

ASSISI COMMUNITY

– A NEW FORM OF RELIGIOUS LIFE?

By Brother Joe Nagle

Twenty one years ago I approached my Franciscan superior to ask if I could join a group of principally lay women and men to start a community in Washington, DC. For a year before I had met with this group on a bi-weekly basis to discuss such a venture and now three of them planned to find a house and begin.

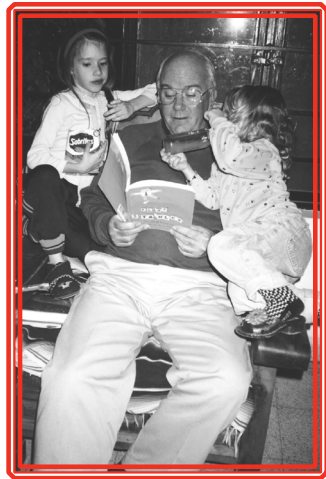
My superior gave me what I considered a very affirming and truly Spirit-filled answer. He said that these new forms of community might be the future of religious life—or they might not be. But we won't know unless we try them, he told me, so go ahead with the group and “stay in touch.” A few months later, on October 4, 1986, a religious sister, a lay man, a lay woman and I walked up the steps of our newly rented house in a gritty section of Washington's inner city and began the Assisi Community. The name we chose was not due to my presence in the group. Rather the group had decided that as community we would try to live out the charism of Francis and Clare of Assisi.

Foundations

From the beginning we claimed two foundational pillars for the community, values which we had decided on during the discussion period prior to setting out on this new venture: simplicity of life style and work for social change. It was our intention to “walk lightly on the earth,” as one of the founding members put it, and not use more resources than necessary. So our life style choices from the beginning included practices like meatless meals, shared automobiles and attention to our ecological surroundings. Every member of the community would engage in work for the betterment of the world.

In addition, from the first, we gathered to pray for half an hour the morning, held a community meeting once each week and to made our decisions through consensus processes. We never had an authority figure among us, but allowed leadership to emerge as situations warranted. All the household chores were shared and we paid our own way through each member's monthly contribution to the common fund. We never, however, asked anyone for more than his or her share of community expenses. What each one did with excess monies would be the person's own business. Finally, we decided not to draw up any house rules but "make that road by walking it"—putting rules in place as needed.

About six weeks after we walked into our community house a Salvadoran refugee family of mother, father and five young children appeared, one cold evening, at our doorstep and asked for hospitality. They had recently arrived from their country and had no place to stay. It was, as they say, a "no-brainer." We welcomed them, gave them the top floor of our house and began what turned out to be a ten-year relationship with these wonderful, hard working Latinos. That connection also furthered contacts with Central America which several of our community members had forged through their concerns about U.S. policies toward El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala. Our household became bi-lingual and bi-cultural.



Brother Joe Nagel with Assisi Community children.

Within a year, we had expanded to a second house and counted fifteen in our number—not counting our Salvadoran guests. New people came to us by word of mouth; indeed until today we've never solicited membership. At any time we have a waiting list of people interested in joining us but for whom there is as yet no

room in our households.

Someone recently counted some fifty or sixty women and men who have lived as members of the Assisi Community over these twenty-one years. Generally speaking, younger people have tended to stay for two to three years before moving on to other life experiences, while older members have remained longer. At the moment two of us “founders” continue to live in the community, while another counts fifteen years there, and still another twelve. This combination of relatively short-term and more lengthy stays has given Assisi both dynamism and stability which we see as blessings. To varying degrees our former “assisiites,” whom we call “the diaspora” remain in contact with the community. We have tried to keep them in touch with our life by means of a periodic newsletter.

Results

Now two-plus decades into this experience we can tentatively say that the venture has proven successful—tentatively, because it’s clear that Assisi continues to be a “work in progress.”

The community-building effort required for such an undertaking never ceases.



The Assisi Community singing together.

We began, as mentioned, as a decidedly mission-oriented community. Social change stood at the forefront of our reason for being and each member worked in her or his own way at bringing about structural justice. One of us, for example, held a staff position at a Guatemalan human rights office; another became a principal part of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns in Washington; I served as Justice and Peace director for the Conference of Major Superiors. To this day everyone goes out each morning to jobs such as these to do what we can about improving

the world in which we find ourselves.

In the course of time, however, new tasks began to emerge for us. Inevitably people with emotional problems joined us and the community's energies became increasingly directed to what might be called a "therapeutic" agenda. Not that we dispensed with our work on behalf of structural change, but a sense of love and compassion made it necessary to care for those who found themselves psychologically unable to give full attention to areas like human rights, poverty, international violence.



Sharing time and talents in an intentional community—Assisi.

In the last several years, we've found that the community has become more loosely knit, with some members engaging irregularly in our daily communal life. This situation has come about because of the intense workload several of us have taken on, complete with frequent out-of-town travel. In addition, we have seen what we could call "satellite" members emerge—individuals, and at least one family unit, who live away from our now three houses, but who relate on a fairly regular basis to the life of Assisi.

While our overriding experience has been of people sincerely interested in living together in the spirit of Francis and Clare of Assisi, we have made some mistakes over time, accepting one or two individuals who were not meant for that sort of communal intentionality. Those experiences have served as a warning to us that not everyone is fit for the kind of life we embrace and we are now ever-so-much more careful in our acceptance policies.

Prayer life

One constant throughout the history of the Assisi Community is our style of prayer. From the beginning we have gathered

early each morning either to pray the Scriptures of the day or the celebrate Eucharist. Either way, our reflections and celebrations are done quite literally with the Bible in one hand and the daily newspapers in the other. Most of us glance at the New York Times and the Washington Post on our dining room table before entering the living room for morning prayer. Throughout the half hour of scriptural reflection or Mass the realities of our contemporary world impact these “solid moments before God”. Our thirty minutes of prayer each morning invariably produce shared insights which inform the rest of our day.

Shadow

One cannot write the story of Assisi without mentioning Shadow, the dog we bought from a pound in Washington early in our history. This little ball of black fur, which covered not only his body but most of his face as well, quickly became our mascot, friend, a sometimes challenge and clearly a symbol of who we were and are. He had an uncanny sense of his surroundings. For example, when we celebrated Eucharist as we do twice or three times weekly in our living room, Shadow seemed to know that something very special was taking place and would lie quietly under the table which serves as our altar. At the sign of peace he would move from person to person, receiving his pat on the head as the rest of us embraced each other. On the rare occasions when a community member took sick (we have enjoyed remarkably good health, due perhaps to our simple diet and life-style), Shadow would invariably spend hours lying outside the sick room as a kind of guardian angel for the person in bed. Two years ago we had to euthanize Shadow who was then in his fifteenth or sixteenth year with us. The decision to do this was wrenching and carrying it out felt like a death in the family—which of course it was. Five of us went to the veterinarian and stood with this faithful little creature as the lethal injection was administered. We have not brought ourselves as yet to look for another dog.

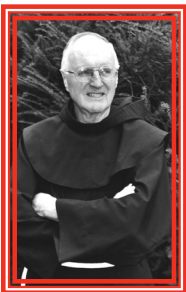
New Form of Religious Life?

When he gave me permission to join Assisi, my provincial superior

speculated as to whether communities like Assisi might be the future of religious life. After twenty-one years I ask myself the same question and cannot as yet formulate an answer. As noted our members are for the most part lay women and men, married and single. We have had only six vowed persons join us over the years. From that standpoint Assisi is clearly not a religious house in the traditional sense of the word. What is more, our spirituality is decidedly secular, with a major focus on the world and its needs. We have no structures in the sense that religious congregations have them, complete with leadership authority, rules of life and accountability to Church hierarchy.

Still, a recent social visit to our community by one of our Franciscan vocation directors proved revealing to me. This friar came and spent a pleasant evening with us. As he took leave, he asked me privately: “what makes these people tick?” In other words, what motivates this group of lay folks to live a simple, even ascetical, and really challenging life in this run down inner city neighborhood? I took from this brother’s question that he was comparing our members to those who approach vowed religious life these days and finding our community equally as, if not more impressive than candidates for our Order.

Perhaps experiences like the Assisi Community, which by now surely has passed the stage of experiment, will become the religious life of the future. Be that as it may, I believe my superior was right on the money when he followed his own question about this by stating: “we’ll never know unless we try it.” At Assisi we continue to try it.



Brother Joe Nagel, OFM, continues to live and work in the Assisi Community he helped found in Washington, DC. He may be reached through **The Way**.