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KOINONIA

... together on the journey

“FRANCISCANS IN THE CELEBRATION OF JUBILEES”



The Holy Gospel as Rule of Life

Fr. Stefan Acatrinei, OFM Conv.



Introduction

The Supreme Pontiff, Pope Francis, as can be seen from his many initiatives, is doing everything possible to re-purpose the ideal of St. Francis of Assisi, whose name he took, not only for the Church but also for today's society¹, since the Poverello of Assisi is "the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation"². By maintaining the ontic and ethical relationship with God, the person enters a sublime value situation, where freedom of conscience, forgiveness, and unlimited love prevail, and it is finally absorbed by the Theo-anthropological primacy, whose characteristic is cosmic brotherhood.

If, according to the Supreme Pontiff, the proposals of St. Francis are valid for the problems of the Church and of today's world, we can ask ourselves: what is its value, what does the Norm of his life and of his Order, the Rule, represent today for those who have embraced his way of life and share his values and ideals?

So, let us now turn our attention to the Franciscan Rule to perceive it simply as a form of life. In fact, this is how Saint Francis conceived it, and his intention was very clear from the very beginning, and it is evident from the very first verse, where it is specified: "The rule and life of the Friars Minor is this: to preserve the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ..."³.

The spiritual dimension of the Franciscan Rule

Thus, the role and purpose of the Friars Minor, in the intention of St. Francis, is none other than to become and to be custodians of the Holy Gospel, of course not in libraries or special places, but by incarnating it in their being. Francis is aware of the value and importance of the word of God and is absolutely convinced that life, in all its fullness (cf. Jn 10:10), dwells only in this word⁴. We can say that the "Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" constitutes the matter while the Rule, conceived by Francis, shapes its form. So the Rule is not life in itself, for only the word of God is life, but the Rule is one of the forms through which life expresses itself, and manifests itself.

¹ Cf. In a particular way, *Laudato Si'*. Lettera Enciclica sulla cura della casa comune, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015.

² <https://www.thecatholictelegraph.com/pope-francis>. Accessed 15 May 2023.

³ LR I 1.

⁴ Cf. M. CONTI, „La Sacra Scrittura nella Regola francescana”, in *La Sacra Scrittura e i Francescani*, Roma, 1973, 31-47.

All of us, whether brothers of the First Order (OFM, OFMConv, OFMConv) and TOR, sisters of the Second Order, brothers and sisters of the Franciscan Secular Order (OFS) as well as the laity, have our inner aspirations concerning our life; these could be summarized very briefly in three demands and one fear:

- the need to give meaning to life: unfortunately, we see how sometimes certain actions are nothing more than the consequence of obligations, as if they wouldn't have a well-defined purpose (sometimes it may be physical work, sometimes even prayer); in theory, we know very well what the purpose of these actions is, but experimentally we do not always seem to be able to live them properly. Today, it is astonishing to see that the loss of the meaning of life is very marked. "If salt loses its taste, how will it regain it?" (Lk 14:34);

- the need to internalize life: that is, not to live superficially, but to taste, even to savour with eagerness, from within, what we are living: "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God!" (1Cor 10:31);

- the need for fellowship: the difficulty of giving meaning to life and the need to interiorise it is closely linked to the desire not to feel alone or become isolated.

These three demands make their voices heard, but they are not always given due attention; they are also joined by the fear, very evident in some cases, that such a life would be detrimental to human qualities, that I risk losing some of my humanity if I seriously commit myself to live the spiritual dimension. Francis urges: "... brothers (...) to remember that they gave up their own will out of love for God"⁵.



If we do not take these demands into account, I do not think we can realize the validity of a Rule because it is meant to give form to life, like a container, a vessel that gives

⁵LR X 2.

form to the contents placed in it. If the 'container' to which we have entrusted our life, the Rule, does not correspond to our demands and does not resolve the problem of this fear, then it is not capable of giving form to life, and we, losing our vitality, begin to fade, slowly, slowly turning into shadows. Vitality is often verified only at the level of ideas but lacks the energy necessary to translate it into reality: "...I call the attention and exhort my brethren in our Lord Jesus Christ not to quarrel, not to contradict one another in words (cf. 2 Tim 2:14), nor to judge others..."⁶.

If we are together and share the same lifestyle, it is also because we feel shaped by this text of the Rule as something that gives us an identity, namely that of brothers and sisters of the same Franciscan Family. In reality, however, we do not relate only to a simple text that gives shape to our life, for the Rule today depends both on the mediation of the Chapter, whether it be the General, Provincial or local, and on the various ministries of the brothers through which the text of the Rule becomes a lived reality, a visible and palpable truth. So it seems interesting that we entrust ourselves to a text that has value only to the extent that we put it into reality in a viable and intelligible way. Otherwise, it is reduced to a simple regulation of good conduct and establishing duties, which would be too little because every civil institution has such a thing.



To realise the formative power of the Rule is to become aware of the responsibility we have towards ourselves and our brothers and sisters⁷, for on the day we entered the Order and made profession, we committed ourselves to

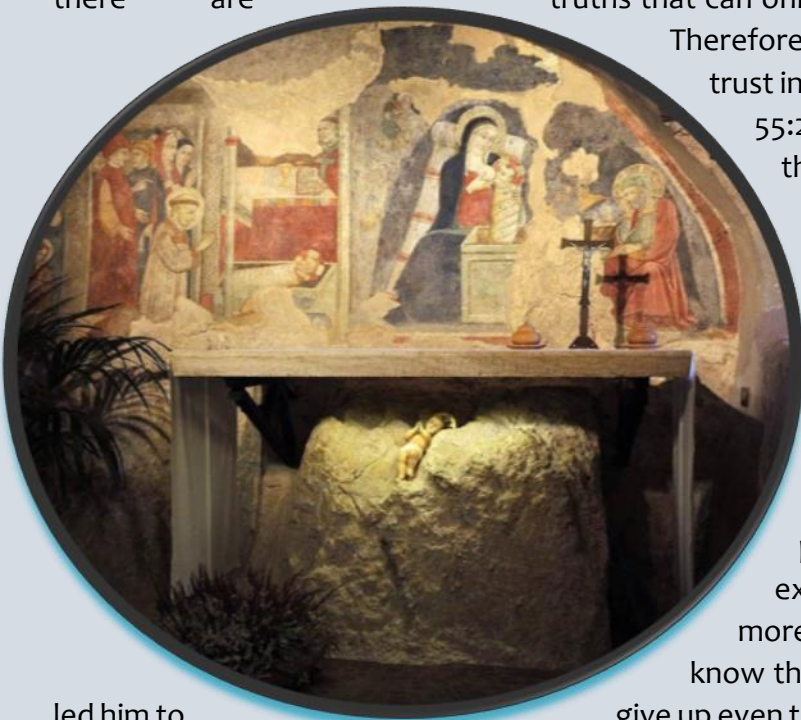
preserve, to take care together of what gives shape to our lives. And the Rule's reason for existence is that we encounter Christ together, that we become companions with him; this is the only way to explain the enthusiasm with which we have embraced it. At the time, everything seemed very easy, but as time went by, perhaps some things changed; we realised that not only keeping the Gospel but even living the vows requires uninterrupted work, which can even lead to discouragement if we are not careful. In order to avoid this risk, greater attention must be paid to the insistence of St Francis to share the life of the poor; or, we know only too well that this means sharing above all the effort made by this category of people in order to survive. And the spiritual life - as the Desert Fathers teach

⁶ LR III 10.

⁷ Cf. LR III 10.

us - requires effort, toil and more toil. We do not progress because we do not know our limits; we do not persevere in what we have committed ourselves to, but we want to become virtuous without making any effort. In other words, we would like to enjoy the fruits immediately, without the toil of ploughing, sowing, watering, and reaping the harvest.

The fact that we have the best of intentions, that we have been doing good, and that we have professed the evangelical counsels, we think it should save us from the mental torture and discouragement; yet how is it that we sometimes feel so downcast? Well, in addition to this way of life, which Francis has handed down to us, there is something else we are not quite able to accept. We today are used to putting a text into action only after we have understood it. So, first, I read the text, and then, if I understand it and accept it, I put it into practice; the same method seems to be used sometimes when it comes to the Rule: I read, I understand, and then (if it suits me) I try to put it into practice. The spiritual wisdom of the ancients followed a different order: read, implement, then understand; there are truths that can only be understood if they are lived.



Therefore, when I pray to say: "Put your trust in the Lord and he will help you" (Ps 55:23), I, even though I understand the words of the Psalm until I put my trust in the Lord, I will not experience his help. Or, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me that I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls!" (Mt 11:29), until I become meek and humble, I do not experience the promised relief. In this sense, the experiences of Saint Francis are more than eloquent: for example, we know that the radical living of the Gospel

led him to give up even the clothes he was wearing, and by accepting the cloak offered by the bishop, he experienced the goodness of God, who clothes the lilies of the field more beautifully than Solomon dressed himself (cf. Mt 6:28f.).

It seems strange, but for Francis, this extreme humility meant, above all, liberation in order to be able to serve, it meant total trust in God, who cares not only for the flowers of the field but also for his children. So what is written in the Rule can only be fully understood after it is lived and not before. This leads us to say that the life-giving force of the Rule is the consequence of practicing it and not only of understanding it. For example, phrases like: "my brothers (...) shall not quarrel, argue or judge others"⁸ or similar, which are sometimes so easily forgotten, are not mere rules aimed at good coexistence and

⁸ LR 3,10-11.

keeping peace among brothers but are pointers to the way forward so that the heart may be comforted and may perceive the approach of the Kingdom of God. It is precisely because of this that the Rule is a form of life because it takes care of our vitality in order that it does not die out.

The words of Holy Scripture found in the Rule carry with them that wisdom which leads us to abandon our pretensions to avoid endless justifications, not necessarily because we need to be virtuous, but simply in order to savour the pleasant taste of brotherhood, to experience the presence of Christ in our midst. Every Rule has this aim, whether it is that of Pachomius, Basil the Great, Augustine, or Benedict. The Rule is not a code of good manners but a concrete way of living Holy Scripture.

We know that Francis often used to say that "the Rule is the marrow (essence) of the Gospel"⁹ Just as the purpose of every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord is to give life and produce fruit, the Rule is meant to preserve, to nourish this life. Since we are so fragile, the Rules throughout the tradition of religious life have this role of preserving life, of setting clear boundaries between which life can flourish and develop. So I don't have to invent it.

Entering a fraternity that has a form of life saves me from being an innovator, I don't have to invent anything; I get in touch with that wisdom that precedes me and that I have to assimilate continuously, confronting it with others to see to what extent it nourishes my life, and then pass it on to those who come after me.



This is the only reason why in the history of the Church, we find no Rule that was written before it was first lived. In the beginning, there were no Rules, but the concrete way Francis lived with his brothers became a custom, a way of life that was later written

⁹ 2Cel 208; *CompAss* 46.

down in its present form. After the Rule was approved, it is known that Francis would have liked to add something to it (With God, there are no preferences, and the Holy Spirit, the general minister of the Order, descends indiscriminately on the poor and the simple), but he was told that he could not do so, since it had already been approved¹⁰. Today, this role is played by the *Constitutions* and *Statutes*.

This form of life does not begin with me, it precedes me and, at the same time, accompanies me, giving me a sense of belonging to this family. Even if the way the brothers lived at the beginning of the last century does not coincide exactly with the way we live today, the existence of the genetic code, which allows us to identify continuity, is visible; I find myself in their way of living, even if I feel drawn to this way of living, of today. I joined this family because I want to live this form of life, although the reasons why most of us remain in the Order, professing the Rule, do not coincide with those that led to our entry into the Order. Just as in family life: no one stays married simply because he or she once proposed to someone. So we could say that the Rule was born and lives on in the faith experience of the generations who pass it on; it has shaped the lives of the brothers who preceded me and will continue to shape the lives of the brothers who will come after me, of course only to the extent that we pass it on to them.

Francis hated to refer to abstract ideas, nor did he like to command, but for him, it had become almost an obsession to be an example¹¹, an attitude so evident in the desert fathers, to be models for others and not legislators. Our aspirations may not be quite so noble and lofty, but we must at least recover that sense of responsibility that is ours.

What shaping do I want to give to my life so that it really radiates and spreads vitality to those around me? Is the life of grace and the truth emanating from Christ reflected in the form of life I live? The people who cross our convent's threshold, what do they find? Christ did not say, "I have come that they may have security and have it in abundance;" some would give anything to feel secure both in this life and the next, but we cannot have both, only one, either security or life. And if we really want to have life then, inevitably, we must risk it. How can we do it today? Certainly, by taking care of the three demands (to give meaning to life, to internalize life, and the need for communion) and overcoming the fear that brotherly life would be at the expense of human qualities. The more sensitive we become to the human demands of our fellow brothers and sisters, the more we predispose our hearts to receive the strength and vigour of this form of life.

Conclusion

We live today in a time of uncertainty about tomorrow, bombed with alarming and tragic news. People are worried and sometimes even frightened; even we are often irritated. To keep the Rule, which shapes our lives, and to be protected by it is to take care

¹⁰ Cf. 2Cel/ 208.

¹¹ Cf. 1Cel/ 34: FF 377; LM VI 10: FF 1115; LM IX 4: FF 1168; CompAss 79.

of this inner wellspring of joy: "to rejoice in the Lord (cf. *Phil* 4:4), being joyful and glad as is fitting"¹².

An eloquent example of this is Blessed Raymond Lull, OFS (1232-1316); he was able to understand St. Francis very well and, once he had identified the source of joy, did not cease to drink it eagerly. I dare to share one of his ideas, for each one of us can say: "Lord, since you have put so much joy in my heart, please spread it throughout my body so that my face, my eyes, my mouth, and all my limbs may feel this joy. Most High God, when I think of eternal life, when I contemplate it, I am filled with inexpressible joy. The sea has not so much water as there is joy in me"



MEETINGS, PRESENCES AND CHAPTERS

Philippines: National Elective Chapter

Overcoming two years of pandemic-related uncertainty that hindered their national chapter, the national fraternity of the Philippines finally assembled at Manresa Retreat House, located at 296 St. Del Monte, for their 13th elective chapter from

April 14 to 17, 2023. The Minister General's long-awaited visit to the Philippines had to be cancelled due to health reasons. However, the leadership responsibility was entrusted to Augustine Yoon, OFS, who presided over the chapter, and Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM, representing the Conference of Spiritual Assistants (CAS). The first afternoon of the chapter commenced with the presentation of reports and was followed by presentations of some themes for reflections. Fr. Ronal Allan Lopez Samon, OFM Cap., explored the subject of "Living Synodality in the Fraternity at various levels". While Augustine Yoon delivered "The Secular Franciscan Order at the International Level (demographics)". Lucy A. Almirañez addressed "Facing the Challenges of Postmodern Times", and Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM, spoke on "The Relationship between the OFS and Spiritual Assistants".

On Sunday, the 49 Chapter members were blessed by the presence of Minister General Fr. Massimo Fusarelli, OFM, accompanied by Definitor General Fr. John Wong, OFM, and Minister Provincial Fr. Gregory Lino Redoblado, OFM. Their presence was greatly appreciated by all members of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS), especially as they

¹² *ER* VII 16; cf. *Am* XX, 1-2:.

experienced the spirit of unity as Franciscans. Following their departure, the assembly proceeded with their scheduled agenda, culminating in the election of the new National Council. Lucy Almiranez emerged as the elected National Minister and International Councilor. The chapter concluded with the Holy Mass of Inauguration of the new council, presided over by Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM., who also witnessed the profession renewal. On Monday, members of the OFS and representatives from YouFra journeyed to the Poor Clare Monastery in Katipunan, where they participated in meetings with Minister General Fr. Massimo Fusarelli, OFM., and thereafter, the OFS clergy meeting with Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM.

Hong Kong: National Elective Chapter

The National Elective Chapter of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) took place at St. Bonaventure Parish, located at 89 Po Kong Village Road, Tsz Wan Shan, Kowloon, on April 15 and 16, 2023. Presided over by Francis Byung-Ju Park, OFS., and Fr. Raymond May Yeung, OFM, represented the Conference of Spiritual Assistants (CAS) as the delegate for the event. Lucia Lau, OFS, was elected as the National Minister and International Councilor during the elective chapter. The culmination of the Elective Chapter was marked by a joyous celebration of the Holy Mass, presided over by Vice Provincial Fr. Placid Wong, OFM. Following the mass, a warm dinner gathering took place at a nearby restaurant, attended by approximately 50 OFS members, spiritual assistants, and friends.

Congo Brazzaville: First National Elective Chapter

Marking a significant milestone in the Republic of Congo, the first elective chapter of the emerging Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) fraternity was joyously celebrated from April 20 to 23, 2023. The chapter took place at the serene St. Damiano guest house in Djiri, a suburb of Brazzaville. The first National Council was established during this historic event, setting the stage for the fraternity's growth and development. Although still pending approval by the CIOFS Presidency, the chapter was conducted in accordance with the Rule, CCGG (Art. 77.4), and the fraternity's current national statutes, which are under further study.

Given that it was the first elective chapter, the assembly embraced a period of formation and explanation, shedding light on the significance of participating in a national chapter of an OFS fraternity. Adolph Atsu Assagba led the formation sessions, enlightening the participants on the theme of the chapter: "Secular Franciscans in a Synodal Church: 'Go repair my Church...'" The chapter was presided over by Adolph Assaga, OFS, serving as the delegate of Minister General Tibor KAUSER, OFS. Fr. Tomas Ginga Panzo Suva, OFM.Cap., the general spiritual assistant representing the Conference of Spiritual Assistants (CAS), also played a crucial role in animating the formation sessions based on the chapter's theme. Approximately 20 OFS members attended the chapter, representing three of the four existing fraternities in the country. Additionally, an invited

delegate from the neighbouring national fraternity of the Democratic Republic of Congo participated as an observer.

On April 21, 2023, which coincided with the liturgical feast of Saint Anselm, the elections for the national council commenced at 2 pm. in the centre's meeting room. The proceedings began with a prayer invoking the Holy Spirit. The election results enabled the establishment of the first national council in the fraternity's history, comprising the following members: Pierre Mandigou as National Minister and International Councilor, Gabriel Boudzoumou as Vice National Minister and the substitute International Councilor, Nestor Maganou as Secretary and Fraternal Animator of YouFra, Felicité Ongambagui as Treasurer, Henri Kodefio Fiongai as Formator, and Fr. Guy Patchel Vengo, OFM, as National Assistant.

The closing Mass and installation of the new council was celebrated on Saturday evening, with the vespertine liturgy of the Third Sunday of Easter, in the church of Notre Dame du Source Monastery in Djiri, of the Poor Clares Sisters. The Holy Eucharist, with the participation of all the capitulars and the Poor Clare sisters as hosts, was presided over by Fr. Guy P. Vengo, OFM, national assistant, and concelebrated by Fr. Tomas Ginga Panzo Suva, OFM Cap., It was indeed a great moment of celebration and Franciscan joy.

Paraguay: The 11th Latin American Congress

OFS and YouFra of Paraguay hosted the 11th Latin American Congress, accompanied by the inaugural 1st Congress uniting brothers and sisters from the United States and Canada. The Congress was held from April 27th to May 1st, at the Marian Shrine of Caacupé, in the Redemptorist Fathers' House of Spirituality, just two hours drive from the capital city of Asunción. Approximately 60 individuals, including members of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS), Franciscan Youth (YouFra), and national and regional spiritual assistants from various countries of America, participated in this enriching Congress. Minister General Tibor Kauser connected virtually the event, and International Councilors Silvia Diana and Ana Maria Raffo represented the International Council of the OFS (CIOFS). The YouFra International President, Felix Chocojay, was present, too. The Assistant General of OFS and YouFra, Fr. Carlos Ginés, TOR., was the representative of the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants (CAS).

The Congress revolved around Pope Francis' profound call to transform the church into a welcoming home for all, with additional focus on the themes of communication, media, social networks, and the Franciscan Centenary as this year marks the 800th anniversary of the Later Rule's approval and the cherished memory of St. Francis celebrating Christmas in Greccio. Fr. Elio Rojas, OFM Conv., a Franciscan scholar and popular communicator-youtuber, played a vital role in facilitating and inspiring the reflection process. The esteemed presence of Fr. Carlos Ginés, TOR, Assistant General, and Ana María Raffo, OFS International Councilor, further enriched the reflection. Notably, it was announced that the next continental Congress, transcending Latin America, will be hosted in Colombia in 2025. The Congress concluded with resounding joy, as participants

cherished the invaluable opportunity to gather, exchange experiences, foster mutual encouragement, and strengthen their commitment to living the Franciscan charism.

Republic of Central Africa: National Elective Chapter

The national fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) in the Central African Republic held its elective chapter from May 5th to 7th at the Archdiocesan Pastoral Center, St. Jean XXIII in Bangui. The chapter commenced with an opening Holy Mass on May 5, presided over by the Comboni priest Fr. Cloude Nkwe Lugiri, the regional spiritual assistant of the Central East Kaga Bondoro region. Concelebrating the mass were Fr. Simion Masarczyk, OFM., the national assistant in turn, and Fr. Tomas Ginga Panzo Suva, OFM^{Cap.}, the general assistant. Alongside the convoked capitulars, members of the local OFS and GIFRA fraternity from Bangui were present, as well as guests and other invitees.

With 63 convened capitulars representing the newly established six regional councils, the chapter proceeded in an atmosphere of peace, fraternity, and serenity, despite the occasional challenges accompanying an event of such scale. The election process was presided over by Adolph Atsu Assagba, OFS, Councilor of the CIOFS Presidency and area coordinator, acting as the delegate of Minister General Tibor Kauser, OFS. Fr. Tomas Ginga Panzo Suva, OFM^{Cap.}, the general spiritual Assistant of OFS and GIFRA, represented the Conference of Spiritual Assistants (CAS) as a witness to the proceedings. The election outcome marked the appointment of the new National Council for the three-year period from 2023 to 2026, per the national Statutes of the fraternity. Brother Magloire Malissaba was elected as the National Minister, and Brother Lucien Gonda assumed the position of International Councilor.

The closing ceremony and installation of the newly elected national council culminated in a Mass held on Saturday afternoon, May 6th, at 6,30 p.m. The national assistant, Fr. Simion Masarczyk, OFM, presided over the mass, which took place in the centre hall. Fr. Tomas Ginga Panzo Suva, OFM^{Cap.}, joined in the concelebration. The Sunday mass was celebrated at St. Francis of Assisi parish in Bangui entrusted to the care of diocesan priests. Following the mass, the parish community was introduced to the new council and informed about the presence of Secular Franciscan brothers and sisters from various regions of the country, fostering a sense of unity and collaboration in the Franciscan mission.

Japan - National Elective Chapter

Nagoya, the country's third-largest city, played host to the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) National Elective Chapter from May 5th to May 6th, 2023. The Nanzan Conference Center warmly welcomed the capitular brothers and sisters, fostering a fraternal atmosphere throughout the event.

The occasion's significance was underscored by the celebration of the Holy Eucharist at 2 pm., which set the tone for the entire congregation assembled for the National Elective Chapter. Fr. Akihiro Iyoku, OFM, the spiritual assistant, presided over the mass, with the presence and concelebration of the other spiritual assistants, namely Fr. Mitsuharu Akao, OFMConv., and Fr. Dsouza Johnson, OFMCap. Delivering the homily, Fr. Stefan Acatrinei, OFMConv., the representative of the General Conference of Spiritual Assistants (CAS), emphasized the importance of not letting one's heart be troubled, drawing from the verse "Do not let your hearts be troubled" (Jn 14:1).

Brother Francisco Fumihiko Takeda, the national OFS Minister, inaugurated the chapter and extended warm greetings to all participants. During his report presentation, he shed light on the distinctive characteristics of the Japanese national fraternity and made various proposals. Discussions followed immediately in a fraternal manner. The first day was concluded with the traditional Franciscan Joy, enjoyed by all participants at the chapter.

The second day, Saturday, May 6th, commenced with the morning prayer at 7 am. in the chapel. All thirteen capitulars and the three spiritual assistants gathered in the designated Saal at 9 am. Brother Francis Byungju Park, OFS Presidency Councillor, assumed the delegate role for Tibor Kauser, the Minister General of OFS, with Fr. Stefan Acatrinei, OFMConv., as witness. With nine nominees, multiple rounds of ballots ensued, leading to the election of Brother Shigekazu Fujita. Eventually, he accepted the position. Brother Francisco Fumihiko Takeda was elected as the International Councillor, and Sister Shiziko Ueda assumed the role of Substitute International Councillor.

The newly elected national council was formally installed during a Holy Eucharist celebration presided over by Fr. Mitsuharu Akao, OFMConv. Following a delightful lunch, the entire assembly reconvened at 2 pm. for further discussions. Francis Byungju Park, OFS Presidency Councillor, pointed out the significance of living according to the Rule and working joyfully together. Fr. Stefan Acatrinei OFMConv., offered words of encouragement to the capitulars, highlighting the beauty and happiness experienced by St. Francis after surrendering his will to the Lord. The chapter concluded around 3 pm. with the blessing given by Fr. Akihiro Iyoku, OFM, and all attendees joyfully returned to their homes as they continued their Franciscan journey.

Panama: National Elective Chapter

The National Fraternity of Panama gathered from May 5th to May 7th, 2023, at Casa de Retiro Emaus, Las Cumbres, San Miguelito, to commemorate its Elective Chapter. Under the distinguished leadership of Ana María Raffo Laos, a member of the International Council of Secular Franciscan Order (CIOFS) Presidency and delegate of Minister General OFS Tibor Kauser, the chapter proceedings unfolded with great fervour. Representing the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants was the delegate Fr. José Enrique Olmos Cortés, OFM, who delivered a captivating discourse on "The Sense of Belonging to the

Order", aligning with the chapter's central theme revolving around the momentous 800th anniversary of the Greccio Nativity.

Thirty-two OFS members attended the chapter, including twenty-four capitulars and eight observers. The gathering commenced with the presentation of national reports highlighting the work undertaken by the fraternities. Subsequently, the chapter members began the elective session, and Sister Ileana Vasquez de Buitrago emerged as the elected National Minister and International Councilor. The chapter concluded with the celebration of the Holy Mass and the installation of the new council, then followed by the approval of the priorities for the next triennium. It was a pleasant experience, a peaceful atmosphere among the brothers and very instructive. Acknowledgement was extended to Ana Raffo and all the dedicated, helpful brothers who played instrumental roles in ensuring the chapter's success.

Denmark: Fraternal and Pastoral Visits

A fraternal and pastoral visit to the Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) in Denmark occurred from May 19th to 21st, 2023. CIOFS International Councilor Dina Shabalina, delegate of Minister General OFS, Tibor Kauser, conducted the visit. While Fr. Carlos Ginés, TOR, representing the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants (CAS), led the pastoral visit. The visitors arrived in Denmark on Thursday afternoon, May 18. The official visits began in Aalborg on May 19th, where the delegation met with the local OFS fraternity and the National Council, led by its minister Hellen Nielsen. After meaningful discussions, the normative books were reviewed, and some suggestions were given. The day was concluded with a fraternal dinner and a talk about their faith and Franciscan community experience with the new local spiritual Assistant, Fr. David De Nigris. On Saturday, May 20th, the visitation continued in Aarhus, accompanied by National Minister and National Spiritual Assistant, Fr. Stephen Bejo, OFMConv. The event commenced with the Eucharistic celebration, and after that, the delegation delved into clarifications regarding the international statutes and thoroughly reviewed the official books. The delegates also received the opportunity to meet the local Assistant, Fr. Herbert Krawczyk, SJ, on the same day. After meeting the local fraternity in Aarhus in the afternoon, the visitation continued in the Danish capital, Copenhagen.

The last meeting of the visitation was on Sunday, May 21st, in Copenhagen, with the local La Verna fraternity. The day began with the Eucharistic celebration at the Parish of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of the OFMConv friars. The fraternity's situation was presented after lunch, and the official books were reviewed. The participants exchanged opinions and shared their experiences as Franciscan followers, fostering encouragement and spiritual growth within the fraternity. The fraternal and pastoral visit concluded with a dinner.

Belgium: National Elective Chapter

The Secular Franciscan Order (OFS) of the National Fraternity of Belgium convened its elective Chapter on Saturday, June 3rd. Held at the esteemed Friars Minor Friary, Our Lady of Grace of Woluwe, in Brussels, the chapter brought together 23 participants for a day of reflection, decision-making, and leadership transitions. The chapter proceedings started with a warm greeting and inspiring speech from Jacques Meulkens, the OFS National Minister. Participants were then offered a reflection by the International Councilor Dina Shabalina, OFS, and General Spiritual Assistant Fr. Carlos Gines, TOR.

The celebration of the Eucharist followed this, presided over by Fr. Roger Marchal, OFM National Spiritual Assistant and Fr. Carlos Gines, TOR. Following the meal, International Councilor Dina Shabalina decided on the arrangements for the proceedings due to the situation arising from a lack of quorum in the chapter for the approval of amendments to the Statutes and the running of elections.

Mons. Franco Copolla, the Apostolic Nuncio in Belgium, encouraged the capitulars with a brief reflection. The participants then voted on the proposed amendments to the National Statutes *ad experimentum*. Then, the outgoing National Minister delivered his final report on the period of his term of office before getting started with the elections for the new National Council. The elections were held with attending members without a quorum. The elections for the new National Council took place with the presence and special approval of the International Councilor. The chapter re-elected Jacques Meulkens as National Minister for a second term and elected Joel Domingos as International Councilor.