



Franciscan Vocation Ministry

"O Most High, Glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me a right faith, a certain hope and a perfect love, insight and wisdom, O Lord, that I may carry out your holy and true command." — St. Francis of Assisi, Prayer before the Cross



Merry Christmas!

Dear friends,

Christmas is a time when we rejoice in Emmanuel: God with us! As John the Evangelist proclaims, "The Word became Flesh and dwelt among us."

St. Francis was literally in awe of the Incarnation: that God would share in every aspect of our frail humanity. What deeply moved Francis was that God came not in power and might, but in the form of a poor, helpless infant born into poverty. Christmas is a time for us to rejoice with the shepherds who witnessed that first Christmas morning that God indeed is among us. And God among us means that all humanity, indeed all creation, is graced by the Incarnation.

As Franciscans, Christmas is a reminder that we are called to be bearers of that great message with great hope and joy. We are called to work for love, peace and justice among all peoples, and to be good stewards of the creation with which God has entrusted us. We are called to "heal wounds, to unite what has fallen apart, and to bring back those who have lost their way." That is the essence of what St. Francis believed and lived out with great joy.

As I begin my new journey as Vocation Director for the Franciscan Friars of Holy Name Province, I cannot help but reflect on the importance of that message today. As Christians, we are called to be bearers of hope to a hurting world. I can think of no better way to do that than to continue to live out my

Franciscan life and ministry in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, and to invite others to join me. I invite you to consider whether God is calling you to the Franciscan way of life.

As you gaze upon the Christmas crèche during this most holy season of the year, ask the Lord to fill your heart with the same peace and joy that Francis experienced as he reflected on that first Christmas morning. And pray for the courage and wisdom to respond to God's call.

In this Christmas edition of *Insight and Wisdom*, Fr. Stephen Lynch, OFM, shares his reflections about St. Francis and Christmas. Our recent Franciscan Experience Weekend in the Bronx, NY, is also featured in this issue. Meet some special guests who came to deepen their discernment of God's call to them. And please note the list of our upcoming Franciscan Hospitality Weekends. Why not come and join us for some great Franciscan hospitality? Pictured above are some of our brothers who attended a recent provincial gathering at Siena College in Loudonville, NY.

May God bless you abundantly during this Christmas season!

Fr. Brian Smail, OFM

Fr. Brian Smail, OFM
Vocation Director

St. Francis and the Christmas Crèche

By Fr. Stephen Lynch, OFM

When I was growing up in New Britain, CT, Christmas always had a very special meaning for our family. The Christmas tree and the manger scene personified the Lynch family Christmas.

I decided to join the Franciscan Order in 1946, after finishing my World War II military service, as I had hoped to become a missionary. At the time, I knew very little about St. Francis of Assisi except the fact that Christmas had a special place in his heart, as it did in the hearts of the Lynch family members. The more I studied the life of St. Francis, the more I began to see the role the birth of Jesus Christ played in terms of Francis' personal spirituality.

I have now been a Franciscan for more than 50 years, and I am amazed at how deeply the birth and death of Jesus Christ have affected my own spirituality. So, this Christmas of 2007 seems as good a time as any to share some thoughts on a Franciscan view of the Christmas story. But first, a brief history of the birth story of Jesus Christ...

The historical celebration of the Feast of Christmas took place after the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century. At the time of the winter solstice, the pagans celebrated the Mythic festival of the birthday of the invincible sun-god. This occurred on Dec. 25 in the Julian calendar and on Jan. 6 in the Egyptian calendar. When Constantine converted to Christianity, he promoted the Christian religion throughout the Roman Empire. To counter worship of the pagan gods in favor of Jesus Christ, he established a festival emphasizing the incarnation of Jesus by uniting the December celebration of the birthday of the Roman sun-god with the birthday of Jesus Christ.

St. Augustine developed the basic content of the Feast of Christmas during the fifth century. His theology focused on Christmas as a remembrance of the historical event of the mystery of the Incarnation.

St. Francis of Assisi, on the other hand, emphasized the humanity of Christ's birth. In fact, the origin of the Christmas crèche rests with St. Francis. In his book, *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, St. Bonaventure (d. 1274) tells us, "In the year 1223, St. Francis, a deacon, was visiting the town of Greccio to cele-

brate Christmas. Greccio was a small town built on a mountain-side overlooking a beautiful valley. It happened in the third year before his death, that in order to excite the inhabitants of Greccio to commemorate the nativity of the Babe of Bethlehem with great devotion, St. Francis determined to celebrate it with all possible solemnity."

After obtaining the permission of the sovereign pontiff, St.

Francis recreated the manger scene in a cave in the hills above Greccio. He prepared a manger, and brought hay and an ox and a donkey. Summoning the people, Francis read the Gospel and preached about the birth in poverty of the Babe of Bethlehem.

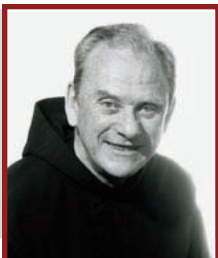
St. Francis' spirituality, as well as the spirituality of the Franciscans, is very much reflected in the crèche. The concrete form of the manger, with live people and animals, underscores the humanity of the Christmas story. St. Francis never forgot that the wood of the manger that held the Infant Jesus would one day give way to the wood of the cross.

The crèche also emphasizes the humility of the Incarnation. Francis insisted that God's family consists of both the haves and the have-nots of this world, both the powerful and the weak, both the social insiders and the social outsiders. The Wise Men represented the non-Jewish outsiders; the shepherds represented the Jewish have-nots. Shepherds were thought of as belonging to the inferior, poor, downtrodden class of Jews, who had no legal standing as witnesses in any Jewish court; neither did the Wise Men, as they were foreigners. The message of Christmas makes it clear that in God's

sight there are no outsiders.

Finally, the scene depicted in the crèche captures the stillness and tranquility of Christmas in the tradition of Psalm 46, "Be still and know that I am God." St. Francis of Assisi in particular, and the Franciscans in general, personify this spirituality.

After Francis' death in 1226, the custom of having the crib at Christmas spread widely throughout Europe. Its effect is still evident today.



Fr. Stephen Lynch, OFM, is Director of Evangelization at St. Francis Chapel and City Ministry Center in Providence, RI. He also serves as chaplain of the St. Thomas More Society of Rhode Island through which he ministers to lawyers and judges. Fr. Stephen, who has served at St. Anthony Shrine in Boston as well as at Siena College near Albany, NY, and at the Catholic Center at the University of South Carolina, has spent most of his Franciscan life as a missionary in Japan.

Special Guests at Franciscan Experience Weekend

Two men, Brian from Delaware and Gerald from Pennsylvania, were special guests this fall at Holy Cross Friary in the Bronx, NY, for a Franciscan Experience Weekend (FEW). The weekend was a time to enjoy some Franciscan hospitality, fraternity, prayer, conversation, and a sharing of stories. Guests who attend these weekends have usually already attended a Franciscan Hospitality Weekend.

The friars at Holy Cross Friary are always very welcoming. Fr. Ronald Pecci, OFM, Postulant Director, and Br. William Herbst, OFM, Assistant Postulant Director, greeted the guests upon arrival Friday afternoon. Brian and Gerald had the pleasure of meeting Jeffery Jordan and William Long, Holy Name's two postulants in the Bronx. Jeffery and William shared experiences of their first year of Franciscan life.

FEWs are a way for the guests and the friars to get to know one another. Several friars from various locations of Holy Name Province attended the Bronx weekend and shared their personal Franciscan journeys with Brian and Gerald. Among them was Br. Dan Horan, OFM, a first-year student in theological studies at the Washington Theological Union. Dan offered a perspective on his journey from undergraduate student at St. Bonaventure University to his profession of simple vows with the Franciscans last summer.

Also attending the weekend were Fr. Brian Smail, OFM, the new Vocation Director, as well as Fr. Gene Pistacchio, OFM, and Fr. Bill Beaudin, OFM, who serve as Regional Vocation Directors in Boston and at Siena College, respectively. Brian and Gerald met individually with several of the friars to deepen their discernment to Franciscan life.

Saturday afternoons during the FEW program offer participants an opportunity to explore New York City and visit Franciscan ministry sites. Postulants Jeffery and William took Brian and Gerald to All Saints Parish in Harlem to meet the friars and learn about their ministries.

This weekend provided a wonderful time for friars to share their Franciscan journeys with men who are discerning a call to the friars' way of life.

For those interested in a similar gathering, consider joining the friars at the Hospitality Weekend at Holy Name College in Silver Spring, MD, the weekend of Feb. 8-10, 2008.



Above, Vocation Director Fr. Brian Smail, OFM, and Gerald, a guest, share a moment with postulant Jeffery Jordan, center.

Right, Br. Dan Horan, OFM, describes his Franciscan vocation journey.



Below, Gerald, left, with Br. Dan Horan, OFM, Fr. Gene Pistacchio, OFM, and Fr. Brian Smail, OFM, pose in front of statue of St. Anthony.



At left, Brothers Dan Sulmasy, OFM, and Glenn Humphrey, OFM, host guests Brian and Gerald at All Saints Church in New York City.



Above, Fr. Bill Beaudin, OFM, describes his path to a Franciscan vocation.



Pax et Bonum

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Upcoming Vocation Weekends

Jan. 18-20, 2008

Franciscan Experience Weekend
Holy Cross Friary; Bronx, NY

Feb. 8-10, 2008

Hospitality Weekend
Holy Name College; Silver Spring, MD

March 20-23, 2008

Holy Triduum & Easter with the Franciscans
Holy Name College; Silver Spring, MD

April 11-13, 2008

Franciscan Experience Weekend
Holy Cross Friary; Bronx, NY

April 25-27, 2008

Discernment Retreat
Holy Peace Friary & Mt. Irenaeus Franciscan Retreat
West Clarksville; NY