure lasted throughout Francis' life and beyond, until the Chapter of 1239, where the deposition of Friar Elijah also meant the seizure of power by the provincial Ministers and the beginning of a model similar to the one we know.





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I do not think that such a radical change can be possible in the short term, and perhaps it is not even necessary; I believe, however, that this reflection helps us to see that the problems that we recognize at the provincial level can be solved by giving more room for intervention at the general level. It is clear, in fact, that when an Entity decreases until it is formed by a few elderly friars who are afraid to ask for a change themselves, the intervention must start from the higher level, that is, from the Minister General, who invites the friars of that Entity to realize the reality and to propose possible paths. In fact, this is what the last General Chapter did by inserting articles 125 and 126 into our General Statutes.

In truth, one could add that, in addition to the Minister General, there is also another body of higher level than the Province, and it is the Conference of Ministers Provincial.

The question is: could the Conference be more directly involved in these situations of degrowth of the Entities? And what could be its role?

In truth, the current article 126 already provides that the Minister General "present the appropriate consultations and informs the respective Conference of Provincial Ministers", before issuing the decree that sets in motion the rethinking of the status of the Entity. And our Statutes always provide that, on the opposite side to degrowth, when it comes to erecting a new Entity, the Conference of Provincial Ministers is also consulted.

To date, therefore, there is provision for information or consultation of the Conference: would a more active role of the Conference itself in the process of accompanying the degrowth of the Entities also be useful? Would it be useful to give the Conferences (which are not government bodies) a more active role? Which role?

Finally, the other body above the Entities of the Order is the General Chapter and, in a certain way, also the Plenary Council. Would it be useful (and possible) to think about the involvement of the General Chapter or the Plenary Council in the processes of degrowth (and perhaps even growth) of the Entities?

As you can see, I am asking many questions, to stimulate the reflection that will have to take place in groups. It seems clear to me what the problem is from which to start: the numerical and qualitative degrowth of some Entities of the Order. We have seen what are the current legislative instruments to accompany this phenomenon, what have been the experiences of merger and reduction to a dependent entity of the last thirty years, and finally we have tried to start a reflection in this regard, with some consideration and some questions.

The task of continuing this reflection lies with the groups that will make proposals. "I have done my part. May Christ teach you what is yours!" (LM 14, 3).

