

## **Final message COTAF (lay)<sup>1</sup> brother conference (8 to 12 April 2024)**

From Monday 8 to Friday 12 April 2024, the COTAF Conference of our Order (the Provinces of Romania, Hungary, Austria, Germany, France-Wallonia and the Netherlands-Flanders and the Custody of Switzerland) held the brotherly conference.

Brothers from all entities were present. There would have been a total of 27 participants, but in the weeks prior to the Conference four brothers had to cancel: three (two Germans and a Frenchman) due to health problems and one from the Netherlands because his presence as a guard in his community was not missed this week. could be.

The final number of participants was 23. That is approximately 11% of the number of brothers in the provinces. (The original number of participants was just above 13%). It must be considered that many of the brothers who do not participate are 80+. In a few cases a brother was unable to attend due to work or did not want to participate.

Of these brothers, three were between 71 and 80, three between 61 and 70, eight between 51 and 60, five between 41 and 50 and four between 31 and 40.

The basis of the conference was the questionnaire from the generalate. About 25% of the brothers responded. The number of respondents from Hungary and the Netherlands was particularly low. The number of reactions from Romania and Flanders is even 0. To this number we also include some 'angry' reactions to the fact that such a conference is being organised.

### **Questionnaire**

Themes had to be extracted from the questionnaire, which was the assignment of the organizational team. This was experienced as difficult because the questionnaire was very much about the formation. It became clear that this is hardly or not a theme within COTAF. What did become extremely clear was that (A) the brothers were often very upset about the (in their eyes) reintroduction of the term 'lay brother' and (B) to a slightly lesser extent brothers are against these types of meetings which (in their eyes) to restore the old division in the order. See also the reason why brothers absolutely did not want to participate.

Both the organizational team and the participants were therefore convinced that the desired theme of 'training' should not be on the agenda as such. The chosen themes were therefore: (1) our identity as Franciscans in Europe, (2) our life in brotherhood in Europe and (3) our life in a secularized Europe. Three themes that were 'too general' for one (because they apply to all Franciscans) and for others they were nice (because not too specific for just the brothers).

### **Passage of the days**

The organizational team had asked all brothers to arrive on Monday at the FMM sisters of Domus Maria delle Rose in Santa Maria degli Angeli. In the evening, we gave a welcome speech before dinner. On Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday mornings, one of the themes was always central. After morning prayers and Mass with our fellow brothers in Porziuncola and breakfast with the sisters, a member of the organizational team gave a brief introduction to the theme. Then we split into (alternating) groups of 4 or 5 brothers to talk about the themes. We then shared the results to the plenum.

In the afternoon we always visited one or more places in Assisi. San Rufino, Chiesa Nuova, Santa Chiara and San Damiano on Tuesday; to pray vespers at the latter place. On Wednesday we visited the San Francesco and the Sacro Convento (led by Br. Thomas Freidel OFMConv) and attended the vespers in the Porziuncola. On Thursday we visited the brothers of the Carceri, where we were excellently received with coffee, soft drinks, and sweets, and then were shown around to finally attend adoration and vespers with the sisters and brothers there. That evening we had a communal recreation with the FMM sisters. Finally, on Friday the day started as the previous days, but everyone started the return journey after breakfast.

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<sup>1</sup> We will return to the brackets later in this message.

### **The usefulness of such a meeting**

The most important topic of discussion, both from the responses to the questionnaire (whether in letter form or otherwise), at official moments and in between, clearly showed the usefulness of such a meeting. Fear seemed to be the main focus, only to recreate the division that we had tried to overcome. What persuaded the participants to participate was the opportunity to experience the international character of the Order and the knowledge that other conferences are still far from overcoming the gap between brothers and brother-priests.

### **Fraternal order**

History and the Church have turned the movement around Saint Francis, which included only a single priest and therefore formed an order of brothers, into a clerical order. In the bishops' view, Franciscans are "practical" in helping to administer the sacraments. The result has been that people do not know about the existence of the brothers. Each of us has had negative experiences of having to explain that 'brother' does not mean that you are still in training or that you may just be a 'simple soul'. (Consider questions such as: are you a priest or *just* a lay brother?) The world recognizes priests and sisters/nuns. Brothers – in the past too often hidden behind 'the fathers' – are unknown. Sometimes we even have to say that we are “male sisters” to make it clear what we are.

We have all had negative experiences with this within the order as well. Sometimes because brother priests still think that we are there for jobs such as shining shoes, but also because the brother priests, from the time when out of 'humility'/'being less', insisted on doing tasks for which they previously turned their noses. picked up. They can do everything, and we cannot (administer sacraments). As a result, we are sometimes seen as 'brothers with a defect'.

### **One Order, two equal vocations**

The equality that the Order so strived for has therefore been achieved essentially less than one might think. It seems to deny that it is a calling in itself that God gives us. The church has vocations for: marriage, the priesthood, the (permanent) diaconate, consecrated virgin ordination, sisterhood, and brotherhood. We ask the Order to recognize this much more clearly. This already starts during the formation period. We'll come back to that in a moment.

We would like to call on the order to reconsider this in order to come closer to Saint Francis' ideals. We are a brotherhood. Being a brother is central. The rest comes with it: whether you are a sexton, teacher, headmaster, cook, priest, guest brother, nurse, doctor, or gardener.

We must recognize that our order has two equal vocations: that of brother and that of brother-priest. We are well aware that we are a more heterogeneous group than the brother priests. This starts with the fact that some of the brothers actually experienced the call to brotherhood and others perhaps wanted to become a priest, but lacked the study capacity and therefore could not become a priest. This makes it more complicated to talk about us as one group. We live our lives out of love and in response to God's calling. That's why we say 'yes' to it every day.

### **Lay brother and 'brother-non-priest'**

Both the terms 'lay brother' and 'brother-non-priest' are experienced as annoying. 'Lay brother' is old-fashioned, unclear and is met with protest from our brothers and sisters of the OFS who rightly claim that they are the true 'lay brothers' and 'lay sisters'. “Brother-not-priest,” as is a common alternative, is even stranger, because you emphasize what you are not. You also don't say: "I'm 'not-blonde', 'not-woman' or 'not-teacher'"...

We want to be addressed as 'brother'. For 'the others' in the order, we consider Jesus' call and Saint Francis' wish in mind (do not let yourself be called 'father' (i.e. 'father')!), the terms 'brother-deacon', 'brother-priest' and (the most common) 'brother bishop' are possible. Which brings us back to the title of this post and the brackets contained within it. As far as we were concerned, it was a 'brothers' conference'.

## **Division of tasks**

We further note that when dividing the tasks within the order (as definator, commissioner, secretary, etc.), the brother-priests are often 'addressed' before the brothers. However, the priesthood has no influence whatsoever on whether or not a person is suitable for the task. On the one hand, it would be good if the tasks were divided 'blindly' at this point, but on the other hand, these tasks could be given to the brothers, so that the brother-priests can devote their time to what they became priests for: dividing the sacraments. Something that these times, with their shortage of priests, are longing for. For example, in one of the COTAF provinces it has been customary for years that the Guardians are by definition not brother-priests.

## **Prayer**

A major prejudice that we experience is that priest brothers reproach us for them being busier than we are. That is something that was also reflected in the questionnaire. Our perspective on this is that we notice that we as brothers attach greater value to communal prayer. Our fellow brother priests sometimes fail to mention (in our ears excuses) that 'hearing confession', 'reading Mass' and having 'pastoral conversations' is also prayer for them and that communal prayer is therefore 'too much' for them. is becoming.

For us brothers, common prayer is one of the main pillars of our fraternal life. And because of our presence there, we are 'reproached' for being quieter... despite the range of tasks in church (sacristan, pastoral care, etc.), care, education, communication, etc. Our opinion is that the brother priests can be happy that we keep the common prayer going, as a sign to the world. It makes us a 'spiritual community' instead of a 'group of men living together.' In small communities we experience prayer as more intense than in larger communities.

In today's Europe, we notice that the world desperately needs the spirituality of Saint Clare and Saint Francis and prayer.

## **Formation**

As mentioned, the formation of the brothers was not a major theme, because the formation within COTAF is experienced as good. Just some small recommendations. In most provinces the question is asked during formation: "Do you want to become a priest?" Other provinces consistently ask, "do you want to be a brother or do you want to become a brother-priest?" The latter is much better. It shows that in our order two equal vocations are possible. Anyone who only asks 'half' a question subconsciously creates the idea that becoming a priest is the default option, the other an alternative. The formation often seems strongly focused on such a standard option (becoming a priest), the focus should be on 'being a brother'.

A second recommendation is that it is good to appoint a brother to the formation team (and especially the novitiate team). It is good and enriching for every brother, including those who want to become a priest (or already are when they enter).

A third recommendation, which goes back to the division of tasks, is to properly equip brothers and brother-priests for tasks entrusted to them. Now Franciscans are regularly faced with tasks for which they have not been trained. Moreover, there seems to be a tendency among brother priests to think that after ordination one can do anything and take on any task, which is of course not the case.

## **Fraternal coexistence in community and entity**

Good mutual communication is essential to be able to live together as a community. Every member of the community must be willing to share something personal with others. Only in that way, understanding for each other can grow. It is very important to keep the shared matters 'internal'. When you hear your personal story at the local weekly market, you will be careful before you say something again in the future.

Communication is more challenging in larger communities than in smaller ones. If communication only takes place via email and WhatsApp (i.e. to avoid direct confrontation), this is a red flag. Then the point begins where the community begins to fall apart.

It takes courage to raise community issues with the Guard, but it is essential. Sometimes a Guardian has a tendency to 'friend everyone' in order to be seen as friendly. That's a bad sign. A good guardian is not a pleaser. There is a danger that (a) brother(s) will abuse it. That is also a red flag.

All this depends on the vow of obedience. The name of this vow contains a part in both German and Dutch that comes from the verb 'hear'. This vow calls for staying within earshot of each other. Then you can hear what the other person needs, and you can trust that the other person also hears your need. We noticed too much focus in our smaller provinces on the question "which communities do we keep?" instead of the question "which brothers are there and what are they willing and able to do?" This second question should be central.

Regarding everything stated under this heading, we see no differences between the brothers and the brother priests. It applies to all of us equally.

### **Missionary**

Although a strange translation has become common in many languages ('go in peace'), the Holy Mass ends with the words 'ita missa est': 'you have been sent'. So we are all sent. This is also a point that is certainly not reserved for the brother priests. The following also applies to all Franciscans.

Our order is a missionary order. By the word 'missionary' we no longer mean the old-fashioned 'winning souls'. Bearing in mind the words of Saint Francis 'preaching, if necessary, with words', it is about being present and setting an example through your (humble, peace-loving and friendly) actions.

We see no distinction between the brothers and the brother priests. We do see a small advantage with 'us'. People from outside often find us easier to access. With a brother priest they always see 'the office' shining through. The brothers are more at eye level. They can talk to us about faith topics at eye level.

It's about being present. Move among people in a habit; at the station, in the tram, on a bench in front of the monastery. It makes people (led by the Holy Spirit) curious; they will speak to you. This is how contact was made. It is exactly as Saint Francis (chapter 16 of the provisional rule) prescribes/recommends to us. We note that 'new evangelism' is a concept that has been hijacked by some modern, new, and ultra-conservative evangelism movements. They use a much more aggressive method of contacting people with the aim of converting them to Christianity. For example, by spontaneously approaching people, going door to door, demonstrating in front of abortion clinics, and so on. That's not our way. In this way you get in the way of the Holy Spirit: they create bad blood and then move further away from their goal. We therefore warn against the use of the term 'new evangelization' because it will be misinterpreted (negatively).

Of course, difficult conversations can also arise, for example about past (and unfortunately still current) sexual abuse within the Church. Our experience is that honesty, openness (acknowledging the pain) and a listening ear work best. Even a victim can feel understood, making healing easier. We see that committees are doing good work in all our countries.

Once again, it's about being present. We do not have to shy away from new avenues: a flash mob in a tram to draw attention to the homeless, presence between other groups (for example Muslims or Gypsies) and between 'subgroups' within them, establishing peace, walking through the city, and so on. These are all examples from 'practice'.

Being present is also reflected in the tasks we take on. The Church is inclined to strongly withdraw us from parish ministry. However, our Franciscan spirituality is more of a spirituality of social matters (the poor, the sick, the seeking, etc.).

Sometimes we seem to focus on newer communities that attract new members more easily. But we must not forget that, unlike them, we have 800 years of tradition. Franciscan spirituality has stood

the test of time, it has solid roots and that is our great advantage over those whose roots are not yet so solid.

### **Other**

Our order recently has a working group 'new Franciscan forms of life'. We see that they are doing a good job. In their work we endorse that: living in brotherhood, living in prayer and living in contact with other (particularly poor) people and learning from them are central.

We conclude that the Church is too preoccupied with itself, as if it wants to reinvent the wheel. The Church must be willing to give up some of its power and actually, like Saint Francis, come into contact with people at eye level and be visible on the street. We as Franciscans are at the forefront of this trend.

The differences between COTAF entities are often quite emphasized. During these days we have (once again) experienced that we all face the same challenges and that differences seem greater than they actually are. In this area, the different languages within Europe, and COTAF in particular, are the largest. Despite the language challenge, we enjoyed this brotherly meeting. We look forward with confidence to the future, which will undoubtedly be more international.

We all live in a secularized Europe. That's a fact. This also means that in all our countries Church and State are strictly separated. We are happy with that. We would not like to live in a 'Catholic version' of Iran, where bishops and cardinals call the shots.

### **Finally**

We would like to end this final message with a few words of thanks. First of all, to our general curia that has the courage - probably despite all resistance - to take this path and give us the opportunity to give our opinion about the order as brothers. We are very aware that the position of our fellow brothers in other conferences is less balanced compared to the brother priests.

We would also like to thank our Sisters Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM) of Domus Maria delle Rose in Santa Maria Degli Angeli for the great hospitality and Franciscan sisterhood with which they received us.

We also thank the brothers of the Porziuncola and San Damiano communities for their hospitable reception in prayer and Mass, Bro. Thomas Freidel ofm conv for the hospitable reception in the San Francesco and the Sacro Convento and the brothers and sisters of the Carceri for their warm welcome in the community and chapel.

The final word of thanks goes to our own fellow brothers in our entities: both those who made it possible for us to leave our communities for a few days and those who welcomed us hospitably on our way there and back.

The reception in the places along the way and in and around Assisi may not be the 'perfect joy' ('perfetta letizia') as Saint Francis described it, but it is a great joy to be able to be at home with each other as brothers and sisters in so many places.

On behalf of all participants in the COTAF Brother conference,

The organizational team

*Feje's brother István (Hungary)*

*Brother Mathias Müller (Switzerland)*

*Brother Hans-Peter Bartels (Netherlands)*

*PS We heard from each entity that some brother priests (particularly the younger ones) also wanted such a process for them. Perhaps the General Curia should think about this?*