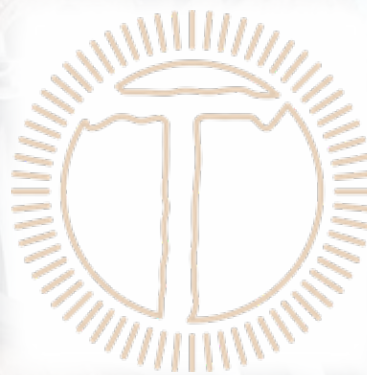


VOX FRANCISCANA

Ordo Franciscanus Saecularis



Published by CIOFS

ISSUE NO.1, 2025



EUROPEAN CONGRESS: ONE FAMILY, ONE MISSION

CIOFS Presidency

Segreteria CIOFS,
Via Vittorio Putti, 4, Int. 6,
00152 Rome, Italia
Tel. 0039 06 45471722
Fax. 0039 06 45473094
E-mail: ciofs@ciofs.org
www.ciofs.info

MINISTER GENERAL

Tibor Kauser, OFS
Hungary

VICE-MINISTER GENERAL

Mary (Maria Teresa) Stronach, OFS
USA

PRESIDENCY COUNCILLORS

Adolph Assagba, OFS
Togo

Eremenciana Chinyama, OFS
Zimbabwe

Silvia Diana, OFS
Argentina

Francis Byung Ju Park, OFS
Korea

Ana Maria Raffo, OFS
Peru

Noemi Paola Riccardi, OFS
Italy

Dina Shabalina, OFS
Ukraine

FRANCISCAN YOUTH COUNCILLOR

Luis Félix Chocojay, OFS
Guatemala

GENERAL SECRETARY

Isabella Di Paola, OFS

GENERAL TREASURER

Roberto Falzago, OFS

GENERAL SPIRITUAL ASSISTANTS

Fr. **Pedro Zitha**, OFM

Fr. **Tomás Ginga Panzo Suva**, OFM Cap

Fr. **Stefan Acatrinei**, OFM Conv

Fr. **Carlos Ginés Campos Julve**, TOR

COMMUNICATIONS

Dina Shabalina, OFS, **Ana Fruk**, OFS,
Robert Stronach, OFS, **Griselda
Romero**, OFS, **Virginija Mickute**, OFS,
Fr. **Carlos Campos Ginés Julve**, TOR

EDITOR

Robert Stronach, OFS
USA

Features



EUROPEAN CONGRESS

More than 120 participants from some 15 countries experienced the spirit of "one family, one mission" at the European OFS-YouFra Congress in Spain. *PAGE 14.*



OFM CHAPTER OF MATS

Secular Franciscans from around the world participated in the International Chapter of Mats of the Order of Friars Minor held in Assisi. *PAGE 7.*



ESSAYS ON BUILDING BRIDGES

It has been 60 years since the 2nd Vatican Council's document on Catholics and Non-Christians. Attilio Galimberti and Patrick Carolan pen essays on its importance to our relationship with our non-Christian brothers and sisters *Page 10.*



ICON TREKS ACROSS EUROPE



POOR CLARES AT CORTONA SINCE 1225

PAGE 19

OFS IN ACTION AROUND THE GLOBE

PAGES 22-32

CIOFS Presidency meeting

by DINA SHABALINA, OFS

It was great to see everyone again. Unfortunately, there were some empty seats in the Seraphicum conference room, where we usually hold these meetings. Vice Minister General Mary Stronach and Editor Bob Stronach couldn't make it due to some health issues, and we definitely missed them.

The meeting began on the afternoon of Saturday, March 15, with warm hugs and friendly greetings. First and foremost, we are brothers and sisters united by the Lord in a shared ministry. He has brought us together as a small family, allowing us to share both our joys and our struggles. Following tradition, the meeting opened with a warm sharing session. The next day, while embracing the spirit of Sunday celebration, we began our work on the program agenda.

Spiritual and practical formation were weaved into the program. Fr. Stefan Acatrinei, OFM Conv. prepared a presentation on the meaning of the *Canticle of Creatures* by St. Francis. It was important for us to see and realize the meaning of this prayer, the conditions and circumstances in which it was born in the heart of the saint. It appeared in a difficult period of Francis' life, after he had been stigmatized. In the darkness of physical and spiritual suffering, he was able to discover the closeness of the Lord. There are no petitions or penitential prayers in the Canticle. It is a continuous glorification of the One who does not leave us alone in difficult times and trials. That is why the canticle is a counter to the spirit of sadness, disappointment, suffering, and fear that overwhelms the world today. That is why it has such a profound meaning for us, who are going through our own journey of trials.



Fr. Stefan



Logo for Cantic's 8th Centenary

Continued on next page.

CIOFS Presidency at work



Continued from previous page.

One day in the meeting, we were pleased to see and hear from Mary, who joined via Zoom. She provided us with valuable and interesting information on practical formation. Her presentation took a more detailed look at an essential component in the work of ministers and councils at various levels: the ability have a vision for the future of a fraternity.

One of the important topics of our spring meeting was the discussion of the General Chapter 2024. This is one of the most extraordinary events in the life of our Order, so it was important for us to analyze its organization, to note all that was done well and that could become a good tradition in the organization of the next General Chapter. We also tried to work on glitches so that the next General Chapter could be better organized.

Reports of the Secretariats and Commissions are always required at every meeting of the Presidency. This spring meeting was no exception. The Commissions coordinators and the Presidency members of the Secretariats presented updated information on the work done since the November meeting. In addition, some new

projects were presented. In particular, the Secretariat for Formation presented a new formation project that aims to help National Fraternities in an in-depth and multidimensional study of the basic documents of our Order.

The Legal Office presented the results of its hard work on the National Statutes as well as various complex legal issues. The Family Commission and the Commission on Vocational Promotion also offered reflective presentations, which were prepared for further distribution and study by the National Fraternities.

Continued on next page.



CIOFS Presidency at work

Continued from previous page.

Special time was devoted to the presentation and discussion of the financial reports of the general treasurer.

A central topic of our meetings is always the National Fraternities with their achievements and challenges. We devote most of our time, and often put a lot of our hearts, to discussing various fraternity issues. Although each of the councilors is responsible for his or her own particular CIOFS area, in discussions concerning the various national fraternities, we all take an active part and share in the burden of responsibility of the other, seeking the good of our brothers and sisters from all over the world.

For us, Wednesday always means that half of the meeting is behind us. This is usually the moment when the hard work of the previous days reaches its peak and requires a short break. Traditionally, we take a walk around Rome and visit the sights of the Vatican. This time we had an unforgettable tour of the pavilions of the National Museum of Rome, where we could travel back in time and admire the art of ancient Roman times, see with our own eyes the world-famous sculptures and mosaics, and listen to the always fascinating stories of our constant guide Masimiliano. Many memories are etched in our minds.

Continued on next page.



Visiting the National Museum of Rome.



CIOFS Presidency

Continued from previous page.

But the no less interesting was visiting the curia of the Friars Minor, where we took memorable photos of the panorama of Rome that opens from the roof of the curia. Then we were invited to meet with the OFM Minister General Fr Massimiliano Fusarelli, Vicar General Fr Ignacio Ceja Jiménez, and other friars, members of the OFM government. It was a time of mutual acquaintance, as well as an exchange of experiences of ministry, presentations of the situation of our Orders in different parts of the world, sharing challenges and joys that revealed the possibility of cooperation and mutual assistance in strengthening and spreading the Franciscan charism. The evening ended with a hospitable monastic dinner and a short tour of the church of the General Curia - the Church of Saint Mary Mediatrix.

Each meeting of the Presidency is always a time of intense work that seems to transform us into one. We search for answers together, recognize and seek God's will together. This would not be possible without sufficient time devoted not only to solving problems and performing ministry, but also to individual and joint prayer, to the daily morning Eucharist, and to the evening fraternal meeting. On Saturday, March 21, when

each of us could share our impressions of the previous week, we thanked the Lord for the time given to us, for each gift of His love, for mutual support. We thanked the Lord again for the gift of the Holy Spirit, who constantly teaches us and guides us in the service of the Order.



Secular Franciscans at OFM Chapter of Mats

Contributing to the Spirit of Fraternity and Collaboration within the Franciscan Family



by VIRGINIJA MICKUTE, OFS

Secular Franciscans from around the world participated in the International Chapter of Mats of the Order of Friars Minor, which was held June 2 to 8, 2025, at St. Mary of the Angels in Assisi.

Fr. Massimo Fusarelli, OFM, minister general, considered it enriching to undertake a synodal journey that involved not only the friars of the First Order, but also the sisters and brothers of the Second and Third Orders – both religious and laypersons – in order to prophetically con-

tribute to the renewal of the identity of the Friars Minor. This experience was made even more meaningful by the fact that the Chapter of Mats took place in Assisi during the week of Pentecost, evoking the memory of the first great Chapter of the Friars Minor in 1221, when more than 5,000 friars gathered at the Porziuncola.

This time, the International Chapter of Mats was attended by 150 participants, including friars, Franciscan religious, and lay men and

women from all the Conferences of the Order. Each of the thirteen OFM Conferences delegated nine representatives – four friars, two religious sisters, and three laypersons – to the Chapter of Mats. Among the other participants, more than twenty Secular Franciscans (OFS) were present, coming from national fraternities in a wide range of countries, including Spain, Italy, Romania, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Angola, Togo,

Continued on next page.



Illustration of the original Chapter of Mats in Assisi in 1221. (Images / OFM Communications Office.)

OFM Chapter of Mats

Continued from previous page.

Zimbabwe, the Republic of South Africa, the Philippines, South Korea, Malaysia, Timor-Leste, Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico, the USA, and others.

The Chapter of Mats opened with a procession to the Conference Hall of the Domus Pacis, carrying a candle lit from the Paschal Candle of the Porziuncola. The opening Mass was presided over by Father Massimo, who later shared that the intention to organize this historic chapter had been with him since the beginning of his service as minister general.

The first two days of the chapter were dedicated to active listening. Representatives from each Conference delivered 20-minute presentations outlining the current reality of their respective regions and summarizing the most significant conclusions reached during the synodal

journey carried out at the local, provincial/custodial and Conference levels. After each presentation, a five-minute “buzz” session was held, allowing participants to reflect and discuss with those seated nearby. The following OFM Conferences were presented in this format: Conference of Southern Europe (CEM), Conference of North Africa and the Middle East (CONAMO), English Speaking Conference (ESC), North Slavic Conference (SLAN), South Slavic Conference (SLAS), East Asian Conference (EAC), Brazil & Southern Cone Conference (BRACS), Bolivian Conference (BOL), Guadalupe Conference (GUAD), English Speaking African Conference (ESAC), French Speaking African Conference (CAF), Conference Beyond the Alps (COTAF), and South Asia-Australia and Oceania Con-

ference (SAAOC). The key points identified by the Conferences were already included in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, which had been shared in advance.

The next three days of the Chapter of Mats were dedicated to working on the three core themes of the *Instrumentum Laboris*: “Embodying the **Charism**”, “Living the Gospel of **Fraternity**”, and “Responding to the **Mission**.” Each core theme was introduced with a reflection offered by a participating friar, sister, or layperson.

Fr. Derrick Yap, OFM, custos of the Custody of Singapore-Malaysia-Brunei and President of the SAAOC, gave the introductory reflection for the first core: “Renewing our vision: to what characteristics of the charism should we open our-

Continued on next page.



Secular Franciscans attending the OFM Chapter of Mats.

OFM Chapter of Mats

Continued from previous page.

selves today?”

Sr. Therèse Myriam, abbess of the Colettine Poor Clares, introduced the second core: “Walking in the style of a fraternity of minors.”

Professor Eduardo Santos Ribón Badillo from Colombia presented the third core: “Embracing the future, testimony and mission: whom and how do we serve?”

All capitulars then actively participated in discussions around each thematic nucleus using a methodology known as the World Café. This method involved rotating discussions across 18 international tables, open to all participants regardless of language. At the end of each day, a plenary assembly summarized everything that had emerged during the table discussions, which were captured on tablecloths or in notes taken by designated persons. The outcomes of these conversations were compiled into the Final Document of the Chapter of Mats.

The capitulars celebrated daily Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours in three language groups – English, Italian, and Spanish – the official languages of the Order of Friars Minor. Some evenings were dedicated to fraternal recreation, enriched by the sharing of traditional dresses and souvenirs from around the world, fostering cultural exchange among the participants.

There were also beautiful moments of prayer, including Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and a Pentecost Vigil which featured the rosary and a procession held in the Basilica of the Porziuncola.



The author (2nd from left) with fellow Secular Franciscans in Assisi.

Saturday was a particularly special day, marked by a pilgrimage to Assisi that included visits to the tombs of St. Francis and St. Clare, along with time for silent personal prayer – both at their tombs and before the Crucifix of San Damiano.

The historic Chapter of Mats concluded with a moment of thanksgiving and the handover of TAU crosses to the delegates of each Conference. On Pentecost Sunday, the Eucharist in the Basilica was

presided over by the Vicar General, Fr. Ignacio Ceja, OFM.

This celebration symbolically marked both the conclusion of the Chapter of Mats and the opening of the Plenary Council of the Order.

One of the key tasks entrusted to the friars participating in the Plenary Council was to approve the Final Document of the Chapter of Mats, to be presented as a proposal for the next OFM General Chapter in 2027.

2nd Vatican Council

A BUILDER OF BRIDGES

by ATTILIO GALIMBERTI, OFS

We often read that the Second Vatican Council marked the crossing of a frontier between an old vision of the church and a new vision, that it gave momentum to Roman Christianity in order to become more effectively “universal” in the sense that is given to this term today: that is, **openness to dialogue with other religions in an attitude and action of respect and listening**. This openness is not only for specialists and academics but for everyone, thus involving the faithful in a deepening of their own faith which then becomes a sign of great maturation, awareness, and shared responsibility.

The shortest of the council’s documents which has revealed itself to be fundamental in this sense (because it is decidedly prophetic and, as such, is always timely), is *Nostra Aetate*, which deals with relations with non-Christian religions. If the reader does not remember the text, I would invite him or her to go back and rediscover it and hope that, in reading it, the same thing will happen as it did to me: that is, to see it as the breath of the Spirit who guided the council fathers in a special way.

I was reflecting on these concepts several days after having participated as an auditor in a Zoom roundtable for the presentation of *Between Thought and Action*, the biography of Fethullah Gülen, a recently deceased Turkish imam who lived in exile in the United States because he was disliked by those in power. The roundtable was facilitated by the book’s author, Ori Z. Soltes, along with two priests who are experts in interreligious dialogue.

Gülen was a very important figure in the Turkish world. In my opinion, among the many initiatives he brought to life, the most important was the Hizmet movement (the word means “service”), whose methodology is that of dialogue and nonviolence. Sound familiar?

Over time the Hizmet movement created schools,

hospitals, universities which were open to students, based on merit, who did not have the means to study in government-run institutions, and many other charitable activities. All of these structures were opened not only in Turkey but also in Italy and in many nations throughout the world.

Unfortunately, following the failed coup d’état in July 2016, which was falsely attributed to Gülen and his followers, the Turkish government declared the movement illegal and seized their structures and activities, conforming them to government standards as well as forcing many of the movement’s members to flee the country and to seek welcome as political exiles in foreign lands.

As one of the panelists at the roundtable noted, the style in which the movement worked, and continues to work, is quite similar to what is proposed by St. Francis in chapter XVI of the Earlier Rule, which treats those who go among the Saracens and other nonbelievers, recommending that the friars be submissive to them, not to create disputes, and to confess to being Christians only if they are asked. This is the way that Gülen’s followers behaved in the schools and initiatives which they operated or are still conducting, and the fraternity to which I belong can bear witness to it, thanks to a decades-old spirit of dialogue and friendship with some members of Hizmet who live in Milan now and who share together in many activities.

If the Second Vatican Council had not thrown open the doors to dialogue and knowledge of the other regardless of differences in faith, I believe that I would have never had this wonderful experience of universal fraternity that not only means that we are all children of the same Father, but also that the aspirations and tension to live as brothers and sisters in peace and harmony are common to all humankind and are a gift that God has poured out upon all people of good will who

Continued on next page.



Grand procession of the Council Fathers at St. Peter's Basilica in 1962. Wikimedia Commons public domain: photo by Peter Geymayer

A BUILDER OF BRIDGES

try to put it in practice, even risking their own life.

In *Nostra Aetate*, there is a recommendation: “The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.”

In this emphasis we can find a great truth. There is no need to fear a dialogue with the other because there is nothing to be lost, only gained. However, in order to go

Continued from previous page.

out of our “comfort zone,” the little garden in which we feel protected and secure, we must strengthen our own faith, our own choices, developing a listening stance, and set out into the deep.

...

Attilio Galimberti, OFS, is a former Presidency counselor and long-time coordinator for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC). This article first appeared in *Francesco il Volto Secolare*, the magazine of the Secular Franciscan Order in Italy, and then in *Today's American Catholic*.

2nd Vatican Council

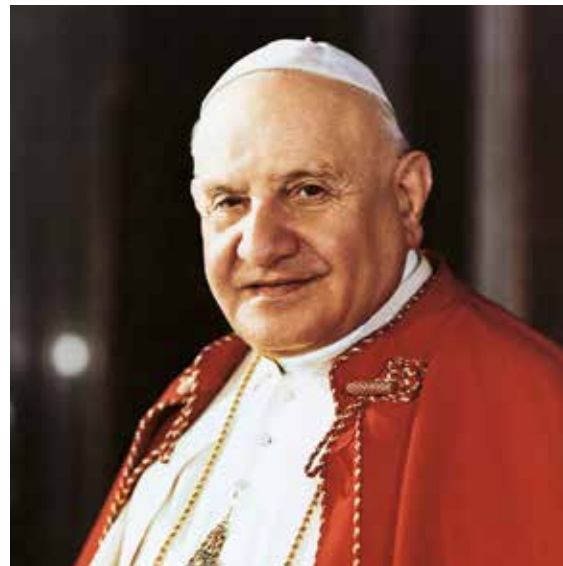
TRANSFORMATION: CATHOLICS & NON-CHRISTIANS

by PATRICK CAROLAN and MICHAEL CENTORE

In 1960, Pope John XXIII met with the French Jewish historian and activist Jules Issac. Issac's wife and daughter had been killed during the Holocaust, and after the war he devoted his life to developing a better understanding of Jewish-Christian relations. He researched and wrote about the Catholic roots of antisemitism and used his work to promote Jewish-Christian dialogue and reconciliation.

During their meeting, Isaac asked John XXIII whether he could “carry away a bit of hope.” The pope replied, “You have a right to more than hope!” It was a result of their encounter that John XXIII created the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, appointing Cardinal Augustin Bea as its first president. A few years later, Cardinal Bea was one of the most highly influential participants in the Second Vatican Council. He served as the key person in the drafting of *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions. *Nostra Aetate* was passed by a vote of 2,221 to 88 by the bishops at the Council. It was the first document in the church's history to focus on the relationship between Catholics and non-Christians, particularly Jews and Muslims, and was promulgated by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965.

While *Nostra Aetate* is often considered to be revolutionary and transformational, it was far from the first attempt to bring about an improved understanding between faith traditions. History is filled with examples of religious leaders who have reached out to understand “the other” in order to promote unity for the common good and usher in an era of peace. Perhaps the most famous of these examples is the 13th-century encounter between Saint Francis of Assisi and the Egyptian Sultan al-Kamil. There is a lot of mythology and speculation around what the two discussed during their approximately three-week dialogue, as is often the case when the narrative of a particular event is written to convey a particular bias or perspective. As a child attending Catholic school, I (Patrick) was taught that Saint Francis set out to either become a martyr or convert the sultan to Christianity, and that in the end the



Pope Saint John XXIII
By De Agostini Editore, Public Domain, Wikimedia.org

sultan did indeed convert. In the Muslim world, the inverse was true: it was thought that Francis converted and became a Sufi. For a period after the encounter, Franciscans were even referred to as “Franciscan Sufis.”

What is known is that in addition to being the leader of the Muslim armies during the Fifth Crusade, the sultan was also a very spiritual person. He allowed Christians who lived in his territories to freely practice their faith. He would often invite mystics of all different faith traditions to stay at his palace. One of those was the Sufi mystic Shams-I Tabrizī, who later became the mentor of the Sufi poet and teacher Rumi. It is said that Shams-I Tabrizī was at the palace when the sultan and Saint Francis had their encounter. Saint Francis at the time had a reputation as a seeker. Twice before he set out for Damietta in Egypt, he attempted to travel to lands controlled by Muslims. Both times, the first due to illness and the second to inclement weather, he failed to reach his destination. Interestingly, both of his attempts were to land rich in Sufism. It is said that when Francis first met the sultan, he greeted him with his familiar

Continued on next page.



movie publicity image

expression: “May the Lord give you peace.” The sultan was surprised because this was almost identical to the familiar Muslim greeting of peace, “*Assalam o alaikum*,” or “Peace be upon you.”

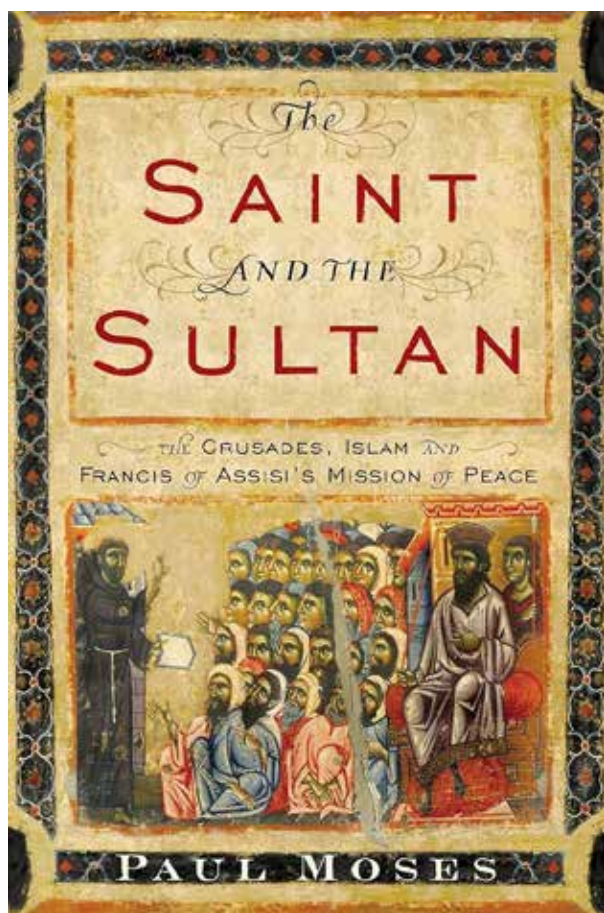
After their encounter, the Muslim armies under al-Kamil soundly defeated the Christian armies. They took thousands of crusaders as prisoners. It would have

been the standard practice for the Christian soldiers to be massacred. Instead, the sultan ordered his troops to provide food and water to the prisoners and granted them safe passage. When Saint Francis returned home, he immediately amended the rules of the Franciscan order to reflect this benevolence on the part of the sultan. As Paul Moses explains in his book *The Saint and the Sultan*, “Francis advocated a revolutionary new way for his friars to interact with Muslims. Rather than preach at them, he said, they could just live peacefully among them and even ‘be subject’ to them. So here he is reaching out not just to the sultan but to Muslims in general.”

Both Saint Francis and the Sultan al-Kamil understood the importance of dialogue and relationship for achieving peace. They understood that while they may have worshiped differently, they were celebrating the same God. They could see God’s love in each other. A few years later, Saint Clare, the co-founder of the Franciscan order, said that if a person looks at you, he or she should see Christ, and if you look at a person, you should see Christ. Francis and the sultan saw Christ in each other. They may have manifested that vision differently, but it was nonetheless a vision centered around love for the other, not hatred.

This process of mutual transformation between Francis and al-Kamil is worth reflecting on as we celebrate the 60th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*. One need only scan the headlines to see that the focus of this docu-

Continued on next page.



ment and the questions that it raises are still relevant today. Religion is being used for ulterior purposes, leading to war and violence. Conflicts in the Middle East have resulted in massacres of innocent children, both Jewish and Muslim. According to Pew Research, in 2018 more than a quarter of the world's countries experienced hostilities motivated by religious hatred. Women have faced increasing harassment for violating religious codes.

Since the publication of *Nostra Aetate*, there have been efforts to diminish it. For a while after the Second Vatican Council, there were lots of discussions, conferences, articles, and exchanges around the document. But that changed under John Paul II. In September 2000, the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) issued a document titled *Dominus Iesus*. It raised ecumenical concerns because it said that only the Catholic Church expresses the full truth of the church of Christ, and that other Christian churches are not as authentic.

Every 10 years or so, *Nostra Aetate* is pulled out and there are articles and conferences celebrating it, and then it is hidden away again and barely mentioned. But a document so profound and transformative should not be gathering dust. We should not be asking whether the questions *Nostra Aetate* raises are still relevant; we should be asking how we can reintroduce and reincorporate its teachings into the life of our faith.

Jewish, Christian, and Muslim voices have all challenged us to do precisely this. Writing in the *Catholic Herald* in 2022, Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Romain observed: “*Nostra Aetate*—the document that radically revised the Church’s relationship with Judaism—is rather like the United Nations. A wonderful ideal which has led to enormous achievements, yet which still has not reached its full potential.” At a colloquium on *Living the Christian Faith in an Inter-Religious and Multicultural World* in 2019, Archbishop Felix Machado said, “Without wanting to oversimplify, I would state that interreligious dialogue means making every effort to relate to people across religious boundaries in order to collaborate and promote peace in society and the world.” When Machado was serving as the Under-Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 2008, he wrote: “All men form but one community. What is this unity? We need to have a clear

idea of ‘being together’ or ‘living together’ in mutual respect, harmony, and peace.” And Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a professor of Islamic studies at George Washington University, expressed a similar sentiment at a conference marking the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*: “There is a great battle going on in the world between dark and light, and on almost every issue we are on the same page. It’s time for us to understand that we are in the same boat and that we can cooperate.”

Perhaps the issue all along is that we have been looking at *Nostra Aetate* from a theological perspective when we should instead be seeking to understand it as a prophetic call for unity, peace, and oneness. The 20th-century Catholic priest and mystic Thomas Berry warned us that “we will go into the future as a single sacred community or we will all perish in the desert.” Berry was not talking about how we practice our faith—what prayers we pray, whether we worship on Friday, Saturday, or Sunday. He was talking about how we see ourselves in connection to God and all of God’s wondrous creation.

In the Christian world, the prayer most frequently prayed is the Lord’s Prayer or “Our Father.” It is the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray. Its central petition is: “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” It is hard to imagine that in heaven there will be wars over how to worship God, or that some children will be starving while others live in mansions. We should use this 60th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* to reimagine it not as a theological construct but as a prophetic call to come together in unity and peace and begin to create God’s kingdom of heaven here on earth.

...

Patrick Carolan was executive director of Franciscan Action Network in the U.S. for ten years; he co-founded the Global Catholic Climate Movement and Catholics Vote Common Good. His writing and activism are centered on his understanding of the Franciscan spirituality of the connectedness of all creation and God.

Michael Centore is the editor of *Today’s American Catholic*.

This article is a shortened version of what appeared in *Today’s American Catholic*.

The 4th European OFS-YouFra Congress

ONE FAMILY, ONE MISSION

by DINA SHABALINA, OFS

It would probably be impossible to find a more picturesque and deeply spiritual place to celebrate the anniversary year of the Cantic of Creatures than colorful Catalonia (a region in northeastern Spain). It was here that, after a long seven-year break, more than 120 participants from different countries gathered for the 4th European OFS-YouFra Congress. The motto was “Creation and fraternity: one family, one mission”.

For almost a week (from July 14 to 19), the common rooms and courtyards of the hospitable Casa de Colonias Mogent of the Marist Brothers in the municipality of Llinars del Vallés were filled with the voices of brothers and sisters who came from Great Britain, France, Germany, Poland,



Croatia, Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ireland, Cyprus, Russia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Belgium, Lithuania, Hungary, Italy, and the Netherlands. There were even guests from Lebanon. And, of course, this year's hosts of the Congress — the brothers and sisters of the OFS and YouFra National Fraternities of Spain.

The Congress began with an opening Eucharist and an inaugural ceremony. Welcoming participants

were María José Píriz, the minister of the OFS of Spain; Yuleidy López, national coordinator of YouFra; and Montserrat Linares, minister of the OFS of Catalonia. Tibor Kauser, the minister general of the OFS, and Félix Chocojay, Franciscan Youth Councilor of the CIOFS Presidency, warmly addressed the participants. They encouraged everyone to embrace the wonderful opportunity to connect and share experiences with their brothers and sisters.

The last OFS and YouFra European Congress took place in 2018 in Lithuania, which concluded with the launch of a pilgrimage of the Icon of Queen of the Franciscan Family across Europe. It was a joy to reconnect with our Mother during the the

Continued on next page.



Celebrating Mass in the Basilica of the Sagrada Familia.

European Congress

4th European Congress of the Secular Franciscan Order and Franciscan Youth that was concluding the icon's pilgrimage through Spain. The German National Fraternity was the next to host the Icon.

The congress program was such a lively experience! There were moments when it felt as though 24 hours just weren't enough to soak up all the joy shared among brothers and sisters reconnecting. Almost every evening, there were fraternal meetings that naturally flowed into night vigils filled with music and joyful conversations.

In addition to the cherished moments spent in informal communication among brothers and sisters, the program also offered space for reflection and discussion. On Tuesday, July 15, Fr. Salvador Jiménez Durán, OFM, invited those present to reflect on the *Canticle of the Creatures*, finding in it an important message for modern men and women, who are called to find reconciliation with

themselves, with the Lord, with their neighbors, and with the surrounding world.

Tibor Kauser, as well as Félix Chocojay, encouraged us to reflect on the meaning of leadership in service. Both highlighted that Franciscan leadership involves serving with humility, listening, and guiding by example. The true leadership is fundamentally an act of love — rooted in “knowing, caring for, and accompanying our brothers and sisters.”

Monsignor Salvador Cristau, bishop of Terrassa, the diocese hosting the Congress, spoke passionately about the vital and distinct role of Franciscan lay people in the Church. He emphasized that “it is not merely about being part of the Church; it is about truly embodying the Church.”

The bishop noted that for St. Francis, everything starts from Jesus and the Gospel. To have the same feelings as Christ has - this is the synodality principle we are called to follow.

Continued from previous page.

Manolo Sánchez, OFS, shared a powerful interpretation of the hymn by St. Francis of Assisi. He reflected on the *Canticle*, highlighting the Secular Franciscan's important role as a beacon of light, peace, reconciliation, and love. He inspired us to embrace a spirituality that revitalizes the Church and transforms the world through the strength of humility.

CIOFS Presidency Councillors Noemi Paola Riccardi and Dina Shabalina provided an overview of the Secular Franciscan Order in Northern and Southern Europe-Mediterranean regions that have different situations and realities. The situation of YouFra in Europe was also shared by Juliana Kolanjian, YouFra international councillor, who presented YouFra European National fraternities with a wide variety of realities and levels of consolidation.

One of the unforgettable moments of the Congress was our journey to the Benedictine Monastery of Montserrat, the spiritual heart of Catalonia and a revered pilgrimage destination. Nature itself — the bizarre rocks, the vast bird's-eye view of Catalonia — immersed us in prayerful contemplation of the majesty of God's creation. It seems that this feeling stayed with us throughout the entire pilgrimage.

Its heart is the statue of the Black Madonna (La Moreneta), a miraculous image venerated by thousands of believers every day. We were blessed with the opportunity to touch this sacred shrine and kiss the throne of the Virgin, carrying our heartfelt prayers and hopes for various needs within us.

Continued on next page.



One of the working groups presenting their reflections.

European Congress

Abbot Manel Gasch i Hurios of Montserrat Monastery warmly welcomed us and briefly recounted the history of the monastery. One of the highlights of the day was participating in the Divine Eucharist in the majestic Basilica of Our Lady of Montserrat.

Another inspiring moment was the journey to Barcelona and Sagrada Familia. The Eucharist at the Basilica of the Sagrada Familia was presided over by Cardinal Joan Josep Omella, the Archbishop of the city. He called upon the members of the OFS and YouFra to embrace their faith with joy, humility, and a missionary spirit, becoming beacons of fraternity across Europe.

The practical workshop prepared by brothers Javi and Rafa from the OFS local fraternity left an indelible impression. They invited participants to reflect on the profound meaning of the life of brothers and sisters united in fraternities, using the symbolic construction of the “castell” as an example. A castell is a Catalan human tower, a traditional cultural practice where people form vertical structures by stacking themselves on top of each other, with children at the very top crowning the tower. Castells aren't just an amazing spectacle; they really represent the spirit of unity, trust, and the strength that comes from being part of a community. The central idea was the principle that fraternity will only be strong when each member finds his or her place in it, when there is trust and cooperation between members. At the end of the workshop we were able to see this for ourselves when we were asked to build a small

human tower under the watchful eye of Javi and Rafa.

It was also inspiring to hear about the experiences of members of the Valencia fraternity, who launched an initiative to help all those affected by the devastating effects of the infamous Hurricane Dana. This project, called “Renewal and Hope,” inspired Congress participants to launch a new joint project to actively support the AFA centers (Association of Relatives of People with Alzheimer's) in Algemés, Catarroja, and Guadassuar that have sustained significant damage and require constructive support to rebuild and enhance their facilities. The main goal of this project is to provide concrete fraternal support and accompaniment to dependent elderly people, their family members, and caregivers.

The 4th European Congress officially concluded on Saturday with the closing Eucharist that was presided over by Fr. Stefan Acatrinei, OFM Conv, general spiritual assistant of the OFS and YouFra, and with the ceremony for the delivery of the Icon of the Queen of the Franciscan Family. The Icon was handed over from the National Fraternity of Spain to the National Fraternity of Germany, thus continuing its pilgrimage of prayer and fraternal joy throughout Europe.

During the Closing Plenary Session, participants voted in favor of holding the next European Congress in three years. United in spirit, the brothers and sisters of the OFS and YouFra from all corners of Europe embarked on their journeys home, as ONE FAMILY committed to ONE MISSION.

Continued from previous page.



Congress participants building a “castell” (a human tower exhibiting a spirit of unity and community).

Queen of the Franciscan Family

ICON ON PILGRIMAGE ACROSS EUROPE

by VIRGINIJA MICKUTE, OFS

The word icon comes from the Greek, meaning “image” or “portrait.” Traditionally painted on wood using natural pigments and gold leaf, icons first appeared in the 4th–5th centuries. They served as tools for prayer, expressing the human desire to see and draw closer to God.

The Icon *Regina Familiae Franciscanae* (Queen of the Franciscan Family) was created in 2018 in Lithuania in preparation for the 3rd European OFS-YouFra Congress. Consecrated on 17 March 2018, the Icon began its pilgrimage among European OFS and YouFra fraternities. Since then, the Icon has journeyed through the national fraternities of Lithuania, Ukraine, Latvia, Switzerland, Slovakia, the Netherlands, Hungary, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Romania, and Spain. Following the 4th European OFS-YouFra Congress in Barcelona, the Icon traveled to Germany.

At the heart of the Icon is the image of the Virgin Mary, depicted in the traditional form of the Mother of God of Mercy. The Icon conveys the special relationship of love between the Mother and the Son, with an emphasis on her humanity. Below her are three principal saints of the Franciscan Family: St. Francis of Assisi, St. Clare of Assisi, and St. Elizabeth of Hungary. The Icon also contains relics of each saint, making it a true spiritual treasure.

The mission of the Icon’s pilgrimage is to visit local OFS and YouFra fraternities. It may also be venerated in Franciscan religious communities and parishes, and it is especially meaningful when brought to the sick members or families with children. Depending on the occasion, different rites of veneration may be used – solemn, ordinary, or private. The Icon also participates in major international OFS-YouFra events, including the OFS General Chapters in Rome in 2021 and 2024. National fraternities welcome the Icon during important events such as Elective Chapters, Fraternal and Pastoral Visits, and other special celebrations – serving as a strong sign of belonging to the worldwide Franciscan Family.

The Icon travels with accompanying materials: a booklet explaining its background, the rules of the pilgrimage, instructions for prayer, and liturgical texts. One of its



most treasured companions is a large pilgrimage journal, where each hosting fraternity places a photo and testimony. This growing album allows Secular Franciscans to connect with their brothers and sisters across Europe through shared stories, faces, and prayers. National coordinators in several countries have shared moving testimonies, revealing its spiritual impact across Europe.

Ukraine was the first country to receive the Icon after the 2018 Congress. Dina Shabalina, Ukraine’s national coordinator for the Icon’s pilgrimage, shared:

“In a few months, Mother Mary, in the company of St. Francis, St. Clare, and St. Elizabeth, visited as many of her children as possible. All five OFS regions, nearly 40 local fraternities, and countless Franciscan families welcomed the Icon. The presence of the Icon added solemnity to key events.”

The pilgrimage took place amid the ongoing war in eastern Ukraine. The Ukrainian nation’s deep longing

Continued on next page.

Icon on pilgrimage across Europe

Continued from previous page.

for peace made the Icon's presence a source of profound spiritual consolation. Reflecting on the Icon's pilgrimage, Dina said:

"We all are thirsty for peace. Thirsty for peace in our country. Thirsty for peace in our hearts. Those who honored the Icon felt peace and grace in her presence. Mary came carrying Jesus, who is true Peace... the Holy Spirit moved us to speak of peace. We brought the Icon to the sick, to Franciscan families, and said to everyone: 'Peace be with you!'"

...

Switzerland experienced similar graces when the Icon spent several months there in 2019, traveling throughout the country. The Icon graced the Regional Chapter to the Mattli Antoniushaus in Morschach before moving on to communities in southern Switzerland.

According to Nadia Rudolf von Rohr, national coordinator of the pilgrimage:

"Whoever got involved with the Queen of the Franciscan Family discovered a world opening up – a world that makes an encounter with God possible. Our Icon holds great power and wonderful charisma! It was good to have her in our midst, and she brought together the local fraternities who hosted her."

...

The Netherlands received the Icon in November 2019 from OFS Slovakia, welcoming her at the airport in Budapest. During the pandemic, her home base was the City Convent San Damiano in Den Bosch, where Friars Minor, a Capuchin, Poor Clares, and Secular Franciscans live together in a large monastery. From there, she visited local fraternities and was also brought to elderly and sick members. The Icon's final stop in the Netherlands was the National Elective Chapter in June 2021, before continuing her pilgrimage to Hungary.

Mariette Fleur, national pilgrimage coordinator, reflected: "The visit of the Icon of Mary has been a great blessing for the OFS in the Netherlands. Not every member was able to greet her due to Covid restrictions, but many could. Cards with her image were distributed, along with the Franciscan Crown on the back side... We felt united with the Franciscan Family as a whole, especially with our

OFS brothers and sisters in other national fraternities who have received the Icon or will receive her in the future."

...

Croatia hosted the Icon from July 2022 to April 2023. The national coordinator, Goran Luketa, shared a traditional Pilgrimage Song recited during the Icon's journey across Croatia:

Zdravo Gospe i Djevice / Hail Lady and Virgin
Svih kršćana pomoćnice / Helper of all Christians
Svih bolesnih ljekarice / Healer of the sick
Duša naših čuvarice / Guardian of our souls

The author of this hymn remains unknown. It originated in the region around Split and has been lovingly passed down through generations – learned by daughters from their mothers, and mothers from their grandmothers.

...

The Czech Republic received the Icon from Bosnia and Herzegovina in September 2023 and passed it on to Slovenia in January 2024. During this time, the Icon visited over 40 local fraternities. Markéta Kubešová, national pilgrimage coordinator, said:

"These fraternal and joyful encounters were perhaps the greatest fruit of the Icon's presence in our country. The Icon was warmly and enthusiastically received by Franciscan communities and Third Order sisters alike, united through prayer and collaboration... At the conclusion of the pilgrimage, ministers and formators gathered to share testimonies of the miracles obtained through the intercession of Mother of God."

...

The Icon's pilgrimage is an opportunity to deepen a sense of belonging to the Order and uniting us in prayer through the intercession of Our Lady, Queen of the entire Franciscan Family, and our Franciscan saints.

The pilgrimage is coordinated by the national fraternity of the OFS in Lithuania. Those interested in hosting the Icon in their country are invited to contact the coordinators by email: ofs.lietuvoje@gmail.com. Follow the Icon's pilgrimage online: facebook.com/reginafamiliae-franciscanae.

800Years: the Canticle, the Exhortation and a Monastery

THE POOR CLARES OF CORTONA IN ITALY



by CRISTINA LONGINOTTI, OSC

It was spring of 1225 and Francis, his eyes severely damaged and his body racked with suffering, stayed for fifty days at San Damiano in a physical, psychological and spiritual state of great tribulation, so much so that he was moved to compassion for himself and asked the Lord for help that he might bear his suffering with patience. In answer he was given the certainty of partaking in the Kingdom of God, “and the experience of the Kingdom of the Father was the experience of a reality...in which only love prevails.”¹ From this comes his decision: “Therefore, for his praise, for our consolation and for the edification of our neighbor,

I want to write a new Praise of the Lord for His creatures”² This is the birth of the Canticle of Brother Sun.

In that very same spring of 1225, just about eighty kilometers from Assisi, a little group of women accepted the donation of land and a house in construction from Azolo di Ranieri of Cortona. The deed of gift records the transfer of these properties to “Sister Lucia, a nun of San Damiano in the Spoleto Valley... so that she may establish there a convent of the Damianesses in honor of the Almighty God and the glorious Virgin Mary, His mother.” It was the nucleus of the first community of the Poor Ladies in Cortona, who

on 13 May 1225 took up residence in the place then called Marignano, today in Cortona, “The Countesses”, on the slopes of the hill. In approving the foundation, the Bishop stated that the sisters should serve the Lord according to the rule given to St. Clare by Cardinal Ugolino (1218-1219), by which he tried to unify the lifestyle of the newly blossomed branches of San Damiano. Nevertheless, our first sisters lived poverty tenaciously, in conformity with the original inspiration received by Clare of Assisi: work and trust in the provident Father were their only sources of sustenance.

Continued on next page.

The Poor Clares of Cortona

Continued from previous page.

In this choice we see how these women had received the Exhortation which Francis, almost like a testament, addressed to the Poor Ladies “in those same days and in the same place ... after he had composed the Praises of the Lord for his Creatures”³. The content of that exhortation, known by its opening words, *Audite poverelle*, was that they, gathered together from many places in holy charity, might live in poverty, in obedience, in unanimity in a familial life, in the discrete and contemplative satisfaction of their bodily needs, in patience, in hard work, to the glory and edification of the Church.⁴ It was not hard for the women of Cortona who became Poor Ladies to know the form of life of Clare and her sisters, as too the words of Francis, because that man from Assisi had preached in Cortona as early as 1211 and some men joined him, giving birth to the

first locus of the Friars Minor in the City: Le Celle of Cortona. Francis was said to have returned there the following year, on his final journey to Assisi. Would he have visited the sisters on that occasion? We cannot know for certain, but we like to imagine it was so....

Given the less than substantial means at the Cortonesi sisters' disposal, the newly erected monastery was not allowed to accept more than twenty sisters. This limit was soon reached and other women were asking to be received into obedience. So, only twelve years after its founding, it was necessary to build a larger monastery. On 20 May 1237, during the pontificate of Gregory IX, the community transferred to Targe, on the opposite side of the hill, and only a few hundred yards outside the city wall, where it flourished, overcoming the suffering and inconveniences of the repeated sieges to

which Cortona was subjected.

From the beginning of the 14th century onward, there are no particularly salient facts, except for that “exceptionality” that the everyday always offers when one looks at it and welcomes it as a place of encounter with the living and present Lord.

And we come to 1479, when a serious fire compromised the livelihood of the monastery. Franciscan friar and historian Luke Wadding also mentions it: “A fire broke out in the convent of Targe in 1479, a great part of it burned and was destroyed, with damage amounting to over one thousand florins.” The sisters “cut expenses as much as they could and lived very economically in order to rebuild the monastery or move elsewhere.” This idea came to fruition in the first half of the 16th century, when Pope Paul III authorized them to build a new St. Clare Monastery
Continued on next page.



Photo / monastery website

St. Clare Monastery, overlooking Cortona.

The Poor Clares of Cortona

Continued from previous page.

within the city walls, given their repeated need to take refuge in the city under the threat of enemy troops, a need that had arisen seven times in the previous ten years! The year was 1537. The site chosen for the sisters' new home was the upper part of Cortona known as "il Poggio," just below the top of the hill on which stands the Basilica dedicated to St. Margaret. The commission for the renovation project of the place was given to the then young architect Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), who envisaged the use of the pre-existing buildings. We can read in the monastery's "expense journal": "Francesco, our apprentice, 44 lire and 17 soldi which he took to Arezzo and paid for the model that we had ordered and brought it back". The work was completed in 1578 and on September 11, 1581 the sisters went up from Targe to the Poggio di

Cortona. "in a solemn procession, accompanied by the Bishop and the clergy of the Cathedral."

Only twice did the sisters have to abandon the building temporarily; the first time was during the Napoleonic suppression, and then under the laws of the newly unified Italian State (cf. the laws of 1866 and 1867). At that time the building was put up for auction and, thanks to the financial capabilities of the family of Sister Concetta Cempini, one of the sisters, it was bought back for the "modest" sum of... three thousand lire! On January 18, 1892, the sisters were able to return to their monastery and on March 28 papal enclosure was restored

Social and even ecclesial contexts change, the practical ways in which daily life is lived may change, but the reference to that original inspiration

that unites today's plant to the roots that 800 years ago began to sink into this land nourished by the Clarian way of life does not change.

Celebrating the eighth centenary of the presence of the Poor Clares in Cortona means for us, heirs of so much history, to re-embrace the form of life in a spirit of praise and gratitude.

...

FOOTNOTES

1. Dario Chiapetti, *San Francesco stigmatizzato. L'innovazione materno-sacerdotale delle creature*, Edizioni Biblioteca Francescana, Milano 2024, p. 364, quotation translated from the Italian for this publication.

2. *Assisi Compilation*, 83.

3. *Assisi Compilation*, 85.

4. Dario Chiapetti, *op. cit.*, p. 404



Mary Stronach, OFS vice minister general, and Sr. Cristina, the author, have a happy reunion during a visit to the Vatican.

OFS in action around the globe



FIRST YOUFRA COUNCIL ELECTED IN VIENNA



The first Council of the Franciscan Youth Vienna (JuFra Wien) was elected for the first time in Austria. The elections were held May 9, 2025, at the center of the OFS Austria, “Haus Franziskus,” in Vienna, and were led by Jasminka Jakic, OFS, youth representative and secretary of the Eastern Region in Austria.

To summarize the development. YouFra Vienna was founded in 2019 by Jasminka Jakic, who is member of the Croatian OFS in Vienna.

“We have witnessed a long, but exciting, and blessed development of this first...Franciscan Youth in

Austria,” Jasminka said.

“Now our prayers and efforts are bearing the long-awaited fruit. On December 14, 2024, the first Promises of YouFra Vienna took place, which opened the doors to the structure, according to the Statute.”

“Five young people have taken this first step with giving their Promise in 2024, encouraged by the example of St. Francis and St. Clare, and thanks to the support of the OFS from all over Austria,” she said.

“The spiritual assistance, theological guidance, and prayers of Fr. Stefan Kitzmüller, OFM, Fr. Karmel We-

glarz, OFM, and Fr. Leszek Nocun, OFMCap, have made the youth unstoppable.”

The first local Council of the Franciscan Youth Vienna is composed as follows: Minister Theresa Bentz, Vice Minister Emily Duggan, Secretary Regina Bentz, Treasurer Esther Schmidtsberger, Formation Director Eva Jagenbrein, OFS representative Jasminka Jakic and Spiritual Assistant Fr. Karmel Weglarz OFM.

Jasminka added: “Let us continue to pray for these brave young people and for the establishment of further YouFra groups in Austria!”

SENEGAL SEES FIRST PROFESSIONS



In Senegal four people have made their professions in the Secular Franciscan Order and two have been admitted as candidates, reports Presidency Councillor Adolph Atsu Assagba, OFS.

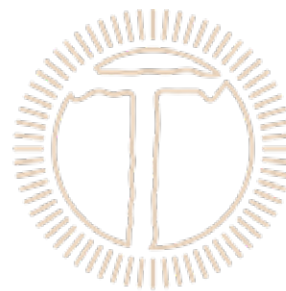
The event took place on Oct. 4, 2025, at La Portioncule de Sainte Marie des Anges in Rufisque. “They are the very first promotion of Secular Franciscans in Senegal,” Adolph notes.

In addition occurring on the feast of St. Francis, the event coincided “with the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the OFM year on October 2, 2015,” he reports, noting: “More than 14 priests were present with a large crowd of Christians and acquaintances during the Mass.”

THE OFS INTERNATIONAL ORDER INTRODUCES A NEW LOGO

The CIOFS Presidency has approved a new corporate brand design centered around the international OFS logo.

The logo seeks to express the nature of the OFS, being Franciscan, secular and an order. It picks up the Franciscan element of the old logo -- namely, the Tau “T”. The new design eliminates the Latin words around the Tau. Instead, a circle of rays bursts out from the Tau, like a sun shining on the secular world. Its identity as an order is expressed through the Latin words, *Ordo Franciscanus Saecularis*. The logo itself can be used without the words, such as on the web, in social media,



Ordo Franciscanus Saecularis
Consilium Internationale

and on products. For appealing graphic effect, a part of the logo can be enlarged for use on such things as envelopes, folders, posters, tote bags, etc. The logo also is expected to be used in various combinations with

the OFS name spelled out, especially on CIOFS letterhead and documents. The brand may be presented in colour (a light brown) or grey-scale. The new design is for use by CIOFS.

USA HOLDS ELECTIVE CHAPTER



The National Fraternity of the United States of America held an elective chapter from September 9 to 14, 2025, in Marriottsville, Maryland, re-electing Jane DeRose Bamman, OFS, as national minister and Mary Frances

Charsky, OFS, as international councillor. Diane Menditto was re-elected vice minister and substitute international councillor.

CONGO HOLDS ELECTIVE CHAPTER



Congo's National Fraternity of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary held its 2nd National Elective Chapter from August 11 to 17, 2025 in Kinsha-

sa, DRC. The National Council is composed of 11 members and two Spiritual Assistants (OFM and OFM Cap), reports Presidency Councillor

Adolph Atsu Assagba, OFS. National minister is Jean Bosco Noel Nkodia Wa Ngina. International councillor is Félicien Kasongo Numbi.

BURKINA FASO HAS NEW NATIONAL COUNCIL



The new National Council of Burkina Faso was formed on September 20, 2025, in Ouagadougou at the Sainte Famille Center in Saaba.

Alida Siguian Kabore-Sawadogo is the new national

minister and international councillor. The council has six members, accompanied by three spiritual assistants (OFM, Cap, Conv), reports Presidency Councillor Adolph Atsu Assagba, OFS.

POLAND HOLDS ELECTIVE CHAPTER



On September 26-27, 2025, the OFS National Elective Chapter took place in Poland. Emilia Nogaj was

re-elected as the National Minister and Slawomir Kowalski was elected as the International Councillor.



MEXICO ELECTS SERVANT LEADERS

The OFS National Fraternity of Mexico celebrated its National Elective Chapter from 26 to 28 September 2025. Eduardo Ibañez was elected national

minister and international councillor, and Cecilia Villegas was elected as vice minister and substitute international councillor.



ELECTIVE CHAPTER IN SLOVAKIA

The OFS National Fraternity of Slovakia celebrated its National Elective Chapter on 6 September 2025.

Damian Berec was elected as national minister and Lucia Spodniakova as international councillor.



ELECTIVE CHAPTER IN AUSTRALIA

The OFS National Fraternity of Australia celebrated its National Elective Chapter on 13 September

2025. Maria Iadanza was re-elected as national minister and international councillor.



ELECTIVE CHAPTER IN NEW ZEALAND

The OFS National Fraternity of New Zealand celebrated its National Elective Chapter on 7 September

2025. Shirley McGinley was elected as national minister and Paul Hitchfield as international councillor.



BRAZIL ELECTS NEW SERVANT LEADERS

From August 21 to 24, 2025, Brazil's National Elective Chapter was held in the city of São Paulo, and a new National Council was elected: Helmir José

Soares Da Silva is the minister and international councillor, and Antonio Julio Martins is the vice minister and substitute international councillor.



PARAGUAY HOLDS ELECTIVE CHAPTER

On August 16 and 17, 2025, Paraguay held its National Elective Chapter with the motto: *"Praised be You, my Lord, for all those who with humility and love serve in Your peace."* Mirtha Ferreira was elected as minister and international councilor,

and Javier Fleitas was elected as vice minister and substitute international councilor. Accompanying this Chapter were Silvia Diana, Presidency Councilor of CIOFS, and Fr. Tomás Ginga Panzo Suva, OFMCap, general spiritual assistant.



BOLIVIA NATIONAL FRATERNITY ELECTS

The OFS National Fraternity of Bolivia celebrated its National Elective Chapter on 25-27 July 2025.

Bernardo Rada was elected as national minister and international councillor.



HUNGARY HOLDS ELECTIVE CHAPTER

The OFS National Fraternity of Hungary celebrated its National Elective Chapter on 11 July 2025.

Imre Daniel was re-elected as national minister and Adrienn Bogнар as international councillor.



VISITATION TO URUGUAY

From June 5 to 8, 2025, Presidency Councillor Silvia Diana made a Fraternal Visit to the OFS in Uruguay, visiting the local Fraternities and the National

Council. She thanked Minister and International Councillor Matilde Beltrame and the Council for their service and hospitality.



EL SALVADOR OFS ELECTS LEADERS

The National Fraternity of the OFS of El Salvador has celebrated its National Elective Chapter from May 16-18, 2025, in Santiago di María District –

Usulután – El Salvador. Sonia Zaldaña was elected as national minister and international councillor. Elmer Carías was elected vice minister and substitute international councillor.



CANADA OFS ELECTS NATIONAL MINISTER

The OFS National Fraternity of Canada celebrated its National Elective Chapter on 28 June 2025. Jewel

Jasmins was re-elected as national minister and international councillor.



ARGENTINA ELECTS NATIONAL MINISTER

The OFS National Fraternity of Argentina held its National Elective Chapter from June 20 to 22, 2025,

re-electing Santiago Negro as national minister and international councillor, and Liliana Valiente as vice minister and substitute international councillor.



ELECTIVE CHAPTER IN COSTA RICA

The National Fraternity of the OFS of Costa Rica celebrated its National Elective Chapter from May

9 to 11, 2025, in Cantón Alajuela. Fanny Rojas Vargas is national minister and international councillor. Malcom Arias Taborda is vice minister and substitute international councillor.

SECULAR FRANCISCANS PARDONED BY PRESIDENT TRUMP

U.S. Secular Franciscans were among 22 pro-life activists who were pardoned by President Donald Trump on Jan. 23, 2025. After protesting outside abortion clinics, they had been convicted of violating the federal Freedom of Access to Clinics (FACE) Act and were serving sentences.

“I got a little choked up,” Paulette Harlow, OFS, told *OSV News*, after seeing the pardon on TV. The mother of six and grandmother of eight was under house arrest at her Kingston, Massachusetts home.

Jean Marshall, Harlow’s sister and also a Secular Franciscan, learned of the pardons on TV while at a halfway house in Boston. “I was just elated that I could watch it. It’s pretty sensa-

tional when you’re pardoned on TV?”

Harlow told *OSV News* that she was looking forward to spending time with her grandchildren, and best of all, attending Mass at Sts. Mary & Joseph Collaborative in nearby Plymouth.

Trump’s pardons marked the end of a legal saga that began in 2022, *OSV News* explained.

That year, a Justice Department task force, in the wake of the Supreme Court overturning the *Roe v. Wade* abortion decision, asked federal attorneys to charge activists who blockaded abortion clinics or otherwise interfered with access with violating the FACE Act even if they had already been previously been convicted for trespassing at the clinics.