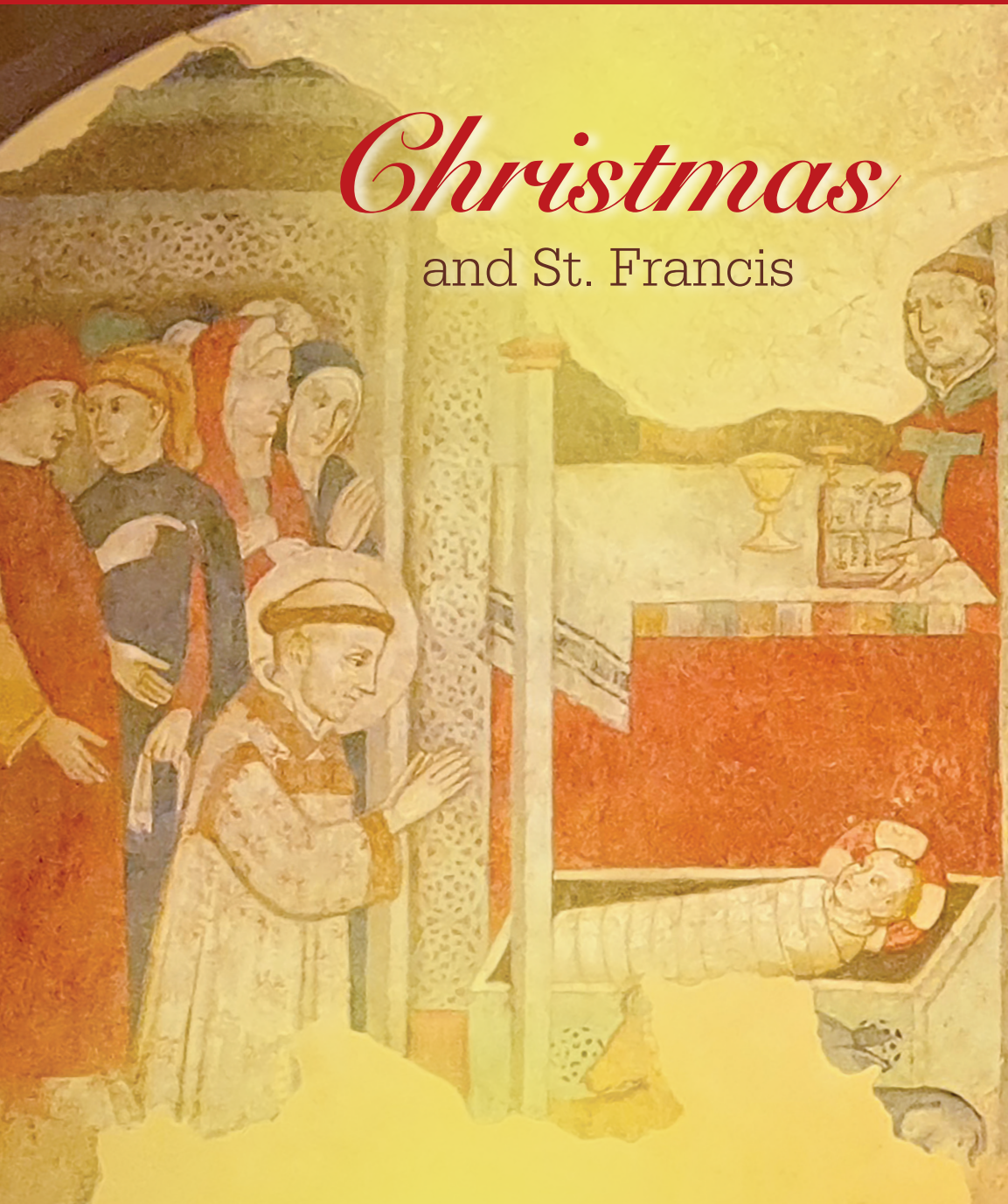


The Way

of St. Francis

Christmas

and St. Francis



Prayer, Fraternity, Joy, Service

The Franciscan Friars of the Province of Saint Barbara are members of a Roman Catholic religious order, from a diversity of backgrounds and cultures, dedicated to serving the poor and promoting justice, peace, care of creation, and reconciliation in the joyful and prophetic spirit of St. Francis of Assisi.

★ ★ ★

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This scene from the shrine at Greccio, Italy, depicts the source of modern crèches: St. Francis' reenactment of the Nativity. He wanted everyone to know, even in the darkest times, that God became one of us in Jesus.

Photo: Pietro, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

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A Saint for Our Time

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dear friends

Peace & all good!

At the beginning, when St. Francis heard his calling, he immediately went to the powerless, to the lepers living in isolation. His awareness had been growing through prayer and experience. Now he could see clearly—his community was in crisis, ignoring the heart of the Gospel, in a sense hiding in security.



We are in a crisis today, one caused by many inequalities brought to the fore by the immediate, universal threat of COVID-19. Like St. Francis, we are called beyond ourselves.

As Minister Provincial of St. Barbara Province, I know that my calling, my duty during my time of leadership, is to care for our friars, who, like you, live in some degree of isolation. Many are older, living in community with the support of their Franciscan brothers. I spend a lot of time on Zoom, staying in touch with my brothers, checking in on them, supporting them. And I spend a lot of time problem solving, protecting our ministries' survival, with the critical support of our lay staff and Provincial leadership. You can read about some of those efforts in this issue.

I have to remind our friars to take care of themselves. Their ministries are in dining rooms for those who need food support, in parishes serving people's everyday needs to witness the Gospel in their families and communities, operating our retreat centers where people from everywhere long for open air and peaceful prayer.

We friars are praying for each of you who receive this magazine, who support our ministries. Please take care. Be safe. And be creative as you find new and quieter ways to celebrate the coming holidays.

God bless,

Fr. David Gaa, OFM

Minister Provincial, Province of St. Barbara

by the way



Photo: Bradley Tuel, OFM

Advent series: Hope, Faith, Joy, & Peace

Tuesdays: 11/24 & 12/1,8,15
(11am-12:30pm PST)

Online Retreat
(via Zoom video conference)
San Damiano Retreat
Danville, CA

Jan Stegner, MTS, MMC

We will be talking about the Four Sunday themes of Advent: HOPE, FAITH, JOY, and PEACE.

We will talk about the spiritual women mentioned in each week and reflect on how that particular woman exemplifies those virtues and qualities.

Nov. 24: HOPE & Sister Helen Prejean. Dec. 1: FAITH and Sister Josephine Bakhita. Dec. 8: JOY & Julian of Norwich. Dec. 5: PEACE & Mother Teresa.

More information:

sandamiano.org
(925) 837-9141

Eternal Cycles of Nature: Advent

(via Zoom video conference)
12/3 (9:30am-12pm PST)

San Damiano Retreat
Danville, CA

Sr. Celeste Crine, OSF

It is easy to forget time and even what is happening beyond the stress of the virus. The seasons of nature remain faithful to their cycles of moving forward.

Gift yourself with part of a day to pause and join others in listening to what nature offers for nourishment of spirit and refreshment of life.

More information:

sandamiano.org
(925) 837-9141

Emmaus Retreat for Grieving Parents

12/4-6

Franciscan Renewal Center
Scottsdale, AZ

Marianne Gouveia & Gregory Eckerman

EMFGP (EMMAUS Ministry For Grieving Parents) is a unique ministry that serves the spiritual needs of grieving parents whose children of any age have died by any cause, no matter how long ago. We focus on the promise of eternal life and the rich teachings of our faith to help these terribly broken parents.

More information:

thecasa.org
(480) 948-7460

First Days of Recollection
(via Zoom video conference)

12/4 (9am-noon PST)

San Damiano Retreat
Danville, CA

Fr. Charlie Smiech, OFM

Prepare for Christmas by

journeying into your "Inner Self" to create room for the Christ Child to be born again within you. Take a step back from the pressing concerns of everyday life and reflect prayerfully on the current state of your relationship with God.

More information:

sandamiano.org
(925) 837-9141

Advent Retreat
(in-person or online)
12/5 (9am-3pm PST)

Mission San Luis Rey Retreat
Oceanside, CA

Vince Mesi, OFM

Join us for this Day of Recollection including talks by Fr. Vince Mesi and group discussions on "Why Advent?" "The Meaning of Christmas" and "The O Antiphons." Personal reflection time and lunch are included. The day will conclude with Mass celebrated by Fr. Vince in the St. Clare Chapel.

More Information:

sanluisrey.org
(760) 757-3651

Introduction To Centering Prayer

(via Zoom video conference)
12/12 (9am-1pm)

Franciscan Renewal Center
Scottsdale, AZ

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along the way

'Lord, Save Us!'

By Dan Lackie, OFM

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

This passage from Matthew's Gospel (14:28) should be a moment of pause for each of us Christians, as surely it was for St. Francis. What has happened in the Scripture? Jesus has instructed his apostles to head onto the waters. ("Jesus made them get into a boat.") The weather changes and Peter does something, boldly asking Jesus for a quick lesson on how to walk on water. Jesus obliges, Peter sinks, and Jesus helps him back in the boat with his friends. Their transformation has begun. Their eyes are opened to recognize the Son of God.

As I write this, I feel the waves roiling around our Church: anger and urgent demands around the pandemic, political polarization and racial inequity, and bitter questions along St. Junípero Serra's path of Spanish colonialism. As our boat is jolted on rough seas, I invite you to pick up a tool from Franciscan theolo-



Photo: Currier & Ives via Wikimedia Commons



Photo: John Feister

gian Father Michael Blasic: a Franciscan lens.

Through a Franciscan lens, what would Francis see? What do *you* see? Where are the gifts God is giving us? What are we doing with those gifts? What might our transformation look like? As you look out from our dangerously careening boat, what do you spot nearby, and on the horizon?

The world we inhabit today is in a political, economic, and social frenzy—all quite confusing. How do we understand it? In another passage, in the parable of the hidden treasure (Mt 13:44), Jesus invites each of us to imagine that in the middle of the field of frenzy there's a buried treasure—the very life of God. Give it your all! Elsewhere he promises a catch of fish he'll help us sort if we dare to throw a net "into the deep" (Lk 5:4).

Now, am I willing to go along on God's crazy treasure hunt or join this

continued on page 29

Jesus invites us to cast aside fear, to risk love. We will lose confidence again and again; Jesus will always outstretch his saving hand.

donor profile

Mustard-seed Faith

By Joe Ledbetter

"I would let the Lord lead my footsteps and he would lead me to a house." That's Cindy Tremblay-Shipway, retired wound care and incontinence nurse-specialist, speaking. Her work took her into people's homes to care for wounds that doctors could not heal. "I would knock on the door and people would say 'Oh my God, I asked God for help!' And I would say, 'Well here I am,'" Cindy shares.

Cindy is deeply spiritual, a devout Catholic. "All you must do is tell him you're available and he will use you mightily.

"I have great faith, but the Lord has given me special experiences that have increased my faith tremendously," Cindy reflects. After she retired, Cindy's husband passed away. "When you lose a spouse, you feel lost. At least in my experience, it takes a good 18 months before Jesus can find you again." And Jesus did find her again, giving her a new purpose in life, "even if all I have to contribute is saying dozens of rosaries here in my home."

Cindy believes the Lord put many rewarding opportunities in front of her. She started a holy-card mission, handing out thousands of cards a year. She also started a child-safe rosary mission. But her true godsend was meeting Franciscan Brother Victor Vega. Brother Victor was taking classes at Holy Names University in Oakland. English is not his native language, so he needed help with his papers. A mutual friend mentioned this to Cindy, and she invited him to her home for private tutoring. It was during that first meeting that Brother Victor



Photo Courtesy of Cindy Tremblay-Shipway

It is a small world, Cindy and Brother Victor learned at the Magic Kingdom. She's helping him fulfill his dream of building a church in his Mexican hometown.

shared his desire to build a church in his hometown in Mexico. "It was still just a dream at the time," Cindy says. "He was so passionate about it. I believed in his church and I wanted to be part of it. So, I wrote him a check that day."

A friendship quickly developed between Brother Victor and Cindy. They continued to work on his papers at Cindy's home until she suddenly fell ill, then was in a coma. Brother Victor regularly came to visit and pray over her at the hospital. "I was totally and completely out of my mind, and Victor will attest to that!" Cindy laughs as she recalls. "But the Lord gave me another miracle and I bounced back."

She continues to support Brother Victor's church project. "I can't explain it, but God knows what's going to be meaningful to each one of his creatures, and it's very meaningful to me to participate in this," Cindy says. "I was so excited when I took Victor to Disneyland and he looked at the it's a Small World ride. He said, 'Oh, I'm going to have the church white and gold just like it's a Small World.' And I felt, *Thank you, Jesus. I got to witness that right here in Disneyland.*"

If you would like to join Cindy in helping Brother Victor's, contact Joe Ledbetter, Director of Development and Communications for our Province: jledbetter@sbofm.org or (510) 536-3722, ext. 109.

snapshot



San Francisco's St. Anthony Foundation, the social service ministry whose centerpiece is St. Anthony Dining Room, celebrated 70 years with a pet blessing and outdoor event on the feast of St. Francis.



Revisiting the Serra Statues

BY ROBERT M. SENKEWICZ

Readers of this magazine are well aware that the movement earlier this year to remove Confederate statues soon broadened into an attack upon statues deemed to represent colonialism and oppression. Statues of Junípero Serra were vandalized and torn down in a number of places, including Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, again in Sacramento, in Los Angeles, more recently in San Rafael.

In the context of reflecting upon some questions that have undergird these activities, I offer a few reflections in a Franciscan spirit of humility and understanding.



Burkhard Mücke, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

When and why were the statues put up?

They were put up in two waves. The large statues in public places generally date from the Spanish Revival movement of the early 20th century. In this era California's mission past was romanticized and simplified into a tale of selfless, heroic missionaries and happy, baptized indigenous people. Largely because he was the only person who already had a full-fledged biography written about him, Serra became the symbol of the entire pre-US Hispanic era.

The smaller statues in front of missions and other Catholic institutions were put up in the early 1990s. They were funded by a prominent Southern California Catholic layman to celebrate Serra's beatification and lay the groundwork for his canonization.

By the 1990s, a revisionist view of the missions emerged. It drew on widespread national efforts to compose more

Statues of St. Junípero up and down the coast, such as this now-toppled at Golden Gate Park, became a symbol of something far beyond Serra.





PHOTO: ST. PAULINE FACEBOOK

This defiled and toppled statue of St. Serra at San Rafael is a horrific statement of our violent time. Moving statues out of public view for now, to promote peace, is one option.

inclusive historical narratives, often moving to the foreground groups that had been marginalized in previous interpretations. This new view tended to regard the missions as elements of a vicious colonial system that deliberately oppressed and killed indigenous peoples.

An accurate view would recognize that both the romantic and revisionist interpretations were incomplete.

Was Serra a participant in a colonial system of oppression?

Like every person of European descent in the Americas after 1492, he was certainly a part of a colonial system. But it's important to understand that not all colonial systems were the same and that there are also variations within individual systems. In the Spanish system, the missions developed as a reaction to the widespread cruelty of the conquistadors during the 1500s. Drawing on the work of Bartolomé de las Casas, members of religious orders tried to create spaces in which indigenous people could be protected from the oppressive behavior of the successors of the original *conquistadores*. Indigenous life in Spanish

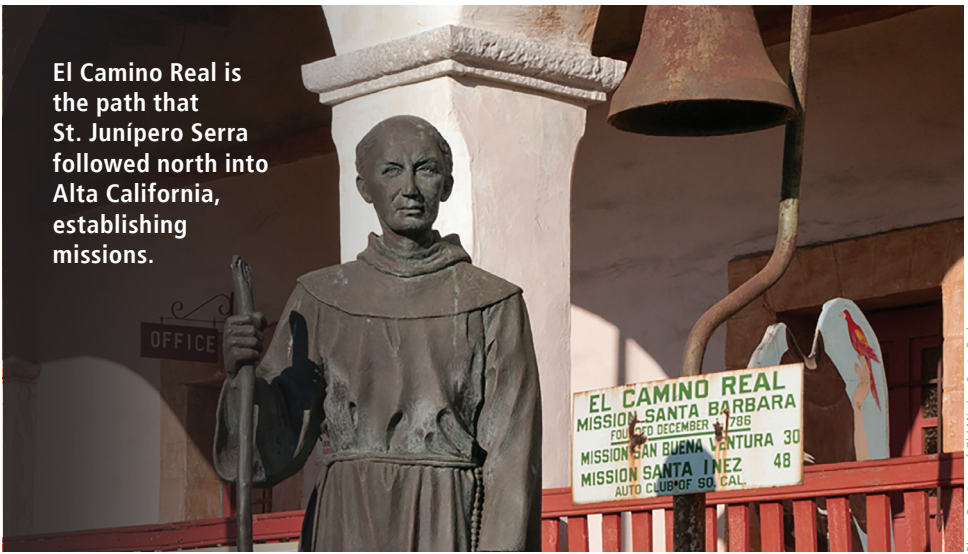
America at haciendas, sugar plantations, and silver mines was clearly brutal. The mission system, while far from perfect, attempted to convert people and to protect them from being worked to death so that eventually they could become productive and land-owning citizens of the empire.

Was the missionary view that they were protectors of the indigenous people justified?

By and large, yes. This is not to say that all the missionaries were equally committed to this project. Some of them did treat the Indians poorly and in many cases the missions were built upon a dynamic of coercion. Also, the fashion in which the indigenous people were forced to live close together in the mission communities meant that diseases to which the natives of the Americas had not developed immunities rapidly spread. In all the California missions, death rate consistently exceeded birth rate. Population declined tremendously.

One of the things that annoyed the other colonial personnel in California was the missionaries' constant insistence

El Camino Real is the path that St. Junipero Serra followed north into Alta California, establishing missions.



that the true owners of the land were the indigenous people. The missionaries looked on with horror as the mission lands were turned into private ranchos in the 1830s. The owners of these ranchos consistently organized raiding parties into the Central Valley to gather a forced labor supply consisting of indigenous people who had never entered the missions.

How did Serra and other missionaries attempt to evangelize California's indigenous peoples?

They attempted to learn as much as they could about the indigenous religions, beliefs, and folkways so that they could present the Gospel in a way that would be understandable to the indigenous communities in the region. Serra, at the beginning of the missionary project, definitely believed that missions ought

to be communities that would voluntarily attract indigenous people who could then freely “taste and see” (Psalm 34) the joy of the Christian message. Missionaries often tried to learn indigenous languages and understand indigenous customs.

It is not easy to understand the motives of all the indigenous people who became Catholics. Some hoped that the priest might be able to cure their children of various diseases. Others found themselves afflicted by hunger because the animal herds introduced by the Spanish quickly trampled the fruits, berries, and nuts that had provided sustenance for generations. Whatever else the missions were, they were places that had food. And some undoubtedly were attracted by the missionaries and became committed members, and leaders, of the mission community.

Finally, it is crucial to realize that all of the California missions were overwhelmingly indigenous communities. There were two priests, a handful of soldiers, and hundreds or thousands of indigenous people. The drawings of mission life done by foreign visitors in the late 18th and early 19th centuries make this very clear. Also, the extensive correspon-

“Missions ought to be communities that would voluntarily attract indigenous people who could then freely ‘taste and see.’”

dence of the missionaries themselves underscored that they always realized that they were an infinitesimal minority of mission inhabitants.

How can the full picture of the missions be best presented today?

California missions became tourist destinations during the Spanish Revival era. Indeed, the mission bells that dot Highway 101 were originally placed there by the Automobile Club of Southern California, in an effort to promote that tourism. Accordingly, most mission museums were started during that period and those museums very much reflected the false romanticization of mission life that was current at that time.

A more complete picture must eliminate that romanticization and emphasize the indigenous presence.

A number of California missions, including the Franciscan-managed Mission

Santa Barbara and Mission San Luis Rey, have actively sought indigenous participation in reconceptualizing the mission museums and devising new ways in which the mission experience can be presented to visitors. Such collaboration is essential if the actual complexity of mission life is to be accurately represented.

And, to end where we began, wouldn't it be a great idea if some statues and representations of indigenous people, designed and executed by indigenous artists, joined the statues of Serra at the missions? I am confident that would please St. Junípero very much! ♦

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Robert M. Senkewicz is Professor of History Emeritus at Santa Clara University. Together with Rose Marie Beebe he is the author of Junípero Serra: California, Indians, and the Transformation of a Missionary.



A Franciscan Response



When the Serra statues fell under attack this past summer, *National Catholic Reporter's* Sarah Salvadore talked to Franciscan experts around the country to get reactions. Two whom she talked to are Franciscan Ministers Provincial Father Jack Clark Robinson, of Our Lady of Guadalupe Province in Albuquerque, and our own Father David Gaa.

Both friars agree that there is a considerable rewriting of history going on in the evaluation of St. Jun pero Serra. Robinson told *NCR* that Serra "has become a very convenient symbol of all the evils of colonization, imperial expansionism and the evils of racism." Gaa observed that the offensives were over a time that far exceeds Serra's, and said to Salvadore, "When talking about removing the statues from public lands, I don't think it has much to do with Serra" (see the accompanying article).

Nonetheless, said Father Gaa to *NCR*, the Franciscans ought to "be part of the healing process, and not a barrier. And in that way, if the statues are a barrier to dialogue and conversation publicly, I have no problem with them being moved."

—J.F.

on the cover

Christmas and St. Francis

BY MURRAY BODO, OFM

This scene from the shrine at Greccio, Italy, depicts the source of modern crèches: St. Francis' dramatic reenactment of the Nativity.

The modern-day Christmas crèche helps tell the story of the Incarnation: how God would become one of us, blessing everyone human and indeed all of creation, perhaps the deepest insight of St. Francis.



Photo: University of Dayton Marian Library

Many of us know that the Christmas crèche custom has its roots among the Franciscans. It started outside the town of Greccio, Italy, near a place St. Francis went to pray. A dramatist himself, Francis decided that year, 1223, to celebrate Christmas in a new way. He wanted the people of this little town to enact mystery.

Francis was taken with the fact of the Incarnation. He saw that the humility of the Incarnation—that God would become a little baby who needs our help—is linked with the charity and the love of the Passion. Becoming human means there’s going to be suffering and death. Francis was overwhelmed that God would do this for us.

He wanted people to feel how God is becoming Incarnate in every Mass. So, in the spirit of the mystery plays of his day, he staged a Christmas Mass with live characters. There in the Eucharist, Christ would be born. There was no empty crib; Christ would become present at the altar, a large rock in a shallow cave there on a hillside. A well-to-do friend of Francis, a man named John, arranged that husbands and wives brought their kids, their cows, their donkeys, perhaps some smaller animals. Francis’ biogra-

pher writes, “The night was filled with bright lights.” It was the torches held by those who had come to share Francis’ good news.

Himself a deacon, Francis gave the homily that night, tying it all together. Among the shadows, John reported even that he saw St. Francis picking up the child Jesus, as if waking him up. That would be the Christ Child, constantly awakening in our hearts.

In our own time this year we, too, can tie things together. What we’re going through now is really the Incarnation in its most dramatic face, the face of suffering. It seems as if the whole world is sick and dying. We are lonely. We long for an end to the pandemic. We are longing for rebirth, for Christmas. Perhaps we’re holding torches of light for each other? That is a point of prayer for each of us as we set up our nativity scenes.

.....
Father Murray Bodo, OFM, is a poet also known for his biographies of Francis, pilgrimages to Assisi, and retreats such as he gave in our Province recently. His books can be found at FranciscanMedia.org.

concerning care

We Still Need Retreats

BY PAT FANNING

St. Barbara Province is known for its retreat ministries. In some cases retreat centers developed around the old missions; in other places they simply were natural responses of local Franciscans to the spiritual needs of the community. In each case, they became peaceful, scenic settings of prayer, reflection, and renewal.

Currently there are five centers: one in Scottsdale, Arizona; the others in California along the Camino Real at San Luis Rey, Malibu, and San Juan Bautista, and also off the Camino at Danville.

In normal times, the centers altogether host thousands of retreatants per year, but we all know better this year of pandemic. In spite of the drastic cuts

in programs and attendance, though, the centers remain open, operating at a fraction of normal capacity.

“There are times when leaders must make decisions that go against the grain of prevailing wisdom,” says Stan Raggio, COO for the Province. Rather than encourage various ministries to close up shop and wait it out, early on Province leadership (the Definitorium) pledged to help them stay open as long as possible. They issued a prophetic call at the start of the pandemic to keep associates employed through at least the end of June to minimize disruption in their lives.

The pandemic closures, though, turned out not to be short-lived. “From March 17 until June 12 we were shut



Photo: St. Francis Retreat Center Facebook

St. Francis Retreat typically provides space for all manner of groups, including this one, “Sew Sistas,” a group of textile enthusiasts.

Even now, people can come to retreat centers, such as Old Mission San Luis Rey, here, to enjoy peace, quiet, open space—and a place to put difficult times into broader perspective.



Photo: Mission San Luis Rey Instagram

down” (by the state), says Tom Anderson, director of Serra Retreat, an idyllic spot overlooking the Pacific above Malibu. Retreat centers continued to keep staff employed through help from the federal Paycheck Protection Program.

As the economy staggered through the coming months, typical retreat-size gatherings were government-restricted everywhere. No retreats means no need for food services, cleaning services, or any other hospitality service. By the end of July, furloughs were the only option. Like so many service businesses, the skeleton staff remaining at each of the centers began scrambling to survive.

“It’s a hard call,” says Father Ken Laverone, OFM, director at St. Francis Center at San Juan Bautista, “but we have to be creative.”

Working Together

As everything began to change, retreat directors worked closely together to come up with creative ideas. Father Ken explains: “The five directors of the retreat centers, generally, every Wednesday have a Zoom [online conference] meeting. We talk for an hour or so about how things are going and how each place is doing it.” Spread over so many miles, and busy with thriving programs, the centers’ leadership never had

that kind of connection before.

“We’re all realizing that, you know, each is in a different situation. There are different regulations depending upon the [virus alert] status of the area. It’s hard to predict. But we learned we have to keep our head out of the sand and begin brainstorming.” The effect of this virus isn’t going away anytime soon.

One idea that came out of the weekly online meetings of directors was a jointly sponsored online retreat. “We’ve basically shared costs of a facilitator and

“By the end of July...the skeleton staff remaining at each of the centers began scrambling to find ways to survive.”

then we’ve marketed to our own groups for a retreat,” explains Kathryn Causee De Anda, director of hosted retreats at Old Mission San Luis Rey, in Oceanside. “One of those was Father Murray Bodo, OFM, in September.” He’s a widely known Franciscan author and spiritual guide, based at a sister Province in Cincinnati, Ohio. He presented, online, a series of live retreat talks to online

participants. “It’s basically a weekend retreat,” says De Anda. “All the retreat centers got registrations for individuals. Then we all pitched in towards the cost of the retreat. Then we also had Father Tom Weston do a recovery retreat for those in Alanon and recovery.

“The collaboration has been very nice, and very helpful and supportive too,” she adds. These centers are surviving with pretty isolated staff. “Being able to have even just a sounding board—that we can come to the group with an idea or thoughts and ask, ‘Hey, did this work for you?’ That’s been really one of the fruitful things that’s come out of this pandemic.”

It will be some time before these online retreats gain actually large participation, but it’s a start. The Casa in Scottsdale, Arizona, is out in front, with about 30 online participants attending a retreat with New York Friar André Cirino. The Bodo retreat was joined by about 20 participants in San Juan Bautista, and attendees elsewhere.

Father Joe Schwab, OFM, at The Casa, observes that it’s just not the same as being in person. “One presenter told me, ‘It’s a lot like going to a football game—you get a little more jazzed up in a room full of people!’ It’s good, but not *really* good.”

But it could be pointing to something

new and long-term says Alison Yount, acting director at San Damiano Retreat in Danville. “This new access format has allowed us to have a very robust retreat schedule while offering onsite individual/personal retreats,” she says. “Going forward we see a hybrid of Zoom and onsite being offered.”

Face-to-Face

During the pandemic, there have been other creative ways to pay some of the bills until things get back to normal. Some of the centers had some money in reserve for the unexpected, but it’s becoming depleted. The Province has also provided support to financially struggling retreat ministries.

More important, though, the centers have found ways to keep offering on-site services, although drastically modified. During the Santa Cruz area fires, for example, Red Cross used St. Francis Center at San Juan Bautista, says Father Ken: “Forty-five people were here for five days.” And San Damiano Retreat has offered a welcome respite to evacuees of the recent fires nearby.

Many retreat centers also have a tiny stream of individual retreatants, about 10 each month. “St. Francis retreat center, for example, has three cottages,” says Father Ken, “little houses that we also have been renting out for people



Photo: Mission San Luis Rey Facebook

There is lots of life in spite of the pandemic. On St. Francis Day Friar Peter Kirwin blesses drive-thru pets at Old Mission San Luis Rey.

Serra Retreat is a place of spiritual nourishment for Malibu and the surrounding area, even during the pandemic. Here a group meets for an outdoor presentation.



Photo: Serra Retreat Facebook

that want to come for private retreats. We don't provide meals; they have full kitchens."

He was also able to provide outdoor Sunday Masses in the center's amphitheater since mid-June. That was before indoor Masses were allowed, and continues as an outdoors alternative, ranging in attendance from about 25-45 people. These are small numbers.

"There are benches and chairs—we follow all the protocol that the diocese tells us we have to follow," says Father Ken.

Malibu's Serra Retreat was fortunate to host a group of Franciscan novices from another community as a pilot group for opening up to small, socially distanced retreats. "They already were in their own bubble," says Tom Anderson, meaning the novices were already like a family unit from the same household. "They showed up for a week, and they were very understanding. They're friars, so they kind of went with the flow, allowing us to fine-tune our protocols while they were here." From their point of view, it made a real difference for them to come to a real retreat center, Anderson adds.

He finds that to be important for everyone: "People really miss being on the property. It's the spiritual grounds they are looking for. It's not necessarily in a

large group; it might be just for personal retreats, or small groups seeing others going through the same struggle. Those are the people calling us."

The gift shops seem to be prospering, in spite of it all. Several of the retreats, including San Damiano, have redesigned their shops for social distancing, and maintain steady sales of much-needed spirituality resources.

Hanging On

Others among the five are also doing what they can with individuals and socially distanced groups. De Anda, at San Luis Rey, tells of finding ways to have programs outdoors and using some things indoors: "We're able to have a reduced capacity for the meeting rooms: 25%. So we've had some smaller groups. They were able to meet in our larger meeting rooms, and we have everyone set up six feet apart."

But Father Joe at The Casa and his business manager, Charlie Brown, offer a sobering note: retreat revenues are down about 95%. Brown gives a grim listing of attendees and finances. "Compared to last September, we've had an 88% reduction in people coming here." That includes a lot of outside groups who use the facility for various retreats

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A Saint for Troubled Times

BY WILLIAM SHORT, OFM



We are not the first generation to face a pandemic, or the first to confront wealth at the expense of the poor, or the first generation to struggle with racism. The 13th-century world of St. Francis, and his response to it, can shed light on each of these.

In Francis' day the deadly health threat came from leprosy, what we now call Hansen's disease. It started circulating in Asia, and travellers brought it back home with them. It soon started to spread, and the rate of infection began to climb, especially in urban areas.

Local governments had little to offer since there was no known cure for the illness, and no effective treatment. What they knew was that it was contagious, and isolating those infected was the one measure that seemed to stop the spread of the disease.

Local hospitals soon had trouble finding staff to care for the many people sick with this frightening disease.

People of extraordinary courage and kindness rose to the occasion, and put themselves at risk in order to care for the suffering. One of those courageous



Photo: ©www.peterjordanphoto.com

Father William Short teaches of Francis' conversion among lepers: "What had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body."



Photo: ©www.peterjordanphoto.com

It was the simple Cross at San Damiano that impelled St. Francis into the world, to live among the sick and poor, to encourage solidarity.

individuals caring for the sick was the young Francis of Assisi.

As we look back from our vantage point 800 years later, we understand that the infection was common among populations in the Middle East, where over centuries most people had become immune to the bacillus that causes Hansen's disease.

When the Crusades brought thousands of European Christians across the Mediterranean to regain control of Christian shrines in the Holy Land from Muslim occupation, they had no immunity to this disease. For centuries Hansen's disease had been nearly extinct in western Europe after the breakdown of the Roman Empire.

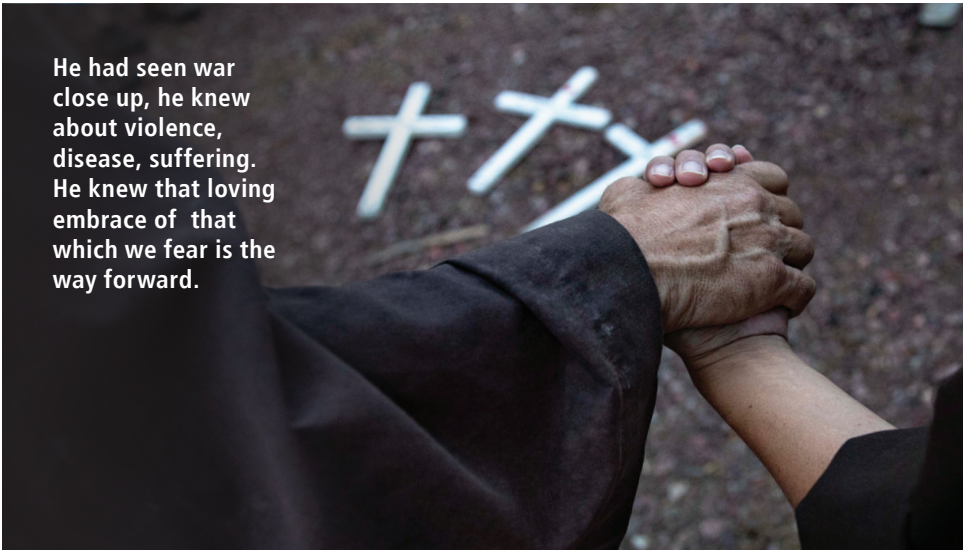
Rejection and Solace

Without any resistance to the disease, soldiers, merchants and pilgrims brought the infection back to their homes in western Europe, where city after city experienced an outbreak of the new illness. With no adequate medical knowledge of what caused leprosy, clergy, doctors and government officials took the most drastic steps to control its

spread. In Assisi, for example, each year an inspection was made door-to-door to see if any resident showed patches of white skin, a symptom of leprosy described in the Bible (Lv 13).

Once confirmed by the priests (again, following biblical directions) the infected person was immediately taken away to the hospice of San Rufino at Arce, an area in the valley below the town, near the abandoned church of St. Mary of the Angels of the Portiuncula. The sick person's property was confiscated and used to support the operations of the hospice.

Brave and generous volunteers, called Brothers and Sisters of Penance, dedicated their lives, quite literally, to caring for these patients in the hospice. It was in these circumstances that we can imagine the context for the famous words of Francis at the opening of his Testament: "When I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body." The story of that change, from



He had seen war
close up, he knew
about violence,
disease, suffering.
He knew that loving
embrace of that
which we fear is the
way forward.

Photo: Octavio Duran, OFM

bitter to sweet, is often referred to as Francis's conversion.

A World Divided

The Umbrian region of Italy, where Francis grew up, also suffered from outbursts of social violence, as old family feuds erupted into violent clashes, and the revenge-killings called vendetta became urban gang violence. This violence was in some ways fueled by a growing social disparity, as a new money economy favored the new merchant class struggling to be free of the older noble classes. People were fighting to maintain

Assisi and its neighbor, Perugia. Francis himself as a young man had fought for his town against the neighboring town. When the men of Assisi were defeated, Francis was one of many who were made prisoners of war, to be freed only when Assisi paid the ransom demanded by Perugia.

Francis Confronts Racism

He had seen war close up, he knew about violence, disease, suffering, imprisonment, and death. Yet even with that knowledge, Francis set out, in the summer of 1219, completely unarmed, to meet the man most feared by Christians as the "enemy of the Cross of Christ," the Muslim ruler of Egypt, Sultan Malek el-Kamil. For European Christians, Muslims were the enemy, the other, those of different language, race, and religion. They were to be feared and attacked.

Though opposed by the leaders of the Christian Crusader forces, Francis insisted on meeting the sultan and eventually crossed the no-man's-land separating the two armies, accompanied only by one companion, Brother Illuminato. It was, most basically, his attempt to put into practice the most difficult of Christ's

*"He faced a new and feared
disease with the strength he
drew from the love of Christ."*

or enhance their positions of privilege and social power.

On a regional level the two major political parties, one supporting the German emperor, Frederick II, and the other favoring the Roman pope, Innocent III, fomented rivalries between cities, like

commands to his disciples: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Lk 6:27-8).

Francis set out, even risking his own life, in order to love his enemy, Malek el-Kamil.

The surprising result of this meeting, a surprise registered by the chroniclers of the Crusaders' army, was that the sultan treated Francis graciously and listened to him willingly. That same sultan defeated the Christian forces at Damietta later that summer after Francis had pleaded with them, unsuccessfully, to accept the offer of peace made by the Muslim commander.

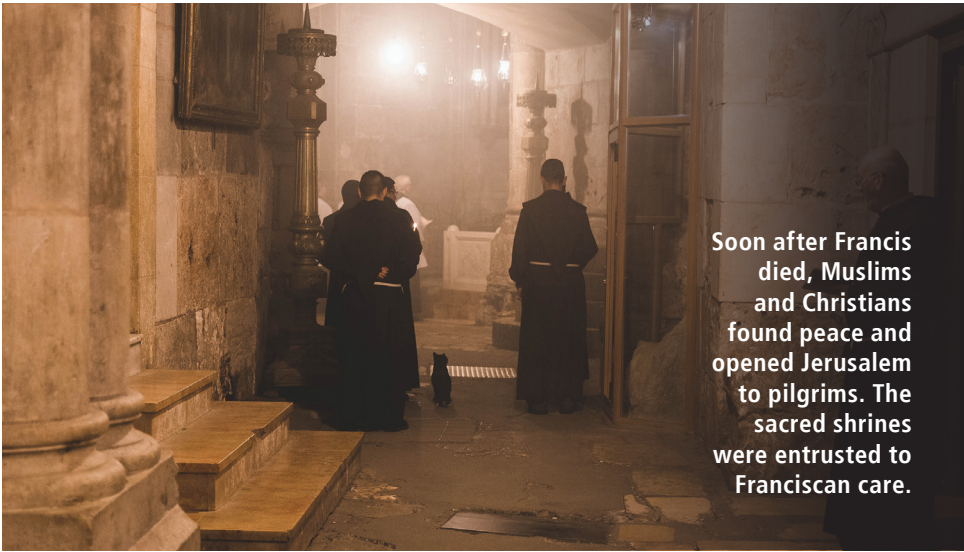
Little more than three years after Francis' death, that same sultan made a treaty of peace with Emperor Frederick II in 1229, allowing Christians free access to the shrines of the Holy Land, and allowing Francis' brothers (called the “friars of the cord”) to become custodians of those shrines, a role that continues to this day.

In times of worry and disorientation we can draw hope and a sense of direction from the examples of earlier generations. These brave people, not

very different from ourselves, found in their faith in Christ a source of life and meaning in the midst of illness, social violence, and global conflict. Francis himself faced a new and feared disease with the strength he drew from the love of Christ, and fearlessly crossed borders in order to love his enemy in a time of conflict.

Whether confronting contagion, poverty, or racism, in St. Francis' example we see put into practice the words of the First Letter of St. John, “love drives out fear” (1 Jn 4:18). It is not ultimately our knowledge, our strength, or our courage that will overcome fear, but rather it is our ability to love others, a love put into practice by concrete actions, big and small, every day of our lives. ♦

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Brother William Short, OFM, is Vice President for Academic Affairs of Franciscan School of Theology at the University of San Diego. A friar of St. Barbara Province, he also is director of the Franciscan International Study Center at St. Isidore's College, Rome, Italy.



Soon after Francis died, Muslims and Christians found peace and opened Jerusalem to pilgrims. The sacred shrines were entrusted to Franciscan care.

Photo: Dave Herring

'God Is With Us': an Interview with Father David

BY JOHN FEISTER

It's been a year like no other for all of us, and the Province of St. Barbara is no exception. We recently talked with Minister Provincial Father David Gaa, OFM, about how his fellow friars are doing, and how the pandemic is impacting the various ministries.

Q: What is happening with the friars during the pandemic? Some people might even think most of the Franciscan ministries kind of had to shut down for a while.

A: Oh, not at all. In fact we're working harder than ever before! I was talking to one of our brothers who's in a huge parish. So I said to him, things must be kind of a little slow for you now. And he said, "No, we're doing all these videos and send them out." Every week the people in that parish get a video on something spiritual or Franciscan or something on the Church. They do music and they're very creative.

Then of course there's a lot of ministry done through phone and talking to people, especially maybe the older people that maybe don't have the technology, or are really isolated in some way.

Q: Can you tell me just a little bit about how the Province is working to support the ministries through this crisis?

A: We have a number of retreat houses, social services, parishes. So it depends. For example, here in San Francisco and Oakland [in September], you still cannot have any services at all inside any buildings or you're allowed to have services outside a limited sense. In parishes people are offering Mass in parking lots, but financially it's been extremely difficult.

Many of the brothers are being very creative and exploring different ways to do ministries. We have online Bible studies using Zoom. It's just like you're sitting in a room. We have one parish that's sending out a weekly spiritual video. This is besides the normal Zooming of the Masses and things like this. The guys are actually extremely busy, trying to find and exploring new ways to do their ministry.

Q: It's a little bit strange how some of these things that you would never have imagined have turned out to be possible, don't you think?

A COVID-19 mask is a sign of the times for this latest group of friars in formation. "We will get through this together" is often heard.



A: Yes, but let me be honest with you: Most of our parishes have social outreach for the low income people. There is more need for food boxes or other support.

We have a dining room in Los Angeles and also in San Francisco. They no longer can have people come into the dining room. So they pack up a hot meal in a styrofoam container, like you would for takeout. The people get that and a bottle of water and maybe a couple of cookies in a bag. The City of San Francisco closed the streets in front of the dining room. So they can line up six feet apart, and the [friars and staff] go down the streets and pass out food to the homeless. So, you know, the friars need to be creative.

There's been some attempt to help make sure that these ministries are financially stable during this crisis too. When the pandemic first broke out, we decided not to lay off anyone or furlough anyone or reduce anyone's hours. So for three months they continued their benefits and their salaries. Remember, those days at the very beginning, we thought perhaps the pandemic would

be short-lived.

Our hope was that maybe in the summer, some of our retreats could return and there'd be some normal life. But the pandemic did not end. Some people are reducing the hours for staff because it's just not safe to have retreats in our places. So to meet the minimum cost of leases and so forth the Province has stepped in to provide support, to a certain degree.

Q: So is it fair to say in the most general way, though, that the province is committed to helping ensure that those ministries can survive during this time?

A: Absolutely. And also with some of the retreats they're doing individual retreats, you know, so they can stay in a cabin, you know, like a hermit. More normally you might have, let's say 80 people on a weekend; now they might allow a retreat for 20 people. They're trying to do limited ministry with the resources they have.

Q: There's another dimension to this. All of us are coping with more isolated lifestyles. That has to be a big concern



The life of community goes on, still deeply committed, still deeply fulfilling. The Franciscans have endured hardships before.

in your community. How do you help the friars support each other?

A: That is my biggest concern for the friars, that isolation and loneliness, particularly are the men that we have in care facilities. We can't visit them. They no longer have Eucharist celebrated. You know, they're very close to our houses. We would visit, and maybe take them out for ice cream. Like everyone else, they're closed in their retirement center.

There's also no movement between our houses. Many of the brothers are older and have health issues. We just can't put a house at risk by allowing visitors.

But there is a positive thing. In some ways it's strengthened the local community. Before, for example, on Sundays we would have dinner and people would have to race off for a parish meeting or do something. Now there is no place to go.

So we're spending more time together. It slowed down the pace of our life and our priorities. In some way, that has been a spiritual blessing for us. But at the same time, I am concerned about the friars' mental well-being. I spend a lot of my time on the phone, talking to brothers.

Q: In a broad way, how would you describe the state of the Province in the middle of this pandemic?

A: I don't want to be a Pollyanna, but I would say it's very good. We friars have a very long history. There have sometimes been periods of great expansion, and other times there are periods of fewer brothers. There have been all sorts of revolutions and so on. But the brothers always have a strong sense that even in our difficulties, God is with us.

Yes, today there's a sense sometimes of great loss and grieving. But I would remind people that it's particularly in these difficult times that Jesus draws near to us.

We see this over and over again in Scriptures: Peter's boat is sinking in the water, and Jesus calls him. He comes out of the boat, he starts walking. And then, then what happens? He sees the wind, the waves, and he becomes afraid. What does Jesus do? He reaches out. So it's important for all of us to somehow put our trust in Jesus. During these difficulties, I will argue very strongly that Christ comes closer to us.

I need to remind myself that because I get worked up in my daily problems and isolation. My big excursion last week was driving to the drug store! ♦

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John Feister is editor of this publication.

Sharon Taszarek and Carole Whittaker, PhD

This workshop will provide the foundation for developing a personal practice of Centering Prayer as a practice that leads to contemplation. In this workshop, you will learn the basic elements for sitting in silence and have several opportunities for practice. Participants will receive background information on this form of prayer in the Christian tradition and discussion on how contemplative prayer practice leads to spiritual awareness. Ample time is given for discussion and feedback.

More information:

thecasa.org
(480) 948-7460

The History and Symbolism of Our Lady of Guadalupe

(via Zoom video conference)

12/12 (10am-11pm)

**Mission San Luis Rey Retreat
Oceanside, CA**

Arasely Rios

During this online class, Arasely will share the miraculous history and symbols of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

More Information:

sanluisrey.org
(760) 757-3651

Serenity Retreat

1/29-31

**Mission San Luis Rey Retreat
Oceanside, CA**

Fr. Tom Weston

Continue your healing as you spend a full weekend with women and men in recovery from alcoholism and addiction. Our focus is the 12-step pro-

gram of Alcoholics Anonymous. We invite members of Al-Anon, all AA groups, alcoholics, addicts, friends and family members. This retreat is open to all 12-step folks. Pray, meditate, and reflect in an inviting and peaceful environment.

More Information:

sanluisrey.org
(760) 757-3651

Holy Week Retreats 2021

3/21-4/4

**Franciscan Renewal Center
Scottsdale, AZ**

As we are planning for Holy Week 2021, we are hopeful that we are able to gather on-campus, in-person for this very special retreat. However, we are also aware that we don't know what the COVID-19 situation will be, so please understand we may find it necessary to cancel or move to a virtual retreat. There are two retreat sessions: March 27-31 and April 1-4.

More information:

thecasa.org
(480) 948-7460

PERSONAL RETREATS

All of the Province of St.

Barbara's retreat centers are once again offering personal retreats and spiritual direction.

A personal retreat provides respite from hectic daily life to seek peace and solitude for rest, renewal, prayer, and praise. Additional offerings differ depending on location. CDC, County, & State COVID-19 guidelines will be observed and enforced for the health & safety of retreat participants & staff.

***Franciscan Renewal Center
Scottsdale, AZ***

Personal and Guided Retreats
Available

WINTER RATES: (October through May)

Single occupancy: \$140.00 per night/Double occupancy: \$198 per night (meals included)

Spiritual direction sessions are available for an additional fee.

thecasa.org
(480) 948-7460

Mission San Luis Rey Retreat Center

Oceanside, CA

Private Retreats & Quiet Days
Available

Spiritual direction sessions are available for an additional fee.

sanluisrey.org
(760) 757-3651

San Damiano Retreat Center

Danville, CA

Personal Retreat/Silent Retreat - \$100 per night (meals included)

Personal Silent Retreat Program available December 4-6, 2020

Spiritual direction sessions are available for an additional fee.

sandamiano.org
(925) 837-9141

Serra Retreat Center

Malibu, CA

Personal Retreats Available
serraretreat.com

(310) 456-6631

St. Francis Retreat Center

San Juan Bautista, CA

Personal Retreats Available
(831) 623-4234

With Our Compliments ...



Our Free Document Organizer Completes Your Estate Plan



The Franciscan Friars are pleased to offer a complimentary estate-planning organizer. A place to store completed legal documents, the organizer also prepares you to create or update your will or living trust and contains a checklist of accounts, assets, and instructions so your loved ones can easily find what they need in case of emergency. When completed, the organizer lifts a burden from your loved ones and can save both them and you time and expense.

To receive your free organizer, please call:
Joe Ledbetter at (510) 536-3722,
or go to sbfranciscans.org/organizer



along the way:
continued from 6

crazy fishing expedition to step out in faith, like St. Peter? St. Francis was and so, I believe, was our own St. Junípero Serra. They weren't perfect, but they let the Gospel rearrange their understanding of the world and move them into action. God wants to clear our vision, too, and bring us into life!

Here is the three-step movement that Father Michael, Franciscan lens-viewer, presents as the core of our Franciscan approach to spreading the Gospel. 1) *God gives a gift*; 2) we choose to *do something* with the gift; and 3) we are *transformed* in the process.

The story of St. Francis, one who prayed over these Scripture passages and sought to live them, is our model. The Lord led him among lepers (the gift); he did something (he served them). Then came the transformation: What he had feared—a distressing and bitter experience—had become sweet. The failed knight became a living sign of Christ. He saw, in the apostles who had cried, "Lord, save us!" that we must step out in faith to follow Jesus. ❖

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Father Dan Lackie, OFM, poet, writer, and former editor of this publication, is pastor at St. Barbara Parish, in Santa Barbara, California, adjoining Old Mission Santa Barbara.

We Still Need Retreats:
continued from page 20

and conferences. "We were blessed to have a large group of Christian Protestant women that were willing to wear a mask, keep their distance, and spend some time with us. God bless them! All told we had 145 people this past September. The monthly number last September was 2,001."

Those kinds of numbers point to the challenges these centers face trying to stay afloat during the pandemic. And there is no guarantee for anyone—the Province can only hope its help will be enough. "But this pandemic will eventually wind down," says Father Joe. "Emotional and spiritual needs of people have been on the back burner, have not been processed adequately. All this tension is going to spill out in all kinds of relationships, in church settings, in marriage and family, in life and business. So the need will be great once it's over."

San Damiano's Yount reiterates a determined spirit: "Change can bring fear or hope, and we choose hope. We adapted our outreach (our mission), we trimmed our sails (staff), and got creative in generating income."

There's a can-do attitude afoot among these directors. Certainly the Provincial leadership is stressing the centers' importance now more than ever, too, hoping that the public will find ways to use the centers safely. "The Province's retreat centers are places to refresh, relax, pray, and connect with God," offers Stan Raggio. "This is core to Franciscan values. As an individual or a small group in a socially distant and beautiful setting—where better to get away?" ❖

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Pat Fanning is a frequent contributor to this publication.



Coffee, smiling eyes, encouragement—all are freely offered by Friars David and Martin on the street outside St. Boniface parish in San Francisco's Tenderloin District.

at last

“Each day offers us
a new opportunity,
a new possibility.
Let us take an active
part in **renewing**
and **supporting** our
troubled societies.”

—Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*

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