

## THE FRANCISCAN WAY: 2021 AND BEYOND

### INTRODUCTION

I've thought a lot about the title of this presentation and its three elements: the "way," "Franciscan," and the element of time, "2021 and beyond. "

I've been a Franciscan for more than half a century (!), so what I'll share is what I've learned along the way!

Let's start with the word, WAY and its modifier, FRANCISCAN.

Way can mean route or journey — obviously TO somewhere or something—and it can also mean HOW WE ACT along the way. The route I'm on leads to a world that's good for everyone, a world of justice and peace in which all belong. Since you're tuned into my presentation, I'm assuming that you agree that that's where we're all headed, and in which we're all involved.

Our route to a good world for all —God's world— is peopled by all kinds and numbers of individuals and groups moving at their own pace, their own rhythm, and their own inspiration, buoyed by their prophets, models, and myths. We Franciscans intersect with many of these co-journeymen: we walk together, join voices and projects, and form lasting relationships.

What makes us different, not better, is who **we've** come from —Francis, Clare, and the movement that developed — and **what** we've learned, and continue to learn, from their experience. And that influences **how we act**. As Clare of Assisi reminded us, from her letter to Agnes of Prague, "Be mindful of your purpose always looking to your beginning."

### **MY JOURNEY SO FAR. I've been asked to speak about my Franciscan journey, so I'll weave elements of the Franciscan way into my story.**

My beginning as a Franciscan happened at the end of the 50s, soon after I graduated from a high school in Cleveland taught by the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis, a Franciscan congregation. I had admired the sisters, impressed by their friendliness, excellence in teaching, and commitment to their students. I decided during my senior year that I wanted to serve God as a religious sister in their community. So, I did. I moved happily, most of the time, through the stages of formation, through undergraduate and graduate university courses equipping me to teach biology, other sciences, and French, and launched into the very satisfying work of high school teaching.

Now, I knew that our community was a Franciscan one, but to be quite honest, Franciscan was, at that time, a title, special liturgies and celebratory food during Francis and Clare's feast days, and selected legends or quotes from the saints. I was a Franciscan in title; it would take another decade before I became one in reality.

The transition from titular Franciscan to real one happened in two stages: first an initiation to poverty, drugs, alcohol, and misery while living and working in the Bronx, New York during the late 60s and early 70s — which, figuratively, opened my eyes; then, in the mid 70s, while working in a poverty area of Chicago, making the amazing and life-altering connection between my life and work in Uptown with the experience of Francis, Clare, and the early movement, some 800 years earlier!

Several particulars on how happened, what evolved, and lessons drawn can, I hope, give some indication of the Franciscan way beyond 2021. Those particulars will form the body of this presentation.

Two important “side notes:”

First, you should know that I’m an activist! Three passages I read decades ago still prod me on.

Here they are:

On the sands of hesitation bleach the bones of countless millions who, on the dawn of victory sat down to wait, and waiting, died!

If you see a problem, you are ordained by the Spirit to work for its solution

And

this on a poster of a mamma duck with her ducklings that decorated my wall for some years: Do something: lead, follow, or get out of the way!

That will give you an idea of me!

Second, I believe that real change happens in a movement, with others. Certainly, Clare and Francis were leaders, but they existed and acted *with* their sisters and brothers. We don’t speak solely of those two individuals, however saintly and inspirational: we include the Franciscan movement.

I had mentioned that my Franciscan transformation began in the Bronx in the late 60s. For those of us of a certain age, the 60s was a time of social upheaval and change, including in the Catholic Church. I was part of a group of five sisters who, following the call of the Second Vatican Council to return to their roots, proposed and won approval for an experiment to build Christian community through concrete personal witness and service. We wanted to live among the poor of the Bronx and serve them as Franciscans. At that time there were no other Franciscans there, much less members of the SSJ-TOSFs. Soon other sisters of the congregation, in other areas of the country, sought permission to “launch into the deep.” That group of Franciscans grew and became the St. Francis Region of the congregation, empowered by the General Chapter to continue Franciscan life and service as a self-governing region within the community.

In a sense, and to put it metaphorically, all of us in what became the St. Francis Region had left Assisi: we had moved from a structured, ordered existence in basically a middle-class society that took care of those who belonged, its own “citizens,” to a foreign land where with eyes, hands, and hearts wide-open, we learned from our new sisters and brothers.

### **I BELIEVE FRANCISCANS HAVE TO LEAVE ASSISI, whatever and wherever theirs may be.**

I continued my Franciscan transformative process in Chicago, moving with four sisters from my community to Uptown in 1972. At that time Uptown was one square mile of the world bounded by Lake Michigan on the east; Clark Avenue on the west; Irving Park on the south, and Foster Avenue on the north. It was the United Nations in miniature: Appalachian whites, African Americans, Hispanics — Puerto Rican and Mexican—, Native Americans, Asians, Eastern Europeans. And, except for those in buildings lining a stretch of lakefront territory, these diverse peoples shared the common stark reality of poverty, its marks everywhere. There were currency exchanges aplenty, for the majority of Uptowners lacked bank accounts. Storefront offices of temporary or daily pay work agencies hawked daily employment needs. Twice each day, at dawn and late afternoon, busloads of unskilled and unemployed workers were moved west from Uptown to factories in outlying areas where the men and women put in an eight-hour work shift. For about \$20 pay. Better than nothing, and a possible supplement to an inadequate welfare check.

However, there were other groups who *chose* Uptown *because* of its poverty and diversity as a place to live and people to serve. The Catholic Workers had a house of hospitality down one street; several small groups of Franciscans lived in apartments scattered throughout the area.

We learned to walk past the men curled in a semi-fetal position on the streets sleeping off some cheap alcohol; avoid the eyes of panhandlers; disregard the sexual and sexist comments of guys hanging out at the corner. You could learn volumes about a neighborhood by its streets. Uptown's sidewalks caught the spew of its people's lives. They also carried and absorbed the weaving walk of the neighborhood drunks, the shuffle of the many elderly in the area, the hesitant gait of mentally and emotionally disturbed women and men living in the local half-way houses, and the glide of wheelchairs. For unlike the city's suburbs which hid or refused "undesirables," Uptown was an open book.

Alice, one of the Franciscan women with whom I lived, and I decided we wanted to get to know the kids in our neighborhood. After all, the two of us were teachers, experienced with both teenagers and young adults! What better way, we decided, than to volunteer at Canterbury House, a drop-in center at the end of our block for Uptown teens. The center, a project of the local Catholic church, St. Thomas of Canterbury, opened its doors at 2:30 pm —after school hours. Most of the teens that frequented the center were school dropouts but knew enough to remain in their apartments until after school hours!

Uptown housed hundreds of young people who had dropped out or been pushed out of high school. According to specifics from the local public high school, at any given time there were about 2,100 dropouts in the area of Uptown.

So, at Canterbury House the two of us played numerous games of Ping-Pong with the teens, engaged in casual chitchat, and grew comfortable with one another. One day I raised a question that had been nagging me: I asked, "Why aren't you going to school?" Their response, simply put, was that Senn, the area's public high school, had not met their needs. They wanted teachers who knew them and who cared for them. They wanted a say in designing both policies and programs, and in evaluating them. They wanted courses that recognized and addressed the world they knew as well as stretched them beyond it, and they wanted all of that to happen in classes small enough to facilitate individual attention and intimate enough to encourage group interaction. Further, they wanted everyone to get along: no gangs, no drugs, no fighting.

It was a big order, but we did just that! With the need right before our eyes, with encouragement and support from our local community, our future students, the parish, and a few social activists from our neighborhood, we developed and launched Prologue. Prologue was the name voted on by all for this new alternative high school that we would build together. Prologue fit with Franciscan!

We opened our doors on the third floor of an office building on Lawrence Avenue in 1973 with 25 students and 4 teachers and a total operating budget of \$20,000 donated by our congregation. (In the 40 years of its existence, Prologue would expand to three other sites, and graduate hundreds of young people.) We were all qualified (with master's degrees, and in Alice's case, a PhD) and our school was accredited, first by a local Catholic high school and then through the North Central Association. Throughout the 18 years I taught at Prologue, my students learned —and so did I. Major policies were developed through discussion and decision of the Prologue community, students and staff. There was student and parent representation on the Board of Directors. Since teachers were required to live in the neighborhood, Uptown soon became everyone's community: its problems and strengths were ours as well. We even practiced a kind of alternative economics: education was a right, so no student fee — and teachers were salaried according to need (those with families received more). We celebrated birthdays, alternative holidays (like International Women's Day), graduations, and we mourned together for losses among us or within our community. The hardest for me during those years was attending the wakes and funerals of 10 of my former students, most of their deaths resulting from gang violence.

Prologue was a project founded by two Franciscans, and all who became part of the Prologue family breathed in that same spirit!

A few years into my 20 years in Uptown, Chicago, 18 of them with Prologue, I joined a small group of Franciscans from the area, religious and lay, to learn about and discuss the foundations of the Franciscan movement from David Flood, a Franciscan historian who, at that time, also lived in Uptown. We met weekly in the living room of our apartment on Kenmore Avenue and heard the story of Francis and Clare as we had not heard it before. But one that made sense to all of us working in the area mainly as social workers or teachers who daily confronted the injustices of our society and the resulting suffering and the frustrations of the people who we knew as sisters and brothers. We saw a Francis and Clare, and others in that initial movement, who walked out of Assisi with its institutionalized privilege and exclusion to build a new world where the economics they developed, their relationships, religion and service contributed to the good of all.

At some point that transformative journey of the early Franciscans clicked with my own, and I really became a Franciscan!

During a meeting one evening, someone asked where we could find other Franciscan sources that linked Franciscan history with the ongoing work for social justice. There weren't any, we learned. Well, we said, we should do something about that! At that point, David invited us to write our perception of the changes in society, including the church and Franciscan institutions, since Vatican II, and bring it to the next week's meeting. Four of us did so: Tom Grady, Alice Trebatoski, David Flood, and myself. In the days and weeks that followed, the four of us met to talk about it and how we might continue through the written word — through some sort of publication—, that amazing connection between what we understood as a radical Franciscan heritage and the contemporary pursuit of a better, more just and peaceful world. The discussions were lively, at times heated, and not easy. Obstacles were many: we were only four and Tom would soon return to Brooklyn, David would be on the move assisting other Franciscan communities, and Alice and I were full-time involved with Prologue. Add to that the impediments of finances, production and distribution. We didn't have all the answers and were on the verge of calling it quits. But such a publication *was* needed. After one such dispiriting meeting, I remember sitting outside on the steps of our apartment building, in tears. Later I told the others that if we were convinced that this project was needed, and we were willing to help create it, we should begin — without all the particulars answered. We could work it out.

We agreed, and we did. Alice came up with the name, Haversack. Check out the two references in Scripture from Luke (10:4; 22:36): one that says to take nothing for your journey, ...including a haversack; the other that warns that in these evil times make sure you have your haversack! (A haversack is like a backpack with food for the journey.) Actually, while we did find the biblical references, we chose it because we just liked the name!

So, *Haversack*, a Franciscan Review, was birthed in September 1977.

We set our educational policy in that initial issue, asserting,

*"We see ourselves as men and women in the late 1970s confronted with the task of making meaning in a world come unhinged. We are doing so. In the process, we are making a Franciscanism for the times, outside the institutional definitions which have contained it since the 1220s."*

In the 21 years of its existence, *Haversack* grew, starting from a small number of Franciscans from our own congregations and those of acquaintances and friends involved in various ways to improving our society and expanding a large and diverse group of religious and lay women and men going the same way, on the same journey. By 1999, the year we ended *Haversack*, we had reached individuals in 37 countries and welcomed the contribution of over 200 authors.

Our themes for the various issues scanned the breath of topics relevant at the time, like AIDS, economics, the environment, health care, education, church, racism, feminism, formation, peace, and politics — to name several. We also sought and published the stories of struggles of developing nations, finally handing over one issue per year to be developed by individuals from a particular country. And, in every issue there was a link with Franciscan history.

(As I flipped through the content of past issues of Haversack in preparation for this presentation, I realized with some sadness that although gains have been made, the concerns we raised in Haversack's pages two decades ago have not been solved, and Franciscan voices once raised through our pages in reflection, analysis, protest and, in some cases, celebration are, for the most part, silent.)

But during the 21 years of its existence, Haversack became more than a magazine: it became a community! Our readers and contributors formed the core of our project. We doubled the editorial production staff to eight, and enjoyed lively planning discussions (sometimes debates) as well as good food and drink! We developed a more efficient means of production and improved the look of the review. And, we launched yearly Haversack conferences, focusing on a vital issue that would draw a diverse group of Franciscans and friends from inside or outside of Chicago (even outside the U.S.) to Prologue's lounge. Afterwards, we would share the conference's discussion and reflection in Haversack's pages.

Through Haversack, those of us who left — or were attempting to leave — Assisi, found companionship. These included Franciscan, religious and lay, as well as many individuals who drew their inspiration from other sources. We were, in fact, going the same way, and through Haversack we found encouragement, insight, and companionship.

With Haversack, the Franciscan world had opened up for me.

Haversack ended in 1999. By that time, I had married another Franciscan, Jean-François Godet, also one of Haversack's editors and a Franciscan historian, and we continued on the Franciscan way, without title or initials, in the "secular" world, first in Cleveland, Ohio, and later —and at present— in the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains, rural Allegany, New York!

So, what is the essence of that Franciscan way we're on? Two words, excerpted from the life and writings of Francis and Clare, encapsulate it best: *miser cordia* and *fraternitas*. The words are in Latin because that was the language they were written in, but the meaning of each is much more profound and interconnected than the usual translation of mercy and fraternity. *Fraternitas* recognizes the essential nature of our relationships: we are a community of sisters and brothers who do mercy (*miser cordia*). We serve and we receive from one another. When Francis and his brothers served those with leprosy, when Clare and her sisters cared for the sick, all of them, whether needing care or giving it, benefited.

Here in our 21<sup>st</sup> century world, *fraternitas* urges us to recognize as sister, as brother, not only those members sharing our warm and familiar socio-economic and relational cocoon, but also—and more forcibly— to seek out those on the outside: those who may live in depressed areas and must deal with poverty's injustices, those who are stigmatized because of their race, ethnicity, gender preference, religion or politics, those who don't belong for whatever the reason in our usual circles. And recognizing them, our brothers and sisters, to do mercy, *miser cordia*: both serving and being served.

Recently, I learned that a Franciscan we know who's married and has a family, became the executor and trustee of his uncle's estate. As a teacher in a university, he followed his inspiration from two men named Francis (the saint and the pope) and established a foundation with his inheritance that would provide funding for educational programming that serves marginalized students in St. Louis.

Another lay Franciscan and university professor volunteers weekly at a local hospice. I think she's

done so for years. In a recent Facebook entry, she described the exchange with one of the women in hospice and closed with this invitation to Facebook friends: "If you have ever thought about volunteering at a hospice, please do. If you want to talk about it, I'd be happy to do so. Hospice care is time intensive. That doesn't mean you need to give all your time. For me, it means 3 hours a week. These are usually the most astonishing three hours I spend each week because I arrive ready for any teacher."

**When you're Franciscan (Jean-François says when you catch the Franciscan virus!), you'll find these sisters and brothers wherever you live, and you'll respond!**

I'm talking with you from our home in Allegany, which sits in Cattaraugus County in the Southern Tier of New York. Our county occupies a large area, its 78,000 people scattered within hollows, villages, towns, and small cities. It is one of the poorest counties in New York with a large number of the elderly, and one of the unhealthiest, (ranking number 60 out of 62 counties in health outcomes). It is also an area of beauty, both in its natural surroundings and in its people. Many of them are uninsured or without adequate health care, frequenting the Dollar Store for food, and lacking transportation. In Olean, the largest city in the county with a little under 15,000 people, there is one bus that stops hourly at specific sites six days a week. At one of the government housing complexes for those elderly or disabled, 75 percent of the people are without a car.

What is a Franciscan to do who lives among sisters and brothers in need? Do *something*, of course! We did, in three areas of need: health care, nutrition, and community.

Health care is a need that extends beyond our county borders to our state and our nation; the solution involves action at all those levels. Some 15 years ago, I initiated what became the Health Care Access Coalition, a grassroots coalition of men and women on the same journey as we Franciscans.

**Here is our Mission Statement:**

***Believing in health care as a right, the Health Care Access Coalition works to promote affordable, comprehensive, and quality health care for all through education and advocacy.***

*We engage in actions that address specific health care needs in rural Cattaraugus County as well as advocate at both state and national level for the legislative/systemic change necessary to bring about universal health care.*

We've gathered and publicized the stories of those in our area who have suffered or continued to suffer from inadequate health care, held several educational programs, and collected and delivered over 1,000 signatures from our neighbors urging Congress to lower prescription drug costs.

Our proximity to St. Bonaventure University and students in the health professions department bolstered our coalition with youth! During this pandemic all of us were able help our County Health Department with COVID related work. We kept the telephone lines busy, registering the many members of our community without computers or Internet access for a COVID-19 test or vaccination.

Two other needs of our people: inadequate nutrition, resulting in high rates of obesity and diabetes, and lack of transportation spurred the second Franciscan project: Veggie Wheels.

Each week during the summer we volunteers pick up vegetables and fruit from local farms (whom we've paid with grants we've written), drive to designated sites, and distribute the produce to low-income families and individuals living in government housing throughout the county.

We get to know them, chit-chatting as well teaching or demonstrating the preparation of veggies, sharing recipes, and welcoming some of them as sister and brother Veggie Wheels volunteers!

Often, someone not on the Veggie Wheels team will comment on the good we do. They don't realize, although I try to make it clear, that I —and we—receive much more than we give.

I imagine Clare of Assisi with her work of healing and food from the sisters' garden had a similar experience!

Before launching into the future, that is, the Franciscan way *beyond 2021*, I'll comment on a recent community project, the third on my list that, I believe, also has some bearing on our projections of a Franciscan way.

More than two years ago I read *Being Mortal* by Atul Gawande. There is much to reflect on in those pages about aging, increasing needs as we age, concerns of our caregivers, and dying. But, for me, the most significant was the question that this author, a doctor and a son, concerned about the needs of his patients and his father, posed: to himself and to those for whom he cared: The question is.... HOW DO YOU WANT TO LIVE?

I am old. So is my husband, and so are most of our friends. Like most of us, we live independently, happily, and are able, thus far, to take care of our needs and our home. Through Zoom and now, thank God, through personal contact, we find companionship and friendship, social involvement, mental stimulation, and, for some of us, shared reflection on our Franciscan and Christian roots. At some point we know we'll need help, either with house or personal needs.

So, to answer the question posed by Dr. Gawande, that is how I want to live: in our own home, with resources as need arises, and with others —in community. This brings me to how my third Franciscan project evolved.

Because of that same book, I came upon the Village-to-Village Network. I learned that in 2004, a group of people in Boston, MA, had raised a similar question — and came up with an answer by establishing a membership based, non-profit organization to help its members continue to remain in their own homes and age well and vibrantly by providing access to necessary resources and opportunities to engage with others, thus preventing isolation. The Beacon Hill Village was the first in the network; today, there are some 273 Villages.

Our Enchanted Mountains Village is now member of the network— in development! The organizing effort has taken almost two years, slowed by the pandemic. Two years ago, I along with a small group of friends, visited co-founders and the executive director of an existing Village in Ithaca, a 2-hour drive away. We returned home at the end of that informative and energizing day revved up to begin to build a Village here in our community! At this point we are incorporated as a nonprofit organization, have produced bylaws and elected a board of directors, and maintain a monthly calendar of social events for the more than 60 folks, 55 and older, thus far on our list of contacts. A survey we distributed recently will help us determine needs, resources, and volunteer potential. Our Enchanted Mountains Village is a wonderful and Franciscan work in progress!

This presentation has been peppered (or, maybe I should say salted!) with several examples of *misericordia* and *fraternitas* — compassion and community, most of them cited because this Franciscan was involved! You'll notice that in none of the examples am I acting alone. Having left that metaphoric Assisi, I'm on my way to a better world *with others*, many of them Franciscan, many not. My Franciscan companions and I are prodded, inspired, and energized by sister Clare, brother Francis, their contemporaries and ours. We remember Clare's words from her Form of Life:

*"The sisters, to whom the Lord has given the grace of working, shall work faithfully and lovingly...at work which contributes to the whole and for the common good."* (Clare of Assisi, Form of Live, Chap. 7) We keep her words in mind, as well as those of others in the movement, both then and now.

My final comments delve into an area that does not yet exist, except in potency: a Franciscan future. After all, the title of this event *is* "The Franciscan Way: 2021 and Beyond." Know that I am definitely not a seer, and I have no crystal ball!

History has shown us that not every good movement or project or purpose endures. For example, we know that penitential movement of the early Middle Ages that predated Francis and Clare ended, or rather was subsumed into what has become the Franciscan movement.

However, the Franciscan movement *has* existed, with its highs and lows, for over 800 years! For instance, at present there are some 350,000 secular Franciscans worldwide and hundreds of churches, educational facilities, and people bearing titular evidence of Franciscan heritage. Beyond the name, I believe the key to the longevity of the movement's reality — and to possibilities for the future — lies in ACTIVE MEMORY. We need to remember, and we need to act. In the movie, *News of the World*, Johanna advised Captain Kid: "To move forward, you need to remember." Through the past 8 plus centuries women and men, have reflected on the lives of those in the early movement, also leaving their Assisi and serving in compassionate community. They are religious people and lay people; those with and those without initials after their name. They are distinguished by *how they live, how they serve. Fraternitas; misericordia.*

So, will the Franciscan way continue beyond the present, for maybe another 800 years? May I suggest that that's the wrong question? What we should ask one another and ourselves is — how can we NOW help build a world of sisters and brothers who care for and serve one another? Each of us can, in our own way and given our circumstances, seek out those not part of an inclusive world, and do what we can to include them. We all have limitations, and we all have strengths. We can focus on the global situation, the political divisions, or on our city, state, nation, or neighborhood. In each we can find people in need and ways to serve. (Prayer, too, is service.) As we do that, with our Franciscan relatives and others, we may form new structures, new joint ventures, and we may drop old names for new ones that fit a new reality. So, whether or not the word Franciscan is ultimately attached, know that you and those on the way with you breathe in and spread the same Spirit as did those early Franciscans. That is what is important!

I close with Francis' words, "*What is mine I have done; what is yours may Christ teach you*"  
(Bonaventure, *Life of St. Francis*, XIV 3)

Thank you!

Athena Godet-Calogeras