

## WHAT HAPPENED AT THE GIBRALTAR CHAPTER?

### A report from the National Minister on the Chapter

As you know Gibraltar fraternity invited us to have a national chapter in Gibraltar of which the main event was a conference called "Upon this Rock". In the event the speaker, Steve Ray, gave 5 talks. A local charismatic renewal music group played and sang to warm the audience up before each talk. The conference was for the whole Gibraltar Diocese, it took place in a theatre and the auditorium was nearly full.

The ofs experience for ofsgb members was a unique example of fraternity, made possible by the size and family nature of Gibraltar local fraternity. If you think of having visitors to stay with you for a few days, we were welcomed like those visitors. As you would meet them on arrival and transport them around, feed them, welcome them for meals you have prepared, make sure they were cared for during their stay, then you have some idea of what the Gibraltar fraternity did for all of us, the 30+ members from the mainland. I hoped every region would be represented and that happened.



Others joined us –



relatives and friends –  
these were also

welcome. Our hosts gave us a gift, see photo here, as a memento of the event and their hospitality even extended to taking us all out for a meal on the Sunday evening. Unfortunately, Kathy and her sons could not stay for the meal.

The gift is made of crystal, in the shape of Gibraltar, and the design on it is the logo used to advertise the conference. I have inserted a photo of the statue from the shrine to Our Lady of Europe upon which the engraving to the right of the Tau was copied.

### CONFERENCE

Subjects introduced in the talks: From Baptist to Catholic; the Eucharist; Our Lady; Peter: the Rock, the Keys and the Chair; Swimming upstream in our culture. All of these are important for us to explore, many appear in our Rule and our Order has always encouraged loyalty to the Church.

Steve Ray reminded some of us of St Paul who began persecuting followers of Jesus but then spent the rest of his life, and seemingly indefatigable energy, evangelising. Steve came to Catholicism,

from evangelical Baptist roots, through study and extensive reading about Catholicism - especially on the doctrines he had been taught to attack when he belonged to a church that genuinely believed Catholicism to be heretical. His studies led him to become a zealous Catholic. He is now an apologist – an evangelical teacher. He covers many areas in his talks and often leads pilgrimages to the Holy Land, where he contextualises biblical scenes and characters. He believes the Old Testament is essential to understanding the New Testament. Since he comes from a culture where evangelicals are trained to counter Roman Catholic doctrine, one of his aims is to give Catholics tools to defend the R C faith. Our European culture is different, as attack on Catholic doctrine is not usually so direct. However, the same subjects are those over which Christians are divided. Steve has a deep conviction and he will use every opportunity to evangelise. He wears the San Damiano cross which he finds often opens a dialogue or conversation.

I was interested to hear familiar subjects from an evangelical speaker. There was much content that was familiar to me but his tone and his evangelical style was new. I was able to focus on what I needed to hear and ponder about. At times, his style and some of the content made me, personally, feel uncomfortable. Throughout, and positively, the talks challenged me and I want to take time to discern where this challenge will lead to in my life.

## **ETHIOPIA AND YOUFRA**

After the talks and celebration of Holy Mass on Sunday we were able to hear about 2 projects in Gibraltar. There are short videos that will be available in your regions on both of these.

Throughout our stay, some of those who are in formation for Youfra joined us and took the opportunity to tell us how much it means to them. They have activities every week, so within every month they will have prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, formation, cooking for the homeless and other practical projects. We met two young men with Downs Syndrome and one who is confined to a wheelchair. The love in the whole fraternity for and between these young people was inspiring. The youth group is learning about faith, compassion, patience and fraternal love. Each one believes the formation is making them firmer in faith and helping them become better people.

A priest from Ethiopia, who has got to know the ofs members in Gibraltar, asked for practical help so remote villages could have good water. Gibraltar have taken this on as a major project. Four men from the local fraternity made a visit which was to make a huge impression on them all. They talk about “wiping a tear” and believe it is worth wiping one tear if this is all that the fraternity can do to assist. Do what you can and it can make a difference. Everyone was moved by this presentation, despite the fact our screens bombard us with the terrible conditions lived in so many places.

Roger echoes how many of us felt: " I was particularly struck by Manolo speaking of the look on the girl's face when she was given the lollipop (and even began to eat the wrapper!). And the way that Manolo said he did not ever want to lose the impression that this look made on him. For me it was so reminiscent of St Francis looking into the eyes of the leper, and realising that it was not just him (St Francis) giving to the leper, but that he was receiving something from the leper also. Giving money to Cafod, Mary's Meals, Aid to the Church in Need, The Good Counsel Network and other organisations is excellent. But Manolo's account really points to the added richness of direct physical participation in a project."

The local fraternity believe that they should always take on practical projects alongside their very regular and deep prayer life (true of individuals as well as in community). They take formation very seriously, both initial and ongoing. Their monthly meetings last a day, allowing time for prayer, formation and socialisation. We manage this on our regional days. Geography certainly plays its part but there is something more, something deeper, that makes this fraternity flourish.

## **VISITS**

On Monday morning, Christine had arranged a visit to the Governor's building, for those who were able to stay. The Governor represents the monarch in Gibraltar. We found ourselves in a busy, working, official property that had rooms of state, bedroom apartments and a garden. In the densely-populated area that is Gibraltar, it is wonderful to see its contained but beautiful garden. The particular interest for ofs members is that this building was a Franciscan friary in the past. Our excellent guide (on the Governor's staff) pointed to the evidence that this had been a substantial convent: its church had been large; frescoes have been found in which you can see Franciscan details in the little that remains undamaged (see photo below). The Church was subdivided into what is now a chapel that is still in use, a conference room that has been a ballroom, storage areas and offices relating to the Governor's work.



Vehicular and pedestrian access is through a secure entrance that leads into a courtyard but you still felt you were in a cloister. Throughout I found it easy to visualise how it would have been. It is very reminiscent of many Franciscan places I have visited in Italy despite its contemporary purpose.

After this very special visit we then did a tourist trip of the island and the rock. This took us to the southernmost tip of Gibraltar the location of the shrine of Our Lady of Europe; St Michael's Cave within the Upper Rock Nature Reserve which is used as an auditorium: and, of course, the Barbary apes.

Later in the week those of us who were able to extend our visit, were welcomed to the shrine by the priest responsible for this lovely spot, formerly a mosque.



## **FRATERNITY**

A strong sense of fraternity permeated everything we did. The mutual respect that you could feel among the local fraternity members seemed to be infectious. Our mainland members were also very generous. The joy and hospitality that seem to ooze within and from this fraternity touched us too.

I cannot do justice to the atmosphere throughout chapter but I hope you now have at least a taste and will see why we felt the experience was more than rewarding.

Paula ofs