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**CONFERENCE OF SPIRITUAL ASSISTANTS GENERAL  
OFS – YOUFRA (CAS)**

# KOINONIA

*... together on the journey*

*“The journey of the Secular Franciscans in the Synodal Church”*



**The participation of the Secular Franciscans in the  
Church as a sign of fidelity**

Fr. Alfred Parambakathu, OFM Conv

<https://ciofs.info/en/news/koinonia/>



## Introduction

This year we have decided to focus on the Synodality. In the last article of Koinonia we discussed the theme of communion of the Church-People of God and how the secular Franciscans can live that communion, following the example of St. Francis. In the present article we would like to see how the Secular Franciscans can participate in the Synodal journey of the Church. A question that we often ask and enter into discussion is how can we renew and revive the life of the Secular Franciscan Order. The most powerful answer can be found in the Constitutions: “open to the demands which come from society and the current state of the church...” (8.2). To participate in the Synodal journey has to be our fundamental response to the present demands of the church. Love for the renewal of the Church is part of our charism (GGCC 13.2) and listening to the guidelines of the Church is the way (GGCC 15.2).

In this study our focus is not on the theological or juridical aspects of the Synodality of the Church, but only on how, as laity, the secular Franciscans can participate in the Synodality.

### 1. Laity and Synodality

Through Synodality the Church is advocating for a new missionary energy that will involve the entire People of God (Doc I, 9). This was already in the air since long time. The Second Vatican Council, by calling them “People of God”, gave the laity an active role in the ecclesial mission of the Church. The Council also gave priority to the collective nature of the Church, rather than the classical hierarchical classification (clergy, religious, laity). They are no more considered as the recipient of the pastoral care from the clerics. But this enthusiasm of the Council also witnessed the social transformation in the West, rejecting or considering everything religious as illegitimate<sup>1</sup>.

Pope Francis took up this idea. The vision enclosed in *Evangelii gaudium*, in a special way, are oriented towards a re-collocation of all the ecclesial figures around a fundamental consideration; that of “holy faithful of God” which is the Church (EG 125)

#### 1.1 *Life and witness of the faithful as participation*

In this new logic the priority is given not to the functions (ministerial or even charismatic) but to the virtuous life of the faithful. It is the life of the ‘christifideles’ that

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. V. MIGNOTTI, in *Crede oggi*, 39 (2019) vol 4, 84-85.

makes us a Church, a Synodal Church. Each one is living a personal and original relationship with Jesus Christ that gives form to his/her existence. This relationship is expressed in his/her relation with other faithful in the community of the disciples of Christ. In this perspective a laity is one who expresses his/her singular experience of faith, in connection with the Church which configures his/her conscience and behavior as faithful.

In this way the accent in the life of the laity, as well as of anybody in the Church, is not placed solely or primarily on the functions or services that one performs, but on the quality of the life-experience of faith and of the following of the Gospel. This is how one participate in the life and mission of the Church. This is what essentially the meaning of *sensus fidei* the Pope Francis speaks (EG 10).



### 1.2 A life-experience

In order to make this participatory nature of the laity clearer let us go through the faith journey of a couple from Croatia:

“We are Mirjam and Dubravko Škorput from Zagreb (Croatia). We met in YouFra fraternity while we were young. It is the time when our spiritual life began to deepen and since then we are both active in the Church. We were members of YouFra for ten years, and even after leaving the fraternity, we remained

closely connected to Franciscan spirituality and Franciscans.

Recently we experienced the loss of a child in his 6th month, a child who was so much longed for (we were waiting for a child since 10 years of our marriage). This happened in April, in the first Easter week, and it was a very surprising moment for us because the course of the pregnancy did not indicate any problems. Preparations for the arrival of our son, Krsto, were in full swing: from planning future events, buying things, choosing a doctor, godparents. After the appearance of high blood pressure, Mirjam was hospitalized, and everything seemed as a routine. However, on the third day of hospitalization, during a routine ultrasound examination, the doctors determined that the heart of Krsto had stopped beating. The disbelief and shock that appeared then, and facing the moment of childbirth that followed, caused mixed feelings: anger, fear, sadness, but at no time did God disappear from that mixture of feelings. We spent the time waiting for the birth, almost a whole day, thinking “How? Why did it happen?” Those 28 hours we spent in the delivery room are an experience that will leave a mark forever: both those difficult memories, and the realization that during those hours God revealed himself through good, sensitive doctors and nurses. Moments of shock slowly disappeared under the feeling of sadness, and at the moment of birth, a great eruption of feelings took place.



We saw our son who was not breathing, and as difficult as it was, we presented him to God, firmly believing that he is now with Him. On the advice of a friend, we buried Krsto in the tomb for the unborn in Zagreb. It was an act that allowed us to bid him a dignified farewell, sharing our grief with many parents who have gone through a similar path. It was especially important that Krsto was accompanied in a prayer led by a priest, and this act allowed us to look forward knowing that Krsto is now with the Lord.

With the passage of time, the grief did not diminish, new questions began to appear: will we ever become parents? What will the next pregnancy be like? Why did God allow this? The whole situation was easier to bear with the company of friends and family who were by our side every day, including people who were not in our lives for a long time. Sometimes, the situation would be more difficult if we saw couples with small babies or came to places where we especially felt that the Krsto was rejoicing, like during the Holy Mass. Despite the gravity of the situation, God's presence through people who are close to us, doctors, and most of all through the sacraments of the Eucharist and anointing of the sick. In addition to the loss of our child, Mirjam faced other problems after being discharged from the hospital, and the treatment continues today.



Once the priest who led the catechesis we attended asked us: “When does God reveal himself?” The participants gave various answers: in nature, in prayer, meditation, people... But the priest concluded that God truly manifests himself fully only in suffering. And that paradox we face in Christianity became more than clear in our case. God revealed himself when we were losing the ground under our feet, the future we were looking forward to, where we least believed: in suffering, through people who helped us, through the sacraments, through the cross, as He did on Good Friday. Like Jesus did, we also experienced this paradox. We strengthened our belief that Easter comes after Good Friday. With trust in Him, we await future days and, if it is His will, new joys”<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Our sincere thanks to Mirjam and Dubravko Škorput who, through Ana Fruk, agreed to share their “journeying together” in faith to our readers. Let us keep them in our prayers for their “new joys”.

This is how one can participate in the synodality of the Church: to see the hand of God in all that happens in life, even in adverse moments and to live and love the faith within the community of the faithful. The above mentioned Croatian couple had never



experienced before the strength of their faith and love for Jesus Christ. It is such kind of experiences of the faithful that renews the faith of the whole Church. “...the spirituality of synodality becomes an ‘ecclesial habitus’ which is a source or renewal and dynamism for the Church’s life and mission. It is a way of being and becoming Church. The spirituality of synodality gives form to the amazing discovery of the hidden energies of love, self-commitment, generosity and sharing, that lie in us sometimes unattended and forgotten: a sort of ‘dowry’ received in baptism but often neglected”<sup>3</sup>. Synodality is such a ‘journeying together’ to discover our hidden strength.

## 2. Participation through evangelization: to be “missionary disciples”

The baptismal origin of a Christian constitutes the principal reason for which each faithful is called to interpret in his/her life the adherence to the Gospel and the belonging to his/her community. “All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients... we no longer say that we are “disciples” and “missionaries”, but rather that we are always “missionary disciples” (EG 120).

We read in our Constitutions that, “Secular Franciscans are called to be co-workers in establishing the Church as the sacrament of salvation for all men and women... Their preferred apostolate is the personal witness in the place they live...” (GGCC 17.1). So to participate in the mission of evangelization is part of the life of the secular Franciscans. Their words and choices can be significant if they are matured in that authenticity that comes from the consciousness of a Christian identity - that of a disciple of Christ who hears the Word of God every day and lives it. So in the document on Synodality it is clearly stated; “In terms of theology and ecclesiological experience, there was a growing awareness that the Church is not identical with her pastors; that the whole Church, by the action of the

<sup>3</sup> COMMISSION ON SPIRITUALITY, Spirituality of Synodality, p 4 (this document is not yet published in the official website of the Synod. But Fr. Giulio Cesareo, OFMConv., a member of this Commission, graciously send me a copy of it).

Holy Spirit, is the subject or ‘organ’ of Tradition; and that lay people have an active role in the transmission of the apostolic faith”.<sup>4</sup>



Our intention to participate in the Synodal Church is thus through our involvement in evangelization.

### 3. Participation through a renewal of structures

“Synodality cannot be realized or sustained unless it is grounded in the prayer of the Church and the faithful people of God”<sup>5</sup>. The principal document on Synodality clearly states that the Church’s synodal path is shaped and nourished by the Eucharist. “The source and summit of synodality are in the celebration of the liturgy - in a unique way - in our full, conscious and active participation in the Eucharistic synaxis”<sup>6</sup>. Our legislation clearly defines this aspect; “Franciscan Secular spirituality is a plan for life, centered on the person of Christ and following Him rather than a detailed program that has to be put into practice” (GGCC 9.1).

Deeply rooted spiritual life in communion with the local church is also a way of participation in the Synodality from the part of the Secular Franciscans.

### 4. Participation through a renewal of structures

To promote a synodal Church means to renew the institutions until they express an attitude of love, communion, listening, dialogue, initiative, accommodation, reciprocal exchange, cooperation and participation between persons and communities. The reform of the Church is the synodal reform of the local churches and the whole Church<sup>7</sup>. After the example of our father and founder St. Francis of Assisi, who repaired three churches in his native town, we are also called to renew the structures constantly.

This does not mean a revolutionary destruction of all the existing structures, but a question of attitude, a change in the methodology of working, first and foremost. In his address to the Synodal fathers, Pope Francis puts it in this way, “... in this Church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located beneath the base. Consequently, those who exercise authority are called “ministers”, because, in the original meaning of the word, they are the least of all. It is in serving the people of God that each bishop becomes, for that portion of the flock entrusted to him, vicarius Christi, the vicar of that Jesus who at the Last Supper bent down to wash the feet of the Apostles. For the disciples of Jesus, yesterday, today

<sup>4</sup> INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, 39.

<sup>5</sup> COMMISSION ON SPIRITUALITY, Spirituality of Synodality, p 15.

<sup>6</sup> INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, 47.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. CARLOS MARIA GALLI,- ANTONIO SPADARO, La Riforma e le Riforme nella Chiesa, Brescia 2016, 12.

and always, the only authority is the authority of service, the only power is the power of the cross”<sup>8</sup>. What the Pope says about the Bishops is valid for all the ‘Ministers’ and those in authority in the Secular Franciscan Order.

The Order of Franciscan Seculars is disclosed in how its members live. The renewal shall begin from individual members, then in the local fraternities and thus reaching up to the whole Order: from bottom to the top.

## 5. Participation as going out to the existential peripheries

A synodal Church has within it a desire to include the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed - a theme that Pope Francis insistently repeats. The poor and the peripheries are found on the margins of society and cultures, but they are also found in the Church itself. They also belong to the peripheries who long to be more closely integrated into the Body of the Church, but cannot be.

Going out to the peripheries is a commitment that we have directly received from Pope Francis when he said; “With this Franciscan and secular identity of yours, you are part of the outbound Church. Your favourite place to be is in the midst of the people, and there, as lay people - celibate or married -, priests and bishops, each according to his or her specific vocation, to bear witness to Jesus with a simple life, without pretension, always content to follow the poor and crucified Christ, as did Saint Francis and so many men and women of your Order. I encourage you too to go out to the peripheries, the existential peripheries of today, and there to make the word of the Gospel resound”<sup>9</sup>. Yet again another way to participate in the Synodality of the Church.

## Conclusions

The Secular Franciscans have the obligation to participate in the initiatives promoted by the Holy See (GGCC 99.1) and to be actively present in the Church (GGCC 31.2). Now that the Church is emphasizing on Synodality as a journeying together, we have to be in the fore front of the march. We can do it through sharing our faith-experience, by becoming missionary disciples, by our prayer life, through the renewal of our personal lives and by going out to the peripheries of the Church and the society. Let the Holy Spirit give us new fervor to live our faith as Secular Franciscans in the third millennium.

<sup>8</sup> POPE FRANCIS, Address during the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (Saturday, 17 October 2015).

<sup>9</sup> POPE FRANCIS, Address to the General Chapter of OFS, on 15 November 2021.



## MEETINGS, VISITS AND CHAPTERS

### **COSTA RICA - National Elective Chapter**

The National Elective Chapter of Costa Rica was held on 22 and 23 January 2022. The national fraternity of Costa Rica is a small fraternity of 126 professed with 14 brothers and sisters in formation. Silvia Diana, member of the CIOFS Presidency presided over the Elective Chapter, assisted by Brother Henry Ramirez Vargas, OFMConv, delegate of CAS.

Silvia Diana presented the theme "the role of the Secular Franciscan in today's world". The outgoing National Minister, Luis Chacón Rojas, presented the report of the OFS National Council, highlighting the highlights of the Council's service during the three-year period. The presentation of the budget by the National Bursar's Office also took place. Both reports were approved.

During the elective session, Ricardo Gerardo Herrera Sandí was elected National Minister and International Councillor. The Chapter discussed YouFra, which is going through a difficult time, due to the resignation of some councillors. The use of the Franciscan cord was also discussed and it was finally decided to abandon this practice.

### **ZIMBABWE - National Elective Chapter**

From 5 to 8 May 2022, the national fraternity of Zimbabwe held the elective chapter in Chivu at "St. Francis of Assisi High School" under the presidency of Jenny Harrington, OFS, delegate of the Minister General Tibor Kauser, OFS, and was accompanied by Fr. Linus Mukumbuzi, OFM, delegate of the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants (CAS). The theme of the Chapter was: "Returning together to Assisi" which unfortunately was presented via audiovisual since Fr. Elias Musona, OFM, National Spiritual Assistant, was unable to be in person.

During the Chapter there were 16 capitulars present. The election of the new National Council was held on Saturday during which Inviolata Nhunduru was elected as National Minister and International Councilor and Daniel Chidemo as Substitute International Councilor. The chapter was held in a fraternal atmosphere.

### **NICARAGUA - National Elective Chapter**

From 27-29 May the National Chapter of Nicaragua was celebrated, in the city of Dario. The Chapter was presided over by Ana Maria Ralfo, OFS, delegate of the General Minister of OFS and Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM, representative of the General Assistants.

The National assistants were present for the Chapter: Fr. Franco Brenes Villavicencio, OFMCap., who presided over the inaugural Mass and Fr. Patricio Tijerino, OFM, who



presided over the mass on the second day of the chapter and later Fr. Eugenio Rios Gracias, OFM, presented the theme of the Chapter “Identity of the OFS - Project of life”.

Afterwards, the budget with the three-year report was presented. The election of the new Council was held on Saturday, during which the new members of the National Council of Nicaragua were elected: Orlando Zamora was elected as National Minister and International Councilor. The inaugural Mass of the new Council was celebrated by Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM, and thus the National Chapter concluded in a spirit of prayer and fraternal communion.

### **SLOVENIA - National Elective Chapter**

The elective chapter of the national fraternity of Slovenia was held from 20-22 May 2022 in Kancevci, in the house of spirituality of the Capuchin friars. The Chapter was preceded by the National Minister Fani Pecar and attended by more than 50 OFS brothers and sisters; among which 47 were members with voting rights out of the total of 95 Capitulars. The others were members of the local fraternity of Kancevci and other neighboring fraternities. In addition, there were also three spiritual assistants: two Capuchins and one Conventual friar.

Saturday was reserved for the elections of the Minister and the National Council. The act was presided by the Minister General of OFS Tibor Kauser - as representative of the CIOFS Presidency, and assisted by Fr. Tomas Ginga Panzo Suva, OFMCap., as delegate of the CAS.

The Chapter was celebrated in an atmosphere of prayer, recollection, responsibility, celebration and fraternal sharing. The results of this election were: Fani Pecar, elected for a second term as National Minister; Jozef Kozel elected as National Vice-Minister and the other six councilors who make up the National Council were also elected. All, when asked by the Minister General after each election, accepted to assume the duties and services entrusted to them and thus were confirmed and blessed. On the evening of this same day, in the Eucharistic celebration presided by Fr. Jozko, OFMCap., and concelebrated by Fr. Danilo, OFMConv.

### **ARGENTINA - Formation Course for the Formators of JPIC**

The II School of formation for formators of JPIC (Justice, Peace and Integration with Creation) of the Southern Cone was held in the city of Corrientes, in northern Argentina. The event took place from 26 to 29 May and had as a theme: “Franciscans on the move, building an integral ecology”. It was attended by members of the OFS and YouFra from Brazil, Bolivia, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile and Argentina.

The event was presided over by the CIOFS International Councilor, Sister Silvia Diana, accompanied by the General Spiritual Assistant Fr. Carlos Ginés, TOR, and the International Councilor of YouFra, Elías Molina.

The Archbishop of Corrientes, Mgr. Andrés Stanovnick OFMCap., presided over the opening Eucharist, welcoming and encouraging all in their dedication and service in the midst of society.

The participants joyfully shared their experiences and expectations on the JPIC projects carried out so far. The conclusions of the previous School for formators were recalled and new orientations were sought, expressing new concerns, challenges and activities until the next meeting in Bolivia in 2024.

### **EL SALVADOR - National Elective Chapter**

The National Elective Chapter of the OFS-El Salvador was held on 3-5 June 2022 in Sonsonate at the “centro de convención-Agape de los frailes Menores”. There were 95 participants among whom 54 capitulars and one national assistant Fr. Ramón Ernesto de le O Cortez, OFM, who gave the sermon during the inaugural mass presided over by Fr. Pedro Zitha, OFM, representative of the Conference of General Assistants (CAS). The Chapter was presided over by Ana Maria Raffo, Councilor of the CIOFS presidency delegated by Tibor Kauser, General Minister of OFS.

Saturday morning was dedicated to the presentation and approval of the three-year budget by the National Council. On Saturday afternoon before the elective session, Ana Maria Raffo presented the theme: “The dedication of the Franciscan Secular”. Afterwards the new National Council was elected: Miguel Ernesto Marquina as National Minister and International Councilor.

The work during the chapter was carried out in a typically Latin American and Franciscan atmosphere.

### **ARGENTINA – Visit and National Elective Chapter**

The fraternal and pastoral visit to the national fraternity of OFS in Argentina was held on 14-17 June 2022 by Ana Maria Raffo, member of the CIOFS Presidency and Fr. Alfred Parambakathu, OFMConv, General Spiritual Assistant. The visit began on 14th afternoon with a meeting with two Provincials of OFM at the Friary of St. Francis in Buenos Aires. We visited also the National Office and the Archives of the National Fraternity found in the Crypt of the Friary. On the following day we went to the city of Corrientes at the Casa de la Merced, a center of Spirituality run by the OFM friars, where the rest of the Visit and the Chapter was held. We met all the members of the National Council and some of the Regional Ministers personally. We met three of the National Spiritual Assistants: Fr. Fernando Lapierre, OFM, Fr. Raul Lombardini, OFM, and Fr. Gonzalvo Caro, OFMCap.

The Elective Chapter was begun on 17th afternoon. The theme of the Chapter was “that no one goes away without your mercy” taken from the Letter to a Minister. On Saturday there was the presentation of various reports from the outgoing National Council and the presentation of the Priorities of the next Triennium. The elective session was held on

Sunday morning. Santiago Negro, who was the National Minister earlier, was elected as the National Minister and International Councilor. Although there were heated discussions, especially on the economic situation of the National Fraternity, the Chapter as a whole took place in a very fraternal and peaceful way.

### **GREECE - National Elective Chapter**

The OFS Chapter of Greece took place in the city of Athens on Sunday, June 12, 2022 and was presided over by Sister Noemi Riccardi of the International Council (CIOFS) and Br. Carlos Ginés as General Assistant (CAS) and witness of the event.

Previously, on Saturday 11th, a small meeting was held with the outgoing council to share feelings, problems and needs.

Sunday, the day of the Chapter, began with the Eucharist presided by the Bishop Emeritus of Mons. Ioannes Spiteris, OFM Cap, National Spiritual Assistant of the small Greek Fraternity.

After sharing a fraternal meal, a prayer of invocation to the Holy Spirit was said to begin the election of the new national council in which sister Maria Thiresia Voutsinou was elected and Sister Nona Villanueva was elected vice-minister.

The new national minister called for unity and to walk together as brothers and sisters and children of St. Francis. The Chapter concluded with a prayer of thanksgiving and a blessing in the chapel of the Church of the Capuchin Friars.

### **VIETNAM - National Elective Chapter**

The National Elective Chapter of the OFS of Vietnam was held in the Seminary of OFM Friars at Ho Chi Minh City on 20-21 June, 2022. On the first day of the Chapter the reports on the last Triennium was presented by the National Minister and the projects for the coming three years were discussed. A report by the National Spiritual Assistants also was presented. Then Francis Byung Ju Park, member of the CIOFS Presidency and delegate of the Minister General, presented the theme, “How to improve fraternity as a Minister (Local or Regional)”.

On the following day the elections were held. The elective session was presided over by Francis Byung Ju Park and was witnessed by Fr. Joseph Nguyen Chinh Luan OFM Conv., delegate of the Conference of the General Spiritual Assistants (CAS). There were 53 Capitulars who participated the Chapter. Joseph Trần Như Kiên was elected as the National Minister and Jerome Nguyễn Vĩnh Phát was elected as the International Councilor. There were two National Spiritual Assistants and Fr. John of God Nguyen Phuoc OFM, Vice Provincial Minister, who participated in the Chapter.