

HOW SHOULD AN ORDER LIKE THE OFS BE MANAGED, AT ALL ITS LEVELS? (*)

*Presentation of subtitles 3, 4 and 5
by Tibor Kauser*

At the OFS General Chapter in Assisi, November 2014.

3. FUNDAMENTAL CHALLENGES, SOME PROBLEMS - What are the points to focus on for the Order to fully develop into what it should be?

The present situation of the Order, despite the great progress attained in the last years, is characterized by four basic challenges.

a. To deepen the understanding and awareness of the commitments made by our Profession to fully correspond to God's vocation for us.

This is the result of an often superficial or inadequate formation and the lack of understanding what the profession in the OFS means. We must understand much more deeply what our profession really means. For this, we may refer to the lecture "*Profession in the OFS: Gift and commitment*" presented at the General Chapter 2008 by Fr. Felice Cangelosi OFMCap.

Just one aspect to be mentioned here: being professed means a readiness to serve our sisters and brothers. A readiness to serve, also in offices, being elected for. A readiness to serve, together with being ready for an ongoing self-formation in the necessary areas in order to be able to fulfill the duties in a better way.

b. To deepen the commitment of many members to enter into a serious conversion journey.

We do not have to follow St. Francis. We have to follow Jesus Christ, in the manner of St. Francis, learning from his personal example, from his writings, from his prayers, from his whole life.

We cannot be good secular Franciscans, if we are not Christians, who have converted their life to Jesus Christ. How could I follow Christ in the manner of St. Francis, if I do not take the very first step: the total conversion? Beside this personal conversion, everything, even valuable parts of the fraternal life, becomes a formality, an externality.

c. The Sacred Scriptures, the writings of Saint Francis, the essential texts of Franciscan spirituality, the OFS Rule, the General Constitutions, the Ritual should be much more frequently taken into our hands.

We have to strive to more deeply understand the Holy Scripture and the other writings. Particularly those sisters and brothers, who are in charge, elected by the fraternity, have to be aware of the nature of our Order, of the basic structure of our proper law.

How beautiful it is to discover, that our Rule and also our General Constitutions, are spiritual readings! Beside some concrete norms for the daily life, the main points describe and reflect on our particular secular Franciscan spirituality, give guidelines both for our personal spiritual life, and also for our fraternal life in the fraternities on the various levels, from the local level to the international fraternity.

I invite you from the depth of my heart to read these documents with this approach: how does the Rule and the General Constitutions help me in living my secular Franciscan vocation more deeply, and to become a better Christian, a better secular Franciscan?

d. We have to face the absence and/or lack of implementation of organizational structures and projects of the Order, consistent with its nature, which may

(*) The overall theme in points 1, 2 and 6 was presented by Benedetto Lino at the OFS General Chapter 2014. See the materials sent out previously.

allow a satisfactory spiritual and apostolic development.

We often hear from members of the Order, that spirituality is the essential part of our life, structures and organization is a mere burden for us. I would like to remind all those who are thinking this way to just one idea from what Lester Bach OFM Cap told the members of the General Chapter in 2005, here in Assisi: a charism without an institution is a daydream; the institution without charism is a nightmare. These two have to go hand in hand, because we are not a spiritual movement, but an Order.

These are closely interconnected and they influence and determine one another. These basic challenges may be summed up in two fundamental chapters:

CONVERSION TO CHRIST AND DEEPENING THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN VOCATION.

In both, formation plays an essential role.

➤ *CONVERSION TO CHRIST*

Though being an Order of “penitents” (i.e. people who have chosen in full awareness a journey of *conversion*, and should perfectly know the goal to reach (*perfection of love and total conformation to Christ, as Francis*), it seems that, for many secular Franciscans true “conversion” is more a topic of conversation than a program of life to implement.

Ministers and, in general, persons who occupy responsibility positions, must carry out their ministry with *humility* and *authentic sense of service*. We find very often, instead, the lack of understanding, how elementary the true conversion to Christ, and based upon this, the real “keeping penance” is. Being a minister is being a servant, a person who is to serve the sisters and brothers, as Christ did it. It is very sad to say, that presumption, prevarication, carelessness, craving appear, attachment to positions of command, shameless and arbitrary use of the resources of the Fraternity, ease to resign if decisions are not promptly endorsed and so on. This is totally the opposite of how we behave: being real ministers, as considering ourselves being smaller than the others, and thus serving them. This shall be a particular principle to those in charge in elected offices. We shall convert our life to Christ, and learn from him.

This is not only a matter of not knowing what the Rule and General Constitutions demand, but more importantly, it is a total **lack of conversion**, of the true conversion of heart and mind. Though recognizing *in words* that our model of *sequela Christi* is Francis, many (too many, indeed) Secular Franciscans maintain attitudes and practices which are the exact contrary of the *humility, docility, meekness, search of poverty, obedience, profound sense of service and testimony, minority, exemplarity* etc. of Saint Francis.

The lack of authentic conversion is, by far, one of the most serious problems we are confronted with in our Order.

This, largely, derives from the lack of *discernment of vocation* before admitting candidates to Profession and from a superficial formation. Generally, we speak of 2 years or more of formation, including all the stages. But let us make a short calculation. If, in average, the candidates meet twice a month for 1 hour, during 10 months in a year, 2 years of formation correspond to only 40 hours!!! And self-formation is a rarity! Most candidates are content to do formation only during the formation meetings.

Also, councilors of the local fraternities must much more understand, what does the discernment of vocation mean. They are the instruments of the Holy Spirit, evaluating the human, Christian and secular Franciscan journey of the candidates. These stages are built onto one another. The true conversion to Christ is the base of the secular Franciscan life.

➤ *DEEPENING THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN VOCATION*

“Secular Franciscans commit themselves to frequently read the Gospel, going from Gospel to life and from life to Gospel”. (Rule 4).

Anyone could say that the Gospel is the four books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and that's right. But I do not think that the Rule has ever had the intention to exempt us from reading. Even though there are happy exceptions, we have frequently (too frequently!) observed that in the Order the habit of reading, studying and meditating the Gospel is not such common practice as it should be. Very rarely are the other books of the New Testament read, and blessed are those who have the deep desire to regularly read the Old Testament.¹

When we speak of deepening our vocation, I also think of deepening the knowledge of the spirituality. We are not a spiritual movement, but we are an Order, and we do have the whole detailed biography of our Seraphic Father, as also his writings are available. The Writings of Saint Francis and his biographies are hardly or superficially known or not at all.

The essence of our life in general is summarized in the Rule, while the details of it, the explanation of the fraternal life are in the General Constitutions. These documents, including the Ritual, are given to us by the Church, saying that by Christ! For this it is even sadder to see when these documents are not well known!

Many secular Franciscans simply live of common places. They just rely on sporadic conferences of some good friar and rarely do they engage in individual, assiduous and personalized frequentation of the Sacred Texts, Franciscan Sources and of the OFS fundamental texts.

The Order is not well known; members do not know how it functions and ignore the fundamental rules on which the communion and structural life of the Order is based.

We have been answering for years to tens and tens of brothers and sisters on problems whose answer can be found by simply opening the Constitutions at the right page!

We must have the courage of asking ourselves as we did before: how many of us can say, in all honesty, to have undertaken in earnest, without looking back, a journey of authentic conversion? How many can say that they are animated only by the desire to completely conform to Christ, **like Francis**?

How many can assert that their activities and behavior are not often motivated to comply only with routine, formal and bureaucratic requirements rather than by spiritual and fraternal service reasons?

If, starting from ourselves, all of us shall be willing to tackle these problems, then, we will be able to face and resolve, together with the brothers and sisters of the whole world, the problem of the structures and management of our Order and, after adequate trial periods, find solutions which fully suit the nature of our Order.

4. OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF “MANAGEMENT”

- a. Managing an Order means, in the first place, to know well the objectives to be reached through management.**

These objectives are very well known: they are perfectly described in the Rule and in the General Constitutions. However, rarely, do they form the object of serious reflection, study, and concrete application.

- b. What are the objectives?**

In essence, the **objective is only one: TO BECOME SAINT** (*strive for perfect charity*) and to **BEHAVE CORRESPONDINGLY** (the mission).

¹ «He who does not know Scripture does not know the power and wisdom of God. Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ» (S. Jerome, Commentary on Isaiah). – See also St. Francis in 2C, LXXI, 105.

All the other objectives stem from this fundamental objective and represent its concrete expressions. Here are the objectives that, most immediately, can be found in our Rule and Constitutions.

Rule:

- Strive for perfect charity in our secular state
- Live the Gospel in the manner of saint Francis
- Make present the charism of saint Francis
- Be witnesses and instruments of the mission of the Church
- Announce Christ by our life and words
- Re-build the Church
- Have the thoughts of Christ: permanent conversion
- Build a more fraternal and evangelical world
- Commit oneself in public life
- Commit in Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC).

These objectives **are not private objectives, which concern the only individual persons.** These objectives **fully concern all, and most of all, leaders at all levels.** So, many of the sisters and brothers think that these refer only to the private spiritual life, but since 1978 the life in the OFS is essentially characterized by the fraternal life, and so everything what we have here as objectives must characterize our common life in the fraternities on the various levels.

We must interiorize and implement all these objectives personally, first, and then we must incessantly and passionately work to assist all others to accomplish them.

«The office of minister or councilor is a fraternal service, a commitment to hold oneself available and responsible in relation to each brother and sister and to the fraternity so that each one will realize his or her own vocation and each fraternity will be a true community, ecclesial and Franciscan, actively present in the Church and in society». (C.G. 31.2)

General Constitutions

- Animate and guide.
- Connect and coordinate:
- Work in order that all the Fraternities of all levels be truly united, connected and coordinated, that they may feel and be one and form a one and only Order.
- Work in order that there may be at all levels (local, regional, national and international) true communion of objectives of formation, of apostolic activities, of concrete charity, common objectives to serve the Church and the world, common objectives to announce and bear witness to the Good News (evangelization).
- Periodical area meetings to achieve joint reciprocal knowledge, sharing and planning.

As we have already said above, **unity, coordination and connection** are extremely important objectives in order to feel and be a true Order. There is still a lot of work to do to achieve this objective. And (it's worth repeating it), if we manage to reach a concrete unity of life and intentions, we could become a tremendously powerful "instrument" to accomplish our mission in the world, together the Franciscan Family.

«Local fraternities are grouped into Fraternities at various levels: regional, national and international according to criteria that are ecclesial, territorial, or of another nature. They are coordinated and connected according to the norm of the Rule and the Constitutions. This is a requirement of the communion among the Fraternities, of the orderly collaboration among them, and of the unity of the OFS». (G.C. 29.1)

c. In order to accomplish the objectives, it is essential to **CHOOSE THE RIGHT PEOPLE** without yielding to the temptation of voting for our best friends, our "allies" who would favor our personal convenience or goals. The people we choose ought to know well the nature of the Order

and its rules and should have the particular talents that are necessary to accomplish what the Fraternity needs in that particular moment.

The leaders of the OFS at every level must be:

- *perpetually professed,*
- *convinced of the validity of the Franciscan evangelical way of life,*
- *attentive to the life of the Church and of society with a broad and encompassing vision,*
- *open to dialogue, and*
- *ready to give and receive help and collaboration». (G.C. 31.3)*

d. After having clarified the objectives, it is necessary TO HAVE A PROJECT and to predispose preventively the actions and the necessary and efficacious organization to implement it.

Very often, instead, in the absence of precise projects, we let **the events dominate us and dictate our priorities and agendas**. There is a widespread tendency to wait for a problem to occur, and to intervene afterwards, rather than to lay the bases to prevent the problem to occur. Therefore, we end up running after the events rather than planning them and steering them to reach the objectives.

The other problem is that we often **give priority rather to the urgent cases than to the important things**. We try to resolve what are right in front of us, urging us to act, we often listen to the loudest voice, instead of – based upon a true evaluation and discernment – setting up the real priorities and doing first what is really to be on the first place.

e. The institution, structures and projects must never stifle or hinder the motions that the spirit raises up in all of us.

It is indispensable to have well thought, precise projects, consistent with the spiritual and institutional aims to reach: we are an Order and the word “order” reminds us of the necessity to organize our life in a regular and orderly manner so as to accomplish our common vocation and mission. This, however, must not be done bureaucratically.

The institution must never stifle or hamper the motions that the Spirit freely arouses in the persons.² The leaders in charge, therefore, will always have to be very attentive to discern these impulses. We must learn how to listen and discern, and, when necessary, be able to modify our decisions.

f. Finally, it is absolutely essential to fully develop and wisely apply all the INSTRUMENTS OF SELF-DETERMINATION AND PERSONALIZATION provided for in our G.C., to comply with the needs of environmental, cultural, social and political diversities which characterize each country, within the framework of our Rule and General Constitutions. In practice, this never occurs!

Suffice it to see how National Statutes are conceived, to understand how little they are “particular”. Often, Statutes are partial or total duplicates of the General Constitutions!

«National statutes must indicate the criteria for the organization of the OFS in the nation. The application of these criteria is left to the prudent judgment of the leaders of the fraternities concerned and of the national council.» (G.C.29.3).

This article explicitly obliges (*must*) to find concrete and personalized ways to organize the Order, confiding in the faithful (*prudent*) creativity of the leaders, to better accomplish the

² Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, his last interview: «We could, at least, look for men who are free and closer to their neighbors. Such as Bishop Romero and the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador. Where are the heroes who can inspire us? **For no reason whatsoever we have to limit them by the bonds of the institution.**»

objectives.

«Where the situation and the needs of the members require it, sections or groups which gather members sharing particular needs, common interests, or the same operational choices, may be established within the Fraternity under the guidance of the one council. Such groups can give themselves specific norms relative to their meetings and activities, firmly remaining faithful, however, to the requirements which arise from membership in the one fraternity. National statutes may establish criteria suitable for the formation and functioning of these sections or groups» (GC 34)

This article offers broad perspectives also to organize structures that are consistent with the implementation of the objectives of the Fraternity Councils. We must learn, when pertinent and applicable, to make a nonrestrictive reading of the articles of the General Constitutions.

Also in our operational decisions and when thinking about how to manage our beloved Order, I invite you to make a free, intuitive, spiritual reading of the General Constitutions., with the intention to find out how is the best way to serve our sisters and brothers.

5. SOME CONCRETE PROBLEMS

We will indicate just a few which correspond to our experience and personal sensitivity. Afterwards, each one of you should offer his/her own constructive contribution on these and other possible topics on the basis of his/her own experience and sensitivity.

a. Lack of collegiality and misunderstanding of the role of the ministers.

This is the most frequent problem in the Order. The problem exists not only because there are ministers who think they are entitled to have absolute powers but also because there are councilors who are convinced that the minister is responsible and empowered to do everything, or who simply have no intention to get involved to serve.

The solution of this problem entirely resides on the full compliance with our Rule and General Constitutions.

Particular misunderstanding can be experienced regarding the role of the vice-ministers. They are very often considered to be “substitute ministers”, saying that they do not have anything to do until the minister is in charge. I strongly recommend to read the General Constitutions for this:

The vice-minister has the following duties: (G.C. 52.1)

- *to collaborate in a fraternal spirit and to support the minister in carrying out his or her specific duties;*
- *to exercise the functions entrusted by the council and/or by the assembly or chapter;*
- *to take the place of the minister in both duties and responsibilities in case of absence or temporary impediment;*
- *to assume the functions of the minister when the office remains vacant.*

These duties – particularly the first two – are way fare more than to wait until the minister “disappears”. This needs a new understanding from both the ministers and the vice-ministers.

b. Councilors who do not accept interferences of the Ministers and Councils.

This is due to **individual personalities, lack of conversion and ignorance**, but also to the fact that the election of individual candidates (this now the prevailing fashion) by the Chapters give the wrong *impression* to these people that the **Chapters have conferred to them a direct and personal mandate** and as a consequence they presume that they are only responsible directly to the Chapters and not to the Councils. This is completely wrong! A methodological and mature reflection is needed to eliminate this serious error.

c. Chronic lack of financial resources!!!

We still adopt a financial contribution system from the National Fraternities that has proven its inefficiency and the impossibility to produce improvements.

We virtually have no other source of revenue.

d. Exhausting workloads for those who, in the councils, really commit themselves to serve the brothers.

This situation produces “exhaustion”, physical and mental, in the people who are seriously committed to serve and it causes significant problems to the individuals and to the whole Fraternity. It causes a loss of sense of responsibility in the other members of the Council and of the other Fraternity members. It favors possible authoritarian management, which mortifies fraternity and collegiality.

e. Insufficient or no involvement at all of non-elected members, in the activities to be performed at all levels!!!

On the opposite side, the structures must always rely on the **best possible competencies**, ability, experience and availability to serve in the Fraternities, even if provided by non-elected members. The elected members will always have the final responsibility and the wise coordination of all structures. If there is no communication between the councils and the members, and if the tasks are not shared in a fraternal way, taking all the competences into account, some will be greatly overburdened, while others perhaps feel themselves useless.

(All) «The brothers and sisters are co-responsible for the life of the Fraternity to which they belong and for the OFS as the organic union of all the Fraternities throughout the world» (G.C.30.1)

f. Lack of permanent structures to support the essential government functions and the fundamental activities of the Order.

Some stable streamlined structures are needed to guarantee:

- Continuity of contents and action in the longer term
- Accomplishment of all the tasks of the Councils
- Fair distribution of workloads and greater efficiency in the implementation of tasks.

In the Order there is the widespread tendency to adopt the universally deprecated “spoils system” used in the political world. When ministers and Councils change the tendency is to change also all collaborators irrespective of whether they were good or bad. Also the entire set-up of systems and projects of the previous “administration” tend to be radically changed, even if things had worked properly.

One thing is to give new impulse, to correct the patent errors and implement new essential projects, another thing is to restart all over and over again only because the new Ministers or the new members wish the activities to be in their image and likeness, to affirm their “authority” and superiority!

At the International level, there are no **efficient and coordinated systems of decentralization**.

g. Self-isolation and excessive localization in the Parishes or local communities. Persisting dependence on Religious.

h. Substantial lack of well prepared and available persons!!!

This is one of the reasons why it is largely impossible to create valid and lasting support structures. Such lack of well prepared people prevents the Order to develop an internal “know-how”. This obliges the Order to seek help outside and often times, even if such external help may be qualified, these persons may not speak the same language of the seculars and may substantially ignore their actual needs, history, Rule, identity etc.

i. Fraternal and Pastoral Visits!!!

The **time** we dedicate to National Fraternities in FPV (but it is even worse in the Fraternities of lower levels) is always **extremely short, both during the on-the-spot visit and afterwards, if there are problems that require time and personal presence**. Concretely, it is always impossible to maintain a **continuous operational contact** and, if needed, a **protracted presence of the visitors on the spot**, to accompany and resolve the problems encountered. Often, the problems we find (which we rarely manage to resolve completely) need a direct, repeated and prolonged presence.

j. Insufficient involvement in Church structures and dynamics (local, diocesan, general, (G.C. 62.2.b, 66.2.i).

k. Insufficient interaction, in concrete and operational terms, with the rest of the Franciscan Family. Lack of shared objectives and activities.

On this point, however, religious are more deficient than we, because they usually work as single isolated Orders. By and large, there is not yet a sufficient awareness in the Franciscan Family of the need to operate all together to accomplish the common apostolic objectives of mission and evangelization. Often times, there is no desire to work together.

l. Vertical and horizontal Communication in the Order !!!

We know very well, through our own experience, that the **transmission chain from the International Fraternity/Presidency downwards, most of the times**, stops already at the National Fraternity level, and almost never does it reach the local levels. If we do not correct this, it is simply an illusion that the Order may ever change to become what it is supposed to be.

With few exceptions, local, regional and national Fraternities have no contacts, exchanges or collaboration among themselves and less still do they share concrete projects.

Lack of communication is largely the responsibility of the higher levels who, in fact, have the task of coordinating and connecting, but also of the Local Fraternities that often times do not wish to come out of their shell.

Finally, there is often no horizontal communication even from ministers toward the members of their own Councils and vice versa!!!

m. Lack of understanding of the nature of the relationship OFS-Young Franciscans (YouFra). Lack of assumption of responsibility toward YouFra.

«OFS considers itself to be particularly responsible for Franciscan Youth, which is formed by those young people who feel called by the Holy Spirit to share the experience of the Christian life in fraternity, in the light of the message of Saint Francis of Assisi, deepening their own vocation within the context of the Secular Franciscan Order». (G.C. 96-2.)

«The OFS ought to (must) be ready to share its experience of evangelical life with the youth ... ». (G.C. 96.1)

With rare exceptions, Secular Franciscans usually do not comply with what the Rule and the General Constitutions demand!

«The Franciscan Youth has a specific organization, methods of formation, and teaching methods adequate for the needs of the world of youth». (G.C.96.5)

YouFra enjoys broad margins of autonomy within the OFS.

In most cases, on the contrary, Secular Franciscans expect and claim to rule over YouFra, and when YouFrans refuse, the answer is indifference and loss of interest for them.

All duties rest on the OFS: animation, adequate Franciscan formation, sharing of the experience of evangelical life.

We are aware of several abuses in many countries and of substantial unwillingness of the OFS to comply with their duties towards YouFra.

«The Franciscan Youth ... requests from the competent secular leaders ... fraternal animation». (G.C. 96.6.)

«The OFS fraternities (must) commit themselves to give to the Franciscan Youth Fraternities a fraternal animator, who ... guarantees an adequate secular Franciscan formation». (G.C. 97-2)

«A representative of the Franciscan Youth is to be designated by his or her council to form part of the OFS council of the corresponding level; a representative of the OFS, designated by his or her own council, forms part of the council of the Franciscan Youth of the same level. The representative of the Franciscan Youth has a vote in the OFS council only if he or she is a professed secular Franciscan». (G.C.97. 4.)

With rare exceptions, the OFS systematically ignores the duties imposed by the Rule and General Constitutions. The vast majority of the local and regional Fraternities do not implement this exchange of representatives, which is essential to promote a close communion with the OFS (cfr. G.C. 97.3.).

The relationship at the International level does work well.

The Church, within the context of the Franciscan Family, has entrusted to the OFS the task of taking close care of the Young Franciscans, within its own organization. This task must be fully accomplished and with joy and strong conviction.

The OFS needs YouFra more than YouFra needs the OFS!

Assisi, November 3rd, 2014