

December 2015

In this year of many travels, the month of November found me at "home" - that is, in Ottawa - where I grew up - with my parents. And it is my parents who are the primary object of this time. I simply want to connect with them. I left home when I was 19 and never lived in Ottawa again. Most of that time has been in the west and with the Franciscans. In the last 36 years, then, my visits home to my parents have often been only once a year.

Normally I see my parents during the summer for my holidays when they are living at the cottage. Visiting now at this time of year is quite different. The cottage is closed up for winter and my parents are back to their normal routine. Being here at this time gives me a window in on their world. Mostly I am just sharing in their regular daily and weekly routines. During the colder months, for instance, my parents are "mall walkers". Most mornings, sometimes before breakfast, they drive to the local mall to walk the halls. Although I would prefer to walk or even run outdoors, I join them. There is quite a number of seniors who walk the mall and I am getting familiar with the little "community" that has formed there.

Christmas is coming and soon this regular routine will be interrupted. Since joining the Franciscans over 25 years ago, I have never celebrated Christmas at home. Being home for Christmas brings both new and old experiences. For the first time, for instance, I helped my father erect the outdoors manger scene. Although this has been for many years an important part of my parent's Christmas decorating, I had never seen it before. There are both old and new decorations in the house as well. Some are familiar to me as a child and I take delight in seeing them again.

Each time I go home I see greater signs of aging in my parents. They're more forgetful and it takes them longer to do things. They have more physical ailments. It is difficult to see my father who was once so sharp and confident now faltering. As I pray through my childhood diaries, I see the contrast. As a boy my dad was my hero. He could do anything! I am concerned about their future and ponder my responsibility towards them. I entrust them to God and his providence.

During this time I have connected with the broader family as well. I have visited places and people that have been very formative for me as I grew up. I anticipate meeting even more family as the Christmas season begins. There are cousins, for instance, which I have seen but rarely throughout the years.

It has not just been family, however, that I have connected with. I have also met friends. One friend in particular I have known since about grade four. He is the only childhood friend with which I have maintained contact. He was a special friend because he shared my love of nature. Together we would go hiking and exploring - especially an area known as the "Rez" (short for reservoir). I had the opportunity once more, after many, many years, to hike the Rez with him as we did so often as children.

While meeting familiar family and friends I have, at the same time, enjoyed the opposite experience of anonymity. When I attend Mass nobody knows me. I'm not Br. Gerry the Franciscan; I'm nobody, just a stranger in a pew. I can slide into Mass and out again totally unnoticed. Normally I'm engaged in the worshipping community with which I'm part. Community or "fraternity" is an important aspect of Franciscan spirituality. As Franciscans, then, we believe in the communal aspect of our faith. I wouldn't want this anonymity as a permanent state, but I am enjoying being free of expectations from others - real or projected.

And so, this part of my sabbatical has been one of reconnecting with what was familiar while at the same time encountering new people and routines. It has been an experience of being known and unknown. I seek God's presence in both. May the God who, as Creator, was so intimately familiar with our world, yet came to us as an unknown, anonymous child, bless you this Christmas!

"Pax et bonum!" Br. Gerry

November 2015

From October 1 to 28 I was at Madonna House Apostolate (M.H.) - a "Public Association of the Christian Faithful" within the Roman Catholic Church. The people there live a simple, communal life under promises of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. It consists of lay people and priests. Their founder (Servant of God - Catherine Doherty) was a Secular Franciscan and their spirituality bears Franciscan influences.

M.H. is situated at Combermere in the beautiful hills of the southern Canadian Shield about 2.5 hours north-west of Ottawa. The terrain was very similar to the Gatineau Hills with which I grew up. Staying at M.H., then - especially in the Fall season with all the red maples - had a very powerful emotional effect on me. Furthermore, this experience was intensified by two factors. The first was that during the week from Tuesday to Friday I was in a "pousinia". Since Catherine Doherty was Russian, M.H. uses that name for a hermitage. Four glorious days each week was given to silent solitude, fasting and praying. St. Elias pousinia was a very rustic 12'x12' log cabin in the woods. Contact with nature, therefore, was close up and immediate. Nature has always been a very intricate part of me - intimately connected to my spiritual life. Prayer came easily immersed in nature.

The second factor to intensify my experience was "praying" through my first diary that I wrote when I was 12 years old. I have kept one ever since. I have, in fact, 44 year's worth of diaries! My goal is to prayerfully read through at least the first ten and trace the hand of God in my life - and then burn them!

Going through this diary in an attitude and atmosphere of prayer (especially in an intense pousinia situation) was an experience of confirmation from God. It was a confirmation of my life direction. Within the pages of almost illegible scrawl (atrocious spelling, grammar and penmanship in faded pencil!) I traced the essential elements of my life vocation - love of God, prayer, silence, solitude, art, poetry, and nature. I was amazed at just how far back and how intense my love for these things went. It was also interesting to detect and name things as an adult which, as a child, I could only intuit but not articulate. I used words, for instance, like "retreat" and "cave" without being aware of the spiritual significance of such words.

My pousinia experience reinforced the importance of spending time in prayer and reflection and staying connected to nature. It is tantamount to breathing in our physical lives. I resolved not only redouble my discipline of personal prayer, but also to make use greater use of the hermitage at Mt. St. Francis.

I did not spend all my days alone in the pousinia, however. During the days when I was not, I prayed with the community. Although Madonna House is an intriguing mix of diverse spiritual influences, there is a prominent "eastern" Christian stamp to its liturgies. An example of this mix is their Morning and Evening Prayer. They are straight from our Liturgy of the Hours, yet done in a "Byzantine" style or ethos. Likewise, the church is a beautiful classic Russian style log church complete with iconostas. A Byzantine Mass, however, is offered only one Sunday per month. During the rest of the month, a Roman style altar - on the congregation side of the iconostas - is used for a Roman Mass. On the Byzantine Sundays, that altar is simply removed and the Byzantine altar on the other side of the iconostas is used.

Being musical, I was intrigued by the music of M.H.. Other than the Mass parts, most of their music consisted of chanting the Scriptures - especially the Psalms. In Byzantine style, they sang with no instrument-ation, but in beautiful harmony.

Lastly, I did not simply pray but I also worked and ate with the community which, in true M.H. style, is considered prayer if we offer all we do to God. I was amazed at the amount of young people present. Many were there to discern God's direction in their lives. There were also over 120 members there living at several different properties, including St. Benedict's farm. To my delight I met many people I had met before from the Marian Centres in either Edmonton or Regina. I was edified that it seemed general knowledge among the community at large of how generous the Friars at St. Michael's Retreat had been to them.

I could say so much more but space is limited. I will end by simply stating that I have for many years wanted to visit Madonna House and I was not disappointed when I finally did! It is truly a spiritual centre.

"Pax et Bonum!" - Br. Gerry

October 2015

I am writing this on a bus. At the moment we're stuck in a traffic jam on the 401. I'm heading to Montreal from Caladon, ON where the three OFM entities in Canada met. This consists of the Provinces of Christ the King, (western Canada), St. Joseph (Quebec) and the Ontario Foundation of the Province of Immaculate Conception (New York, USA). The purpose of this historic meeting was to begin the process towards future amalgamation. The Friars from Quebec rented a bus to come to the meeting and offered me a ride.

An important element of this meeting was for the Friars to create fraternal bonds. It was, then, a fitting follow up to the first stage of my sabbatical which began September 1 at Brooksdale Environmental Centre in Surrey, BC. Brooksdale belongs to A Rocha - an international Christian environmental organization. Like the Friars, an important element for them is fraternity. Wherever A Rocha establishes a centre they do so as intentional communities. Thus there were several families living where I stayed. Besides these, there are always international visitors. The other person on a sabbatical with me, for instance, was Rachelle - a missionary in the Philippines from Switzerland. A strong community spirit pervaded the centre. Residents, interns and volunteers ate and prayed together. Wherever the Spirit of God is allowed to move, community forms - whether it is with the Franciscan Friars or with an ecumenical community like A Rocha.

At Brooksdale I was a "woofer" - a Worker On Organic Farms. The farming there is labor intensive because, without pesticides and herbicides, much of the work must be done manually. As well, the farm grows vegetables. These require manual labour because they yield a continuous crop throughout the growing season - not like grain which yields once a year and so can be machine harvested.

This type of farming afforded me an experience of working physically hard in fields alongside others. The saying is "A change is as good as a rest". And although I often went to bed at the end of the day pretty much exhausted, it was "a good tiredness". There was a simplicity in the work that was refreshing: a field needs to be cleared of weeds before the next planting - here's a Grub Fork; go and do it.

There was also something rejuvenating about working so close to the land. Often, in buying our food at a grocery market we lose the link between eating and where our food comes from. At Brooksdale the link was very evident. For a mid-morning snack, for instance, you might bend down and pick a sweet pepper from the plant. This was not an intellectual learning; everyone, of course, knows that vegetables grow in the earth. But my time at the farm was mainly an experiential learning - though I did learn a lot of really neat stuff as well.

Linked to community, manual work on the land was prayer. Each morning, after a brief Scripture reading there was twenty minutes of silent prayer. There is a Spirit-created fraternal bond that forms as people sit together in silence in God's presence. This was augmented by a weekly time of Taize type music and Lectio Divina (praying of the Scriptures).

Although I am on a bus traveling to Montreal, I trust that this whole year will be a journey open to the Holy Spirit. On the bus is my brother Franciscan Friars. You also journey with me - in mutual prayer. Next I will go to Madonna House in Cumbermere, ON. This is the founding place of the Marian Centres throughout Canada. Their founder - Catherine Dorherty - was a Secular Franciscan. This comes through in their spirituality. There will be many of the same elements as at A Rocha (prayer, working close to nature, simplicity and fraternity) because the Spirit is there too.

"Pax et Bonum!" Br. Gerry

September 2015

Today is my last day at St. Michael's Retreat Centre. I am writing this in my empty room. I am packed and ready to go. The Friar's retreat, Br. Ben's Profession of Solemn Vows, the move of the Friary, the official Farewell and the last Mass has all been accomplished. It has been an emotional roller-coaster. I have said many teary goodbyes. Yesterday (Sunday) afternoon I walked St. Michael's trails for the last time and made it all the way up Fitzsimmon's coulee.

I don't simply mourn my leaving, but also the departure of the Franciscan Friars. After 52 years of serving the people, the Friars not only leave St. Michael's but also Saskatchewan in general. I have developed a sense of loyalty to this province and especially its church. Leaving almost feels like a betrayal.

Saying goodbye is always hard. It is a dying. Goodbyes are smaller reflections of the great Paschal Mystery. In the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, God turns this most terrible of crimes into the greatest good - the source of our salvation. The Paschal Mystery has become the pattern or the prototype for all our tragedies and goodbyes if we face them with Christ. Resurrection only comes through death.

During the time of loss and grieving, however, the death and dying element looms foremost. Jesus, himself, while hanging on the cross cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Yet, Jesus was praying Psalm 22 which, ultimately, is a Psalm of hope and trust in God. Jesus, like the Psalmist, did not deny his sorrow. He expressed it, but did not give in to despair. Jesus is an example for me during this time of departure. I don't deny my tears and feelings of sorrow, but I know there is resurrection if I bring Christ into my grief. I am called at this time to trust in God.

I am called to trust in another way. I have been preoccupied with the countless details of the retreat, the profession, the farewell and the move. (It is never much of a retreat for the hosting Friary at any time let alone when one is preparing for a move and several important events.) I have been so preoccupied, in fact, that even while engage in final preparations for it, I have not been able to emotionally enter fully into my sabbatical. I should be more excited about it, but I just haven't had the time. There is an emotional disconnect. It suddenly dawned on me one day "Wow, next week I begin my sabbatical!" I am called, therefore, to trust in God's providence, that He will make all things work out for good.

Tomorrow I head to Mt. St. Francis (Cochrane, AB) and the first stage of my sabbatical - Brooksdale Environmental Centre in Surrey B.C.. I will stay there September 1 to 15. Brooksdale is part of an international Christian environmental organizational called A Rocha, which means the Rock - a reference to Christ. It was founded in Portugal by Anglican priest Peter Harris. Brooksdale is a special place that witnesses to the love of God through conservation, sustainable agriculture and environmental education. (If you are interested in knowing more look up: www.arocha.ca.)

Please pray for me as I enter this time of greater self discovery and commitment to Christ. And stay tuned next month for further reflection on my sabbatical.

"Pax et Bonum" Br. Gerry

August 2015

Hello everyone! I hope you are having a good summer. From the perspective of our fraternity bulletins, August is the beginning of a new year after a break for summer. And it is a very much a new year for me as I put the final touches to preparations for a year-long sabbatical beginning September 1. Part of the preparations concerns my responsibilities towards you - the Secular Franciscans. Among these preparations was finding replacements for me as both National and Regional Spiritual Assistant. I am happy to say that both positions have been filled! Fr. Peter Knaapen OFM Conv. will replace me as National and Br. Joseph Glaab OFM as Regional. Peter is the Regional S.A. for the Trillium OFS region (southern Ontario) while Joe lives in Edmonton.

One of the duties I have not passed on, however, is the writing of this monthly letter. Through my continued monthly messages I hope to share with you some of my reflections on what this unique year brings from wherever I happen to be. Below I have listed a rough itinerary, lest you may be interested in what I'm doing and where I'm doing it.*

So, consider this the first of this new series. I write this in the midst of the turmoil of a major transition - not merely for myself but for the friars of western Canada. After 52 years we are leaving St. Michael's Retreat Centre. This entails the infinite details of closing a friary and moving both personal and common things. There are also the details concerning the Friar's retreat, Br. Ben's Solemn Vows and the final farewell.

In the midst of all this transition I find myself in a very interesting "interior space". I am full of conflicting emotions. On one hand, I feel sadness for leaving St. Michael's (it was the place of my novitiate) while on the other, I'm pleased to move back to Mt. St. Francis. At the same time I cannot emotionally embrace my new home as I won't really be living there for the next year. This year looms up in front of me yet, because of all that preoccupies me, I sense an emotional disconnect in me. In fact, with the arrival of August it suddenly struck me anew: "Next month my sabbatical begins!"

In times of transition - and life is full of them - we cling to things which maintain for us a sense of identity, meaning, purpose and belonging. They are times that strip us to the essentials and call forth an awareness of what is most important. If we are not firmly anchored in this we can easily fall apart. Transition times are full of "letting go". We are called to let go of the nonessential things and re-evaluate what we put our trust in.

At times like these we who are Christians, Catholics and Franciscans know in whom lies our sense of identity, meaning, purpose and belonging. Christ is our true identity. We are Children of God in the Son, who in the Bond of Love which is the Holy Spirit is in the bosom of the Father. As members of the Body Christ we are also members of the Catholic Church - Christians who recognize the Pope and those bishops in communion with him as their principle ecclesial and spiritual leaders. Furthermore, as we are Franciscans, our identity is also derived from the spiritual legacy left to us by St. Francis of Assisi. Yes, in times of change we know anew that in Christ "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

* Sept. 1 - 15 - Brooksdale Environmental Centre - Surrey, B.C.; Sept. 20 - 23 - Chapter of Mats - Caladon, ON; Oct. 1- 30 - Madonna House - Combermere, ON; Nov., Dec.- Jan. 10 - Ottawa; Jan. 19 - May 7 - School of Applied Theology, San Francisco Bay; Mid May - Mid June - Camino, Spain; June, July - St. Bonaventure University; Aug. 3-7 - Men's Retreat, Princeton, Illinois.

June 2015



The Chapel of Notre-Dame-des-Anges Our Lady of the Angels, Quebec, May 16, 2015.

As you are aware, the OFS in Canada just recently completed at National Chapter (May 14-17). It was held at the Ursuline Centre for Spirituality in Loretteville, Quebec (near Quebec City). There were many "sacred" moments - some official and many others unofficial.

One official moment that was particularly sacred to me was gathering for Mass at the first Franciscan Church in Canada in Quebec City - founded by the Recollects. It was built in the 1600s. Residing there are Augustinian Nuns and Poor Clares. It felt like walking on "holy ground". The place almost gave you the impulse to take off your shoes. The church was ornate and after Mass we were given a tour of the ancient rooms behind the sanctuary. Being there was an experience of experiential learning. One could not help but feel very connected with our Canadian Franciscan heritage.

Two unofficial moments stand out to me as well. One was walking up to a spectacular waterfall just beyond the Centre. It is unique in that immediately at the base of this thunderous falls, the river cuts an abrupt right angle. The sheer volume of water, the thunderous noise spoke of the power of God. The solidity of the granite rock wall at the base of the falls that has withstood continuous, relentless, straight-on frontal pounding for eons demonstrated God's inconceivable omnipotence. We all know that God is almighty; this is basic theology. To experience this falls, however, was to come to an experiential knowing of it.

The other unofficial sacred moment demonstrated another almost "opposite" aspect of God. It was less grand but more in the order of warmth, love and joy. At one of our two social evenings, a member from PEI (Leonarda) got out her fiddle which she had brought. Jewel - our good Vice Minister for Vancouver / lower mainland, BC - and I got out our guitars to play a few tunes with her to "entertain the troupes". Once the fiddle started, within seconds a few spontaneously got up on the floor and danced to the delight of everyone. Some of this was even captured on someone's phone. (I believe it is now posted on the National site.) This too was an experience of "experiential knowing". We all have heard of Franciscan fraternal joy, but it was palpable that evening.

These events caused me to reflect on being open to the "sacred moments" that God brings along in life. God is more present and desirous to reveal God's self to us than we are to receive him. It has also caused me to think about ways of learning and the importance of experiential learning. Learning from books is important and then to experience what we have learned roots the truth of what we've learned in our hearts and gives us passion and conviction!

"Pax et Bonum!" everyone and have a great summer! Br. Gerry

May 2015

The times that I experience peace (inner restfulness - of spirit/soul) most often is either early in the morning when I mingle prayer, spiritual reading and art together or when I go for walks - especially in natural places. At these times when I am completely absorbed in prayer I become aware of a sense that "all is well" with my life or at least "don't fear; everything will be O.K.". It feels like I am where I am supposed to be, that I am doing what I'm supposed to be doing for the moment. These are the times when God can seem close.

It is when my life becomes too hectic and I do not take enough quiet time that I most often experience "desolation" (inner turmoil, anxiety and disturbance, disquietude of spirit/soul). My darkness seems to loom in front of me as insurmountable. My woundedness preoccupies me. Everything seems coloured by my faults and failings. I'm restless, unstable and distracted. I feel enslaved to my foibles and subject to obsession and compulsiveness. I am weak and vulnerable to temptations. I seek self-affirmation in unhealthy ways looking to temporal, passing things for consolation. I feel separated, disconnected and out of sync with God, others and the natural world.

During these times I feel sad and depressed and this has both emotional and physiological manifestations. Or else, I become belligerent trying to take control of my life as a spirit that is not open, receptive and attuned to the Holy Spirit's leading. All this is self-absorption. It may be my sins that pre-occupy me, but it is still self-preoccupation. Whether it is how good I am or how bad I am, it's self-preoccupation all the same.

Of course, these are the times when God seems a million miles away. And it is during these times that I have to "live by faith" and not by feeling. These are the times when it is important that I maintain my regular prayer life - even when I don't feel like it. It is important, also, that I not make important decisions during these times. And finally, it is important that I share with others - especially with wise, spiritual friends who I trust. Here is where having a spiritual director is very beneficial.

I write this on the feast of Blessed Luchesius Modestini (c. 1180 - 1260) - the first Secular Franciscan (April 28). As a businessman, he and his wife Buonadonna de' Segni must have been aware of how crazy life can get and how this can detract from what is truly important. They also must have known how dark life can look at these times. Let us, too, then, hold fast to our rhythm and discipline of prayer and let us "walk by faith" in Jesus who is our light - the "light of the world". In a particularly bleak time in his life, another holy man penned the poetic words to our Lord which I always remember in my dark times:

"Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom, lead Thou me on! The night is dark, and I am far from home; lead Thou me on! Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see The distant scene; one step enough for me."

Cardinal John Henry Newman

"Pax et Bonum!" Br. Gerry

April 2015 FRANCISCAN POVERTY - 3

This article is the last of three installments on the theme of Franciscan poverty. First we looked at the concept of contentment with simplicity, then Jesus' simple lifestyle and now His teaching on poverty. In order not to devote yet another message on this theme, I simply want to put forth a short synopsis. I only summarize the most basic point of each text, so to get the full meaning read the each reference in its entirety.

1. Mt. 6:19-20; Lk. 12:32-34 – Set not your heart on material treasure which is temporal, but on spiritual treasure which is eternal. To "set the heart" on something is to put your whole trust in it and to define your identity by it.
2. Mt. 5:40, 42; Lk. 6:29b, 30 – Give extra to those who sue; give to those who beg; lend without expectation of return. This demands a spirit of detachment from possessions and a trust in God's providential care.
3. Mt. 6:22-23 – The eye is a lamp to the body. Focus on that which gives light. We become like what we focus on. Focus on God, then, not material wealth.
4. Mt. 6:24; Lk. 16:13 – We cannot serve God and mammon. Serving God and wealth is incompatible. Serving wealth leads to despising God. To "serve" is to work for something with all one's energy, devotion and focus.
5. Mt. 6:25-34; Lk. 12:22-34 – Be not anxious about material necessities; trust in God's providence. You are of great value to the Father, and He knows your needs. Have faith and seek first the Kingdom of God. The spiritual life is to be the first priority of your life.
6. Lk. 12:13-21- Parable of the rich farmer. We are warned against covetousness and greed. Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions. Great loss is for those who lay up treasure for themselves but are not rich towards God. Laying up riches for one's self leads to poverty towards God. Be rich toward God.
7. Mt. 13:22; Mk. 4:18-19; Lk. 8:14 & – Parable of the sower. Material wealth chokes ours receptivity to the Word of God and makes it unfruitful in our lives. It distracts from the Kingdom of Heaven.
8. Mt. 22:1-4; Lk. 14:21 - Parable of the great wedding feast. Wealth can preoccupy and distract us from the Kingdom of Heaven.
9. Mt. 19:16-26; Mk. 10:17-27; Lk. 18:18-27 – Rich Young Ruler. Wealth can be a bondage. It can be made a higher priority than God. Sometimes a radical break is required. To follow Jesus we must be free of slavery to wealth. This leads to "treasure in heaven". It is difficult for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God.
10. Mt. 19:27-30; Mk. 10:28-31; Lk. 28-30 – The reward of following Christ above material wealth. That which is sacrificed to follow Christ will be multiplied and given back along with eternal life.
11. Lk. 16:19-31 – Parable of Lazarus and rich man. We are to have mercy to the poor. Both mercy and unkindness is rewarded in the after-life. Wealth is to be shared with the less fortunate.
12. Lk. 6:20-21, 24-25 – "Blessed are the poor, the Kingdom is theirs." By way of judgment, in the afterlife, there is a reversal of fortune - at least for those who are wealthy by greed and oppression.
13. Mt. 10:5-15; Mk.6:7-13; Lk. 9:1-6; 10:1-12 – Apostolic life style. Trust in God's loving providence.

EASTER is the grand finale of Jesus' life totally given to God (and therefore simplicity towards material wealth). As we strive, by God's grace, to simplify our lives so that God may have first place, resurrection awaits us also who live as Jesus did. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven". (Mt. 5:3)

HAPPY EASTER! - Br. Gerry -

March 2015 FRANCISCAN POVERTY - 2

This month's message will continue on the theme of Franciscan poverty. Last month we approached the theme by addressing the subjects of simplicity and contentment. This time we'll look at poverty from the life of Jesus. The next month we'll look at his teaching.

The life that Jesus lived on earth speaks of poverty and serves as an example for us. First, the very fact of the Incarnation is an example. In this great act Jesus divested himself of all divine power, privilege and prerogative. (Phil.2). He chose to come to us not merely as a person but as a poor person. He was born in the stable under the circumstances occasioned by an occupying power (the Romans). Furthermore, the offering Joseph gave at the Temple after his birth testifies that Jesus was born into a poor family. Two doves were designated by the Law as the sacrifice of the poor.

Jesus' Early Life: Although we do not know much about his early life, we can assume that Jesus must have lived and worked among the common poor people. Joseph was a carpenter and it is assumed that Jesus took up that trade as well. This indicates that Jesus did not belong to the lower classes of society such as unskilled day-workers, beggars and lepers. He would have belonged to the tradesman class - a class perhaps lower than merchants but not the lowest class of society. The Holy Family was not rich. On the contrary, their situation was one of working hard "to make ends meet". This is the lot of the "working poor" and surely Jesus' affection for the poor comes from this experience.

Jesus' Public Life: When he entered public ministry as an itinerant preacher Jesus began to live off the hospitality of others. He depended on the means of a group of women who supported him (Lk.8:1-3) and he often stayed at people's places. His statement that "... the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (MT. 8:19-20; LK. 9:58-59) may be more theological than fact. Jesus was enormously popular traveling within a relatively small area with probably lots of relatives. In fact, at times he had to resort to seeking out privacy in houses. (Mt.13:36, Mk.7:24) Also, he had friends - some wealthy - with whom he stayed. (Nicodemus -JN. 3:1-21; 7:50; 19:39, Joseph of Arimathea - Mk. 15:43; MT. 27:57-60; LK. 23:50-54; JN. 19:38-42, Zecchaeus - LK. 19:5) He regularly lodged with Mary, Martha and Lazarus (Lk.10:38) and he stayed at Peter's mother-in-law's place. (Mk.1:29-38, Mt.8:14-17, Lk.438-43) We see Jesus preaching and healing from houses at which we assume he was staying. (Mt.9:27-28; 12:46, Mk3:31, Lk.8:19, Mk.2:1-4, Lk.5:18-19) Lastly, observing his own instructions to his Apostles, he stayed at people's places and ate the food put before him (Mt.10:11; Mk.6:10; Lk. 9:4, 10:5-7). In fact Jesus sent out disciples ahead of him to the next town "to make ready for him". (Luke 9:52; 10:1) There are several other places referring to Jesus staying at a "house" (Mt.13:36; 17:25, Mk.2:1-4).

Money: Although He instructed his Disciples to "Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper ..." (Mt.10:9), they did have a common purse. Judas was the bursar (Jn.12:6; 13:29). In John 4:8 we note that the Disciples went to "buy" bread. The instruction to "Take no gold, nor silver" seems to pertain specifically to when the Disciples dispersed on preaching tours. The context is "for your journey..." (Lk. 9:3). Jesus said to the Rich Young Man "...go, sell what you possess and give it to the poor...and come, follow me" (Mt. 19:16-24). He knew how possessed the man was by his possessions. In this case Jesus knew that a radical break was necessary. We see, however, that Jesus did not demand this of everyone. It was sufficient for Zecchaeus, for instance, to give away only "half" his possessions (Lk. 19:8).

Space does not permit me to say more, but this is enough for us to draw some lessons from Jesus' life. It was a simple, humble lifestyle. Yet, compared to that of John the Baptist, for instance, Jesus' life was balanced. It demonstrated a priority given to the spiritual. The material is always in service of the spiritual, but without condemning it. For this reason we see great detachment from wealth and property but with great trust in God's providence - especially as it came through others. He knew how receive.

Next month we will see that Jesus' life underscored his teaching.

I wish you all a continued good Lent and an up-coming blessed Easter. - Br. Gerry

February 2015 FRANCISCAN POVERTY - 1

For this month and at least the next I would like to address the sometimes thorny issue of Franciscan poverty. Probably more ink has been spilt on this subject in Franciscan history than any other. Unfortunately, it has often led to polarization and division in the family. It is an important and essential part of the Franciscan identity, however, and "fools rush in where wise men dare not tread". Joking aside, I think that if we remain anchored in the teaching of Jesus and the Scriptures we can look at this subject with beneficial results.

Essentially, the issue - which for lack of a better name has traditionally been called "poverty" - really has to do with the place of material goods in our lives and how they affect - for good or for bad - our relationship with God and others. The name "Poverty" is an unfortunate one because it frightens people. It congers up images of being dressed in rags and going through the dumpster in the back alley. It sounds so radical that we can't relate to it. We shy away from it and miss the message it has for us. (We note that Jesus never used the word.)

I find that one way to approach this subject is to look at it under less "offensive" names. Two such words that make up the concept of poverty are "simplicity" and "contentment". These words are very appropriate for Seculars who are not called, as Religious are, to formally renounce ownership of property.

The word "simplicity" as it applies to material property, implies a simplification of one's life style and processions. But this simplicity is not something in and of itself. It is for a greater purpose - a spiritual purpose. It is so that we are not drawn away or distracted from the most important things in our lives which are the love of God, family, others, self and all creation. When the central focus of our lives is taken off love, we fall into sin (because sin is simply to act unlovingly) and our "soul", our true self, becomes warped and we lose our center.

Simplicity calls for us to examine our life style and see if our possessions are taking us away from God and His love. It may ask us to reduce the amount of "gadgets" we own (and it may not). It may simply question our use of the things we have - perhaps calling us to give them less priority.

The next word is "contentment". This concept goes hand in hand with simplicity. As you examine your life through the lens of simplicity, keep contentment in mind. I would like to leave for your pondering three important Scripture texts that capsule the concept of contentment:

Philippians 4:11-13 (NRSV)

11 I have learned to be content with whatever I have. 12 I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

1 Timothy 6:6-10 (NRSV)

6 Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; 7 for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; 8 but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. 9 But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

Hebrews 13:5-6 (NRSV)

5 Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." 6 So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

With these basic attitudes of simplicity and contentment in place, the next time, we will look at Jesus' teaching on the subject of "poverty".

"Pax et Bonum!" Br. Gerry

January 2015 MAKE THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN LIFE THEMES

For me the beginning of the new year is a time to look back and seek the common themes that ran throughout the past year (and, indeed, my whole life) and to make the connections between them. Making these connections is important because it gives meaning and identity to my life and ministry. I wish to share with you some connections between these themes that I have observed and I hope that they might encourage you to make your own connections.

As a child, I inherited from my deeply religious parents both a great love for God and for the land. (Although my father left the farm, the farm never quite left him.) Consequently, although I grew up in the city, I have always had an intensely spiritual (and psychological) connection to the land.

These two loves (that of God and the land) influenced my life choices as I grew up. As I experienced the personal loss of natural places which I loved, this sense of connection to the land crystallized into a concrete interest in "conservation" (wildlife habitat preservation). Many places which were dear to me now lay under concrete and pavement. I relate well to the line in James Taylor's song called Copperline: "I tried to go back, as if I could - All spec house and plywood. Tore up and tore up good...".

Furthermore, in becoming a Catholic I found a fuller incarnational, sacramental connection between matter (nature, the land) and spirit (God, the spiritual life). Later, in becoming a Franciscan that link was made even more explicit and intense.

In the forward to the book entitled *The Sacred Earth* by the famous Saskatchewan Photographer Courtney Milne, the Dalai Lama mentions St. Francis and Assisi. He does so in the contexts of special places throughout the world that we have come to deem as "sacred". These places, he explains, are sacred either because of their association with a holy person - such as Assisi with St. Francis or more importantly, the Holy Land with Jesus - or because there are "uplifting qualities intrinsic to the places themselves". So often these places bring together the connection between the spiritual life and the natural world. This is why many sacred places are of natural beauty. The Friar's two retreat centres in Cochrane, AB and Lumsden, SK are good examples. Countless are the times I have heard people say of these places such things as "Whenever I come here I feel something holy in the air." One lady, after making a statement like this added "And I don't even believe in God".

The Dalai Lama goes on to make yet another connection - that of "pilgrimage". Anyone who knows me knows of my love for hiking. Pilgrimage is hiking with a spiritual emphasis. The destination of a pilgrimage is some "sacred place" which is meaningful to the pilgrim. The destination as well as the journey are symbolic of the pilgrim's spiritual journey to God.

There is one last connection in my life that I want to make and that is with contemplation. Contemplative prayer teaches us to live life contemplatively. From this perspective, because of the Incarnation, we see Christ in all things and all places. This means that ultimately there is no longer a division between "sacred and profane" (Nicholi Berdyaev, Orthodox theologian). All of earth is a temple to worship God - though that comes more naturally for me in natural places. In the incarnation - which we have just celebrated in Christmas - earth has been touched and "infused" in a unique manner with the Divine. Now, pilgrimages to sacred places remind us that God is everywhere and that because of this, "Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God..." (Elizabeth Barrett Browning).

I hope that sharing these connections of life themes has inspired you to take a little quiet time at the beginning of this new year to look for your own personal themes. This year I am scheduled to move back to Cochrane. It is also my 25th anniversary of vows. These themes are very much on my mind as I prepare for this transition. Happy New year to you all! Br. Gerry