



K O I N Ō N I A

...together on the journey

THE CONFERENCE OF GENERAL SPIRITUAL ASSISTANTS OFS-YOUFRA

2020 - 1

Year 27

n.105

SECULAR FRANCISCANS IN TIMES OF GREAT CHANGES

THE OFS RULE AS A RESPONSE IN TIMES OF GREAT CHANGES

Fr. Francis Bongajum Dor, OFMCAP.

Introduction

Father Raniero Cantalamessa, the preacher of the pontifical house says in one of his reflections that if, by some miracle the whole Bible were to be concentrated to pronounce one word, all it would say will be “God-loves-you!”¹. Sacred Scripture is all about the love of God. Jesus Christ, by his incarnation, life, passion, death and resurrection, is the supreme prove and eternal covenant of this love. The Church is founded to be a means and instrument, “some sort of sacrament”² to tell the world of this love until the end of time. In this light, evangelization is telling the world of God’s love made known to us in Christ Jesus. However, how can this be done *in language intelligible to each generation*³? This is the challenge of inculturation. It is the challenge of up-dating, “aggiornamento” which the universal Church decided to take up with faith and courage from Vatican II. As times and cultures change, so too should we update and adapt our language and methods to ensure effective evangelization.

“We are happy that the “Franciscan charism” today is still a force for the good of the Church and the human community, despite the infiltration of doctrines and tendencies that alienate people from God and from the supernatural”, affirms Pope St. Paul VI⁴. In all four numbers of Koinonia for this year 2020, we have chosen the main theme above: “Secular Franciscans in times of great changes”. In this first number, Fr. Francis Bongajum Dor, OFMCap. reflects on “The OFS Rule as a response in times of great changes”. In the subsequent numbers, we will reflect on, “The Secular Franciscan and the immigrant” (Fr.

¹Cf. R. CANTALAMESSA, *Rifulge il mistero della croce – meditazioni per ogni giorno della quaresima*, Ancora, Milano 2014.

²VATICAN II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world, Gaudium et spes* 1.

³ VATICAN II, *Gaudium et spes*, N° 4.

⁴POPE PAUL VI, *Apostolic letter, Seraphicus Patriarca*, 24 June 1978.

Pedro Zitha, OFM); “*Integral ecology: the response of Secular Franciscan*” (Fr. Claudio Hernán, TOR); and, finally, “*Franciscan Economy for Seculars*” (Fr. Alfred Parambakathu, OFMConv.).

1. Saint Francis and changes of his time: reconciling the Gospel with history

“*The gospel experience of Francis, writes Eloi Leclerc, is not a simple episode in the history of Christianity. It has an exemplary and prophetic value*”⁵. Francis of Assisi lived during a time of great socio-political and economic changes. European societies were moving from feudal systems to communal cities. Financial economy founded on free trade was taking over from that based on land ownership. New associations of common interest were shaking traditional social equilibrium of relationships. There was great mobility of persons, a reality that seriously challenged the Church that for long had found her equilibrium on the monastic model of “*stabilitas loci*”. It was a time of crises and expectation. Therefore, what did Francis do to become such a model of Gospel witness transcending times and cultures? Eloi Leclerc outlines three features of Francis that we will consider here. First, Francis’ rich human nature. Secondly, the breath of the Gospel and, thirdly, Francis’ complicity with the movement of history⁶.

Francis’ rich human nature: all the biographies bear witness to the rich personality of Francis even before his conversion, his passion for life and beauty and his love for his city that would take him to war against Perugia. This resulted in his experience as a prisoner. His ambition for social greatness sent him on the roads to the Puglia for a war expedition. His ability in business was such that he could sell both cloth and horse with no difficulty. In his joyousness, love for life and parties and poetry earned him the title of “king of the youth” in his city. His sensitivity to the needs of others, made him generous to a fault, though fear of lepers kept him away from this particular group. He overcame this fear despite himself, through merciful service to the lepers, and this for him was a gift of grace as he narrates in his *Testament*. His experience of the fragility of sickness before conversion and at the end of his life was likewise an enriching experience. He could talk to the sick from the depth of their misery that he shared. Francis incarnated in himself the life and aspirations of his contemporaries. He was one with them; he spoke their language and shared in their joys, sufferings, and dreams. The words of St. Augustine came true for Francis in a prominent way when he says of God: “*Our hearts are made for you and they are restless till they rest in you*”.

The breath of the Gospel: The Gospel has in it the power to renew the Church and bring new life to the world. It can restore life to dry bones (cf. Ez 37). As a river flowing from Christ, the Gospel brings abundant life to the world of men and cultures: “*Flowing into the sea, it makes the waters wholesome. Wherever the river flows, all living creatures teeming in it will live*” (Ez 47:7.9). Francis and the movement sparked by him is proof of this, thus confirming the promise of Christ Jesus who says: “*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*” (Jn10:10). Inspired specifically by the Gospel of the sending out of the apostles (Mt. 10:1-10), Francis discerned for himself and his followers the specific

⁵ÉLOI LECLERC, *François d’Assise le retour à l’Évangile*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1981, ed. 2010, pg. 203, (my translation)

⁶ Cfr. Idem.

mission to live the Gospel in its pure simplicity and to take the Gospel of peace to the people of his time where they were, on the roads, in town squares or battle fields. Eloi Leclerc puts it very beautifully when he says: “*the world of men is a battle field. The messenger of the Gospel must not appear as a rival or a competitor in the scramble for riches and power*”⁷. The radical choice of poverty made Francis and his followers particularly harmless.

The flame of the Gospel was so strong in Francis that when he could no longer travel due to ill health, he resorted to writing and was so daring to the point of addressing a letter to humanity. He opens the Letter to the faithful in these words: “*Brother Francis, their servant and subject, sends esteem and reverence, true peace from heaven and sincere love in the Lord to all Christian religious people: clergy and laity, men and women, and to all who live in the whole world. Because I am the servant of all, I am obliged to serve all and to administer the fragrant worlds of my Lord to them*”⁸. This letter is the basis for all the Rules of the Third Order down the centuries. He brought the breath of the Gospel to the people by every means available to him. The conversion to Christ and the Gospel rather sharpened the human qualities of Francis and opened up the horizons of his world. And that is how it supposed to be.

*Francis’ complicity with the movement of history: “The salvation that God offers us is an invitation to be part of a love story interwoven with our personal stories; it is alive and wants to be born in our midst so that we can bear fruit just as we are, wherever we are and with everyone all around us”*⁹. Eloi Leclerc observes that “*there are times when excessive asceticism, and intense spiritual life, dampens sensitivity and renders persons more or less foreign to visible and tangible reality*”¹⁰. This did not occur to Francis. Francis used the movements of history to take him to his objectives in the same way a good surfer would use the waves of the ocean. This is certainly how Christian life is supposed to be. When one attains such a degree of faith, then there is no more space for lamentations. Every experience becomes an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel and an invitation to join in the dance of creation in praise of the Most High Glorious God. Docility to the Holy Spirit and attention to the changing times yet in total submission to ecclesiastical authority has marked the Franciscan movement from the beginning until date. In one of his last recommendations to his followers Francis clearly expresses this fact: “*I have done my part; May Christ teach you that which is yours to do*”. This is certainly the main reason for the diversity and dynamic creativity typical of all Franciscan groups, including OFS.

2. Great changes of today’s world

The letter to the Hebrews, says that Jesus is “*the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word*” (Hb 1:3). The Gospel sustains all things and without the Gospel, the world falls into a void, into chaos. Times may change but the Word of God

⁷ELOI LECLERC, op. cit., p. 83. (Le monde est un champs de luttes. Le messenger de l’Evangile ne doit pas apparaitre comme un rival ou un concurrent dans la course à la richesse et au pouvoir)

⁸ Second Letter to the Faithful, 1-2.

⁹ FRANCIS, *Post-synodal Apostolic exhortation Christus vivit to young people and to the entire people of God*, n° 252.

¹⁰ ELOI LECLERC, *François d’Assise*, op cit. p. 204.

stands forever. Vatican II acknowledges important mutations typical of these times in the following passage:

“Today, the human race is involved in a new stage of history. Profound and rapid changes are spreading by degrees around the whole world. Triggered by the intelligence and creative energies of man, these changes recoil upon him, upon his decisions and desires, both individual and collective, and upon his manner of thinking and acting with respect to things and to people. Hence we can already speak of a true cultural and social transformation, one which has repercussions on man's religious life as well”¹¹.

These profound and rapid changes are a source of serious difficulties as happens at times of any crises. The council fathers went further to list the major difficulties:

- *Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, and yet a huge proportion of the world's citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty, while countless numbers suffer from total illiteracy.*
- *Never before has man had so keen an understanding of freedom, yet at the same time new forms of social and psychological slavery make their appearance.*
- *Although the world of today has a very vivid awareness of its unity and of how one man depends on another in needful solidarity, it is most grievously torn into opposing camps by conflicting forces.*
- *For political, social, economic, racial and ideological disputes still continue bitterly, and with them the peril of a war which would reduce everything to ashes. True, there is a growing exchange of ideas, but the very words by which key concepts are expressed take on quite different meanings in diverse ideological systems.*
- *Finally, man painstakingly searches for a better world, without a corresponding spiritual advancement.*
- *Influenced by such a variety of complexities, many of our contemporaries are kept from accurately identifying permanent values and adjusting them properly to fresh discoveries.¹²*

Today, more than fifty years from the end of the Council, this analysis of the council fathers has lost nothing of its freshness and currency. It is with such a deep consciousness of the changing realities that the Church offered the current Rule of the OFS to Franciscan Family in General and to the OFS in particular as a way of sanctification and a valid response for the today's world.

3. The Rule as a response in times of great changes

“The only act by which a human being can correspond to the God who reveals himself, is the act of unlimited readiness. It is the unity of faith, hope, and love.”¹³

¹¹ VATICAN II, *Gaudium et spes*, N° 4.

¹² idem

The explosion of COVID-19 has taken the world unawares and is predictably going to cause unpredictable changes in the world. In 2007, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, a Lebanese-American scholar, statistician, and former option trader and risk analyst published a book titled “*The Black Swan the impact of the highly improbable*”¹⁴. According to the author, greatest changes in the lives of individuals and collectivities always begin from highly improbable and unpredictable events. This is what is termed a Black Swan. The encounter of Saint Francis with the leper, for example, was a Black Swan. COVID-19 is a Black Swan with global impact. Such phenomena do not have space for stereotype responses, because they were not predictable. We can neither reverse the situation nor change it, people have died, people are dying and the contagion continues to spread. However, we can change, in fact, entire cities and nations are under lock-down for the past 2-4 weeks. This is change. But the change to which this situation obliges us is deeper, it is a conversion.

How can the OFS Rule be of help to Secular Franciscans in such a situation? We are called to perfection of charity, love of God above all else and love of neighbour as Christ has loved us. We should never lose focus of this, because the Rule itself is a path to this and not an end. Conversion keeps us on the right path. Changing times come and go but the call to holiness remains and the Rule will always be of help in every. Now, for example, is the favourable time to renew our personal and fraternal lives in conformity to the Rule we have professed as brothers and sisters of penance. The Rule states: “*Let them conform their thoughts and deeds to those of Christ by means of that radical interior change which the gospel itself calls conversion. Human frailty makes it necessary that this conversion be carried out daily*”¹⁵. Saint Paul says “*If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing*” (1Cor 13:3). Charity is always creative.

In these times that community celebrations are not even possible for many, our love of God and neighbour should even be more creative in our forms of prayer, communication and activity. The OFS General Constitutions offer some guidelines to this effect: “*Some means to cultivate this characteristic of the Franciscan vocation, individually and in fraternity, are: listening to and celebrating the Word of God; review of life; spiritual retreats; the help of a spiritual adviser, and penitential celebrations. ... The fruits of conversion, which is a response to the love of God, are the works of charity in the interactions with the brothers and sisters*”¹⁶. The present experience of lock-down is new to many. The uncertainty continues to loom over all as the pandemic continues its course across the globe. One thing is certain, God is with us, even as he descended in the furnace with Daniel and his companions. Spiritual assistants are and will continue to be of great help to the brothers and sisters of the OFS especially in such times.

¹³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Communio* 37 (Spring 2010). © 2010 by Communio: International Catholic Review, <https://www.communio-icr.com/files/BalthasarVocationFormat2.pdf> (2/04/2019).

¹⁴ NASSIM NICHOLAS TALEB, *The Black Swan the impact of the improbable*, Random House, New York, 2007.

¹⁵ OFS Rule n° 7.

¹⁶ OFS General Constitutions, Art. 13.1-2.

Conclusion

Hans Urs von Balthasar is known to have held strongly that “*life is a vocation because reality is a provocation*”. Such situations as these certainly provoke us either to seek God for refuge, assistance or for a solution. Like St. Francis, we may want to ask: “*Lord, what do you want me to do?*”. These times call for discernment in fraternity and openness to the Spirit. “*Those who seek the Lord will not be disappointed*” (Ps 9:11). In such a situation, God’s will for us might be heard only through the very cry of those suffering. COVID-19 opens our eyes to the fact that humanity is more united than many are tempted to think. If one person is infected, we are all in danger. It provokes us to sincere prayer, penance and to concrete acts of charity towards all affected brothers and sisters. By doing good to others, you do it to yourself. We should join hands to ensure that even if we cannot come together for meetings or celebrations, no brother or sister is left alone, alive or dead. “*When I was in sin, writes St. Francis, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body*”¹⁷. God may be waiting for us exactly where we do not want to go. When love of neighbour obliges us to leave our false securities to go to help others, there we will meet Christ, and it will be sweetness of soul and body. The OFS Rule is a gift for Secular Franciscans to live these difficult times of COVID-19 with joy and hope and to bring solace to many.

NEWS - CHAPTERS – VISITS – MEETINGS

Christmas greetings

When working together, it is always very good to take a moment to say “thank you” to the other. This is the sense of the exchanges of Christmas greetings, which became almost like a tradition by now, that take place at the CIOFS Secretariat every year just before Christmas between the CAS and some members of the presidency with the officers of the Presidency. This year, the short celebration was held on December 16th. Present this time were the three general assistants, Fr. Alfred, Fr. Hernan and Fr. Francis. (Fr. Pedro was absent because he was outside Rome). There were then the Minister General of OFS, Tibor; the Secretary General, Isabella di Paola; the general treasurer, Lucio Monti and his wife Giovanna and the two assistant secretaries, Isabella and Laura. Tibor’s son Giacomo and his wife who accompanied Tibor to Rome were also added to this group. The official program began shortly after 12 O’clock with the recitation of the Mid-day Prayers. This was followed by the lunch prepared by Lucio. Finally, everyone exchanged Christmas greetings with familial simplicity and hugs before departing by 2.30pm.

¹⁷Testament, 2-3.

Ivory Coast - National Elective Chapter

The National Elective Chapter of OFS in Ivory Coast was held on 24 and 25 January at the Padre Pio Spirituality Centre of the Capuchin Friars in Angré, Abidjan. The Chapter was presided by Michel Janian OFS, councillor of the Presidency, delegated by Tibor Kauser, Minister General of OFS. He was assisted by Fr. Zacharie Kolantrin OFMCap., delegated by the CAS.

Nigeria - National Elective Chapter

The National Elective Chapter of OFS in Nigeria was celebrated from February 28 to March 1 at the Padre Pio Friary of the Capuchin friars in Ibadan. The Chapter was presided by Jenny Harrington OFS, delegated by Tibor Kauser OFS, Minister General in the presence of Fr. Francis Bongajum Dor, OFMCap, general Assistant. At the time of the chapter the emerging National Fraternity had 193 members, (121 perpetual professed, 20 temporal professed and 52 candidates) in 7 local fraternities, all assisted by the Capuchin friars. During the Chapter Fr. Francis made a presentation on the theme: “OFS, light of the world according to the Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* of Pope Francis”. The elective session was held on the afternoon of Saturday 29th. Lilian-Rita Akudolu was elected as national Minister and international Councillor. On the evening of the same day, the newly elected council was installed by Jenny during the concluding Mass presided over by Fr. Francis. The chapter was held in great serenity and Franciscan simplicity. The national fraternity needs help in its growth and understanding of the charism in order to become a constituted National Fraternity.

Chad - National Elective Chapter

The National Fraternity of OFS in Chad held its elective Chapter from January 29 to February 2 at the Santa Elizabetta Centre in Moundou. The Chapter was presided by Adolph Atsu Assagba OFS from Togo, delegated by Tibor Kauser OFS, General Minister. He was assisted by Fr. Robert Wnuk, OFMCap., delegated by the CAS. During the work Fr. Roberto gave a conference on the theme: “Knowledge of the legislative texts of OFS, Role of the Council in a Fraternity”. The Chapter was attended by 39 members with voting rights and 37 others from among YouFra, assistants and observers. Soulassagar Ange Gabriel was elected national Minister and international Councillor for a second term. With respect to the Chapter as a whole Fr. Robert Wnuk notes: “an excellent preparation, a well-followed program, a good mutual sharing, a good representation and presentation of the reports of the fraternities and a massive presence of YouFra”.

Albania- National Elective Chapter

The elective Chapter of the emerging national fraternity of Albania was celebrated from 31 January to 2 February in Bajzë, presided over by Attilio Galimberti OFS, delegate of the General Minister of OFS and by Fr. Valentin Rroku OFM, delegate of the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants (CAS). The main theme of the Chapter was: “Knowing and living the Statutes of OFS of Albania”. The Chapter was attended by 32 Capitulars, 8 observers and the Custos of the Friars Minor in Albania, Fr. Aurel Gjerka

OFM. The election of the new Council took place on Saturday during which the new members of the National Council of Albania were elected: Pavlin Ndreka as National Minister and Lazarin Gega as International Councillor. The Chapter was held in a serene and fraternal atmosphere.

Venezuela – National elective chapter

The National Elective Chapter of the OFS of Venezuela was held from February 28th to March 1st, 2020, at the Madre Emilia retreat house in the city of Caracas. The Venezuelan National Fraternity has 30 local Fraternities, 6 emerging Fraternities and is currently divided into 6 Regional Fraternities. In total 17 capitulars, 3 observers and the National Assistants participated Fr. Ramón Morillo, OFM Cap. and Fr. Antonio Reyes OFM. The Chapter was presided over by Tibor Kauser OFS Minister General and as a witness of the conference of General Assistants Fr. Hernán Eguzquiza, TOR.

During the chapter, various aspects of the life of the OFS of Venezuela were discussed. Among these, we can highlight the Analysis of the socio-political situation of the country where it was possible to glimpse the difficulty to come together as a Fraternity at the various levels, the economic problems faced by families and the large migration of brothers and sisters leaving the country. Another important aspect was the presentation of the new National Statute, on which several articles were discussed and it was concluded to present some modifications to the CIOFS, then to study them again in the year to improve their knowledge and application.

The election of the new National Council was held on Saturday 29 and Marielide de Lima was elected as National Minister. The Chapter was celebrated in a fraternal atmosphere and with the assiduous participation of the Capitulars and culminated with the Holy Mass, celebrated by Fr. Hernán Eguzquiza, TOR, and the confirmation of the new National Council, followed by a fraternal agape.