



A PLACE AT THE TABLE

NEWSLETTER OF THE UNITED STATES SUB-CONFERENCE (ESC)

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Facilitating a national conversation

NEW YORK – The Provincial Ministers of the United States met from February 13-14 at the Provincial Curia of the Immaculate Conception Province in New York. The primary focus of this meeting was to discuss the issues related to our ongoing national conversation about greater collaboration and possible reconfiguration of Provincial structures.

As each of the seven U.S. Provinces begin to discuss these possibilities in a more serious and focused way through regional gatherings leading to Provincial Chapters for almost all Provinces, different questions have begun to surface related to this process and related to our future together. As part of our desire to help facilitate this conversation, the Provincials have created this publication as a way to facilitate clear, quick and helpful information for you and the friars of your Province as you engage these questions about the future of our life together in this country.



Provincials gathered at the IC Provincial Curia, New York

We are aware that as one question is answered, often enough, two more pop up. Feel free to send us your questions at exec@escofm.org so that we can all have the most informed and fraternal discussion possible.

General Minister encourages friars in planning for the future

NEW YORK – At the start of the U.S. Provincial Ministers’ meeting in New York, **General Definitior Francis Walter, OFM**, brought a message from **General Minister Michael Perry, OFM**.

Some excerpts from the General Minister’s Letter:

- “It is with great joy that I write to you at this time, to encourage you as you meet in New York to further discuss ways to strengthen and ensure the future vitality of our Franciscan life and witness in the United States. The road upon which you have embarked is not an easy one. I am certain you are already confronting many necessary challenges, particularly if you are to remain respectful of the friars, the particular histories of each province, while at the same time seeking to develop a new spirit among the brothers, an identity that will be capable of engaging in new ways with brothers from other provinces since we all share the same and one fundamental identity as *Friars Minor*.”



General Minister Michael Perry, OFM

- “You have already made significant progress towards evaluating areas of strength, weakness, threat and opportunity. What is at stake here is the singular lives of human beings, brothers who have and continue to strive to live faithfully their Gospel commitment in the context of fraternity, a fraternity that is ‘on the road’ towards the Kingdom of God, that is missionary.”
- “I understand that you will review the various proposals or scenarios that were presented for study and reflection at the level of each province, proposals for moving towards a future that might be very different but also potentially very exciting. We must always keep before us the central concern that each of you hold as very important, the vitality of our Franciscan life, its renewal, and the renewal of our passion for the missionary vocation that each of us has received at baptism.”
- “I urge you to continue to maintain clear and regular communications with the brothers, informing them of the contents of your discussions without glossing over difficulties and differences of opinion.”
- “I urge you to lead the brothers, helping them to enter into an honest and Gospel-inspired discernment about how the future could look for the friars living and witnessing in the U.S. As your own report indicates, these reflections more than likely will require restructuring and reconfiguring of the current seven provinces and could lead to a possible reduction in their number. I also would urge you to help the friars explore what it means to respect history without becoming a prisoner to it. By that I mean that the current governing and organizing structures in the U.S. did not always exist. They are products of history, of friars making determinations about the way they wanted to give witness to our Gospel life and mission in changing circumstances. Each of your provinces is replete with such history-making friars who were courageous, visionary and deeply committed to the Franciscan life and mission.”

Provincials formulate Proposal for Provincial Gatherings

NEW YORK – One of the most important tasks of the Provincial Ministers last week was creating suggested agenda items related to the Interprovincial Commission Report and the question of reconfiguration of Provinces in the United States.

The goal is for each Province gathering this Spring into Summer have some time devoted to discussion of the Report and what it means for our Franciscan life in the years ahead and to reach a consensus of those gathered on moving forward with the other Provinces.

To that end, each Province will be asked to consider the following Proposal:

PROPOSAL

We, the friars of _____ Province, COMMIT TO PARTICIPATE IN A PROCESS that will reduce the current number of Provinces in the United States by creating one or more new Provinces that better serve our Franciscan fraternal life and mission.

The Provincial Administrations of all Provinces who come to agreement to “commit to participate” in this process will then meet again during the first week of August to plan the next steps.

Additionally, each Provincial gathering will be asked to find time to consider the following in their Chapter or other gathering:

1. Video presentation of the U.S. Provincial Ministers
2. Review of the current situation in the U.S. and the impact on each particular Province
3. Review of the text of the Proposal
4. Review of the FAQ
5. Some time for ritual, reflection, and quiet time before measuring the consensus of those friars gathered

Provincials film video to be shown at Provincial Gatherings

NEW YORK – As Provinces plan to gather in the months ahead, nearly all in the context of a Chapter or Extraordinary Chapter, the Provincial Ministers recorded a special video message to be shown at all of the gatherings.



John O'Connor, OFM, Provincial Minister of the Holy Name Province during the taping of the video

One of the purposes for the video is so that each of the fraternal discussions taking place across the country, begin their conversation from the same starting point with the same information. This is a first-of-its-kind endeavor whereby all seven Provincial Ministers of the United States appear together in the video to speak to all of us, their brothers, in the country.

The video, *A Place at the Table*, gives explanation of the current state of affairs, as well as some of the hopes that the Provincials have for the process as it moves forward.

FAQ – Frequently Asked Questions

NEW YORK – As each Provincial Minister discussed the dialogue currently taking place in each Province about the Interprovincial Commission Report and its conclusions, a clear set of common questions began to emerge that are being asked in regional gatherings across the country.

In an attempt to answer those questions as they emerge, the Provincials are offering the following FAQ or Frequently Asked Questions; and are also encouraging friars to send in any additional questions they may have as the process continues forward. New questions can be submitted at: exec@escofm.org and will be answered in future additions of this newsletter.

- 1. Some have asked what the Provincials meant when they said in their October 2013 letter that “the organizational status quo is not sustainable”?**

Responding to the conclusions of the Interprovincial Commission Report, the Provincial Ministers came to this conclusion for the following reasons:

- ✓ Statistical analysis tells us that we will continue to experience a drop in the total number of friars in the U.S. (40% in the next 11 years) leaving the country with only 506 active but aging friars. If we maintain seven Provinces, many friars would be needed for Administration, leaving far fewer available for other ministries.
- ✓ Small numbers also means an ever-decreasing pool of qualified leaders for administration and other leadership positions in ministry.
- ✓ These realities have a specific impact on the way we live our life. For example, fewer members means we all wear too many hats. With an increased percentage of our membership engaged in internal ministry, this leads to a greater focus on ourselves, as opposed to being focused on our mission and ministry.
- ✓ Being stretched too thin can result in a lessened public visibility for our Franciscan values and life.
- ✓ We already duplicate many of the same services in our various Provinces, and a new or different structure might bring forth a better use of our personnel and resources.
- ✓ Restructuring will not solve all of our issues, but we believe that restructuring can make us better equipped as a fraternity to face these issues as we move forward.

2. Is this process only about statistical and structural realities?

- ✓ While we cannot ignore the statistics and demographics, these are not the primary motivation for this conversation. What is most important is the continued vitality of our Franciscan life and ministry in this country. Our conversation about structures needs to be motivated by that reality – what structures best support carrying our Franciscan life into the future.

3. What's the projected timeline for Provinces that decide to be part of the process?

- ✓ At this point, there is no timeline in set in stone. Part of the reason is that we're waiting to hear from all of the friars in each of the Provinces and the timeline will depend on how many Provinces decide to participate. But, a possible timeline, as proposed by the Commission, could have participating Provinces voting on proposals near June 2017; with new structures becoming effective around 2020 – but, again, this timeline is just a proposed one.

4. In the meantime, will we continue to pursue greater collaboration among the Provinces?

- ✓ Yes. Collaboration is already a part of who we are and the way we live and work together as brothers. As members of the Conference, we continue to pursue significant levels of collaboration in the areas of formation, JPIC, among our treasurers and development personnel, communications on a national level, and other areas as seem appropriate. No matter what, this will continue.

5. Can a Province opt out of the process once it has begun?

- ✓ Though we presume the commitment of all those Provinces who agree to participate in the process, all Provinces always retain the option to opt out. As the process moves forward, eventually final proposals will require the approval of Provincial Chapters, and so individual Chapters will still be able to say yes or no to any final proposal.

6. What happens if a Province decides it would like to enter the process after July 2014?

- ✓ Joining the process mid-stream could be problematic since the participating Provinces will have already begun to talk and plan for the future and the number of Provinces participating will determine the shape of that conversation. Adding Provinces in the middle of the process would force the process back to square one. Provinces that decide to wait now may have to wait until the process is done and new structures are established and seek to join those new structures at that point.

7. What if a friar of a non-participating Province wants to be part of (one of) the new Province(s)?

- ✓ Our General Minister has told us that when new structures are created, any friar will be permitted to join the new Provinces, this would include friars of non-participating Provinces.

8. How will this next stage of the process involving the participating Provinces be different than the work of the Interprovincial Commission?

- ✓ The work of the Interprovincial Commission was a first step that helped advise the Provincial Ministers and bring a conversation to the friars of the United States. Their work was brought to an initial conclusion when they presented their report to the Provincials in San Diego in October 2013.
- ✓ This process is now moving into a more deliberative stage that is geared towards action and change in our structures. It will move from pure deliberation to a process that is geared toward active change. It will also address issues like retirement policies, ministerial commitments, the best use of formation personnel, healthcare issues, vocation recruiting, communication, the best use of financial resources, development, etc.

9. Does this process jeopardize the financial stability of any Province?

- ✓ No. The Provinces are all currently financially stable and the process will employ appropriate legal counsel to assure that no individual Provincial resources will be threatened by this process.

10. What happens if Provinces choose to opt out of the process this year in their Provincial gatherings? Does that end everything?

- ✓ This does not end the process. The Provincials are agreed that any and all Provinces that vote to be part of the process will move forward toward reconfiguration.

11. How will the administration of new Provinces be formed? Will there be an election?

- ✓ According to our *General Statutes*, when new Provinces are formed, the first Administration is appointed by the General Definitorium, typically following a consultation with the friars of the entities involved and with a goal of having a membership representative of the legacy Provinces joining the new Province.

12. The Interprovincial Report mentioned Federation as an option, but the Provincials have stated that it is off the table. Can you say more?

- ✓ The concept of Federation does not represent any significant change that addresses the challenges we are facing. Through the Conference structure, we are already, in

essence, federated. Furthermore, our *General Statutes* only envision restructuring in the context of Provinces.

13. What if I have more questions?

- ✓ We want to answer your questions throughout this process. Just send them in to: exec@escofm.org and we'll get an answer for you.

Schedule of Provincial Gatherings

As the national conversation moves forward a number of things are taking place. In Provinces, friars are coming together in friaries and regional gatherings to discuss the future of our Franciscan life. These local conversations are leading to a series of Provincial Gatherings in all seven U.S. Provinces. The schedule is as follows:

March, 2014

St. Barbara Province, Regional Gatherings

May 19-23, 2014

St. John the Baptist, Provincial Chapter

June 1-6, 2014

Holy Name Province, Provincial Chapter

June 2-6, 2014

Our Lady of Guadalupe Province, Provincial Chapter

June 8-13, 2014

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Province, Provincial Chapter
Sacred Heart Province, Provincial Chapter

June 23, 2014

St. Barbara Province, Province Retreat & Blessing of Regional Process

June 23-25, 2014

Immaculate Conception Province, Extraordinary Chapter

August 3-6, 2014 (Tentative Date)

Gathering of Provincial Administrations participating in the continuing process



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UNITED STATES SUB-CONFERENCE
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