



Insight & Wisdom

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

Advent – An Invitation from God

The Advent season is an awesome celebration that invites each of us to trust in the promises of God and to open our hearts anew in hopeful anticipation for the coming of Christ. We look to the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary who lovingly trusted God and, with courageous faith, wholeheartedly welcomed God's invitation that changed our world. Are you being invited by God to trust God and to courageously be an instrument of Christ's peace and love as a Franciscan friar? During this Advent season, may God bless you with the wisdom to discern God's desire for you and the courage you need to respond. Peace and All Good.

An Advent Reflection

by Fr. Tom Vigliotta, OFM

In his poem "The Road Not Taken," Robert Frost wrote: "I shall be telling this with a sigh somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I - I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

On June 6, of this year, I celebrated 25 years as a Franciscan friar of Holy Name Province. Prior to that day, I had spent many years of prayer and discernment wondering if the way of St. Francis of Assisi was for me. Twenty-five years ago I finally took the poet's words to heart, I took the road less traveled and I must say it has made all the "difference."

Responding to the call to live a vowed life of poverty, chastity, and obedience has not diminished my life in any way. The vows I have tried to live these many years have actually opened and enriched my life in ways that I had never imagined. I have come to understand that my life is richer through the vowed life because I have greater access to this earth and to all the people who inhabit it, especially the poor and vulnerable.

Advent prayer and scriptures are always ways for me to rediscover the God who comes towards me and the same God who helps me come to God in creative and imaginative ways. I could never underestimate the years of theology and Franciscan studies that formed me years

ago and continue to form me. My years in study helped me to articulate the inclusive and expansive understanding of God's gratuitous grace as a Catholic. In truth, however, one never really experiences this economy of grace operative in our lives until one is on the road.

In August 1985 I began my first "road trip" in an African-American parish in Greenville, SC. It was there that people reminded me what was essential and real. I had come to St Anthony's parish ready to take on the world with all that I knew regarding the latest biblical scholarship and my new-found knowledge of Vatican II. Prior to joining the friars, I had received a degree in counseling and here, too, I was eager to serve the people of God through individual counseling and support groups. I saw the people in this poor parish sorely lacking and it was my intention to lead them into the Promised Land. For me, the compass to the Promised Land was a better understanding of the Bible, Vatican II, and my counseling skills.

I found out all too quickly that the expectation that I had for St Anthony's was not the expectation the people had for me. During those early months of priesthood, I would hold classes on weekday evenings on the latest insights of Catholic theology, scripture, and spirituality. I would announce in the bulletin that I was available for counseling and would even like to start a support group. Over and over again, I found that people did not show up. These were difficult days for me, so much so that I began to wonder if I really had a vocation.



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Then one day sitting alone in my room and really feeling discouraged, I started to reflect on the life and ministry of Jesus and on the life and ministry of St. Francis. It occurred to me that Jesus did not spend much time in the synagogue. In fact, Jesus was often referred to as the itinerant preacher. Then I thought of St. Francis. Although tradition tells us that Francis heard the voice of Jesus come from a cross at the Church of San Damiano that said "Francis rebuild my Church," we know that Francis did not spend too much time in that building. Francis was also

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the road less traveled...**

itinerant. He was a man on a mission and a real pilgrim. Like Jesus, he traveled to where people were broken and healed them; he traveled to where divisions existed in his world and he brought reconciliation and peace. He saw Church as a dynamic adventure where one was led by the Holy Spirit and where that same Spirit had to be brought to the world.

This realization of the life and ministry of Jesus and of St. Francis was the day that I found myself as a friar. It was the day that I realized that being a friar was so much more than holding classes at the church hall or waiting in my office for someone to come see me for counseling. This was the day I did something concrete. I took out my parish list and I decided that I would visit each home in the parish.

Over time I found myself not just in people's living rooms, I found myself in the living room of their lives. I began to hear people's joys and sorrows. They had moments to celebrate births, marriages, and anniversaries, but they also had lives with problems. Their sorrows were financial, medical, emotional, and spiritual. Yet I realized that the faith I wanted to share with them through the scriptures and the Church tradition already had deep roots within them.

Many of these people were poor and they knew racism and exclusion from society in ways that were totally foreign to me. Because of the long-term effects of prejudice, I saw these good people as a real leaven within the greater Church. They had this collective experience of suffering

and redemption and the Exodus story was not just a story for them, it was their story. My notion of Church was good but so was theirs. My presence in their lives was not so much to offer them something new but to share and listen to their faith struggle. They, in turn, helped me to deal with my own faith struggles. I began to see that when Francis served the alienated and estranged of his day, the estranged and alienated also served him.

These wonderful people of faith did not need a class from me. What they needed and wanted from me was me. My life with them was about growing into a trusting relationship where we could rejoice and grieve together over life, and together we could learn to find God's love in the midst of it all.

That first year was very hard for me and would have been impossible had it not been for the Franciscan fraternity where I found wisdom, love, and many laughs! The vows I took 25 years ago continue to challenge me to find God in new and creative ways of trusting relationships. All too often I find myself at the fork in the road where God may



be calling me to go deeper into the mystery of faith. This road may demand that that I face opposition in the culture in which I live. It also may demand of me that I face the opposition that comes from within. When I have to face these challenges, I turn again to the wisdom of the Franciscan fraternity. I turn to the example of St. Francis who spent time in prayerful solitude and I turn again to the wisdom of the people who journey with me. In these places, I have come to know more about the ways of God.

This Advent season is an invitation to that quiet time of prayer where we encounter God who walks with us on the road. For sure, living the Gospel will be the road less traveled, but it is also the road that leads to eternal life. And taking this road makes all the difference in the world.



Rev. Thomas F. Vigliotta, OFM, is a Regional Vocation Director. He is currently ministering as a Campus Minister for the Catholic Center at the University of Georgia in Athens, GA. The Franciscan Friars of Holy Name Province have ministered at the University of Georgia for 40 years. Prior to his August 2005 arrival in Athens, he spent 16 years with the Province's Ministry of the Word, the last four years as the director. The Ministry of the Word offers parish missions and retreats. Fr. Tom came to the friars in 1979, professed his first vows in 1981, and was ordained a priest in 1985. He is a native of Patchogue, NY.



Mt. Irenaeus, the Franciscan mountain retreat in Western New York, hosted men discerning their call to religious life during a contemplative Vocation Discernment Retreat weekend on October 20–22, 2006.

Responding to the Invitation. . .



Franciscan Experience Weekend
New York City
November 3 – 5, 2006



The friars at Siena College in Loudonville, NY hosted a Hospitality Weekend on November 17–19, 2006. Pictured above, Br. Walter Liss, OFM, (left) engages in conversation with our guest.



Pax et
Bonum

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Upcoming Vocation Weekends

December 8 - 10, 2006

Hospitality Weekend
St. Anthony's Shrine
Boston, MA

February 9 - 11, 2007

Hospitality Weekend
Holy Name College
Silver Spring, MD

March 2 - 4, 2007

Discernment Retreat (Service Experience)
San Damiano Spiritual Center & St. Francis Inn
Philadelphia, PA