

# From Roswell to Rome for a Fraternity Gathering

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In November 2021, I had the opportunity to travel from Roswell, N.M., to Rome, Italy, for a fraternity gathering. Well, it wasn't just *any* fraternity meeting, it was the gathering of the International Fraternity Council of the Secular Franciscan Order (CIOFS). All Secular Franciscans (OFS) are members of the International Fraternity. But this was the first time I was able to attend it. Of course, I more regularly attend gatherings for the other three fraternities for which I am a member – the OFS-USA (national), Our Lady of Guadalupe-Empress of the Americas Region (regional) and St. Francis– Roswell, N.M. (local).

The International Fraternity Council meets every three years. Due to COVID, the XVI General Chapter was postponed to November 13-21, 2021. This time, the gathering also involved the VII Elective Chapter of the International Fraternity Council. Awilda Guadalupe OFS, CIOFS Councilor for OFS-USA, was not able to attend. Since I was elected as Alternate to the CIOFS Councilor (as well as National Secretary), I made my way to Rome to represent the OFS-USA at the Chapter. What an honor!

After 24 hours of traveling, I arrived at the meeting location. The first person to greet me was our Minister General, Tibor Kauser, OFS. We had met two times before (2015 and 2016), but I was truly amazed that he remembered me, seeing that there are 173,000+ OFS. Surrounded by many strangers wearing masks and speaking various languages, Tibor's greeting indicated I was family and welcome. Presidency Councilors staffed the registration table. The servants were serving their brothers and sisters. Soon after, I was reunited with Mary and Bob Stronach, OFS,<sup>1</sup> who were working at the Chapter in various capacities.

There was a buzz in the lobby. No matter the language, the enthusiasm was evident. Participants from five continents were so excited to be together after a year-long delay, and it wasn't just because of the access to Italian gelato!



The *Instrumentum Laboris*<sup>2</sup> inspired the Chapter theme: "Animating and Guiding with Servant Leadership." The talks, homilies, and keynotes<sup>3</sup> were focused on this challenging but appropriate theme. It is difficult to be brief about the events of the nine-day gathering, so I direct you to the summaries, the presentations and photo galleries for each day at: <https://ciofs.info/news/gen-chapter/2020-general-chapter/>.<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Bob and Mary Stronach, OFS, for the wonderful summary of the days'

events along with the collection of snapshots. This article contains the impressions from my participation in the gathering.

The number of participants was impressive. A total of 57 of 70 National Fraternities were represented, along with the wider Franciscan Family. I met brothers and sisters from Mexico, Central America, South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The four Ministers General participated in the Chapter (Amando Trujillo-Cano, TOR; Fr. Massimo Fusarelli, OFM; Fr. Roberto Genuin, OFM Cap; and Fr. Carlos Tovarelli, OFM Conv). Our former General Minister (2002-2014), Encarnacion del Pozo, OFS, also attended the Chapter.

It was a relief to learn that this Chapter followed the same format as the Chapters for the OFS-USA National fraternity and regional fraternities: prayer (daily Mass and Evening Prayer), business meeting, formation, and hospitality. It wasn't a surprise that the meeting schedule was packed running from 7:30 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. most days. I had to get used to the European meal schedule (lunch at 1:00 p.m. and dinner at 8:00 p.m.).

Because this was an international gathering, materials were provided in the four major languages of the Order (Italian, English, French, and Spanish). Real-time translation was provided for presentations and discussions in the large group meeting hall. Individuals had handsets with earphones to dial into the appropriate translation channel. Presenters and those in the audience with questions had to speak slowly so the translators had time to translate. As you can imagine, the team of translators worked very hard the entire week.

<sup>1</sup> Mary Stronach serves as a translator and Bob Stronach serves as a photographer and editor of several publications for CIOFS.

<sup>2</sup> A copy of the *Instrumentum Laboris* from 2020 can be downloaded in English or Spanish at: <https://secularfranciscansusa.org/ongoing-formation-resources/>.

<sup>3</sup> Make sure to review the talk by Br. Michael Perry, OFM: <https://ciofs.info/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/EN-The-Gift-and-Responsibility-of-Minister-as-Servant-fr.-Michael-Perry-OFM.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Note: the link is correct with "2020" instead of "2021."

The business topics for this chapter included: changes to the geographic groupings for the Presidency Councilors, triennial budget, and proposed revisions to the International Statutes. Voting was done by raising green, red, or white cards. To generate discussion on those topic and suggested priorities prior to voting, participants met in small groups by language. My working groups included the representatives from the Netherlands, Bosnia Herzegovina, Republic of Czechoslovakia, Sweden, Slovenia, Germany, and Korea. I learned that we all struggle with similar issues: aging membership, few wanting to serve on councils, limited numbers of vocations, shortage of spiritual assistants, and limited formation materials. Several mentioned they experienced challenges with translating –

especially lengthy, complex documents. We are blessed in the United States to have access to very good formation materials and strong teams for translation.

I did my best to take notes and pay attention – not just because I needed to report back to our fraternity council, but also because I was appointed to the committee to develop the final “Message to the Order” or Conclusive Document from the Chapter.<sup>5</sup> General Vice-Minister, Chelito Nunez (Venezuela), Michel Versteegh (International Councilor from the Netherlands), and I were appointed to this committee. This was a labor of love during my first International Chapter.

Highlights of the trip include a private audience with Pope Francis on November 15, 2021, and the Chapter of Elections on November 17, 2021 (the Feast of St. Elizabeth of Hungary). The Holy Father challenged us to do penance and to “Let the Gospel, that is, Jesus Himself, shape your lives.” We were so delighted that each participant was able to personally greet the Pontiff. I will never forget the experience.

Elections, no matter the fraternity level, are always exciting to me. This one was exciting because we didn’t get the slate until the afternoon before the elections, several candidates were added before the elections on Wednesday, and during the elections several positions went to the third ballot for the decision. (Does this ever happen in the elections in which you’ve participated?) All candidates were wonderfully qualified and dedicated, so the Holy Spirit truly was needed. Also, this was an historic election, as a

member from the United States (Mary [Maria Teresa] Stronach) was elected as Vice-Minister General. We pray that the Holy Spirit leads the newly elected Presidency members as they form as a Council and digest the outcome from the Chapter. Our new Presidency representative is Ana Maria Raffo from Peru. She is representing Northern and Central America.



Thanks to outgoing Presidency members: Chelito Núñez (Venezuela), Ana Fruk (Croatia), Attilio Galimberti (Italy), Michel Janian (Lebanon), Jenny Harrington (South Africa), Augustine Young Hak Yoon (Korea), and Andrea Karlovic (Bosnia and Herzegovina). Their efforts in serving the Order over the last seven years (some longer) have been monumental.

Another fascinating point was related to YouFra. There was a general discussion on how to incorporate YouFra members into the OFS. Many (20+) participants revealed they had been part of YouFra in their countries (European, Central and South American). I had never lived in an area where YouFra groups were strong – so I was quite surprised to learn how extensive they are in other parts of the world. Many of those people responding were in their 40s. It was very impressive to see that those people who started as YouFra members were very active as adults.

Bonzica Loncar, OFS, International Councilor from Bosnia Herzegovina, expressed that at first we were all strangers, but by the end of Chapter, we were one fraternity although from different backgrounds. We knew each other’s names and our countries of origin. We learned a little bit about how each applied their vocations and the challenges of doing it in their specific cultures. These individuals were so excited about doing what Pope Francis exhorted us to do – let Jesus shape our lives. I returned to Roswell<sup>6</sup> to be reunited with my husband a few pounds heavier because of all the pasta, but energized to continue with ongoing conversion so that I can allow Jesus to shape my life and be open to His holy will.

If you haven’t participated in a regional or national chapter gathering, I encourage you to attend if there is room. These events are an energy boost for our vocation. The Quinquennial is scheduled for August; you’ll be able to meet members of your National and International fraternities there. I am planning to attend. I hope to meet you there.

<sup>5</sup> The Conclusive Document can be found at: <https://ciofs.info/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/EN-XVI-General-Chapter-Conclusive-document.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> I was quite astounded by how many people from all over the world knew about little Roswell, New Mexico. The people would joke with me about the 1947 crash landing.