TOWARDS A FRANCISCAN MISSIONARY SPIRIT

March 2019
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table of Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If the world in the simplest sense, as the phrase attributed to St. Augustine states, “is a book, and those who do not travel read only one page,” then the decision to travel to faraway places requires a willingness to experience the unexpected on the journey. Every experienced traveler has a story of the unexpected, whether it occasioned pleasure or pain. Those usually make the best stories.

Yet there is a different kind of travel possible for those who dare leave home in the spiritual sense. To travel as a pilgrim to faraway places is a desire for even more than adventure or the unexpected. It is a willingness not only be surprised, but possibly transformed. Christian pilgrimage is born of yearning for spiritual renewal; the pilgrim seeks a different kind of travel experience than the one merely logged by photos and souvenirs. In his Asian notes, Thomas Merton observes, “There is another side of Kanchenjunga and of every mountain—the side that has never been turned into postcards. That is the only side worth seeing.”

I have confidence in two spiritually oriented, travel-related maxims. The first is, when you travel well, the most important journey is the one that goes inward, no matter the outward destination. The second maxim I believe is this; you do not have to go anywhere to find ground for the soul’s journey toward God, you just need to be ready for that journey. The quest for meaningful spirituality is not out there or over there somewhere. Mindfulness of God’s faithful presence is found everywhere by the Holy Spirit’s ministry of comfort and conviction. “Sit in your cell as in paradise,” begins the Brief Rule that guides the Camaldolese monks.

Spiritual wisdom has long insisted on stability and perseverance to build a relationship with the Divine. Yet even with that wisdom in mind, our Christian heritage also tells us that there’s nothing like actually being there. From the earliest centuries, Christianity has had a vibrant tradition of pilgrimage to holy sites associated with the life of Jesus, the apostles, and the saints. Generations of Christians have experienced sacred places as windows to the divine.

A popular way of going on pilgrimage is joining an organized tour group of people traveling with the same intention. Every well-planned group pilgrimage involves some time when you are truly alone. These are occasions when we can be still. They are precious moments for reflection and to experience the unexpected without the need to share.

**How a Pilgrimage can be an opportunity for Spiritual Growth**

Travel can be overwhelming. Around every street corner, through every door dwells something that might inspire you, enlighten you, or change you. Constantly confronting the unexpected is perhaps one of the most electrifying and spiritual aspects of a pilgrimage. But like everything, there are drawbacks.
In the present age, more and more people are travelling around the world, some are doing it for fun, while others are doing it for work. Travel is important because it removes us from our routines and comforts, hurling us into a world and experience that often feels utterly out of our control. This is a good thing. Yet any traveler will tell you that at some point during your journey, there will come a time when the going gets rough. Sometimes, despite the amazing place you may find yourself, you simply can’t motivate or find the energy to do anything. Sometimes, all you desire is to be still, to stay in one place with some semblance of familiarity, and ignore the strange, whirling world just outside your door.

Having a few simple practices outside of your pilgrimage prayer schedule can make all the difference when trying to navigate the inevitable surprises and mysteries that pilgrimage puts in front of you.

Perhaps even more importantly, these practices will help you descend more deeply into the intended purpose for the journey you have undertaken. You might smell the air differently, or see those around you in a new light. You might discover a profound sense of peace, joy, or appreciation. You might indeed be transformed. If anything, by finding stillness on the road, insights and lessons will come. In one way or another, you will grow and learn, and that’s really what pilgrimage is all about.

You won’t hear about this in any Lonely Planet book or TripAdvisor article. These insights have been passed on to me from some of the most devoted and well-travelled pilgrims I’ve met from around the world. I apply them in my daily life on the road, and the increasingly rarely when I’m “at home.”

1. Slow Down

One of the only regrets I’ve had throughout my travels is not spending more time in certain places. Rapid-fire tours through towns or monuments does not do justice to the intent of your pilgrimage but has sadly become a style of travel that is popular today.

Not everybody can leave their jobs or families for months on end. Also, some people simply aren’t the type to enjoy long-term travel. If you have just two weeks, go to ONE place, and really absorb it. Don’t try to cram in (or consume) experiences.

2. Technology Fast

Tech. It’s all the rage these days. we love technology. we love the fact that it enables us to share our journeys and perspectives, and to stay connected with amazing people all over the world. Yet how often do we allow ourselves space away from it?

A practical way of aiding your commitment to slow down and to aid in clearing your mind a bit so you can be present to the unexpected is to redefine your relationship to technology, and become more mindful and aware of your surroundings. Try going out for the day and leaving your tech behind. Experiment with challenging yourself by setting boundaries on technology use. Maybe leave your phone behind, use Internet once a day, or have a specific time of day where you go online. Let the rest of your experience be tech free. The best part of any travel experience, be it a pilgrimage, mission trip, or a vacation is to see a place free of a camera lenses, with your just your eyes and ears and perspectives.

“...become more mindful and aware of your surroundings.”
3. Reflection and Meditation

Perhaps no group of people know impermanence more intimately than those who take time for reflection and meditation. Pilgrims are on pilgrimage to connect with the human past of the person who inspired our faith and helped shape our beliefs. The saints learned that life is impermanent and that all things must pass, just as pilgrims learn that they must, like St. Peter at the Transfiguration, come down off the mountain and go back to their everyday existence.

To travel in general is to embrace impermanence. Through reflection and meditation, you can learn to savor and be thankful for your journey to the holy place you are visiting.

Here’s the secret to reflective meditation: just do it. In travel and in life, there is rarely an ideal time or place to practice this amazingly simple act. The truth is that you don’t need to sit in your favorite chair, or have complete silence to be able to meditate on an experience. You don’t need to be in a church either, it can happen anywhere. Meditation will help you be more present on your journey, and help you to slow down, notice the details, and navigate swirl of feelings you may be experiencing as you away from the temporal realities of pilgrimage into the spiritual gifts of your journey. Without reflection and meditation a pilgrimage becomes superficial and lifeless.

4. Gratitude

It’s easy to get jaded and burnt out by either the group your traveling with, the food, the schedule, or the just the journey in general. But the important thing, and the hard thing, is to be grateful for all of it. Leaving the comfort of your home and undertaking a pilgrimage involves a lot of aspects that are less than memorable. Flying is no longer glamorous, and navigating cultural differences and linguistic barriers can be overwhelming after the honeymoon wears off. The glorious part is that traveling on pilgrimage can actually help you feel more grateful. There are countless ways to introduce a practice of gratitude into your pilgrimage but practicing daily gratitude for the experiences. Be they enlightening or frustrating, showing gratitude for your experiences on pilgrimage can remind you of the impermanence of life and underline the reasons you felt called to embark on a pilgrimage.

Whatever you do, and wherever you go, the practices of learning to slow down, fasting from technology or whatever stands in the way of your being present, reflecting on your day, and being grateful for the journey can open you up to the unexpected, where God can enter and transform you. Make a commitment to yourself to open your spiritual eyes and ears and all of your senses to absorb the unexpected. Take the time to integrate these few insights and watch your pilgrimage become a spiritual adventure.

SLOW DOWN | TECHNOLOGY FAST | REFLECTIVE MEDITATION | GRATITUDE
Greetings. A lot has changed for me in a week’s time! I’m sending a little commentary if you’d like to have an idea of my new home and environment. Here goes:

The OFM community here (in Turkey) has 2 houses: one in Istanbul and one in Izmir, a big city going south on the coast of the Aegean Sea (west coast of Turkey). We are 8 members: 2 Congolese, 2 Indonesians, 2 Italians, 1 Pakistani and myself. For this month I’m in the Istanbul house. We mostly use Italian and French in the house, a bit of English too. Not everyone can speak all 3 languages. Daily morning and evening prayer (lauds and vespers) are in Turkish, so not really possible for me yet to participate much, but daily mass in the chapel is in Italian. On the weekends there are masses in Italian, Spanish, English-French bilingual and Korean, with 1 mass in Turkish. Since Turkish now uses a Roman script (years ago it was written in Arabic), I can “mouth the words” of the breviary but I don’t know what I’m saying/praying!

Just outside our gate, we have tons of cafes and shops as our neighbors. Outside my bedroom window is the Russian consulate, and close by are the Italian and Dutch consulates too. Istiklal Street is for pedestrians only, but there’s an old tram line (still used) which runs along it. Walking on Istiklal Street has very much the feeling of being in a big European city with Mediterranean/Middle Eastern faces all about. Of course it’s not so surprising since Istanbul straddles both Europe and Asia; our house sits on the European side. If you go to Wikipedia (or any other online source, I suppose) and type “Santa Maria Draperis Church, Istanbul” you can read about the church we are attached to. The established church goes back to the year 1584 and the brochure here says the present church dates to 1769 (the structure having burned down a couple of times in the past). Just down the street the Conventual Franciscans have a bigger and more beautiful church, Sant’Antonio. The friars there come from Romania. Visitors stroll in from the busy street throughout the day; this isn’t a big tourist attraction, but when some people spot it and see the gate is open during the day, they wander in either to check it out or to pray. Later, I’m told by our guardian, we will have a schedule and take turns being “on duty” in the chapel in the afternoon to welcome visitors. From what I have noticed, there are people coming and going in the church all day long; many are Muslim women wearing their jihab (veil), so I guess they are curious to see what the inside is like. Turkey is considered a secular state, so women have the choice of wearing a jihab or not.

Our cook comes from Armenia and makes wonderful meals; there’s definitely a more Mediterranean flair to this cooking and I enjoy having pasta often as part of it. If I’m not careful I may gain weight easily here. And if I get really “homesick”, there’s a Burger King across the street from us! She (the cook) only speaks Armenian and Turkish, so at this point I can’t even directly compliment her on her cooking, only to say “çok lezzetli” (very delicious) in Turkish. But when I rub my belly she knows what I’m trying to convey! The seasons are basically comparable to those in the Midwest.

“...there are people coming and going in the church all day long.”
of the USA. These days a sweater or sweatshirt feels good in the house and going outside. One brother in the house showed me a video with snow from last year; as in the Midwest, it seems the amount of snow can really vary from one year to the next. I must say I’ll miss the year-round warmth of Thailand, but it’s also nice to experience the 4 seasons again. Time-wise Istanbul is 7 hours ahead of New York and 8 hours ahead of Chicago, St Louis and Houston.

On Tuesday eve, Oct 9, I went to a Taizé-style ecumenical prayer gathering at Sts Peter and Paul Dominican parish nearby. I was told it’s once a month; the core participants are Orthodox and Catholics, but some Protestants attend too. Songs were in English, German, French, Italian and Turkish. We have some “regulars” at our daily mass in our small house chapel at Santa Maria Draperis, most of whom are Italian. The other day I met a young lady from Chicago who works for Caritas Turkey (Catholic social services agency). Speaking of Chicago, last Monday a group of pilgrims (this is the “Land of St. Paul”, after all) from Chicago were here with their leader, a friar of ours from Memphis, TN. They invited us friars to dinner at their hotel, so I for one was happy to oblige. A good time was had by all.

On October 11 this diocese celebrated the feast of its 2 patrons, Saint John Chrysostom and St (Pope) John XXIII. We friars went to the cathedral for the mass. St John C was the Bishop of Constantinople (earlier times the name for Istanbul) and died in 407 AD. John XXIII was Bishop here for a while until he became a cardinal for Venice and then Pope in 1958. So there are 2 Johns, early and recent times, both of whom were pastors here.
On January 27, Franciscan Mission Service held its annual Re-Commissioning Mass celebrating three recently returned missioners Anna Klonowski, Cindy Mizes, and Misty Menis-Kyler, who lived in solidarity with the marginalized of Bolivia, Jamaica, and Guatemala, respectively, for two years.

The special Re-Commissioning Mass not only brought a close to the missioners’ time serving with FMS overseas, but it also concluded the missioners’ two-week Re-Entry Retreat, which was co-facilitated by FMS returned missioner Beth Riehle (El Salvador, 2006-2009) and Programs Manager Emily Norton.

The Re-Entry Retreat is a unique programmatic component that distinguishes FMS as an international mission organization. It offers returned missioners the opportunity to engage in guided individual reflection time, group sharing, and sessions such as, “Trauma and Violence in Mission,” “Gifts of the Journey,” “Reverse Culture Shock,” “Navigating Transitions” and “Being Faithful to Who You Have Become.” The central goal of Re-Entry is to provide returned missioners with a safe space to process their time overseas and begin to reflect on how they want to integrate their mission experiences and the Franciscan values into the next chapter of their lives.

“I [was] grateful for the opportunity to welcome the lay missioners back to Casa San Salvador [in Washington, DC],” shared Beth Riehle. “This sacred space is where they began their orientation and were commissioned to their mission sites. [The missioners were able] to unpack and share their mission stories, both the hardships and the joys. It was a blessing to accompanying them during this time of transition. Their stories of mission challenged me to continue to be faithful to my own call.”

Being faithful to one’s own call was a theme that FMS was intentional about integrating into this year’s Re-Commissioning Mass. This year’s ceremony was unique as it invited not only the recently returned missioners, but all FMS program alumni – those who served internationally and those who served in the United States – to verbally renew their commitment to serve alongside the marginalized, follow where Christ leads them, and continue breaking bread with people in new and different ways.

During the homily, Fr. Joe Nangle OFM, former FMS Co-Director emphasized that “overseas mission experiences prepare and challenge us for the rest of our lives” as we are called to “reverse mission,” a guiding principle of FMS in which returned missioners are called to continue sharing their mission spirit in the United States, advocating for peace and justice in home communities in the United States.

Fr. Joe shared how important it is for the FMS family to stay united as a community of faith and to encourage each other in the challenges of reverse mission. “The Gospel values that defined Christ’s mission are our mandate as well. We are no less called than Christ was to be the presence of the Lord in this time and this moment in our history.” How we live out this mandate that Christ also received is unique to each of
TOWARDS A MISSIONARY SPIRIT

Missioner Anna Klonowski shared how grateful she was to discover this through the FMS retreat and Mass: “One particularly impactful part for me was getting to meet and spend time with so many members of our extended FMS family—DC Service Corps alum, returned missioners, board members, and supporters. I saw so many inspiring examples of how to live out our shared Franciscan values, which motivates me to continue searching for the unique ways I am called to live as a Franciscan-hearted person.”

Fr. Brad Milunski, OFM Conv chair of the FMS Board of Directors, presided over the Recommissioning Mass and remarked, “Celebrating the re-commissioning of [recently] returned missioners and FMS program alumni at the Eucharist was a powerful way to bring the past, present, and future together as the Body of Christ and to realize that the call to mission continues here in the U.S. Joy, enthusiasm, and a sense of gratitude pervaded the whole celebration.”

The presence of the body of Christ was striking and powerful as upwards of twenty program participants stood up and reconfirmed their commitment to living out the Franciscan charism. Staff members were beaming with gratitude and pride as they facilitated the blessing over alumni.

“Standing with program alumni and re-committing ourselves to living out the Gospel values, reminded me that the mission of FMS does not stop when our service [term] is completed,” shared Joshua Maxey an alum of the DC Service Corps Program. “The journey continues as we are called to continue to share these values with those whom we encounter daily.”

As a part of the Re-Commissioning celebration, FMS invited its vibrant community of Board members, staff, formation presenters, current and former volunteers and missioners, and family and friends in attendance to a reception at Casa San Salvador, the FMS hospitality house. Current staff and volunteers organized a delicious breakfast potluck, to which guests contributed. The Franciscan charism permeated the space filled with joy and purpose, and one guest commented it felt like a large, family reunion.

Amy Brandt current FMS Communications Associate and DC Service Corp volunteer curated a gallery of framed photos that the missioners had taken during their time serving on mission. The depth of meaning of having the photos in the chapel was quite powerful. It was a beautiful way to remind guests that each person—our Bolivian, Guatemalan and Jamaican brothers and sisters—in the photo had a sacred story and was a part of the Body of Christ that Fr. Brad, Milunski, OFM, Conv highlighted.

Anna, Cindy, and Misty have been sent forth to begin the next chapter of their lives, never forgetting their lifelong call to mission. Please keep them and the communities in which they served alongside in your prayers as they take their next steps in their ministry journeys.
Special Religious Classes

AT ST. MARY MISSION IN TOHATCHI, NM

Sister Pat Bietsch, OSF | St. Mary Mission

Special Religious Education Development (SPRED) is a religious program that helps people with special needs and abilities. Sr. Pat Bietsch an Oldenburg Franciscan directs and helps the special friends who come for prayer and spiritual guidance. She has a volunteer group of four people from the parish who are willing to help. Some volunteers come every time and have experienced a special bond with their friend. The SPRED program has been in existence since 1994. The local group homes and Tohatchi Area of Opportunity Services (TAOS organization) have cooperated with bringing the friends to and from the Church.

Special Friends come from Tohatchi and Gallup, NM group homes. They arrive in a van and are accompanied by a driver and chaperone. The driver and chaperone also participate in the session. The session involves a quiet calming activity, input session by the director, an art or craft to follow up the lesson and finally a prayer circle around the bible which includes music and songs. Everyone enjoys a sugar free jello treat followed by a closing prayer.

Volunteers walk their special friend to the van to say good-bye until the next time. All went well and all felt the beautiful goodness and holiness of our Special Friends.

LEFT PHOTO: Bernice Owens also volunteers at SPRED and has a special bond with our friends. Pauline, center, is a special friend and likes to help too. Jen smiles, paints and listens to the lessons. She is very active in the program.

RIGHT PHOTO: Bob Ketelsen was a volunteer at St. Mary’s in Tohatchi and still loves to help our Special Friends when he returns for a visit. He loves to make Vicki smile.
Valentina Benallie, a volunteer from St. Mary Mission Parish in Tohatchi, left, is helping Cecilia our Special Friend with her water coloring. Sr. Pat Bietsch, center, directs and shares the Gospel message during the class.
Very recently, I participated in a youth weekend. I was concerned about the remarks that a young man made about Muslims. To me, his words were like rude amalgams. I asked him if he had already met a Muslim or a family from that religion. He justified himself by saying that he didn’t, and then, he continued with his stereotyped comments that, in my opinion, seem very offensive. The people around us didn’t know how to react. With tact and ease, I pulled out my cellphone to show him a photo. I asked him calmly what he saw on that photo. He quickly stared at my device: “They’re all a bunch of terrorists!” I asked him to pay close attention to the photo. Half a second later, he realized that I was also on the photo!

I told him that I didn’t see the same thing as he did that maybe if he met a Muslim or a Muslim family, he would understand or see things differently. Of course, he tried to cover those words with the cloak of mockery, which is somewhat how ordinary racism is. As for me, I really wanted him to show some interest, by asking me who the family on the photo was. However, he didn’t do it! You certainly understand that such conversation leaves a cold ambiance in a group. He left the room for a few minutes, maybe to regain his composure or to try to understand what just happened.

**An Answer Against Fear**

In fact, that weekend I was asked to conduct a workshop on: the pacific crusade of Saint Francis; a conversion itinerary. No one went back over that event. It’s commonplace, but it bears witness of a reality, our fear of the other. As I already stated in my speech, without the other, it is very difficult to convert oneself.

This fear exists when we address the issue of migration and welcoming the other whether a refugee or an asylum seeker. Often, that same fear comes out when no encounter happens with the other that arrives, so what takes over, it’s not the situation of the person who needs help, but rather the potential problems that she can give us.

Now, let me go back to that photo, because the people who witnessed that small controversy during that weekend, didn’t ask me neither who that family was. In that particular situation, that photo is important because it became, in a certain way, my answer when facing that fear of the other. That fear that reduces the other to representations or prejudices even though he’s much more than an idea that we can make about himself.
On that photo, a Syrian refugee family accompanied me. We were in an apartment in Germany, in the suburbs of Ludwigshafen. That family is part of the six million people who left their cities and villages because bombs were falling from the sky upon their heads. Some of them found refuge in Lebanon, others in Jordan, or in Turkey. Some of them risked themselves by taking a shabby makeshift boat in order to travel to Europe and find refuge. Many of them, felt a great desire to redo their lives, in a different environment than the one of fear and insecurity.

In 2010, when I was in Syria, it was a good place to live. If I know that family, it is because I was invited to spend some time in that small village in the south-west part of Aleppo. Eight years later, who would have thought that that family would invite me again to “their house”, which I will call pragmatically a provisional home, because their status is precarious, even if the German government fulfills all their “needs”.

During those ten days, which were for us like a reunion, we talked a lot, of many things, beautiful things, sad things and the true challenges that we currently faced. A true friendship made this possible!

When the war broke out and foreign interests began to arm the rebel militia groups, my Syrian friend contacted me to ask for help. I asked information on the different programs available and on how I could sponsor him. I even asked my parish of Saint Rose of Lima, in Laval, to help me. At that time, I was going to enter the Franciscan community and I couldn’t stand as a guarantor for the procedures that were going to be undertaken. Meanwhile, the battles in the region of Idlib intensified and the family had to seek refuge in Turkey. We continued the procedures, but because a large number of refugees were arriving in Turkey, the Canadian embassy didn’t handle the asylum requests anymore. As for us, we undertook the procedure for a private sponsorship. The parish started to collect some funds, but also the necessary items to furnish an apartment. My friend’s wife was pregnant and we hoped that they will be able to come before the child’s birth, but unfortunately, their request was rejected, because their address didn’t correspond to their place of residence. We tried to explain that they were refugees in constant movement, that their precarious situation forced them to travel, but it was useless.

The living conditions were deteriorating in Turkey, so my friend decided to travel alone on a boat towards Greece. Then, it took him about 24 days to reach Germany. He started a blog in which he mentioned his whereabouts and the difficulties he faced, so that he could guide those who also intended to travel. Eventually, one after the other, the members of his family travel in order to meet him, but unfortunately, not all of them were able to reach their destination.

Meanwhile, we undertook a second sponsorship request. It was about to be attained, but once again, it was unsuccessful, because the Canadian embassy in Vienna, who was handling the request, rejected it at the very last step, on the pretext that the family’s situation was already regular in Germany. The members of Parliament were informed about that deceiving situation. Michel Bouchard, the parish priest, put some pressure, but the decision of the civil servants remained the same. However, we conducted all the procedures well. Even so, the parish stood firm to support that family and offered them financial assistance.

The photo that I showed, marks my second encounter with that family, natives from the village of Al Barra. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the parish of Saint Rose of Lima. They made this special encounter possible by contributing, despite the refusal of our government, to their new attempt to take root in a land that has not been granted to them yet.

That’s the meaning of that photo!
As Franciscans, a fraternity in mission, our way of life is not simply informative, but is profoundly performative. Of course, a missionary does not simply come into a foreign country and only give. Rather, they also receive in many ways through the relationship that are developed. Here in Jamaica, we friars spend a great deal of time building relationships in the communities where we serve and joyfully witness to the hope only God can give. This witness is about looking beyond the current struggles and difficulties of life in a country that has a long history of racial violence, cannot provide the dignity of work to many of its citizens, is celebrating just over fifty years of independence, and that has a complete lack of infrastructure as well as access to basic services like education, medical care, justice system, and food/clean water. We friars in Jamaica preach a joyful hope looking toward the future, while making all the difference in how we live today.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Montego Bay is a small rural diocese, with 32 churches, 14 priests, 18 sisters, 6 deacons, 2 brothers, 5 Deacon candidates, 1 priestly candidate and consists of under 2% of the population. Although our diocese is small by the numbers, we cover almost 1,500 square miles and are spread throughout five civil parishes.

In the six churches and two friaries where we Franciscans live and minister, we friars are the social safety net in the western part of Jamaica. Each day we feed well over a hundred people, help over two hundred students attend school, work to provide medical assistance, support the widow and orphan, visit the imprisoned and sick, and many other good works. We are doing all this while part of our diocese is under a State of Emergency and violent crimes are increasing.

For me personally, this means being a pastor at two “bush” churches, St. Julie Billiart and St. Mary’s, in rural Westmoreland, Jamaica. These communities are deeply Catholic and have grown out of the Churches themselves. As a newly ordained friar, I have spent considerable time and energy engaging the local communities where I am assigned. This has allowed me to learn about the hopes and dreams as well as the griefs and anxieties of the people I serve. This has also allowed me personally to be touched by the deep sense of faith, perseverance, and love that the people have.

Everything we are working for at St. Julie Billiart and St. Mary’s Catholic Churches begins with our faith. As these churches develop missionary disciples of Jesus Christ we are renewing, revitalizing, and reengaging the local communities. This has meant an intentional focus on developing a Jamaican Catholic Church experience. Having foreign missionaries can help a local
community to gain a broader understanding of the universal Church. Yet it can also mean that the missionary comes in and, consciously or not, impose the local customs of their homeland on the missions. Growing up with fish fry’s and wakes in Central Ohio did not prepare me for Caribbean Crusades! As the members of these churches and I grow as missionaries of hope, we rejoice in God’s saving power, persevere in faith and charity, never lose heart, and help others to look to the future with confidence.

The local economies are stagnant and there are few opportunities other than subsistence farming. We have been able to work with farmers and fishermen to give out loans in order to help them buy needed fishing equipment, build chicken coops and purchase a ram goat as a way of helping to provide economic opportunities to young families that are simply not possible otherwise.

Education is a major issue in Jamaica, as only 25% of the students graduate high school. And most of those who do graduate high school leave the island to find job opportunities in other countries. There are seven schools under the pastoral area where I work, two of the schools were just in the finals of the National Junior Schools Challenge Quiz. These schools struggle to provide adequate access to educational services for the students. We have been working with the schools to remove obstacles that stop students from attending daily and also help provide breakfast and lunch to students who cannot afford to eat.

Access to basic medical care is unavailable in the bush, the closest medical clinic is 25 minutes away and you would have to arrive by 6:00 am to be seen by a doctor. So one of the churches is currently struggling to open a rural medical clinic on church grounds to address this need. As we work to open this medical clinic, we are already bringing in nurses and doctors to help the people in the community. As the clinic develops, we will be able to provide more services and address greater needs.

We also work to bring student groups to Jamaica to allow young people the opportunity to grow in Christian discipleship and witness the power of Christ’s Gospel through encountering Jamaicans and works of charity. This allows the students to put their faith into action in concrete and exciting ways. It also allows the students to develop an awareness of the social and cultural diversity of the Catholic Church and Franciscan’s missionary efforts.

“We friars in Jamaica preach a joyful hope looking toward the future, while making all the difference in how we live today.”
The SJBP friars built and staffed St. Mary of the Angels (SMA) Church and Elementary School in the Upper Ninth Ward of New Orleans in 1925 and continue ministering to the present. Along with the SMA Church and Elementary School the friars also ministered to the mission churches in the Delta with the large SMA Friary accommodating the Delta mission friars for fraternal and material needs. Since 1991 the friars no longer ministered in the Delta. Two major events altered SMA church population. 1965 was the period of Integration of our church and elementary school and many people migrated causing a big drop in overall population but also a gradual increase in African-American membership. 2005 was the massive flooding and destruction to our church buildings and neighborhood homes from Hurricane Katrina causing many people to relocate to other cities and states.

Some years after Katrina, with FEMA funds and generous benefactors and volunteers, our SMA Church and Friary and School were cleaned and repaired. Our school did not re-open as an elementary school but we have two tenants. On the 1st floor is the Catholic Charities Head Start Program for children and on the 2nd floor is the College Track Program for high school students. Both programs serving the educational needs of our neighborhood youth and offering opportunities with much success.

The 300 year old City of New Orleans is described as a “Gumbo Pot” of various cultures. Our SMA Church environment reflects the African American culture and the Sunday Gospel Choir vibrates with drums, key board, saxophone, tambourines and bells to move the church members to sway, clap and sing to the rhythm. Secular and religious celebrations are core to the New Orleans cultures. Liturgical celebrations for African and African American saints and ancestors are held. Parish liturgical ministers are very active in various roles. Our members are promoting local religious and priests to be saints. Our SMA community is annually represented at the Archbishop Lyke Black Catholic Conference and other events promoting Black Catholic presence in our Church.

Our SMA Church membership is made up of approximately 280 African American senior citizens and many were baptized and educated at SMA School. We bond together at SMA as a caring family and are grateful to worship with joy and dignity. Finances is a concern especially with maintenance and salaries. Nevertheless the members take responsibility with fund raisers and weekly contributions. Since Katrina we have a twinning covenant relationship that is based on mutual sharing of gifts and resources with churches in New Orleans and other States.

SMA friary has one friar pastor and three friars in residence and willing to serve where needed especially to the Poor Clares and Secular Franciscan Fraternities. Our friary has 6 rooms on the 2nd floor with a rec room and a chapel. On the 1st floor is the guardian and parish offices with conference room, food pantry and guest room. Also there is a laundry room, kitchen and dining room with connecting common room.
Some social concern involvements in our neighborhood include the “bunny friend” association for community safety issues and involvement with prison ministry through the Micah Project as well as gathering pledges from citizens to vote. SMA justice and charity commission is involved in neighborhood Peace Walks and involvement in the respect life movement joining church rallies near abortion clinics and memorial services in the cemetery for the unborn. Canned and dry goods are offered at Mass and placed in our food pantry for the needs of our neighbors and neighboring churches. SMA members also help at the St. Jude feeding center serving meals to 300 street persons.

Our SMA community welcomes all friars and visitors with our warm New Orleans style hospitality. During your visit you may decide to join our community and ministries. Our website is smaneworleans.org