

crime". While we were sure not to take one step without the archbishop's blessing, every small step we did take proved painful. In the beginning our decision to initiate a renewal was big news in the Order, yet after some years the story became stale and finally dropped from the back page. While fraternal relations between us were certainly bruised, they were never completely broken. In fact, despite our very real differences, our numerous official meetings were always characterized by authentic charity and mutual respect. Today, looking back, the big tornado that tore things up now appears to be small, like a "tempest in a tea pot". The bridge once damaged by the storm is now well repaired and well used.

Of course, Father Benedict's question, "Remember when we were eight friars" was more rhetorical than real. How could I forget the very first night we ventured deep into the South Bronx to visit what Cardinal O'Connor called, "a possible place" for our first home. The parish of Saint Adalbert's was once the heart of a thriving Polish neighborhood; yet, the social unrest and economic decline of the time sent much of the city into a slow tailspin. "Ravaged" would be the best word to describe the area, especially at night when the streets became ominous and dangerous. On arriving, we parked as close as possible to the rectory, keeping an eye on a small cluster of teenagers down the street. As we stepped out and stood about admiring the ornate facade of the church, one of the kids shouted: "Hey! Are you guys ninja monks?" At that very moment the steel door of the rectory squealed on its hinges, and a silver haired man leaned out making a "hurry-up-and-get-in-here" gesture. We filed through the narrow door which he closed so quickly he almost caught my heel. The elderly Polish monsignor who greeted us appeared as worn and frayed as his clerical shirt. The inside of the rectory had a dull prison-like appearance mostly due to the heavy steel mesh screens which covered every window - even upstairs. Evidently every time the old pastor called the cops on the local drug addicts, they replied "thank you" by throwing a brick through a window. Well, by the end of our exciting visit, two things were crystal clear; he wanted out - and we wanted in!

Yes, these memories are branded in my brain for good. In fact, for me every building in the church complex is like a big brick time machine; I step in and bang - its 1987! Indeed, almost every room has a tale to tell. For example, the simple and somewhat austere chapel of Saint Crispin friary was once the rectory parlor replete with tacky furniture, olive green carpeting, frilly yellow curtains and 1950s floral design wallpaper. For some reason this small room also had a monster air conditioner, which four of us spent much of a day trying to extract. In frustration we finally called it quits leaving our back-breaking project for the next day. Our fruitless labor, however, must have piqued the attention of

some of our neighbors. They paid us a friendly visit completing the job for us - at three in the morning! A loud crash outside woke up the whole house and sent us rushing to our windows. We all laughed as we watched three skinny guys hobbling down the street struggling with their unwieldy and overweight treasure. I can still see Father Stan stretching way out the window and shouting: "God bless you bros - I hope it works!"

While most of us were accustomed to city living, nothing could prepare us for what we would call "the summer night experience". Saturday nights were especially animated and few people stayed inside because of the stifling heat. When the sun went down the noise went up; it was relentless - continual music, loud laughter, bottles breaking, and occasional gun shots. I remember one bleary-eyed friar hunched over and lamenting into his bowl of cereal: "We're doing more penance than Saint Francis - he fell asleep to crickets - we have car alarms!" Do recall this was the era of the infamous "boom box", an appropriately named luggage-sized attention-getting device designed to help someone share his favorite "music" with the immediate world. It was generally used in two ways: balancing the box on the shoulder as one strutted down the street, or set on a windowsill with the speakers facing out, of course. To our chagrin, summer Saturday nights not only brought out the worst in our neighbors, but admittedly, in us. Our Sunday morning breakfast often resembled an anger management support group meeting. The conversation would inevitably slide into sharing imaginative "guy solutions" to the nightly noise problem, these included SWAT teams, fire hoses, or sledge hammers. Yet, believe it or not, there was one bright side to Saturday nights; that was enjoying the deep, sweet silence of Sunday morning.

Considering the chaos which surrounded our new home, one might think after some time we wanted out. Quite the opposite: we were happy - may I say deliriously happy - because we were all given a golden opportunity to live what Franciscans call "the life". No doubt, the Hollywood version would have us frolicking through the overgrown abandoned lots, preaching to rats, and singing Kumbaya in a circle with local crack dealers! No, drugs and AIDS and homelessness are not fun, and they're far from romantic. But in the midst of it all we did our best to bring a bit of light into the darkness. Yet, the secret of our happiness has always been living a gospel way of life filled with work, prayer, preaching, and serving. While the neighborhood is much better, with attractive new housing, bustling local businesses, and lower noise levels, what was once on the surface now sleeps at the center. This is why the South Bronx is still home sweet home for the friars, because without complete conversion from the culture to Christ, any neighborhood, even one that seems secure and settled, is really only inches away from the edge of an abyss.

History attests that the growth and maturation of religious communities can be like that to a person. Both are conceived, born and develop with difficulty and pain. Like a tiny infant, a new community enters the world awkwardly crawling and groping with unfocused energy and wide-eyed wonder. The early years often need security and affirmation, while adolescence is marked by undisciplined activity motivated by an exaggerated sense of self and naive idealism. The teen years are full of drama and adventure, which often mask deep interior conflict. While much good may be accomplished with youthful energy, such energy may have to coexist with arrogance and impetuosity. At the end come the adult years which are far less tumultuous and possess a certain sense of peace and stability. Here real humility and wisdom often emerge when an individual or community admits mistakes and extends forgiveness towards others. Yet the real measure of authentic maturity is not age, but actions and attitude. Thus, a fully developed person or community displays a consistent generous and joyful spirit of self-sacrifice and service. Both also display an evident love and trust in God and others accepting life with its unexpected obstacles and deep disappointments. Where the CFR's are chronologically we know, where we *really* are only God knows. Yet, we hope to continue growing, not only in numbers, but more importantly into our Capuchin charism, identity, and mission.

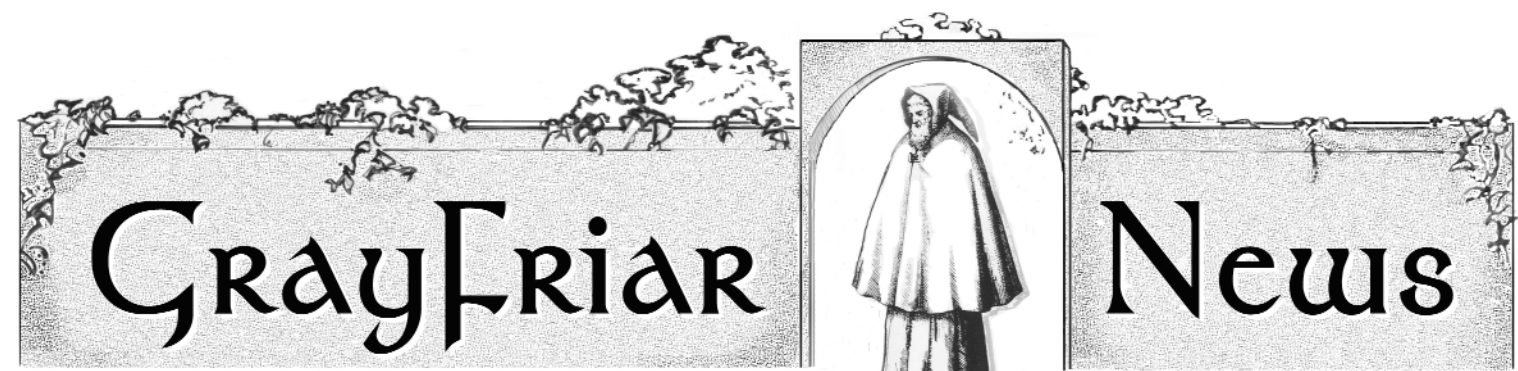
While we are very grateful to God for reaching this milestone, we must admit that twenty five miles isn't very far, especially when one considers the length of the road. In the annals of Church history, we're but a footnote. Well aware of our small size, we stand in the shadow of giants, those ancient orders which span the centuries and the globe. While in the beginning we made some sort of splash, the truth is, the lake is very large. Will we survive, or succumb and eventually sink? The Holy Scriptures make it quite clear that the longevity and vitality of an individual, a community, and even a nation, are offered yet not guaranteed. The formula is brief but the consequences big: "If you're faithful, you'll be fruitful." Our Lord speaks to us in the Gospel: "If you remain in me you will bear abundant fruit." Here the Bible and biology agree: life is brought forth by intimate union, not simply close contact. Therefore, friends, if at some time you detect a gap - however slight - between us, a religious body, and His Church, His Mystical Body, point to that small space and play the prophet. Cry out: "Sons and daughters of Saint Francis, behold, right here is the beginning of your end!"

I hope most people realize that our original intention in initiating a renewal community was not born simply out of a frustrated desire to live and work with the poor. Rather, it emerged from a growing conviction that the vocation crisis in the Church was the result of a crisis

of faith. At that time, weak and watered down seminaries and communities often extinguished the fire of those who walked through their doors. While things are better today, they can always get even better. For this reason, the Franciscan Friars and Sisters of the Renewal are not looking for "commandos to hit the beach" but rather enthusiastic, generous, and mature men and women seeking to live a sacrificial and meaningful life. Those interested in a comfortable religious career which provides perks and early retirement need not apply. Today more than ever the Church cannot afford religious union workers who like to lean on shovels when digging hard and deep is the job for the day. While no one knows what may happen tomorrow, we can get a good idea by what we see today. No wonder one American prelate recently made a chilling statement: "I expect to be persecuted, my successor to be imprisoned, and his successor to be a martyr." So if you sense a call to something daring, and maybe even dangerous, have courage and come!

At this time we extend heartfelt thanks to our family members, friends and benefactors living and deceased who have made this renewal community possible. All along, it has been you who have taught us the true meaning of sacrifice, fidelity and generosity. We are well-aware that if we have indeed been able to stand shoulder to shoulder, it is only because we know you have our back. God supported our efforts early on with wonderful people like you, and as we continue to grow, how much more do we need your prayers, friendship, and generous support! Through the intercession of the Holy Mother of God and of Saint Francis and Saint Clare, may our mission to bring renewal to the Church and the world continue for many years to come. May it be as evident in the future what is most obvious now - that God deigns to choose and use imperfect people to accomplish His perfect will.

While the ways of the world today afford little hope for a bright tomorrow, the goodness of God promises His faithful brilliance beyond measure. If only all of God's children would simply love and obey, then perhaps they too would know true joy and laugh with abandon even in these dark and difficult days. This indeed is the lot of the holy ones, who despite their own weakness, give themselves completely into the hands of the Almighty and become vessels of Divine grace for the salvation of all. Such is the secret of the saints who pour themselves out for love of others, and in doing so refresh and restore a fallen and wounded world. May we, like His humble soft spoken servant, continue to "fight on" so that we too might see something very special right before our eyes. Here indeed is the Divine plan of redemption slowly and silently unfolding, a plan so hidden and so sublime it appears merely to be the work of men, yet in reality, it must be called what it really is, a truly merciful and a most wonderful work of God!



Franciscan Friars of the Renewal

Issue 46, Summer 2012

A Work of God

by Fr. Glenn Sudano, CFR

The din of laughter and loud banter made it almost impossible for Father Benedict and me to hold a simple conversation. As age and infirmity have noticeably taken their toll, he is quite soft spoken nowadays - apart from the pulpit. I had to raise my voice as an explosion of laughter and applause erupted from a nearby table. I leaned over and aimed my question right into his ear: "Father Benedict, how are you?" I pulled back, and looking at his lips, received an almost expected response: "Fighting on!" My smile was met with his well-worn and bone dry exhortation: "Don't get old!"

As we sat together enjoying a CFR home-cooked meal, we couldn't help but turn our attention to the antics of two highly animated friars who were hamming it up at the next table. Some novice sisters sitting at a distance were laughing, totally enjoying the hilarity while struggling to maintain some semblance of religious decorum. While Father Benedict and I would have appreciated a slightly lower level of volume, we sat there observing the radiant joy of these young religious. He gently grasped my arm and with his other hand motioned me to come close. I leaned over, with my ear almost touching his lips. "Remember when we were just eight friars?" he whispered. As I drew my head back to offer a reply, he was already gazing over my shoulder slowly scanning the crowded hall as if to say "Look at all of this!" He then turned toward me and, with his eyes slightly squinted, said with a certain intensity and awe: "It's a work of God!"

It's somewhat odd that nowadays the "original eight" are hardly able to see one another except at special community celebrations and events. In fact, now we're down to seven since Father Robert left for heaven three years ago. How different it was in those early months when our common cause demanded seemingly endless days of discussion, deliberation, and debate. In fact, for

many years we had to meet weekly just to keep our tiny boat on course. Our eventual growth in numbers and stability finally allowed us old guys to happily relinquish the helm to younger yet very capable friars. Nowadays we seasoned senior friars meet only on occasion, and even then our words are few. Yet don't be fooled, deep down we're still connected, in fact, bonded together for life. Back then some would have described us as being "joined at the hip"; twenty five years later, I would say we're "joined at the heart".

Perhaps sometime in the future, when reading the history of our community, some pious novice will imagine the first friars as being a bit larger than life. His imagination might see us as well-trained commandos sent on a secret mission, bravely hitting the beach of the South Bronx. Yet, I must admit there were some days when I felt more like a shipwrecked sailor than a Navy Seal. Despite the mutual support and same inner conviction, there were days I felt alone and haunted by an elusive anxiety, while swarms of unanswered questions buzzed about my head. Yet, in the end, it was the courage and confidence we witnessed in one another that gave us the strength to go on. From day one we were well-aware that survival meant sticking together, which meant a sometimes painful surrender of the "me" to the "we". The obvious immensity of the task before us exposed our individual poverty, yet we learned when we each emptied our pockets completely, we always had more than enough.

As expected, our resolve to begin what we called a "more intentional" form of Franciscan life went down sideways with the larger Capuchin community. Reactions within the ranks varied from quiet support to loud opposition. Some of our closer confreres teased us, calling us "the gang of eight", while others who were more annoyed than amused preferred "partners in

(continued in center)