



## The Structures of Conferences in the OFM

*By Br. John Wong, General Definitor*

### Purpose and Function

- Conferences serve as forums for regional coordination and collaboration.
- They facilitate dialogue between Provincial Ministers within similar cultural and geographical contexts.
- They help implement broader initiatives of the Order at regional levels.
- Their evolution mirrors broader patterns of growth and decline within the Franciscan Order itself.

### GGSS 200

*§1 The Conference of Ministers Provincial, Custodes and Presidents of other Entities is of great importance for the promotion of unity, coordination and collaboration in the life and mission of the Order.*

*§2 A Conference is erected by a decree of the Minister General, with the consent of his Definitor, after the Ministers, Custodes and Presidents concerned have been consulted and when the conditions exist for its usefulness.*

*§3 It is obligatory for every Province, Custody and Foundation to belong to a Conference.*

*§4 In the erection or re-structuring of a Conference of Ministers Provincial and Custodes, it is necessary to keep in mind geographic proximity, the number of Provinces and other Entities, as well as their language and culture, but in such a way that at least five members constitute it.*

*§5 When a Conference is no longer able to function in accordance with art. 201 of these GGSS or when the number of Entities that are members of the Conference falls below five, the Ministers Provincial and the Custodes of the Conference, either sua sponte or at the instigation of the relevant General Definitor, shall initiate a process of evaluation with a view to a change of juridical status. The President of the Conference is obliged to send a report on the process to the Minister General at least once a year.*

### GGSS 201

*The principal duties and faculties of the Conferences are:*

- To bring together the Entities that constitute the Conference in order to devote themselves jointly to the common good of the Friars and of the respective parts of the Order.*





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- b. To offer assistance to the Minister General and his Definitory in the government and animation of the entire Order. To this end, in their meetings with the general government, the Presidents of the Conferences are to be consulted in questions of greater importance for the Order.*
- c. Along with the Minister General and his Definitory, to discern about the erection, unification and suppression of Provinces, Custodies and other Entities within its territory and to collaborate in the execution of decisions.*
- d. To help initial and ongoing formation as well as the life and mission of the Friars within its territory; to promote, with the Minister General and his Definitory, the work of the apostolate and missionary evangelisation and to support jointly the spread and establishment of the Order.*
- e. To discuss progress, major difficulties and problems existing in the territory of the Conference and to inform the Minister General about the remedies taken.*
- f. To help, either through personnel or material resources, individual Provinces, Custodies, Federations and Foundations of the Conference that are in difficulty because of a lack of Friars or their advanced age or because of an inability to act in a determined ministry, or because of poverty.*
- g. To discuss the questions to be dealt with in the General Chapter or Plenary Council of the Order and to send their conclusions and proposals to the Minister General in good time.*

## Origins and Inspiration

- Conferences in the Franciscan Order were modeled after Episcopal Conferences, which first emerged in Belgium in 1830. Others subsequently emerged in Europe, America and Australia.
- Episcopal Conferences received formal recognition during Vatican II through the decree *Christus Dominus* (1965).
- Similarly, Conferences of Major Superiors were acknowledged by the Council's decree *Perfectae Caritatis*.
- These structures are not deliberative bodies with jurisdictions over Ordinaries or Major Superiors; instead, they are designed to promote collaboration, shared experience, and unified action.

## Establishment

- Conferences of Provincial Ministers were first introduced in the OFM during the General Chapter of 1967.





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- The legislation regarding Conferences was included in the new General Constitutions, though full promulgation came in 1970.
- Initially, Conferences formed through grassroots initiatives of Provincial Ministers who chose to associate together.
- These early associations were recognized, rather than formally established, by the Minister General.

## **Growth and Expansion**

- By the late 1990s, the structure had expanded to 15 distinct Conferences.
- These Conferences encompassed approximately 116 entities across the globe.
- Each Conference represented Franciscan provinces within specific geographical regions.
- This arrangement reflected the global spread and diverse cultural contexts of the Order.

## **Formalization and Restructuring**

- A significant change occurred in 2005 when all Conferences received formal canonical erection.
- This change stemmed from the 2004 General Statutes, which required Conferences to be officially established by the Minister General.
- The restructuring process reduced the number from 15 to 13 Conferences (plus the Holy Land as a special case).
- This consolidation occurred through the merger of several existing Conferences.

## **Recent Developments**

- Further consolidation took place in 2021 with the merger of the Brazil and Southern Cone Conferences.
- This reduced the total to 12 Conferences plus the Holy Land entity.
- These changes reflect ongoing adaptation to the evolving realities of the Order.
- The history of Conferences demonstrates their capacity for structural flexibility in response to changing circumstances.





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## Current Conferences

As of 2025, the current Conferences are:

BOLIV Bolivariana Conference

BRACS Brazil and Southern Cone Conference

CAF Francophone African Conference

CEM Southern Europe Conference

CONAMO North Africa and Middle East Conference

COTAF Transalpine Franciscan Conference

EAC East Asia Conference

ESAC English Speaking African Conference

ESC English Speaking Conference

MEXAC Mexico and Central America (Guadalupana) Conference

SAAOC South Asia, Australia and Oceania Conference

SLAN North Slavic Conference

SLAS South Slavic Conference

## AFRICANA

## AFRICAN CONFERENCES

Acronym	Name	Seats	Total Entities	Total Countries	Total Friars
CAF	Francophone African Conference	Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Congo Brazzaville, D.R. Congo, Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Mauritius, Senegal, Togo	7	13	470
ESAC	English Speaking African Conference	Angola, Kenya, Rwanda, Mozambique, South Africa, Sudan, Zimbabwe	7	14	425





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## FCAO FRANCISCAN CONFERENCES OF ASIA-OCEANIA

Acronym	Name	Seats	Total Entities	Total Countries	Total Friars
EAC	East Asia Conference	Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Myanmar, Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam	10	12	941
SAAOC (FCAO)	South Asia, Australia and Oceania Conference	Australia, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Singapore, Sri Lanka	11	12	651

## UCLAF UNION OF FRANCISCAN LATIN AMERICAN CONFERENCES

Acronym	Name	Seats	Total Entities	Total Countries	Total Friars
BOLIV	Bolivariana Conference	Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela	7	5	709
BRACS	Brazil and Southern Cone Conference	Argentina, Brazil, Chile	12	5	1114
MEXAC	Mexico and Central America (Guadalupana) Conference	Guatemala, Haiti, Mexico	7	15	1155

## UFME UNION OF FRIARS MINOR OF EUROPE

Acronym	Name	Seats	Total Entities	Total Countries	Total Friars
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CEM	Southern Europe Conference	Albania, Spain, Italy	17	11	1943
COTAF	Transalpine Franciscan Conference	Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Low Countries, Romania, Switzerland,	7	12	622
SLAN (UFME)	North Slavic Conference	Czech, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Ukraine	9	16	1241
SLAS (UFME)	South Slavic Conference	Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia	6	13	975

## Others

Acronym	Name	Seats	Total Entities	Total Countries	Total Friars
CONAMO	North Africa and Middle East Conference	Egypt, Holy Land, Libya, Morocco, Turkey	6	14	319
ESC	English Speaking Conference	16: Canada, Ireland, Lithuania, Malta, USA	8	16	1008

## Some Strengths

### Organizational Adaptability

- Openness to reorganisation and optimism in face of changes
- Development of conference statutes and frameworks for cooperation
- Transparent economic management with clear budgets and reporting





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## **Collaboration and Unity**

- Strong collaboration and harmonious working relationships
- Regular meetings and good attendance
- Shared language facilitating unity and communication
- Sincere and fraternal sharing

## **Formation Initiatives**

- Collaborative programmes for initial and ongoing formation
- Combined novitiates
- "Under-10" meetings with significant interest

## **Ministerial Effectiveness**

- Effective Educational Pastoral Secretariat
- Annual gatherings for lay brothers
- Collaborative sanctuary management
- New perspectives for collaboration in interreligious dialogue

## **Social Engagement**

- Commitment to indigenous peoples and the poor
- Engagement with migration issues

## **Cultural and Linguistic Practices**

- Multilingual prayer practices respecting cultural diversity

## **Some Challenges**

### **Communication Issues**

- Communication challenges between Entity administration and General Curia
- Communication challenges within conferences and entities themselves
- Language barriers due to multiple languages across different countries
- Not all friars can participate in interprovincial meetings due to language limitations





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- Conference secretariats often play only marginal roles in communication
- Communication depends heavily on conference presidents, with inconsistent results

## **Structural and Planning Challenges**

- Decision-making focuses on short-term needs rather than medium/long-term planning
- Lack of proper evaluation of past decisions
- Poor support for community life from provincial governments and guardians
- Too few people carrying too many responsibilities

## **Collaboration and Unity Issues**

- Persistent "provincialism"
- Resistance to interprovincial and international fraternities in some provinces
- Collaboration viewed as a last resort rather than a proactive strategy
- Subjective perceptions sometimes prevail over common projects
- Some Entities remain at the margins of their conference
- Lack of common evangelization projects despite financial support
- Lack of shared programs in Evangelization and Mission

## **Administrative and Governance Challenges**

- Economic challenges of Entities
- Transfer of friars between provinces often occurs without necessary requirements or reports
- Some ministers lack of proficiency in common Conference language
- Travel difficulties between some countries due to distance and cost

## **Formation and Vocational Challenges**

- Declining vocations requiring consideration of collaborative futures
- Weak formation in some provinces
- Lack of qualified formators/ suitable members for formation team





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## **Adaptation to Change**

- Difficulty adapting to changing times (including diminishment)
- Uncertainty about the potential unions

## **Some Hopes/ Possible Futures**

### **Using Current Challenges as Opportunities**

- Leverage on downsizing processes for serious discernment and revitalizing core values and purpose

### **Enhanced Collaboration**

- Develop closer collaboration, especially in initial formation
- Establish common postulancy or novitiate programs
- Foster collaboration in ongoing formation, particularly in intercultural areas
- Increase involvement of the General Definitor in collaboration and various conference meetings
- Share experiences in managing cultural and educational centers
- Implement joint approaches to help migrants
- Strengthen ecumenical and interfaith dialogue initiatives

### **Improved Conference Structure and Governance**

- Reinforce the structure and collaboration of conferences
- Consider possibility of non-provincials with provincial experience to serve as conference presidents
- Update statutes to better reflect conferences' new situations
- Create clearer guidelines for conference secretaries, potentially making positions full-time or part-time
- Better define the General Definitor's role beyond just attending meetings

### **Strategic Planning**

- Increase meeting frequency to address issues more consistently





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- Develop unified approaches to address vocational decline
- Create shared visions for the future as numbers decrease
- Address remaining "provincialism" between entities
- Consider strategic changes to Conference membership

## **Mission and Purpose Clarification**

- Examine conference objectives more sincerely, especially regarding common projects
- Develop common evangelization projects for specific regions

## **Intercultural and Interfaith Emphasis**

- Prioritize collaboration in areas of interculturality
- Strengthen interfaith dialogue capabilities
- Focus on ecumenical engagement

## **Practical Operational Improvements**

- Increase meeting frequency where beneficial
- Address language diversity challenges constructively
- Improve coordination between entities despite geographical distances

## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

*Regarding the structure and functioning of the Conferences:*

- 1) *AFFIRMATIONS: What is our Order currently doing well?*
- 2) *HOPES: What could we concretely achieve as Conferences?*
- 3) *SUGGESTIONS: What would we need to do to achieve our desired outcome?*





## RESOURCES

### 1) *THE CONFERENCES IN THE OFM: HISTORICAL-LEGAL DEVELOPMENT AND NEW CHALLENGES TOWARDS THE FUTURE (2024)*

*This document offers an overview of the Conferences of the Ministers Provincial of the Order, and can be downloaded from:*

EN <https://ofm.org/en/conferences-in-the-ofm.html>

ES <https://ofm.org/es/conferencias-en-la-ofm.html>

IT <https://ofm.org/le-conferenze-nell-ofm.html>

### 2) *GENERAL CONSTITUTIONS & STATUTES OF THE ORDER OF FRIARS MINOR (2021)*

*Some additional statutes related to the roles and functions of conferences, in addition to GGSS 200 and 201, are :*

## REGARDING CPO/ GENERAL CHAPTER

GGCC 194

*The duty of the Plenary Council, assembled collegially, is the following:*

**2. to encourage relations and communications** between the General Curia and the Conferences, and between the Conferences themselves;

GGSS 143

§3 *Each Conference of Ministers Provincial must elect, according to the norm of the Statutes of the same Conference, one of the **solemnly professed lay brothers** residing in the territory as a **legitimate member of the General Chapter.***

GGSS 144

*The **Plenary Council of the Order** is to be convoked by the Minister General at the time and place established by the General Chapter or when it seems opportune to the Minister himself, with the consent of his Definitory, and, in addition, **any time the majority of the Conferences requests it.***





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GGSS 145

*§1 The **Council Members of the Plenary Council of the Order** are to be elected by the **Conferences of Ministers Provincial** so that two Council Members are present from each Conference.*

*§2 The Minister General, with the consent of his Definitory, can designate other Council Members for the Plenary Council, provided that the designated Councillors do not exceed half the number of the Conferences of Ministers Provincial.*

*§3 Friars, who may or may not be Ministers, can be elected as Council Members. The election of Council Members is made by the Conferences as they see fit, so that the Council Members will have been elected at least three months before the celebration of the Plenary Council. The names of the elected Council Members and of their substitutes are to be sent to the Minister General in good time.*

GGSS 146

*§1 The Minister General, with the consent of his Definitory, compiles the list of questions to be dealt with in the Plenary Council and is to ensure that this is sent to the members of the Conferences of Ministers Provincial six months beforehand so that they may **exchange ideas on the matters proposed**.*

## **REGARDING THE ROLE OF CONFERENCES**

GGCC 114

*§1 It is the duty of the Conferences of Ministers Provincial **to coordinate the works which provinces** undertake to carry out in fraternal co-operation, without prejudice to their autonomy; it is also their duty to find appropriate ways of **fostering that co-operation**.*

GGCC 143

*Those engaged in formation in the Order, in the Provinces and the Conferences of Ministers Provincial are to consult with one another so that they may **study their own experiences, foster mutual cooperation and promote unity of orientation by means of common criteria**.*

GGSS 42

*§2 Each Conference and Province is to draw up **Statutes** in which the **integration of JPIC** into the life and service of the Order is provided for during both initial and ongoing formation as well as for those that are, in a specific way, engaged in JPIC.*





## GGSS 50

§1 The **International Council for the Missions and Evangelisation**, composed of **delegates** from all the Conferences of Ministers Provincial and of other Friars, in accordance with the Special Statutes, helps the General Secretariat for the Missions and Evangelisation.

§2 Each Conference of Ministers Provincial elects a Delegate in accordance with the norms of the Conference itself and of the Special Statutes of the International Council for the Missions and Evangelisation.

## GGSS 53

§1 An **Interprovincial Secretariat for the Missions and Evangelisation** is to be instituted, if possible, for each Conference of Ministers Provincial. The main task of this Secretariat is to animate and promote cooperation, formation and exchange of experiences in the area of evangelisation and to set up relationships between the different Provincial Secretariats and between these and the General Secretariat for the Missions and Evangelisation.

§2 In each Conference of Ministers Provincial there is to be instituted, if it seems appropriate, an **Interprovincial Council for the Missions**, composed of the Delegate for the Missions and Evangelisation and by the Animators of the Missions, to promote the missionary spirit and activity within the Conference of Ministers Provincial and participation in the missionary initiatives of the Order; to animate interprovincial cooperation in the area of Missionary Evangelisation and, in accordance with the Special Statutes of the General Secretariat for the Missions and Evangelisation, to set up relationships with the General Secretariat for the Missions and Evangelisation.

## GGSS 80

§1 The **International Council for Formation and Studies**, composed of **Delegates** from all the Conferences of Ministers Provincial and other Friars, helps the General Secretariat for Formation and Studies in accordance with the Special Statutes.

§2 Every Conference of Ministers Provincial is to elect a Delegate in accordance with the norms of the respective Conference and of the Special Statutes of the International Council for Formation and Studies.

## GGSS 81

§3 Each Conference of Ministers Provincial, each Province and each other competent Entity is to draw up its own **Ratio Formationis and Ratio Studiorum**, observing the requirements of law and safeguarding the unity between initial and ongoing formation. These Rationes Formationis et Studiorum, approved in accordance with the Particular Statutes, are to be ratified by the Minister General.





## GGSS 83

§1 For the individual Conferences of Ministers Provincial there is to be established, if it is possible, a **Conference Secretariat for Formation and Studies**, whose duty will be to promote dialogue and collaboration on formation and studies and to meet frequently with both the General Secretariat and the Provincial Secretaries for Formation and Studies.

## GGSS 114

§2 The Ministers are **to promote intellectual activity** through Institutes of Studies and meetings in both the Provinces and the Conferences.

## GGSS 209

§2 The institution of some **permanent organisation between the Conferences of the same Continent (e.g., Presidency, Secretariat, along with the General Definitors of each Continent)** is recommended for the animation of common activities, i.e., formation, studies, evangelisation, justice, peace and the integrity of creation. These entities are to meet at determined intervals of time.

## GGSS 210

§2 The Conferences, along with the Minister General and his Definitory, are **to promote new kinds of international and inter-continental meetings** within the Order for a better exchange and sharing of goods of all kinds.

## REGARDING MEETINGS OF CONFERENCE PRESIDENTS

### GGSS 147

§1 At least once every two years, the Minister General is to convoke a meeting of the Presidents of the Conferences, either all of them or just those of a certain territory. The purpose of the meeting is **to consider, with a consultative voice, the issues, questions and matters of major importance for the Order.**

## REGARDING THE ROLE OF CONFERENCES IN CONSULTATIONS/ VOTATIONS

### GGCC 190

§2 After having consulted the Presidents of Conferences, the Minister General can, with the consent of the General Definitory, convoke an **extraordinary Chapter**, in which elections can also be held for those offices that then chanced to be vacant, when provision for those offices is a Chapter responsibility.





## GGCC 201

*§1 If the **office of Minister General becomes vacant outside of Chapter before the Feast of Pentecost in the year prior to a General Chapter**, the election of a new Minister General to complete the six-year term is carried out by the Presidents and Vice-Presidents of the Conferences of Ministers Provincial, convoked along with the General Definitory by the Vicar General and collegially assembled within two months counted from the time of vacancy.*

## GGCC 210

*Should the **office of Definitor General become vacant outside of General Chapter**, another friar is elected by the General Definitory to complete the six-year term after consultation with the Ministers Provincial of the Conference for which the Definitor who left office had been elected.*

## GGSS 64

*§2 A Province establishing a **new mission in a country where there is no presence of the Order** must inform the President of the Conference in the region where the new mission is located. It must seek to collaborate with neighbouring Provinces and Custodies in the work of initial and ongoing formation, and in other areas of animation and the organisation of missionary evangelisation.*

## GGSS 121

*§1 If Friars of one or more Provinces are living in a region where, in the judgement of the General Definitory, there is a sufficient number of Friars with a well-founded hope for the future growth of the Order, with the advice of the Ministers of the Conference of that region and having consulted the Friars, the Ministers Provincial concerned, on their own initiative or at the request of the Minister General, are to draw up an agreement. Once this is done the **erection of a new Province** or, if the case requires it, **of an autonomous or dependent Custody** can proceed, with due regard for the requirements of law.*

## GGSS 126

*§3 Should the report of the Visitor General not consider suitable the aforementioned elements in the Province or autonomous Custody, the Minister General, having verified the conditions reported, with the General Definitory and with its consent, shall decide by decree that the government of the Province or autonomous Custody – after appropriate consultation and having informed the Conference of Ministers Provincial of the matter – is to prepare, within three years after the Visitation – a plan, to be approved by the General Definitory, for **resolving the question regarding the nature of the Entity to be established**.*





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GGSS 129

*§2 For the **erection of a House within the territory of another Entity**, after the respective Conference of Ministers Provincial has been consulted, the consent of both the General Definitory and of the Definitory of the Province or Provinces concerned is required, as well as a prior agreement of cooperation between the parties.*

