



XI Latin American OFS and YouFra Congress  
and the I American OFS and YouFra Congress  
"... called to bear witness to a Church that is the home of all...  
Are we capable of communicating this face of the Church?"  
(Pope Francis).

Asunción, Paraguay, on: April 27, 28, 29, 30, and May 1, 2023

## Challenges for the OFS after the 2021 General Chapter

First of all, I would like to confess, how much I miss you; how much I wanted to be together with you during these days. I was looking forward to meeting you all in Paraguay, but I had to accept that at this time God had other plans for me, and I had to stay home due to certain health issues. For this moment, I am grateful to God that I can meet you this way and greet you.

I was asked to speak to you about the challenges we, as an Order are facing today, after the 2021 General Chapter.

The 2021 General Chapter was celebrated at a time when the world had to face a lot of significant changes. As I wrote in the report to the Chapter:

*The Church has changed during last years or decades. We must see that material and economical resources have been focused on the so called 'first world', while human resources have been focused outside of it.*

*We can see in the contemporary world less divinity and less humanity. Mankind has announced that we need less God. The world became more godless, but the result has been that it became less human, or even more inhuman.*

*Questions have been asked that have never been asked before in history. (Who is man?, Is there a God?, What is a family?, Who is a man and who is a woman?, Is it definitive to be a man or a woman?) This is being articulated in the name of liberty, but this is not freedom.*

*The Church has to decide how to reflect on these questions. We often see that it is not even easy to decide if these questions need an answer from the Church or not. What is the best way for the Church to give testimony of the Gospel today? Also, Pope Francis is seeking – and many times giving - the answers to very, very concrete questions. What are we to do with Mother Earth? How should the Church look at herself? What are the most urgent questions of the pastoral work of the Church? How should the Church start to accomplish its mission? How can we explain the point of the Church on the most relevant questions coming from the world? What does universal fraternity, universal kinship, mean and how should it be lived? If we look at the series of the letters and writings of Pope Francis, we can see how intensely he is willing to share his thoughts.*

*We, as OFS have to find our place in the world facing these challenges, facing these questions. The big question for us is how can and how should we insert ourselves into the Church and into the world, both individually and also as an Order. Living in the world and living in the Church, we have to ask the same questions of ourselves.*

I have to mention here also what Pope Francis told us in 2021 at the private audience before the General Chapter. He called our attention to the social problems, the changes in the environment.

Covid-19 marked the turn of the decade very strongly and had a big impact on many countries, certainly in different ways and in different depth.



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The last decades have produced faster ways of communication than ever, including the sharing of information both public and private. Communication and media became a really strong component of social and political life. The extreme speed of information often blocks the possibility of considering, of thinking about the news, of checking truth in the information. This is one major factor that has polarized and thus divided many societies, and it is present in the Church, too.

The war in the Ukraine has changed our ideas in many senses. We thought that we had a more or less peaceful era, which is not true anymore. We thought that freedom was increasing while it is not true, at least in a spiritual and cultural sense.

The difference – and sometimes tension – between north and south has increased. Vocations are fewer in Europe and North America, greater in Africa and Asia, Central and South America are somewhere in the middle.

We can see that many things have happened since November 2021 which have a big impact on our lives. However, the directions set by the General Chapter are still valid today and give good guidelines for us.

There are many challenges inside the OFS too, which are also challenges for the whole International Fraternity. We can discover deep contradictions between some ideas that were shared at the General Chapter, and more significantly in the work on the *Instrumentum Laboris*. I would like to mention two of them now.

More autonomy requested vs more guidelines, centralized directions and structures are requested (e.g. permanent structures)

More of the expenses to be taken care of by the International Fraternity (e.g. travel expenses of Presidency councillors, financial help to the participants at the General Chapter or Congresses) vs reduce the general budget and contributions.

Among the duties of the CIOFS Presidency is finding solutions to these challenges and inspiring national fraternities to fulfill their part in this work. We have to implement the decisions of the General Chapter in the life and practice of the International Fraternity. Let us remember what these decisions are and what the priorities for the years 2021-2027 are. Let's have a look at the decisions of the General Chapter, with some of my observations and comments.

### **13.1. Implementation of New Secretariats**

*Put into operation the Secretariats, according to the decisions of the General Chapter of 2017. In forming the new secretariats (Formation; Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC); and Communications), the Presidency should provide the national fraternities with details for the composition of the Secretariats, the responsibilities and terms for service along with budgetary needs. All materials produced will be approved by the Presidency. The financing of these Secretariats, at least in part, comes from donations.*

The secretariats have already been established, and two of the three have already started their work. Well, the last part of the priority is the biggest challenge. It is uncertain so far what kind of donations the General Chapter was thinking of when the vast majority of the fraternities are requesting that contributions be cut to an extent which endangers the operation of the International Fraternity. The other part of the question is what would happen if donations do not arrive?



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## **13.2. Formation**

*It is important to avoid academic language in all formation materials.*

This is a reminder not only for the Formation Secretariat but for all formators. However, I think the real challenge is not to avoid academic language but to find the proper language either academic or as simple as for the first grade in primary school.

### **13.2.1. Servant Leadership.**

*Additional focus on servant leadership, sharing tools from the Instrumentum Laboris and Br. Michael Perry's talk on the main theme, provided excellent tools for local fraternities to use (modules, templates, training format/outline, simple language). Create a grant fund that can support various actions related to implementing the suggestions.*

Again, acknowledging that the International Fraternity cannot finance everything, a grant fund is requested.

### **13.2.2. Vocation.**

*Offer tools for discernment and ways to promote vocations to the OFS. Assign a Presidency Councillor responsible for overseeing vocation, in joint collaboration with YouFra and the larger Franciscan family.*

The Presidency has established a commission for vocational promotion, preparing useful materials, guidelines and tools. However, please remember that vocations have to be promoted, first of all, in the local fraternities which have to be helped by the regional or national councils. Eremenciana is responsible for this commission.

### **13.2.3. Financial.**

*Information about fraternity finances (at all levels) should be included in formation materials used by each fraternity.*

The Presidency is working on this, some materials have already been shared. Ana Maria is responsible for this part of the service.

### **13.2.4. Family life.**

*Continue the work of the family commission providing materials to promote the values of family life, helping us to become effective witnesses who affirm the dignity of all human life from the moment of conception to the end as a gift from God.*

The presidency has decided to continue AND renew the family commission, under the coordination of Adolph.

## **13.3. Finances**

### **13.3.1.**

*The Presidency should convene a commission of OFS-members with experience and expertise in finances and budgets. This commission will work together with the General Treasurer. They can study the financial numbers and are allowed and invited to ask all relevant questions. The commission can also make a proposal for the budgets for the next three years. During the chapter itself the commission can respond to the questions of the capitulants who are not familiar with financial topics. The commission on finances has started to work but we must realize that it is a long, slow process.*

### **13.3.2.**

*The Chapter needs a proposed triennial budget six (6) months ahead of time to allow national fraternities to review and discuss. Annual reports of Presidency income and spending will be sent to national Fraternities as mandated by Chapter vote.*



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It is already under preparation and will be done.

### **13.3.3.**

*CIOFS could create a sponsorship system; providing tools/guidelines to better argue requests for any specific project.*

Again, this is a difficult thing. It seems rather to be more a local idea rather than international, should the world 'local' mean anything. This is part of the culture only in parts of the world, while in other parts, it is absolutely unknown or alien.

## **13.4. Communications**

### **13.4.1.**

*Make optimal use of social media to spread personal communication between brothers and sisters around the world, means of mutual animation.*

For me this is a two-edged sword, seeing the younger generations, though I acknowledge the benefits of what social media can offer. The key work is 'optimal'.

### **13.4.2.**

*Encourage National Fraternities to use digital means to keep in contact with local fraternities and individual members in those times when physical encounters are not possible.*

We have learned a lot about this during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Technology offers many possibilities to many brothers and sisters, but we must realize that whole nations are lacking the technical background for it.

## **13.5. YouFra**

*The presence of YouFra at this General Chapter is a witness of the importance the OFS has attached to YouFra. The Presidency should continue this approach, and:*

### **13.5.1.**

*the Presidency should promote National Fraternities to support their YouFra fraternities, on one hand, to find their own way, but on the other hand to always be prepared to give help when asked;*

### **13.5.2.**

*the Presidency should promote the local fraternities to open their fraternity meetings for YouFra (on a regular or occasional basis);*

### **13.5.3.**

*where and when possible, youth members should be involved in the Formation, Finances and Communications groups/secretariats.*

I have to repeat myself, as I said, vocational promotion is mostly local work. This is valid for YouFra as well. The Presidency does its best, but we are not present at the local level.

## **13.6. Spiritual Assistance**

### **13.6.1.**

*Promote that Spiritual Assistants use the tools from the 2019 formation course.*

### **13.6.2.**

*Support National Fraternities in developing a formation course for non-Franciscan religious and priests and OFS-members to become Spiritual Assistants.*



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### 13.6.3.

*Help improve the communication of the General Spiritual Assistants with the National Spiritual Assistants.*

All I can add to this is that the General Spiritual Assistants are always ready to get in contact and in communication with the national spiritual assistants. Many have a positive response to this, but not all of them. Priorities 1 and 2 concern the national and local fraternities.

### 13.7. Other recommendations

#### 13.7.1.

**Statistics** - *carry out a real census of the OFS. Councils have a basic responsibility for being acquainted with the membership in their fraternities, as the General Chapter 2017 has already decided and requested.*

This has been a long, long challenge. We are perpetually requesting the statistics, but it is really difficult to get the annual reports from the national fraternities.

#### 13.7.2.

**Existing Projects** – *work in an integrated manner to carry out existing Presidency projects, evaluate the process periodically and provide feedback on each one. Engage national fraternities to get involved with financial or in-person support for such projects.*

From the point of the presidency this seems to work well, but we are open to any proposals on how it can be improved.

As you can see, we are facing challenges; we have lots to do. Challenges for the International Fraternity are general. Responses from the national fraternities rather have to be local, specific. Each national fraternity has to discover how to implement these priorities in their own fraternal life, what they need from the CIOFS Presidency to accomplish it, and how can they help the entire international fraternity to realize these priorities.

What to do next?

First of all, let's turn back to what Pope Francis told us in 2021:

*Your vocation is born of the universal call to holiness. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that "lay people share in Christ's priesthood: ever more united with Him, they exhibit the grace of Baptism and Confirmation in all dimensions of their personal family, social and ecclesial lives, and fulfill the call to holiness addressed to all the baptized".*

*This holiness, to which you are called as Secular Franciscans, as the General Constitutions and the Rule approved by Saint Paul VI ask of you, involves the conversion of the heart, attracted, conquered and transformed by the One who is the only Holy One, who is "the good, every good, the supreme good" (Saint Francis, Praises of God Most High). This is what makes you true "penitents".*

We have to fulfill all our activities, all our missions, all our endeavors with this spirit of holiness and penance. Without this we will not be able to accomplish anything in conformity with the plan of God.

I would ask you to remember one more of the Pope's thoughts:



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*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.*

We shall not think only about the social peripheries in a physical sense.

We have to strengthen our fraternities, including the councils of the various levels, by seeking those who are on the peripheries there. One can be there financially, but also according to their ideas, according to personal capacities, skills, or according to human behavior. Let us first identify this kind of lack of unity and reach out. We shall not expect that those on the peripheries should take the first step. We have to do it.

We also have to do the same in the Church and in the world. We have to seek those in the Church who are lonely; who are spiritually in need; who have lost beloved persons or jobs; who do not belong to any community and, therefore, are lonely. There are many who do not seem to be on the peripheries, but spiritually, they are there. It is often more difficult to find these people than those who are living on the streets or somewhere outside the cities.

Finally, I would like to share one more thing with you, in the Americas.

There are some general tendencies, from which we have to learn. As the so called 'first world' has been strengthened economically, possessing the majority of the material goods, it has lost its interest in spirituality, both on a general and state level, and also, in its individual members, in the people. The lack of vocations is one sign of this, but not the only one. A general loss of interest for spirituality, the great impact of shallow, low-quality media has shown an incredible growth. The idea of so-called liberal democracy has a great impact on the human way of thinking, too. The idea of truth has significantly changed. Truth is now based upon the numbers—what is told, communicated, or voted on by the majority, has to be considered true, good, and right. One of the consequences of this is that only simple 'receivers' are needed, that is, persons who only accept ideas but do not think about them. Educated persons have become obstacles, if not enemies.

This tendency is going to spread, not by accident, in a relationship with the economic situation of certain countries. Please, be careful, because it is easier (more possible) to avoid it than to manage it once it penetrates society and changes life. Some of you might have already experienced this, some already might see the challenge, and for some of you it is not a reality yet. However, we have to see the challenges in order to be able to find the solutions.

I wish you all a fruitful Congress, filled with the Holy Spirit. I wish you good work and a fraternal spirit, which will renew your fraternities and strengthen them.

I send you all my very fraternal greetings