“Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

Is. 43:18-19

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

May the Lord give you peace!

Whenever I greet one of our senior friars with, “It’s good to see you,” their quick response is, “Well at my age, it’s good to be seen.” So, if you’re reading this New Year’s greeting, you have survived another Christmas and have greeted the 2019 new year. This is no small matter! Time marches on!

We stand at the beginning of a new year. There are exciting challenges which will unfold before us, challenges which will need God’s presence and guidance. It will also require our trust in one another as we face the future of “Renewal and Restructuring.”

We have our hopes and expectations for the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Province as we continue the process of “Renewal and Restructuring” Franciscan life in the United States. God knows what the year ahead holds for us. But we believe that God alone can give us the strength and the wisdom we will need to meet the challenges of “getting our house in order.”

So, let us humbly place our hands into the hands of God; the God we call “Emmanuel, God with us.” Let us trust God, trust each other and to seek the guidance of God for ourselves and the Order of Friars Minor in the United States.

And so let us pray;
+ In the midst of life’s uncertainties, in the days ahead, assure us of Your unchanging love.

+ In the midst of life’s disappointments and heartaches, help us to turn to You for the stability and comfort we will need.

+ In the midst of life’s temptations and the pull of our stubborn self-will, help us not to lose our way but have the courage to do what is right in Your sight, regardless of the cost.
In the midst of our daily preoccupations and pursuits, open our eyes to the sorrows and injustices of our hurting world, and help us to respond with compassion and sacrifice to those who are friendless and in need.

In the midst of the demands of our ministry, help us to lift up in prayer the friars of the Assumption BVM Province and the Franciscans in the United States.

In the midst of our nation’s political struggles, grant our leaders the strength and determination to work for peace and justice in our troubled world.

In the midst of conflict and division, we pray for those who serve in our armed forces; we honor their commitment to defend our freedoms; be with their families and assure them of Your love and concern for them.

In the midst of divisions, bring our nation together, and give us a greater vision of what You desire us to be.

And finally, we thank You for the promise and hope of this new year. We look forward to the days ahead with expectancy and faith. Let us together offer our prayers of petition in the name of our Lord and Savior, who by His death and resurrection has given us hope for this present age and in the age to come.

Happy New Year!

Jim

Franciscan Friars - Assumption BVM Province
Franklin, Wi. December 18, 19, 20, 2018
Provincial Definitory Meeting Minutes

Friar Personnel and Friaries:

James Wisniewski:
Before Thanksgiving, Jim Gannon met with James Wisniewski at Lourdes Friary, Cedar Lake, IN. Jim Gannon stressed the importance of Jim ending his leave of absence, which has been extended a few times and move back into a fraternity of the Province. Jim emphasized his need to remain outside of the province to take care of his sisters, In the end, Jim decided to be released from his Solemn Vows. Jim Gannon will write his letter to Rome presenting Jim's request.

Mario Nagy:
With Bernard Kennedy continuing his rehabilitation at Fairmont Care and Rehabilitation Center, and Randy Roberts on a temporary assignment, Mario has moved in with Warren at Holy Name Friary, Peterson Ave. This is a temporary assignment for Mario as
he will be entering into an intensive Spanish Language Program as part of his preparations to join the Cuba Project.

Randy Roberts:
As reported in a December 6 Friar Update, Randy was appointed to the VA National Chaplains Headquarters, Hampton, VA. Randy will serve as an associate director and liaison to the Archdiocese for the Military Services. Quoting Randy, “Though the assignment is temporary – 120 days at most – I look forward to being part of the Director’s staff and making contributions when and where I can. I have total confidence in my staff, who will feel the crunch but support the mission wholeheartedly,” says Randy. Randy requests "Prayers, please!"

Temporary Address: VMAC
100 Emancipation Dr.
Hampton, VA 23667

Bernard Kennedy:
After surgery for the repair of his fractured tibia, early December, a few days later, Bernard was transferred to Fairmont Care + Rehabilitation Center, Chicago, IL. Bernard is grateful for our prayers and support. Bernard is making excellent progress in his rehabilitation.

Gregory Havel:
After suffering from a brain bleed, December 9th, Greg had emergency surgery for the removal of a tumor within the brain. It was determined that the tumor is cancerous. Greg remains at St. Luke’s Patient Tower, Milwaukee, WI. His radiation therapy has begun. Eventually, Greg will be transferred to the Milwaukee Catholic Home.

Placid Stroik:
Early in December, Placid informed the Business Office and the Provincial Council that there had been a change in ownership of the building that houses Franciscans Downtown. After much discussion involving all our properties in light of Renewal and Restructuring, the members of the Provincial Council have advised Placid to enter into a yearly rental contract with the new owner.

Michael Surufka:
In a letter to the Secretary of Formation. Michael has requested permission to investigate doctoral programs. Michael will continue serving as pastor of Holy Name Parish, Cedar Lake, IN while studying. A unanimous “yes” was given to Michael’s request.
Formation

Formation Update:
Greg Plata (pictured right), Secretary of Formation and Director of Vocations, provided an in-person update. Greg reports several steps have been taken to unify the Vocation Office as we move forward in Renewal and Restructuring and the eventual creation of a new Franciscan Province in the US.

• There is also some movement on the level of Secretaries of Formation to work collaboratively. There are three “Come and See” weekends organized for 2019.

• Since the November Provincial Council meeting discusses and approves the 2019 budget, the budget for the Vocation Office and Formation was reviewed and approved.

• The use of some Packer Tickets for fundraising for Formation and the Provincial Development Office were raised and discussed. Greg will submit a proposal to John Cella, Provincial Treasurer.

• John Cella will make a formal request from the treasures of the six OFM Provinces for a comparative cost of the novitiate program since it moved to the West Coast. It was also suggested that one of the Provincial Treasurers be appointed as the “Contact Treasurer” to the six Secretaries of Formation.

Finance/Property

Budgets:
The members of the ABVM Business Office; Nicole Wildes, Ramona Brown and Brian Bangart gathered around the conference table, with the members of the Provincial Council to; review budgets, answer questions, before the Provincial Council approved individual fraternity budgets and high-end maintenance requests.

• John Cella and the members of the Business Office pointed out, once again, that we, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Province, can no longer support ourselves by the work of our hands. Again, this fiscal year, we have lost over $150,000 in salary with the passing of Friars and retirement. The death of Carl Graczyk was a harsh reminder. These salaries have never been replaced. The members of the Business Office reminded us that we are in deficit spending. Several spending habits of Friars were raised and will be addressed individually.

• With the closure and “moth-balling” of St. Francis Friary, Burlington, WI costs have been significantly reduced.

• Looking into the future of the fiscal year 2019:
  • We will be $669,730 in deficit spending in Central Banking.
  • In the General Fund $1.038,00 in deficit spending.
  • We will no longer be able to maintain a balanced budget.

Derrick Nolan, Merrill Lynch/The Nolan Group:

• Derrick Nolan is our financial manager. He is invited twice a year to update us on our portfolio, of which he is our manager. Derrick reported that, despite the chaos of the market and government chaos, our portfolio is doing very well.
Guardians:
- As in years past, the Provincial Council will invite two Guardians to one of the scheduled council meetings for 2019. Two Guardians will be contacted for availability to join the February 26, 27, 28 meeting.

Property Updates

Burlington property:
The council recommended that we sign a one year lease with the Milwaukee Catholic Home in reference to Clare Gardens. 51% of the produce from Clare Gardens goes to the Milwaukee Food Bank, to assist in feeding the poor.
- The council continues to work with the Hoffman Group in developing a plan for the Burlington property and all our properties.

St. Mary of the Angels Parish, Green Bay:
- Anthony Cirignani and Deacon Paul Umentum, report that after a few minor clarifications, we, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Province and Common-wealth Development, closed on the sale of the buildings and the property, Friday, December 21, 2018.
- A HUGE THANK YOU is extended Brian Bangart, Paul Umentum, Tony Cirignani and Kevin McDonnell of Commonwealth Development, who saw this long and tedious process to the end: the sale of St. Mary of the Angels Parish and property, and a viable future for the parish community of St. Mary’s
- Tony Cirignani and Paul Umentum report that work has begun on the restoration of the interior of the church of St. Mary’s. Since the Feast of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, November 25th, Mass has been celebrated in the school hall.

Holy Dormition Friary, Sybertsville, PA:
- There have been no further talks with potential buyers. Jerome Wolbert, Guardian, reports serious mold problems as a result of the flooding rains, earlier in the year.

Pulaski/Printery:
- The Gorman Group, the party interested in the purchase of the Printery Building, has requested a six-month extension on the sale of the Printery Building. The request was agreed to so that the Gorman Group can submit to their US Government for necessary tax credits. June is the new date for closing.

Villa:
- Some initial interest in several acres. Nothing concrete. Further interest in the remaining property. Not definite at this point.

West Chicago, IL:
- Nothing is happening with this property.
Planning

Chapter Planning Committee:
• Edward Tlucek, liaison to the Chapter Planning Committee, gave an update from the first meeting of the committee.
• Point of clarification: Provincial Chapter, June 2020, is not the last Provincial Chapter for the Assumption BVM Province. There will be a Provincial Chapter in 2023 before the new entity is established.

Greenwood:
• Joachim Studwell, pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Parish and Craig Wilking, Guardian of the Friar fraternity and development director for the mission reported that during a recent joint meeting of the Pastoral Council and Finance Council, the subject of the Family life Center surfaced for discussion. The members of the councils presented building options to be considered. The opportunities offered will be explored during future meetings. Explore purchase of the vacant bank building across Highway 82 in the strip mall area
• The understanding is that the parish would have to form some not-for-profit LLC for which the Province is not responsible.

Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs:
• As required by the Assumption BVM Province and Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs “corporate by-laws”, the members of the Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs, Board of Advisors, met with the ABVM Provincial Council.

Agenda items covered:
• A discussion followed concerning separating the Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs from the Assumption BVM Province before the 2023 creation of a new entity. The Franciscan Pilgrimage Board agreed to continue the discussions during their scheduled meetings for 2019.
• Support for a succession plan, before the 2024 creation of a new entity.

Extra-Provincial
Renewal & Restructuring:
• The Six Provincials continue to connect via conference calls and face-to-face visit. There will be a face-to-face meeting in January in Albuquerque, NM. Because of the extensive information being collected and will continue to increase, the six Provincials have commenced conversation on hiring a Project Manager”. The topic of the project manager will be a priority on the agenda for the January face-to-face meetings in Albuquerque, NM.
• Getting our houses in order: during the January meeting, the provincials will present the ABVM Ministries to the table.

Presently, we are proposing:
• St. Francis, Greenwood, MS, Holy Dormition, Sybertsville, PA
Assumption BVM Parishes, Pulaski, WI. Lourdes Friary and the Cedar Lake, IN property.
Franciscan Pilgrimages and “R+R”:
John Cella, director of the Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs, will forward communications, after January 1, 2019, mapping out the ten (10) planned pilgrimages: Rome/Assisi, the Holy Land, California Franciscan Missions, Arizona Franciscan Missions, and Texas Franciscan Missions.

Other Reports/Committees
Reviewing minutes from friary chapters are an essential part of each Provincial Council meeting. It is important that you forward your minutes to Edward, Provincial Secretary.

Order of Franciscans Secular:
Jerome provided a report on the status of the OSF Fraternities under our jurisdiction. Conrad Targonski is shepherding a new fraternity in La Crosse, WI. They will eventually be bonded to our Province. The Toledo fraternity is in the process of being energized. We have 20 fraternities, 1 Cell, and one newly formed group. There is a strong desire to strengthen the relationship between the friars and the Secular Franciscans.

How have we responded to the Poor:
Our on-going discussions regarding St. Francis, Greenwood, MS continues to raise our awareness of the poor. In the future, the members of the council are planning to serve at St. Benedict the Moor, (OFM Cap ministry) Soup Kitchen, possibly during our February meeting.

SAVE THE DATE: Chapter of Mats
Place: Hyatt Regency Tech Center, Denver, CO.

Future dates for the Provincial Council Meetings:
- February 26, 27, 28, 2019, Francis + Clare Friary, Franklin, WI
- March 26, 27, 28, 2019, Holy Dormition Friary, Sybertsville, PA.
- Assumption BVM Province hosts the Spring meeting of the Provincials of the English Speaking Conference, Monday, April 1, 2019, to Friday, April 5, 2019, Siena Retreat Center, Racine, WI.
  - May 7, 8, 9, 2019, Lourdes Friary, Cedar Lake, IN
- June 25, 26, 27, 2019, St. Anthony of Padua Friary, St. Petersburg, FL
  - October 8, 9, 10, 2019: Francis + Clare Friary, Franklin, WI.
  - December 17, 18, 19, 2019: Francis + Clare Friary, Franklin, WI.
You might picture St. Francis of Assisi as a preacher to the birds or as the poor man who forsook his birthright. But he has another identity that is especially meaningful to me, and that is “combat veteran.” Like St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Martin of Tours, he returned from battle a changed man. As an Iraq War veteran, I can identify with this.

But ultimately God intervened to help Francis rebuild his life, and it was the same with me. Only in my case, Francis himself played a role in my healing journey. He helped me discover how to keep serving even after I left the service. “Keep the Spirit of Prayer Alive.” My life in the military started in 1986, when I was living in Milwaukee. I had been a Franciscan priest for twelve years. It was my routine to begin each day reading Scripture and then taking a run through the city. This gave me welcome time alone to ponder God’s word. One day during my run, I stepped inside the Navy Marine Corps Reserve Center to look for a drink of water—and I walked back outside with information about the Navy chaplaincy.

I decided to pursue it. Not long afterward, I was commissioned as a chaplain in the United States Navy and found that this form of priestly ministry suited me well. I enjoyed the physical activity, and because I came of age in the Vietnam era (but never served), I wanted to “pay my dues.” In 2004, my most formidable chance to do so arrived—our regiment deployed overseas for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

We were assigned to the heaviest combat mission in the Iraq War: the Battle for Fallujah. As the only Catholic priest in our operation area, I had to be mobile, even as explosions were wounding and killing people all around me.

It was a challenging time for me, but I stayed spiritually grounded by following the advice of my Franciscan superiors: “Keep the spirit of prayer alive in all circumstances.” This advice helped keep me sane as I spent days on end in life-and-death situations. I prayed the Liturgy of the Hours in Humvees in hundred-degree heat. I prayed with the wounded. I prayed with the fallen. Constant prayer helped me to keep ministering even in the most traumatic harrowing situations.

St. Francis, the Wounded Warrior. During deployment, when computer access became available, I would wait in long lines for my turn to read my email. This had become another source of spiritual nourishment for me as my spiritual director back in the States sent me reflections on St. Francis of Assisi’s experience in combat.

He described Francis as a wild fun guy who wanted to be a knight, but found out the hard way that it’s not all that glorious. Francis spent a year as a prisoner of war, and that experience marked him for life.
He came home more reserved, even non-communicative. Years later, long after he had become a friar, Francis was haunted by dreams of rats crawling over him. Did he have post-traumatic stress disorder? We’ll never know, but it’s possible.

These struggles of Francis resonated with me. During the height of the war, I found out my mother was dying, and briefly went home to say goodbye before returning to the combat zone. My family remarked then that I looked awful. If I looked half as bad as I felt, they were right. I faced death everywhere I turned, and with each tragedy I lost a piece of myself. My spiritual director described the wounds I was experiencing as a type of stigmata. He also encouraged me to reflect more on Francis after I returned home.

Reflecting on Sacred Ground. After Iraq, though, I did other active-duty assignments for five years. Very slowly I began putting myself back together, starting with my exercise routine. According to one therapist, my body had returned home before my soul. It really wasn’t until I retired from the military in July 2010 that I started processing the deeper interior wounds of my combat experience.

To do this, I requested permission to walk the five-hundred mile path of the Camino de Santiago in Spain—as St. Francis is believed to have done. During those weeks, I spent time in prayer, reflection, and solitude. When I was exhausted and wanted to give up, my walking companion would tell me, “Keep going.” I heard those words as coming from God. So I persisted in the pilgrimage, told my story to other pilgrims, and heard their stories too. Through this, God showed me that we’re all poor and in need of healing.

I’ll never forget the day that I came to a new insight about Francis that helped me enormously. It had to do with that image of war wounds as a kind of stigmata: the wounds of Christ. Just as the wounds of Jesus never went away—even after his resurrection—the wounds of war never completely disappear. This reality is embodied in Francis, who was the first person (and significantly, a combat veteran) who was recorded to have experienced the stigmata.

But in the case of Jesus, and in the case of Francis, the wounds that remained were redeemed through loving service to their friends. After his experience in war, Francis imitated the risen Jesus by living a life of service with his friars. His famous rebuilding of San Damiano Chapel and founding of his religious order arose out of his
desire to serve, despite his wounds. We combat veterans can also find meaning through serving after our return—even if our wounds don’t go away.

“Rebuild this House.” The pilgrimage experience was so helpful to me that the director of the Franciscan pilgrimage programs asked me afterward to lead more pilgrimages to Assisi for combat veterans. On these trips, we retrace the footsteps of Francis from the battlefield to prison, all the way to La Verna, where he received the stigmata.

One of the most moving stops along the way is in the town of Poggio Bustone. It is there that Francis had a life-changing experience of God’s forgiveness for all his past sins—including those that may have occurred in battle. It is here that many veterans offer up the struggle of their own unforgiving past and receive a measure of God’s peace and pardon.

For them and me, this healing journey is a living experience of the words that Jesus spoke to Francis in the rundown chapel of San Damiano: “Rebuild this house.” Francis thought that Jesus was referring to the physical house of God, and he was. But Jesus was also inviting him, and each of us, to rebuild ourselves and rebuild the world by giving our lives in service once again. Through these pilgrimages, I’ve found my new place to serve.

Do you have a New Year’s Resolution for 2019? Send them to awtretow14@gmail.com for them to be published in the next newsletter!