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by Catholic News Service

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Cincinnati — May 31, 2018
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Editor's note: This story was updated at 12:45 p.m. Central time with information about a seventh U.S. province that opted not to participate in the reconfiguration.

Franciscans of the Order of Friars Minor in six of the order's U.S. provinces voted May 30 to form one new organization to reinvigorate Franciscan life in this country.

Friars in each of the order's U.S. provinces took the vote at meetings in their respective communities. The provinces have been in dialogue about unifying since 2012.

Once established the organization would be made up of the almost 1,000 Franciscan brothers and priests who belong to the existing provinces. A location for its headquarters will be determined later.

"The other provincial ministers and I are delighted with the outcome of the vote," said Fr. David Gaa, provincial minister of the St. Barbara Province, based in Oakland, California. "This is an important step in the process of revitalizing Franciscan life in the United States."

The reconfiguration will not happen immediately. The next step in the process is to obtain approval to unify from the order's minister general, Fr. Michael Perry, who is based in Rome.

If he decides this reconfiguration would be helpful to Franciscan life and ministry, he will appoint a delegate to visit the friars in the United States, according to a news release about the friars' vote. If the delegate's report is favorable, it is expected that the process of reconfiguration will move forward, with the new province to be officially formed in late 2022 or early 2023.

In addition to the St. Barbara Province, the U.S. provinces are: Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, based in Franklin, Wisconsin; Holy Name, which has its headquarters on 31st Street in New York City; Our Lady of Guadalupe, based in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Sacred Heart, based in St. Louis; and St. John the Baptist, based in Cincinnati.

"The new entity will better serve the friars' fraternal life and mission in the United States by making adjustments to the current administrative structure," said Fr. Jack Clark Robinson, provincial minister of Our Lady of Guadalupe Province.

A seventh U.S. province of Franciscans of the Order of Friars Minor — the Immaculate Conception Province, also based in New York City — already had decided to not participate in the process.

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Like many other religious communities in the U.S., the Franciscan order is facing a reduction in the number of its members. During the 1960s and 1970s, the number of Friars Minor in the United States peaked at 3,252, but today there are under 1,000 friars.

The worldwide Franciscan order, founded in 1209 by St. Francis of Assisi, comprises brothers and priests who work in a variety of settings including parishes, schools, retreat centers and social justice ministries. Today, St. Francis, whose feast day is Oct. 4, remains one of the most widely known saints, revered for his affection for nature and care for creation.