

An incredible story

A few coordinates will give the occurrence a historical dimension: it was at the time of the Emperor Augustus, Quirinus, who was the legate of Syria, and the taboo word of the year was "tax list" and when you had to get registered – everyone in his or her hometown; it was Bethlehem for Joseph and his fiancée Maria, who had to accompany him – they were as good as married.

And then the incident: a child is born. It was not the only one on that day. And the circumstances were not that unusual in order to be talked about still today. The child was born into this world in a stable. What kind of "world" are children born into – then and now?

But then the scenery is unusual after all: who hears the angels sing, when a child is born? The shepherds with the herds in the fields, common folk, they did not belong to the mighty, but they received this grace. They heard the angels sing. And what about us?

What did the angels sing: the Messiah is born, the Savior, the Promised, the Desired, the Augured – a joy for the people of Israel. And the identification? A child wrapped in diapers in a crib.

And only to resolve the doubts, a heavenly host joins in: Glory to God and peace on earth for mankind. A host singing songs of praise to God and that proclaims peace to mankind has to come from heaven – at least from a different world.

It is unbelievable how everyday things mix with exceptional things, how they merge together, how they connect with each other to what we call "Christmas", the Holy Night.

It is unbelievable that we have the courage to believe that during this night the light appeared not only above Bethlehem, not only for Mary and Joseph, not only for the shepherds, not only for Israel – no: for the entire world, for all of mankind.

It is unbelievable that we have the belief that God became man in this child. It is unbelievable what people are able to accomplish who

have committed themselves to this child, this Messiah, this God. It is also unbelievable what people were able to do, who denied this child, who felt threatened by this child or who abused it for themselves and their own purposes.

God became man. The Holy Scripture describes it even more drastic: "the word was made flesh". Flesh – also unbelievable. Touch yourself gently, and you will realize that flesh is sensible; there is a nervous system. God became man – he feels like us. Indeed, he has even become vulnerable like us: headache, cancer, AIDS, Alzheimer's disease, and death – unbelievable.

Up to this moment in history mankind had to tolerate an almighty God above them. And now, after he was made flesh, after he has incarnated, it was possible for people to make him suffer, to kill him – just like they do with flesh of their own flesh.

If a Martian would visit earth these days, he would surely regard Christmas as an ecological celebration, with all these greens and flowers. If the Martian would look around the stores, he surely might think that Christmas is an economical celebration. If he would study (some) children's eyes then he would probably think that Christmas was an invention only for children. And in each case he would be a little bit right. The way we celebrate a feast shows what we are celebrating. But there is a little bit more to it: If Christmas was only an ecological celebration our hopes would wither like Christmas roses and needles like dry fir. If it was only an economical feast our love would last just as long as our money. If Christmas was only made for children, then we would lose our innocence when we are grown up. Christmas would be a feast that we could only see from the outside, with a little bit of melancholy and nostalgia.

So what is Christmas for me, for us? We should pose this question calmly. God became man in a child – "with a very small face".

Hadrian W. Koch OFM

Africa

Kenya

Fr. Hermann Borg OFM, CCFMC Coordinator of the English-speaking Africa gives a detailed overview about the development of the Franciscan Family in this region.



The year 2015 will go down in African history as the year of encounter. Inspired by the motto **Wake Up the World**, which is the theme of the "Year of the Consecrated Life", Franciscan Sisters and Brothers have contributed to present a lively Church.

This year was not mainly about contents, about new areas of work and mission, burdens and strains. The

goal was to approach each other. Indeed, new ways of solidarity have been found.

At the end of September, about 2,000 Religious gathered at the Catholic University of Nairobi to participate in a four-day seminar. The participation and creativity were impressive.

Already on 5 September 400 Franciscans had celebrated their **Festive Day of the Franciscan Family**. Every Sister and Brothers was taken with the brotherly-sisterly atmosphere, which was very noticeable. The Apostolic Nuntius of Kenya, Archbishop Karl Balvo, marveled at this demonstration of Franciscan unity.

On 3 October 2015, a grand number of 500 Franciscan Sisters and Brothers participated in the celebration of **Transitus**. This was once again a visible sign of our solidarity. And our Brother and Father Francis is our inspiration. The celebration of Transitus on the passing of our Brother and Father Francis is regarded and valued in many places as the highlight of Franciscan community.

About 60 and 80 Sisters, respectively, participated in the monthly days of reflection. The tangible success is the result of years of cooperation within the framework of the Comprehensive Course on Franciscan Mission Charism (CCFMC). The CCFMC repeatedly suggests in different ways to put this solidarity into practice. Cooperation, joined action, and solidarity are part of the Franciscan calling. A look to other countries shows, that, e.g. in Uganda, Tanzania, Cameroon, Zambia, South Africa, Malawi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Burundi and Congo cooperation has been or is being established between Franciscan communities.

The registered Young Franciscans in Uganda with over 1,000 members celebrate this occasion with a seminar lasting several days. This seminar takes place before Christmas in a parish or school that will be acting as the hosts for this occasion.

Email communication as well as visits of many Franciscan Sisters and Brothers in southern Africa, which has been taking place for many years, is bearing fruit. Our collaboration has an influence on the integration process of the manifold



traditions and cultures within Africa.

The Franciscan St. Anthony of Padua Institute (SAPIA) is a result of a CCFMC Comprehensive Course. The entire Franciscan heritage of the 800 years' of Franciscan history, philosophy, and theology is to be raised here in Africa. The Franciscan faculty with its educated lecturers is growing year by year. There are plans for a quarterly Franciscan journal that the team of lecturers wants to publish in the context of African culture and tradition.

In Lusaka, Zambia, the Philosophic College for the vocation of Franciscan Brothers has been upgraded to university level by the government. This shows the recognition of Franciscan life among the population. On the basis of SAPIA, there is a chance of maintaining an entire Franciscan-oriented institution in Nairobi with up to 200 students.

In the past 30 years, the number of African Brothers has quintupled. Today, there are 32 postulants and 12 novices. It can be said with admiration that Franciscans are valued within the Church and around the world. This experience confirms our future planning. We will extend the facilities for students of philosophy in Lusaka and for the students of theology in Nairobi. It is foreseeable that we will soon be opening communities in those countries that we are not yet present in.



We are presently preparing for the visit by Pope Francis. The **Mother Earth Network**, which is carried by Franciscan inspiration, has accepted the invitation to plant a tree with the Holy Father on the premises of the United Nations.

Apart from caring for children, the elderly, the ill, handicapped people and the homeless, our focus lies on the preservation of fundamental quality of life. We are working with Hindus and Muslims to repair this damaged world – especially for the sake of the poor.

South East Asia

Philippines

Sr. Dorothy Ortega reports about the new Coordination Team for East Asia/Oceania as well as new programmes.



Jeanne Luyun SFIC, who served as the CCFMC Coordinator for Asia/Oceania for the past 15 years, has turned over her position to **Ms. Renita Joy Fabric**. However, she will remain an important part within the "CCFMC Web of Life". Many will remember Jeanne for her efficiency in the organization and management of international programs and her accuracy in the elaboration of final reports as well as her diligence in the performance of other tasks for Asia/Oceania. Apart from her continued involvement with the CCFMC, Jeanne Luyun is now the Assistant Coordinator for Formation Programs of

the SFIC Junior-professed sisters.

Joy Fabric was the CCFMC National Coordinator in the Philippines since 1998. Her tenure of office as CCFMC Coordinator for South-East Asia/Oceania lasts three years, but she may be re-elected for another period of three years. She



has successfully implemented the national CCFMC Programs for almost two decades. She earns her living as a teacher in one of the Catholic schools in Metro-Manila.

International CCFMC Programs in 2016

During the period of change of the CCFMC Coordinator, international programs did not take place. The new coordination team came up with a plan for an international programs to be held in Kota Kinabalu in Sabah/Malaysia from 19 to 30 October 2016. The program will especially focus on the *History and Development of the Order of the Poor Clares (OSC), The Third Order Regular (TOR) and the Order of Secular Franciscans (OFS)*. The objective is to highlight the impact of the missionary dimension that these three groups in the Franciscan Family had on the congregations, the Church and in the world. At the end of the program, participants are expected to come up with concrete proposals on how these three groups can be more effective and affective in the revitalization of the Franciscan mission charism in our fast changing world. The 2016 CCFMC Program will also use the Lessons on Marxism and Capitalism as point of departure for the study and reflection on *“Globalization: changed paradigms and the effects and consequences of these changes people’s lives in general and on Franciscans in particular”*.

National Programs 2015-2016

National Programs, especially in the Philippines, come in three parts and usually take place on weekends. Part One is composed of eight to nine Lesson Units dealing with the foundation of the Franciscan mission charism. The Second Part covers nine Lesson Units dealing with the mystical dimension and the inner dynamics of the Franciscan mission. The third part of the program, using the last eight Lesson Units, the focus will be on the Franciscan challenge called “among people” and “salt of the earth” and “light of the world”, to make tangible, audible and visible the values encased in the CCFMC Lesson Units.



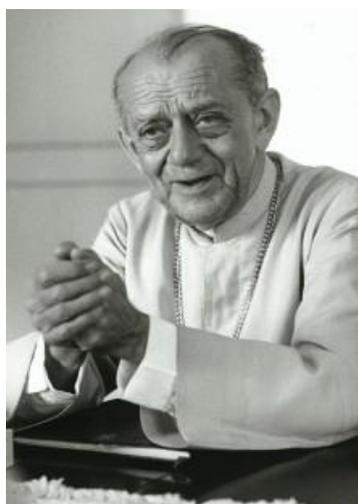
Two further national programs will simultaneously continue in the Philippines in 2015 and 2016; One will take place in Luzon and another one in Visayas and Mindanao. In Luzon, Part One was held at St. Joseph’s College on 19 and 20 June 2015; Part Two will take place from 12 to 14 February 2016; a date for Part Three will be decided later on. Thirty participants are enrolled in the program.

In Mindanao this three-phased program will be offered for the first time for the Franciscans in Visayas and Mindanao. The venue will be the residence of Mrs. Mae Salazar in General Santos City in the south of Mindanao. The dates are: 16 to 19 October 2015, 24 to 26 June and August 2016. The fifty highly motivated participants come from five islands in Visayas and three cities in Mindanao. They are all keen to know more about Franciscan spirituality and missionary charism through the CCFMC; but they are also interested in academic studies about the lives of Saint Francis and Saint Clare. Prospective formators and resource persons will participate in the 2016 International Program in Sabah, Malaysia. Due to their dedication, Mrs. Frau Belinda Inao from Siquijor, and Mrs. Mae Salazar from General Santos City have been selected as resource persons.

The Catacombs' Pact of the Poor and Servant Church

International Meeting from 11 to 17 November 2015 in Rome

An almost forgotten story from the Second Vatican Council is coming alive again. About 50 years ago, on 16 November 1965, 40 bishops met in the Catacombs outside of Rome to make a pact, the renowned „Catacombs' Pact“. In a radio address shortly before the Council Pope John XXIII had announced the motto: “The Church of the Poor”. Initially 40 and then finally almost 500 Council Bishops attended – they got inspired by this dream of a renewed Church - many of these Bishops came from Latin America. It was all about a credible Church for the poor representing a large majority of God's People today.



Dom Helder Camara

After returning from the Council, which had ended on 8 December 1965, the Bishops promised that they wanted to bring about some fundamental change: to lead a simple life and to renounce all insignias of power and honour as well as to make a pact with the poor. This means that in future they wanted to look at the world through the eyes of the poor, thus being the great majority of the world population and to act accordingly and speak on behalf of the poor. Dom Helder Camara, Archbishop from Recife/Brazil was their animator: The Bishops met on a regular basis and made plans together. Dom Helder called Francis of Assisi the “Patron of the Church of the Poor”; he travelled to Assisi himself in order to seek advice and help. The Bishops presented plans that had been carefully considered to the Council Fathers. But soon the Bishops had to realize that the large majority of the Council Fathers were not at all interested in this issue. They were – as Dom Helder put it – “not yet touched by the grace of love for poverty”.

The suggestions of the Catacombs' Pact only attracted real interest within the large continental Council of Latin America, in Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979) and Aparecida (2006). In these places the topics of the Catacombs' Pact became part of the teaching authority of the Church. It was a radical relocation from the side of the rich and mighty onto the side of the poor. This led to a new kind of Church, a liberating Church on the side of the poor, from a hierarchical to a serving Church of God's People. Cardinal once said that Latin America had discovered its Franciscan soul during these assemblies.

And now the Catacombs' Pact is returning to Rome through the Pope from Latin America. Pope Francis knows and lives the so-called “Theology of the People”, the Argentinian kind of liberation theology. It is affected by the large meetings of the Latin American Church in Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979) and Aparecida (2005). The Pope wants to revive the Council and to continue the implementation of the Council decrees. The Pope thinks and lives in a Franciscan way with Jesuit cunning. The Pope often demonstrates this with his life style, through gestures and encounters, through “Laudato si”.

The vision of the “Catacomb Bishops” of a “Church of the Poor for the Poor” is still a long way of after 50 years. The international meeting from 11 to 17 November 2015 in Rome was a reminder of this. The goal of this gathering was the revival of the Catacombs' Pact and to celebrate church services in the Domitilla Catacombs. For those people who relate to Francis, it should be an affair of the heart to help that it will not be forgotten.

Andreas Müller OFM

The Pact of the Catacombs (Domitilla)

<http://www.sedosmission.org/web/attachments/article/137/Catacomb%20Pact%20-%20English.pdf>