##### ACCOMPANYING the OFS and YouFra

##### Brother Michael Perry OFM, Minister General

##### Report to the OFM General Chapter 2021, p. 159-160

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The General Spiritual Assistant for the OFS/YouFra is Brother Pedro Zitha OFM. I encourage you to read the Report that he has submitted. He has done an excellent job, working in close collaboration with the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants (OFM, OFM Conventual, OFM Capuchin, and TOR) and with the International Council of the OFS (CIOFS). He also has made great efforts to help educate the Friars of our Order who serve as Spiritual Assistants so that they might better understand their role in helping the Secular Franciscans and YouFra members to become the key protagonists of their vocation. This has proven to be a challenge since a significant number of Friars and Secular Franciscans continue to rely on older models of animation, many of which identified the role of the Friars as protagonists and organizers, leaving little space for the local OFS Ministers to fulfil their duties.

I urge all Friars to take a greater interest in providing encouragement and spiritual support to our OFS/YouFra brothers and sisters. May the Friars who currently serve as Spiritual Assistants deepen their awareness of the vocation of the OFS/YouFra and encourage them in their role as central protagonists. May the Friars also support the central priorities of the OFS, namely, the strengthening of a sense of identity, a deepening of the bonds of fraternity, and an embrace of the missionary aspects of their lives as OFS/YouFra.

One of the greatest gifts I have received in these past years in my service as Minister and Servant has been the gift of friendship with the Minister General of the OFS, Brother Tibor Kauser. He has provided guidance and spiritual and moral support to me and to our Order. May God bless you, Brother Tibor, and bless all of our brothers and sisters of the OFS/YouFra.

**Brother Pedro Zitha OFM**

**General Spiritual Assistant to OFS/YouFra**

##### Appendix to the Report of the Minister General

During the past four years, 2017-2020, my service to the Order, as General Spiritual Assistant to the OFS/YouFra, has been marked by many positive as well as challenging experiences. Those positive experiences have helped me to know better the Secular Franciscan Order internationally. Working with them helped me to develop a love for the Order and to engage my energies to serve the Order.

Assisting the OFS collectively as a Conference of Spiritual Assistants has been one of the greatest ways that strengthen the unity of the OFS. This collaboration has helped me integrate more closely into the worldwide experience of the OFS Fraternity. More and more, the brothers and sisters of the OFS around the world have demonstrated their sense of belonging to a larger Franciscan family. Although most of the fraternities are aging, there is a lot of enthusiasm and love for the Order.

I wish to express a deep sense of gratitude to the local, regional, and national Spiritual Assistants from the First Order (OFM; OFMConv; OFMCap) and the Third Order Regular. They have demonstrated a since willingness to give of themselves, making many personal sacrifices in order to accompany closely and fraternally the OFS and the YouFra. I realize that all the Spiritual Assistants have many other duties to fulfil within their respective Order and fraternities. Thank you for your spirit of sacrifice.

There are many challenges confronting the Secular Franciscan Order. In many parts of the world, most members are content and comfortable with the normal way of life in the fraternity as long as someone else leads the fraternity meetings and doesn’t introduce new things. There are fraternities where the spiritual life depends entirely on its local Minister, or on the Spiritual Assistant. There is a lack of understanding of the ‘new’ *Rule* and *General Constitutions*, especially with regard to the autonomy that the OFS enjoys. Unfortunately, even we friars may not have had a clear understanding of the nature of the OFS vocation, and how we are to relate to brothers and sisters who have their proper charismatic and juridical identity and dignity.

There is much work to be done in the area of ongoing formation with the goal of helping the OFS understand the fundamental elements of their vocation as Secular Franciscans. Presently, there is a tendency among the members of OFS to be closed within their fraternities. They are very hesitant to engage in apostolic activities, especially those that deal with social, political, or economic issues. There also is an urgent need to provide formation for the Spiritual Assistants before they begin their service to the OFS, and also that opportunities for ongoing formation be provided. It also would be important that all friars of the Order make efforts to get to know who the OFS and YouFra are, to study the OFS *Rule* and *General* *Constitutions*, and make efforts to get to know members of the OFS and YouFra who are living in regions where the friars are present. This could serve to strengthen the bonds of the Franciscan Family and provide opportunities for giving to others a common witness to the Franciscan spirit through collaborative projects.

With regard to our work as General Spiritual Assistants to the YouFra, our service has been highly dependent upon friars who serve as National Spiritual Assistants. In some countries, there is a continuous growth of Franciscan-inspired youth movements that have little or nothing to do with the traditional YouFra. Let us recall that YouFra members make a public promise to follow the spirituality and the *Rule* of the OFS. The other Franciscan-inspired movements have been strongly encouraged by some friars. Various motives are presented for why such movements should be created and allowed to flourish. Some argue that it is better to help the young people to live a Franciscan spirituality without making any public promises. Others are encouraged by friars who lack a good understanding of the spirituality and structures of the OFS and YouFra. Still other groups emerge due to inter-generational conflicts between the YouFra and the OFS.

In the last two World Youth Days in Poland and in Panama, many of these different Franciscan groups were totally dispersed in different parts of the country with their Friar Assistants and had little or nothing to do with the meeting of YouFra. A serious evaluation must be conducted at the general level to address such situations. This will require the cooperation and collaboration of the Provincial and Custodial Ministers, and their commitment to help and ensure that the friars receive adequate formation regarding the spirituality, structures, and life of the OFS and YouFra. This will help all of us to better understand and appreciate the common threads that exist between all members of the Franciscan Family.

In short, it’s hard to point out what in these last four years we have accomplished as a Conference of General Spiritual Assistants. However, we have managed to successfully coordinate efforts to prove continuous animation of the OFS and YouFra by way of a wide range of communication tools and opportunities for initial and ongoing formation. This has been accomplished through the ordinary means of attending elective Chapters, conducting pastoral and fraternal visits, and providing conferences and formation courses. We also have made similar efforts among the friars of the respective Order, with the goal of educating and encouraging the friars to engage with our brothers and sisters of the OFS and YouFra. In some national fraternities of OFS, there has been an effort to strengthen the relationship with the entire Order and with YouFra. As the Conference of Spiritual Assistants, we also collaborate in different commissions and projects of the OFS/YouFra at international levels, including Project Africa; Formation Commission; Juridical and Patrimonial Commission; Communications Commission; YouFra Commission; Family Commission; and help with the revision and translation of official documents of the OFS.

I wish to thank our Minister General, Brother Michael A. Perry OFM, and the General Definitory, for entrusting me with the care of the OFS and YouFra on their behalf. I also wish to thank all my brothers and sisters who serve as Spiritual Assistants in different parts of the world, for their tireless service to the OFS/YouFra. Please be assured of my continuous support and spiritual accompaniment, especially in these very difficult times of Pandemic. May the good Lord continue to protect you and your religious fraternities.

Rome, November 2020

“***Let us begin again for up until now we have done nothing***”