



Where Are Our YouFras? (Youth Fraternities)

by Kathleen Molaro, OFS
National Youth/Young Adult Commission Chair

As the Franciscan Youth and Young Adult Commission has stated many times, our mission calls us to share the Franciscan way of life through prayer, formation, and social justice action. Even though we may only have a few official YouFras in the states, we discovered in reading last year's annual reports, there are individuals, fraternities, and regions all across the United States who are taking seriously our OFS Rule, Article 24 to "Foster communion among members," especially with our young people, and to "adopt appropriate means for growth in the Franciscan and the ecclesial life."

The concluding document from the recent (XI Latin American Congress and I American) OFS-YouFra Congress in Paraguay states that it's imperative that we "strengthen the bond between OFS and YouFra with listening, dialogue, opportunities and presence!" Throughout the nation, folks are finding ways to do just that. The power point we shared at the 2023 NAFRA Chapter highlighted some of what we learned in the reports, and hopefully encouraged ministers to return to their regions energized and determined to increase efforts in this vital area of OFS life.

There is one question that continually comes up in conversations with Regional Animators and Ministers. "Why don't we have YouFra in the United States?" Folks are concerned that when young people contact their fraternities, there are only a few YouFras to which they can be directed. My quick answer is that the youth in the United States have different needs than those of countries where YouFra is well established.

In the final report of the National Dialogue on Catholic Pastoral Ministry with Youth and Young Adults, we are reminded that "...the urgent needs of the young are very different in other countries and continents even within the commonality of the one faith." In the United States, our young people are faced with challenges unique to our area of the world, and within their own communities. I'll attempt to give a few simple explanations as to why this is a reality, but there are other reasons also, so this could be a semester long topic of study! We are a cosmopolitan society—quite diverse even within local communities. Diversity is a gift! Each culture represented offers unique perspectives, traditions, and ways of living. Even though this gives our country a wonderful flavor, it also offers challenges. Young people have so many choices, especially when it comes to faith and ways of life. In the YouFra heavy countries, we find mostly Catholic societies quite often accompanied by the presence of Franciscans. Young people grow up with the influence of Franciscan charism and YouFra and are deeply immersed in their Catholicism.

As a result of the diversity and freedoms we experience in the United States, young people are often faced with a lack of identity. They don't automatically consider themselves bonded to a particular culture or religion. Youth in other countries have only one cultural identity, so their sense of belonging is stronger. In fact, the tradition in our country whereby young people leave home after they finish high school contributes to this lack of identity. Suddenly thrust into a society filled with divisiveness and mixed messages makes "adulthood" difficult for our United States youth. In other cultures, young people traditionally continue living at home until they are married or make a major life change.

Our country is also blessed with affluence, which means most young people have access to computers and internet. Again, this is a gift—but can also present problems. In *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis suggests that "Contemporary life offers immense possibilities for action and distraction, and the world presents all of them as valid and good. All of us, but especially the young, are immersed in a culture of zapping. Without the wisdom of discernment, we can easily become prey to every passing trend."

In the book *iGen: Why today's Super Connected Kids are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* the author, Jean Twenge, PhD, states that even

though there are great personality characteristics in this age group, “new media is making teens more lonely, anxious, and depressed, and is undermining their social skills and even their sleep.” The commission is delving into these (and many other) differences more deeply. We are asking the question, “How are we, as Secular Franciscans, uniquely equipped to offer our younger Catholics the support they need in facing these challenges. How can we best accompany them? What is distinct about us, and how might that help us specifically respond to the needs of young people?”

Our young people need encouragement, inspiration, and support in their journey toward holiness. And we, as older more seasoned Catholics need their energy and enthusiasm, their questions and challenges, and their youthful presence in our journey toward holiness. We walk together as pilgrims.

Thank you for loving our youth and mustering up the courage and time to step into their world. We will be resuming our monthly zoom gatherings soon. We hope to see you there!

Additional Pictures From Chapter

