



Members of the CIOFS Presidency pose with Cardinal Parolin after opening mass at the XV General Chapter. In front row, is past General Minister Encarnación del Pozo, OFS and next to Cardinal Parolin is present General Minister Tibor Kauser, OFS.

## XV GENERAL CHAPTER TAKES ORDER TO NEW LEVEL

by Mary Stronach, OFS, International Councilor

One hundred fifty participants from 110 countries converged at the Seraphicum, a Franciscan Theological University in Rome, Italy, in November 2017 for the XV General Chapter. Guests and visitors included members of our National Executive Council, Vice Minister Mary Bittner, OFS, and National Councilor Mary Frances Charsky, OFS, as well as National PR Co-chair and Editor of *Vox Franciscana* Bob Stronach. Anne Mulqueen, OFS, was a special guest who had been invited to speak to the assembly. As International Councilor, I was the official representative and voting member of the group.

The joy of so many of our brothers and sisters meeting from around the world filled the air with excitement. Hugs, smiles, laughter, song, and prayers embraced us. Every day, a new discovery was made about our brothers and sisters from beyond the seven seas. Every day, the challenge of communication was met. Every day, the realization was reached that we are one in Francis but our experiences cover the gamut – from the pain of dysfunctional governments in some African countries to the devastation of hurricanes in Puerto Rico, flooding in Peru, and earthquakes in Mexico. Each brother or sister shared a new experience, helping me realize how blessed we are in the United States – despite our own destruction from hurricanes and other challenges.

Our week began with an inspirational Mass presided over by the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin. A choir from the area lifted its voice in exultation. The next morning, all gathered in the auditorium with

headphones serving as our link to the messages we received in the four official languages.



Cardinal Parolin and St. Francis lift up their arms in prayer. Left is General Spiritual Assistant, Fr. Amando Trujillo Cano. The priest to the right is the Cardinal's assistant.

First General Minister Tibor Kauser, OFS, welcomed the OFS and updated us on state of the Order and what had happened during the last three years (the General Chapter is held only every three years): 300,000 members in the world order; 50,000 Franciscan Youth; challenges and hopes for the Order in parts of Africa, Egypt, China; successes in outreach in some parts of Africa and Southeast Asia; Congresses held in Southeast Asia, Europe and South America; YouFra plans for World Youth Day. He had much news for the capitulars, as they called the voting councilors, and all was presented in four languages with the help of interpreters in Spanish, English, French and Italian.

Reflecting the theme *“As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world”* (Jn 17,18), there were particularly emotional and dramatic presentations by Seculars Eugenio and Elisabetta that addressed special ministries in Milan. They and their family work and live at a rundown, urban church and reach out to the struggling neighborhood families. Then there was Michel, a Secular Franciscan and cardiovascular surgeon from the Netherlands, who shared his testimony about how he serves the OFS at its different levels.

There was also Franco, who participates in both public and political life in Italy. He emphasized the importance of getting involved in the politics of the times. Lorena from Spain shared how she started a formation project on care for creation. And, finally, our very own Anne Mulqueen, OFS, explained the role of the lay spiritual assistant and how our lay spiritual assistants in the United States provide support for the order.

Among the most emotional moments were presentations on the causes of beatification and canonization of two Secular Franciscans who gave their lives as martyrs for their faith: Lucien Botovasoa, a teacher from Madagascar, and Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian farmer.

A report was also given on the beginning process of the causes for the beatification of Augusto Natali (Italy), an OFS leader in the precursor of the international fraternity, and past General Ministers Manuela Mattioli (Venezuela) and Emanuela de Nunzio (Italy).

Interspersed among the presentations were work sessions based on the *Instrumentum Laboris* on the Management of the Order – a project that we in the United States have been working on for the past three years, completing surveys, discussing at our fraternities, participating in focus groups. As a focal point of the General Chapter, it took much time and discussion. It was the task of the International Fraternity (the International Councilors and the Presidency representing the countries of the world) to recommend various actions for the future of the Order and to put support behind the chosen proposals.

Canadian Doug Clorey, OFS, previous vice minister of the Order, pointed out that this is a major step in moving the order forward and has been a priority for the Presidency for years. “I don’t think our members realize what this means for the Order.”

The Chapter voted to:

1. establish a permanent international formation office/team that will focus on maintaining continuity of formation around the world
2. form an international communications office/team to ensure that there is follow-through on outreach – both internally and outside the order –

to bring the life of the international fraternity closer to the brothers and sisters scattered around the world.

3. Establish a JPIC Secretariat to help integrate efforts and coordinate activities and to collaborate with others in the Franciscan family
4. develop a financial strategy for the future of the Order
5. recommend that National Fraternities establish a National Registry of OFS members in their countries



Capitulars voting on an agenda item.

For a complete list of all decisions and how they may impact our National, Regional and Local fraternities, go to our national website.

The participants worked intensely during the days, but the nights were dedicated to laughter and the sharing of cultures through song, dance, and presentations. Our United States and Canadian contingents entered singing “When the Saints Come Marching In” and then talked about our newest saints and venerables from the United States, among them St. Marianne Cope, St. Kateri Tekakwitha, and Blessed Solanus Casey.

This was, indeed, a momentous Chapter, a Chapter that will change the way we, as an Order, interact with each other and with the world. It reminded us that we are one Order whose goal is to bring the Gospel to life – for our members and for the world.



Gerty, International Councilor from Germany, introduces her friar friend to General Minister Tibor Kauser, OFS.