

ASSISI REFLECTION

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International Councilor

How can anyone bring an experience of the soul, of family, of culture to life? How can I give a sense of being a member of an international order that brings together the Franciscan family from around the world?

This Order has no walls. It flows seamlessly from one nation to another, one brother or sister to another. Yes, we have our differences. We have cultural experiences that add a unique Franciscan twist to all we do – our music distinguishes us, our special practices enrich us, our dialects and our language identify us. But, at the core, when we first meet, we embrace as a brother or sister whom we haven't seen in a while. And we have brothers and sisters everywhere – Japan, China, Angola, Eritrea, South Africa, Switzerland, France, England, Norway, Germany, Croatia, Argentina, Venezuela – the list seems endless.

Just like family, we sometimes think differently. I was gently told that I was too quick to offer solutions. We must talk about them, talk around them, talk them through. In our group discussions, we often had different points of view on how to address issues. Some cultures are more quiet, wait for others to give their opinions, process what is being said and then, possibly, offer their perspective. We, on the other hand, tend to tackle the problem head first. It made for some interesting moments, but at the end, we found consensus.

Our day always began with prayer and Mass at 7 a.m. Our General Assistants brought the Eucharist to us in multicultural and multilingual modes. Our General Assistant from



The Portiuncula sits prominently in the central nave of the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels. The group posing for the photo include members of the U. S. delegation. FROM RIGHT: National Councilor and Observer Mary Frances Charsky, International Councilor Mary Stronach, National Minister and Observer Tom Bello, and National Secretary and Observer Jan Parker.

Cameroon, Fr. Francis, even shared the idea of “dancing in the Lord.” The first Mass was celebrated at the Lower Basilica of St. Francis. Just below lies the crypt where Francis sleeps. Imagine that... to be so close to Francis – not just in spirit but in physical proximity.

Just as amazing was our next Mass at Santa Maria degli Angeli where we found the chapel of the Portiuncula

inside the basilica. Yes, the same chapel that Francis rebuilt with his own hands. Bob, my husband who served as the chapter photographer, said the moment lingered throughout the day for him. Indeed, we all felt the presence of Francis as we began eight days of work for the Lord.

Meals were an Italian feast! But, more importantly, we spent the time sharing with our brothers and sisters

GENERAL CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS



Mary Stronach, OFS, (center left), international councilor for the U.S., confers with Gerti Theobald, OFS, of Germany during the opening session of the XIV General Chapter in Assisi.

ASSISI -- The General Chapter, held Nov. 1-8 in Assisi, attracted 170 participants, including some 84 capitulars (or voting delegates).

With an overarching theme of how to better manage the order, the chapter set the following priorities for the next three years: **Formation, Family, Presence in the World, Communication, YouFra, Emerging Fraternities, Finances.** These priorities will, among other things, focus on creation of a permanent translators' group, better use of the internet, strengthening the sense of belonging to the universal fraternity, boosting formation efforts, continuing to provide aid to special projects (particularly Africa, China and Haiti), developing an international

plan to promote vocations, and maximizing the relationship between Franciscan Youth and the OFS.

National fraternities are being asked to review the state of the order in their countries, including problems, strengths and opportunities, and to make recommendations on how to better adapt to today's reality. (At the National Chapter, NAFRA took the first steps with a mini-session discussing these issues. A committee, representing all levels of the order, will be pulled together to further the discussion.)

PRESIDENCY AREAS

The Chapter modified the areas of service within the Presidency to help equalize the workload for the

Presidency Councilors.

Areas are no longer based solely on language, but, also geography. The countries to the south of Latin America and those that speak Portuguese now share the same Presidency Councilor (Spanish – Portuguese) and the same happens for the countries in South East Europe (Italian – English), while the Asian nations and those of Oceania now have their own Presidency Councilor. The U.S. and Canada are now paired with English speaking Africa.

3-YEAR BUDGET

The Chapter approved the budget for the next three years: 209,624 Euros (2015), 215,707 Euros (2016), and 221,730 Euros (2017).

– the African brother who shared the struggles of his fraternity in a country where Christians are martyred; the Japanese sister who spoke English with a lovely British lilt; the brother from Cuba who shared his work experiences at a local university; the Italian brother and sister who volunteer at the Vatican.

I must admit, the system of managing meetings is quite different at the inter-

national level. They do not follow parliamentary procedure, and, until I realized that, I felt a little frustrated. While ideas and suggestions were offered, they did not always have the opportunity to be vetted by further discussion.

Elections followed the guidelines we all follow. At the end, there was a good balance of past and new representatives. New General Minister Tibor Kauser is a past Presidency councilor

for English speaking countries. He brings an understanding of the constitutions and legal system of the Order, but he also is very fraternal and open-minded. He is, in fact, the first man to be





Mary Stronach (rear, 3rd from left) shares a lighter moment with African and Canadian brothers and sisters.

general minister since we changed from the provincial model. Our vice minister, María Consuelo Núñez (or Chelito, as we call her), is also a past presidency councilor (12 years). She's a great organizer and has a great understanding of the Order. Ana Fruk, previously YouFra representative, was elected to serve Northern and Eastern Europe. She brings a youthful perspective, vigor, enthusiasm. The other presidency councilors are new and come from Italy, Peru, Libya and South Africa. The USA will have as its representative a very intelligent, loving and energetic sister from South Africa -- Jenny Harrington. She has been very involved in assisting the African countries as they establish themselves in the Order and address the unique needs of the African brothers and sisters.

I had the privilege of working with

Chelito on the Conclusions Committee, producing a document that offers an overview of the Chapter happenings and focuses in on the priorities for the next three years. In this committee, it was very apparent that different cultures plan their projects differently. We had two Latino Americans. Besides Chelito, there was Fr. Amando Trujillo Cano, TOR, General Spiritual Assistant. Two North Americans, myself and Marion Clorey. And one Southeast Asian, Hendro Satiawan. As you might expect, Hendro was very flexible. Chelito and Amando needed to process and organize. Mary and Marion wanted to get right to work. We ultimately found a workable model that successfully delivered an eight-page document to the Chapter assembly on the final day.

On our last day together we were

taken to La Verna, a two-hour journey by bus. Upon arriving, we had to hike up part of the mountain. It was drizzling but the view was magnificent. I am not surprised that Francis would take this hike often to refresh and renew his spirit. The church there had numerous De la Rocha ceramics -- beautiful works of art of blue and white ceramics. During the pilgrimage, we visited the cave where Francis slept. We walked where Francis had walked, sat where he spent time in prayer. Further on and in a small chapel was the spot where historically, he received the stigmata. Many of us spent much time there praying and just absorbing the spirit that surrounded us.

On our trek back to the bus, I had the privilege of walking arm-in-arm with Jenny, our Presidency councilor. We had become family. A joyful one.

ENTER INTO THE DANCE OF THE LORD

“To be Christian is to dance in the life of God.” In fact, Capuchin Friar Francis Bongajum Dor noted, “in Africa, we do everything with dance...even funerals.”

Speaking at the mass launching the third day of the chapter, Father Francis had everyone stand, raise their arms and sway side to side while chanting, “Be happy in the Lord.”

He spoke of “the joy that springs from a pure heart,” of entering “into the dance

of the Lord,” especially at such a “privileged moment” as a General Chapter in Assisi.

It's like returning to the womb and being reborn, he added; being “born again with St. Francis.” Pointing out that everyone “should leave Assisi with renewed fervor to live the Gospel,” Father Francis prayed: “May Mary the mother of God, intercede for us that we may live our life as Eucharist... going into the feast of God.”

