

NAFRA CHAPTER

October 21-26, 2014

“Be the Merciful Presence of God”



Our National Fraternity (NAFRA) will gather in Chapter from October 21-26, 2014 at Montserrat Retreat House in Lake Dallas, Texas. Our co-hosts for this Chapter are Our Lady of Guadalupe and Los Tres Compañeros Regional Fraternities. We are most grateful for all they are doing to prepare for this major event!

The International Council of the Secular Franciscan Order (CIOFS) has produced a wonderful document entitled Guidelines for the Celebration of OFS Fraternity Chapters. It describes the history and importance of a Chapter in the life of our Order and defines specific guidelines to follow when planning a Chapter. Our NAFRA Chapter this coming October will be planned in accordance with these guidelines.

This document does not only apply to our NAFRA Chapter – it is applicable for local and regional gatherings as well. We have reprinted this document here in part. In a future issue of the TAU we hope to include the remaining sections that deal specifically with Elective Chapters.

GUIDELINES FOR THE CELEBRATION OF OFS FRATERNITY CHAPTERS

From the CIOFS Presidency, issued in Rome on April 26, 2008

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the different structures which the religious community life has created to express and promote the spiritual values of its charism, a particularly important one is the gathering of the components of the community convoked to deal with issues regarding their professed form of life, an assembly which is generally called *Chapter*.

The name, originating in the monastic environment, referred to the assembly of religious members of a community for the purpose of reading and discussing one of the “chapters” of the Rule. From here the use of the term *Chapter* also when referring to both the location and meeting itself.

The Franciscan family, from its origins, has instead conferred a particular connotation to the term Chapter, the expression for its very reason of existing: the *fraternity*. Thomas of Celano, faithful witness to the way of thinking of Francis of Assisi, emphasized the fraternal value of the Chapter when he reminded us that the friars “were committed to even donating themselves to meet the needs of the brothers. They were happy when they could meet, happier when they were together” (Franciscan Sources, 1C XV, 39).

For Saint Francis the Chapters were of extreme importance in the life of his friars. They were gatherings of brothers in the name of the Lord. They constituted true celebrations of life in fraternity, animated by the Holy Spirit. In the *Regula non bullata*, Francis asks that the friars gather together in the Chapter to discuss matters pertaining to God (Chapter 18).

According to Saint Clare, *“the Chapter is important to consult with all the sisters concerning whatever pertains to the welfare and good of the monastery; for the Lord frequently reveals what is best to the least* (Rule. St. Clare 4,16-18).

Francis himself, fully aware of the gift and the calling to be brothers in an evangelic fraternity, often invites his friars to become more aware of the action of God, who brought them together through his grace: *“And, wherever the friars are and have come upon one another, let them mutually show themselves to be members of each other’s family. And let one without fear manifest to the other his own need, since, if a mother nourishes and loves her own son according to the flesh, how much more diligently ought he love and nourish his own spiritual brother?”* (Franciscan Sources, LR VI, 7, Regula bullata VI, 8).

If we consult the writings of Saint Francis and his biographies, we realize that the Chapter was a gathering of brothers at different levels, where the spiritual life of the friars was dealt with. We could point out some aspects: the proclamation of the Word of God, prayer, exhortations and admonitions for living the Rule at best, the promulgation of regulations, the election of ministers, fraternal sharing and the revision of life, confession of personal sins, common prayer, fraternization, sending to the mission, reciprocal consolation...

In the present OFS legislation there is a distinction between the various types of chapters according to the level of the Fraternity that is celebrating it and according to their purpose. From the purpose point of view, we can distinguish the deliberative Chapters from the elective ones; from the point of view of level, we find the local Chapter (or Assembly), (G.C. art.49.2), the regional one (G.C. art. 64), the national one (G.C. art. 68) as well as the General Chapter (art. 70.3 and 4).

Because of its peculiarity, the general Chapter, requires regulations of its own. Here we will deal with the national Chapter and the local and regional Chapters, starting with a fervent recommendation: that the participants adequately prepare themselves by praying and reading (or re-reading) the dispositions that regulated them: General Constitutions, Ritual and Statutes.

2. GENERAL CRITERIA

2.1 – Celebratory character of the Chapter of the OFS Fraternity

The Fraternity Chapter is not an ordinary meeting, like civil or secular meetings. The Chapter is also a feast. To celebrate is to “make present”. To make what present? In the first place the Capitular assembly makes Christ himself present. Jesus Christ who teaches, Jesus Christ who serves, Jesus Christ who prays. Jesus Christ is present *“...where one or two people are gathered in my name...”*. Furthermore, the Capitular assembly evokes the Church and renders it present. It constitutes the Church assembled in faith, hope and charity.

The Chapter is to be always celebrated in an attitude of conversion, since there is a search for greater perfection in life according to the Rule, in fraternity. In the Chapter all personal interests and ambitions of power must be excluded. Everything must be done according to the example of Jesus Christ, in the spirit of service.

Therefore, the essential aspects of a Chapter are:

- ❖ The proclamation of the Word of God, which enlightens the themes to be discussed;
- ❖ Prayer;
- ❖ The search for what is best for the life of the Fraternity.

It goes without saying that since the group exists because of a project which has God as its inspiration and goal, **it is God who must be at the heart of the thoughts of the group and of each one.** Only in Him will we find inspiration to conform to His authentic will. “*Unless the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it*” (Sal. 126 (127), 1).

In our life, we must always recognize the primacy of the Spirit. If we are secular Franciscans it is because the Lord called us to be so, because He has a project for us. His project, not ours. We must, therefore, listen, in the best possible way so that we can hear well and render our vocation more firm, as Saint Peter taught us. (2Pt 1,10).

We, therefore, must:

- ❖ allow, above all, sufficient time for individual and community prayer, so that God may talk to our heart,
- ❖ dedicate some time for shared reading and meditation of some appropriate passages of the Word of God so that it will tune us up on the God’s “wavelength”,
- ❖ read some appropriate passages of the writings of Saint Francis so that we are inspired by the catalyst and model of our specific vocation.

In all this, however, a sense of measure is needed, because talking in continuation is not productive.

2.2 –Development of the Chapter

Needless to say, the implementation of the Chapter will be very different depending on whether it is a study Chapter or a deliberative Chapter, or an elective Chapter. In any of these cases, works will be introduced by one or more reports, which in any case must respond to the needs to strengthen, with renewed commitment, the values that derive from following Christ, to which we have voluntarily adhered under the loving care of the Saint of Assisi; to the need to do it together, as a Fraternity assembled by the Holy Spirit and called to grow in faith, in listening and welcoming.

Naturally, the introductory report will have an important space and will have to receive the attention it deserves from the members of the Chapter. It would be opportune also to prepare a brief outline of the essential points, which could be of use to the capitulars for study, reflection and subsequent debates.

The participants will then have to have enough time to intervene (have the “right of voice in the Chapter”). It is important that this point be fully elaborated taking all the time necessary: it is from a careful analysis of the state of the Fraternity that a project can emerge to enable its progress. The person who will preside or moderate, must see that interventions are concise and above all, kept to the subject.

The celebration of the Chapter thus becomes a **privileged moment of personal and community formation**, in the style of the most authentic Franciscan tradition: “*At Pentecost all the friars assembled unto St. Mary and consulted how best they might observe the Rule..... St. Francis gave unto them admonition, rebukes, and precepts, according as seemed good unto him by the counsel of the Lord... He was untiring in exhorting the brethren to observe the Gospel and the Rule ...*” (Franciscan Sources L3C XIV, 57).