



Volume 32 ✦ Number 07 ✦ July 2018
Official Newsletter of Our Lady of Guadalupe Province, Order of Friars Minor, Albuquerque NM
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Into Our Tradition

A monthly Reflection from Our Franciscan Heritage #23 • July 2018

— Jack Clark-Robinson, ofm —

I attended the Plenary Council of the Order in Nairobi, Kenya as one of the two representatives of the English Speaking Conference from the 11th to the 29th of June. Article 194 of the General Constitutions, states that the duties of the Plenary Council include:



- 1. to offer assistance to the Minister General and his Definitory in governing and inspiring the Order;*
- 2. to encourage relations and communications between the General Curia and the Conferences, and between the Conferences themselves; . . .*
- 5. to help prepare the next General Chapter and to offer advice regarding its location;*
- 6. to discuss the finances of the Order.*

We did all of those things and more.

This Plenary Council began by gathering information from friars around the world months ago. Each Conference of the Order, as well as the Custody of the Holy Land, prepared a report on the social situation within their geographic area, the situation of the Church in their area, and the responses of the friars of the Conference to the challenges presented by these social and ecclesial situations. Beyond these written reports which were translated and made available to all of the Council members before we got to Nairobi, each Conference gave an hour-long presentation of their situation, usually complete with Power Point illustrations and videos. With guidance from Caoimhin O'Laoide and input from a number of Provinces, Keith Warner, Pierre Charland and I put together our report and presentation. Then the first week of the Council the whole Council listened and learned from each other.

Amazingly, what we learned was that in large measure friars around the world are facing some of the same issues, not only as friars, but in society and in the Church. The world seems to be more connected and a lot smaller than we might have imagined before hearing the reports of the first week. The moderators, including Keith, and steering committee of the Council sifted through all of the reports and came up with seven issues for focusing our discussion through the next part of our time together. Those issues were: 1) *fraternity in mission*, 2) *the rapidly changing world*, 3) *youth*, 4) *evangelization in the spirit of Laudato Si*, 5) *migrants*, 6) *instruments of peace in the face of contemporary violence*, and 7) *religious life and the vision of Pope Francis*. We did not come with any grand plans as to what we should all be doing concerning these seven issues, but we offered questions for the consideration of the General Minister and the General Administration to contemplate as they seek to offer guidance for the work of the friars through the next several years, and especially in leading up to the General Chapter of 2021. In that way, we responded to that first directive of the General Constitutions with regard to a Plenary Council, *1. to offer assistance to the Minister General and his Definitory in governing and inspiring the Order*.

As to the second instruction to the Plenary Council from the General Constitutions, *to encourage relations and communications between the General Curia and the Conferences, and between the Conferences themselves*, that seemed to be what we were doing before we got to Africa and the first week with the sharing of the Conference reports. But not only did we share then, the whole time that we were together seemed to be full of opportunities and occasions to share with one another what it means to be a Friar where we are in the world at the moment, and we are all around the world. I got to know the English “*official language group*” friars best and they were from such diverse places as Malaysia/New Zealand, Korea, Viet Nam, Hong Kong, India, the Philippines – represented by four different friars, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Croatia, Poland, Ireland, the United States (*five of us, Michael Perry, John Poudziunas, Gilberto Cavasos, Keith Warner and me*) and Canada. But there were those who spoke English very well, though they spoke other languages as their official language or in their ministry, and they were from Argentina, Brazil, Columbia, Italy, Portugal, Mexico and Costa Rica! I have come home with a greatly deepened appreciation for the world-wide nature of our fraternity and a hope to share it with all of you whenever we are together as a Province.

The General Constitutions also state that we were to: 5. *to help prepare the next General Chapter and to offer advice regarding its location*; 6. *to discuss the finances of the Order*. We did both of those things. The Council heard John Poudziunas update us on the finances of the Order. John's presentation was very well received by all of the Friars present. I think that the applause which he received at the end of his presentation was the most prolonged and sustained of any speaker, and that is quite an accomplishment when you talk about money! But John was not only talking about money. He laid a very Franciscan foundation for his talk speaking of how our values, including especially transparency, must be represented and underlie anything and everything that we do with regard to money. He also pointed out decisions which need to be made soon in General Chapters and elsewhere to help us address the demographic shifts in the Order. In some ways the shifts amount to this: The financial resources of the Order are primarily in the Northern Hemisphere, but with decreasing numbers of friars, while in the Southern Hemisphere, the numbers of friars are growing, but there are few financial resources. In addition, the overall financial resources needed for our mission and for formation of the friars, as they are currently gathered are both rapidly dwindling to a point where they may soon not be adequate unless something is done. The financial situation of the Order is no longer a crisis, but it is a challenge. When we discussed topics for the General Chapter in 2021, the English speakers present proposed that future financial plans be seriously considered.

We also proposed that the General Chapter in 2021 take place in or near Manila in the Philippines. Other groups proposed: Assisi, Jakarta (Indonesia), Jerusalem and Mexico. When we had a show of hands among all of the Council members, the greatest support was for the Philippines. The final decision as to the location of the Chapter will be made by the General Administration, but the reasons for the Philippines are compelling: They are in Asia, where so much is happening in the Order. The Philippines are a crossroads of religion, culture and politics, but still on the periphery. Travel to the Philippines is relatively easy for most foreign travelers. Finally, 2021 will mark the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Christian missionaries in the country, and a big celebration is already being planned.

I mentioned that the Council did all of the things indicated in the General Constitutions and more. I want to speak of the "*more*." We were in Africa. Africa is a place of unbelievable contrasts and a place where the Order had never conducted a world-wide meeting before. The theme of this Council was to listen to the Spirit, but it seemed that the Spirit also wanted us to see.

We saw natural wonders and human poverty. We visited lions, giraffes, ostriches, and zebras (*no elephants! They are not native to the Nairobi area.*), twenty minutes from the retreat house where we were stayed. We saw the need to protect our Sister, Mother Earth. We saw men, women and many, many children surviving on \$2 a day and less, in an incredibly crowded neighborhood, a ten-minute walk from skyscrapers and wealth, but without streets or indoor plumbing. Narrow walkways, with mercifully concreted open "*drainage*" ditches, wound in a maze between every "*house*." Yet, we were welcomed into homes of only a few square feet,

housing a half dozen people, who wanted to share their homes with us.

Older and younger women there, some Catholic, some “*Christian*” and some Muslim have banded together to help each other and all those many, many children, to survive and thrive as best they can, while Friars of the East Africa Province do what they can to help, too. Those women sang with true joy and danced with lively hearts to welcome us. We were in Africa. Need and hope mixed together, and both challenged us to live lives of Faith. They showed us that Faith and community are the resources that can always be counted on in the face of overwhelming challenges. At this Council we were reminded of how much we need to be, and how much the world needs us to be, Lessor Brothers.

Preach Often and, When Necessary, Speak . . .

Approximately 300 parishioners from *Santuario San Martin de Porres* and *Holy Family Parishes* in Albuquerque’s South Valley joined together for a peaceful demonstration against the current *USA government’s Immigration Policy which separates children from their parents*. Our **Patrick Schafer, OFM** marched along side **Fr Oscar Coelho** who is the pastor of *Santuario San Martin Parish*. The group walked in silence from the Catholic Charities of Central New Mexico building to Holy Family church where the group broke their silence and prayed a rosary which was led by members of the Holy Family Youth Group. The event took place on Sunday, July 1st.



Our Noé Alfaro Casas, OFM Renews Vows . . .

The ceremony took place at St John's church in Roswell, NM. Charlie Martinez, OFM witnessed Noé's renewal of vows on Sunday, June 23.

**Congratulations and Prayers
for our newest member.**



St John's Parish in Roswell NM Celebrates Feast of St John the Baptist, June 24th . . .



Images of Africa . . .



*Andres Gallegos, July 04
Jack Clark Robinson, July 04
Gerald Steinmetz, July 14
Edgardo Diaz, July 23
Don Billiard, July 28*

Photo credits for July 2018 Padre's Trail:

*Bruce Michalek, OFM . . . Holy Family/San Martin Walk
Sandra Martinez . . . Noe's Renewal of Vows/St John Fiesta
Jack Clark Robinson, OFM . . . Africa*