

FIFTY YEARS with CLARE and FRANCIS

Friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm

My classmates and I were invested with the Franciscan habit on August 12, 1968. At that time it was the Feast of Clare of Assisi, as it is to this day in Assisi because San Rufino, patron of Assisi, is celebrated on August 11. Now the Roman calendar has Clare's Feast on August 11. It was extremely hot in Teutopolis, IL, but I was happy. Believe it or not, I knew in sixth grade that I wanted to wear brown and now I was. Yes, sixth grade. Hot wool, but I was 19 and in brown!



I grew up in St. Francis Solano parish in Quincy, IL and every newly ordained class came to our parish for their first year of priestly ministry. They were all young, they were all happy and I wanted their happiness. The seminary system in 1962 (different world, very different Church) meant we could choose to go to the high school seminary in Oak Brook, two years of college in Quincy followed by the year of novitiate in Teutopolis and back to Quincy to finish college. Four years of theology at CTU in Chicago preceded ordination to priesthood.

I have two photographs from that day we were invested. We were invested with the habits of dead friars back then and mine was so old it was reddish brown and as thick as a horse blanket, hotter than a skillet in the Outback of Australia. But I was so happy! There was one significant moment in the ceremony when Fr. Germain put the habit over my head. Somehow it got tangled and I was stuck in darkness for a few seconds. I remember realizing I'd entered a different world and I wasn't in complete control. I believe I'm still not in control after 50 golden years.

Another distant memory was serving for a friar's Golden Jubilee when I was in fifth grade at St. Francis. The old ritual called for the jubilarian to hold a staff with flowers on it and to wear a crown of flowers. That was striking though I

thought the friar was two years younger than God. And here I am a Golden Jubilarian! How did that happen? Where did those years go? Well, I know. So this month I offer you a few reflections on my fifty years as a friar. Just a few.

I had no idea who Clare of Assisi was in 1968. Neither did most Franciscans. Honestly. I was part of an Assisi study group in 1988 and the women who'd been Franciscans for years told us they knew nothing of Francis when they joined religious life; the Church felt it more important that they be good Catholics and solid nuns rather than spend time on Francis. So if Francis wasn't deemed important in early formation, how could one expect Clare to be at the top of a reading list? The first biography of Francis I ever read was in comic book form we got in elementary school (and I still have that copy). It got me interested in the man and the Order and here I am in 2018!

In 1990, at the request of the Poor Clares in New Jersey, I began a project of research in medieval hymn texts about Clare and Francis. I lived with friars in Chiesa Nuova, three of whom were famous scholars in both medieval music and the life of Clare. They took me under their wings and became significant mentors in my life as a friar and a composer. (Someday you may read my unpublished *A Composer's Conversion* that details my first three months with them.)

At the same time of my work with priceless manuscripts, scholars in the Franciscan world were publishing new research and biographies about our co-founder. These new works celebrated the 800th anniversary of Clare's birth in 1193. I was privileged to be in Assisi in 1993 for that celebration in her Basilica, at San Damiano and basically, all over the town. Gilberto Cavazos-González, ofm, of our province had just begun his doctoral work



Clare by Mark Balma at our University of Saint Anthony in Rome and joined me in Assisi. Those days together confirmed our shared love for Clare and spurred

us on to publish our works in distinctive fields of music and spirituality.

My great respect for Lady Clare deepens to this day. She has brought me friendships with many of the Poor Clares around the U.S., Italy and Canada. Music and knowledge of things medieval have afforded me opportunities I couldn't even have dreamed of doing when I was a novice in Teutopolis. Yet there is one benefit of having Clare in my life that I know I cannot live without. She was and is a healer.

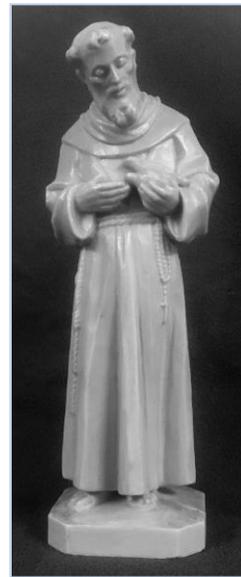
The Acts of the Process of Canonization of 1253 was begun by Pope Alexander IV, just two months after Clare died. She was canonized two years later, as Francis was only two years after he died in 1226. The pages of interviews of sisters who lived with Clare, friars who knew and worked with her and others are filled with great stories of how she healed women, men and children: married people who had trouble conceiving, a little boy with a stone up his nose, a friar who was mentally disturbed, other nuns in the community with physical problems...great stories of how Clare interceded for them all, blessed them with the Sign of the Cross ~ and they were healed by God's power. This woman was renowned throughout the area for healing, and this gift certainly advanced her path to sainthood. Most all these healings were done as she herself suffered and was confined to bed the last 28 years of her life.

I was diagnosed in 1993 with a rare form of lymphoma that lasts for life. Interestingly that happened the week after I returned from her 800th anniversary. From that August day, 1993, this holy woman has been one of the anchors in my life. I've come to understand and know that healing by God often comes as the gift to be able to bear suffering. Her own example has allowed me to smile during challenging periods and days of pain. Other health problems I live with – I give them to God through Clare and can still laugh and give that joy I discovered when Fr. Germain gave me the habit to other people. I love Clare and hold on to her and am constantly grateful for all she has brought me and millions of other people over the years. If you are in need of healing – go to Clare of Assisi! She will bring you peace.

Fr. Kurt, pastor of St. Peter's, asked me to preside at our **Solemn Mass for the Solemnity of St. Clare**. This year we celebrate it on **Monday, August 13, 11:40 a.m.** because the 11th falls on

Saturday. Please join us also for **Anointing of the Sick, Friday, August 10, 1:15 p.m. Mass.**

And now for this guy named Francesco. What can I say about one whose life has shaped mine since 6th grade? I am still learning about his life and his role in mine. He continues to inspire me artistically. His example knocks at my own Door of Comfort constantly; he can be a real pain! His holiness, humility and simplicity radiate into my heart while occasionally shaming me when I consider the stuff I've accumulated in life. How he emulated the Crucified One has become central in how I amalgamate suffering into my life. He was a poet and musical man of prayer – the bedrock of my fifty years in our fraternity. And, by far, the one reason I am most grateful that this man is in my life forever is his crazy joy and love for God and all of creation! Stories of climbing trees, playing with rabbits, dancing in front of Innocent III and other tales have deepened my sense of humor and zeal for life. I love this man!



To the left is a tiny, quasi-secret part of my life...a 6" tan plastic statue of Francis given to me in 8th grade by Sr. Miriam Francis, SSND, when she knew I was leaving at 13 for the seminary. This image has literally been around the world with me, every place I've lived or been stationed as a friar in the U.S. and many, many days in Assisi. I have other images in my room that are important, but this one tells my whole story and has been with me 56 years. I love this man!

His conversion period lasted four, maybe five years. Tumultuous doesn't quite capture the chapters of his story. 13th century Italy was in upheaval as the rising merchant class (of which he was part) clashed openly with nobility. Civil war tore Assisi apart at times. Italian duchies were constantly battling for land and power, to say nothing of the papal forces warring with the Holy Roman Emperor whose castle loomed above the town of Assisi. Francis was involved in a battle Assisi waged against nearby Perugia, captured and imprisoned. He started off on the Fourth Crusade but a dream changed his mind. This man knew violence in all its ugliest, cruelest forms.

And in the midst of mayhem and being lost, he fell in love with God. I love this man!

I've come to regard his years of turning from a future in business to life as itinerant preacher with great respect. There are significant moments where Francis turned from this to that. One was that prayerful moment before the San Damiano crucifix; another was confronting and embracing the leper. He was forced to make a public and complete break with his family by his father for economic reasons. During those turbulent years the poor guy's heart must have broken a hundred times because there was no clarity of direction. Yet he somehow kept finding joy. I love this man!

Even after Pope Innocent III gave him and the first friars permission to preach, Francis was constantly listening, discerning, changing and trying to understand what it meant to live the Gospel. As the fraternity was forced by the Church and by friars themselves to become more organized and institutionalized, he relinquished leadership of the entire Order six years before his death. An Italian scholar once told me he believes that Francis and his constant companion, Leo, pondered leaving the Order itself. The physical, spiritual and mental pains he suffered had to have caused deep, deep depression. That was the basis for the text of my oratorio, *Dialogue of Francis and Clare*. And yet Francis lived the Gospel with passion like few before him. He became a living crucifix and finished his majestic paean of creation, *Canticle of the Creatures*, during the final year of his life. He had changed and grown and followed the Lord so faithfully that he could see the unity of all God's creatures; he lived his message of peace and penance till his dying breath. He was, indeed, a model for all Christians to follow. Now probably the world's most beloved saint, Francesco Bernadone allowed Christ to transform him to such an extent that people experienced God. And millions still do. I love this man!

Fifty years in brown – something I never thought of that August 12, 1968. When I ponder these years I am only humbled. Why would God consider me worthy of such a role in life? I have crossed paths with thousands of people who reveal so much of God's tenderness. The artist in Francis and support of my parents and many friars brought me myriad chances to meet and perform with remarkably talented artists. The Franciscan

family continues to reveal God's power and grace operative in a world that, on close inspection, doesn't differ from the violent world in which Francis grew up and lived in so beautifully. As a Messenger of Peace, he lives on in the hearts of us Franciscans. And that is the one constant that has helped me overcome dark days and walk with joy in my heart – the brothers. I often tell people that if you want to find out what your relationship with God is really like, consider how you relate with other people.

I simply would not be who I am today without my brothers; that is the greatest gift we give each other and those we serve. One of the greatest statements about the friars I ever heard came from a lady who was part of some friar celebration somewhere (you know how they all fade together). She observed us during the evening and said: "You guys really love each other." Indeed. Our founder showed us how to do that so beautifully, so simply.

This article has turned out to be all about me, which I don't prefer to do but I felt it necessary to express my gratitude to God and so many people for the rich blessings of these past 50 years. I've only been a priest 39 years but this Jubilee is much more important because our vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are the foundation of our life.

Sr. Kay Frances Berger, osf
I've made many mistakes as a friar and ask forgiveness from God and people. I will continue to discern and change as best I can in the footsteps of Francis. As Sr. Kay's watercolor of Francesco depicts – I fall on my knees in gratitude to the Most High, all-powerful, all good Lord for such a life as ours. When I reflect on those days in childhood when I saw happy friars – that was the Lord calling me to follow. So thanks, guys, for bringing me into the fold. I am still very happy! Memories are good but I believe the most vibrant part of life is today and what God is doing in me/us now. Whatever lies ahead I willingly accept.

Thank you for supporting our Franciscan ministry at St. Peter's in so many ways. May God



give you peace and happiness always!

Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm