

interchange

from humble beginnings...

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Dear Family and Friends,

When we look back at events, celebrations, venues or people, we are often surprised to find out how they arose from humble beginnings.

One thought, idea, action, can lead to a wonderful result. In the following articles, you will learn the great impact made by:

- a gentle touch,
- an encounter with religious life,
- creating a place to feed the spirit,
- a re-enactment of the Christmas story, and
- a desire to serve others.

We hope you are inspired by these humble beginnings.

Kathy Gatliff

Editor, Director of Communications

Sister Franchon Pirkl, OSF: A Compassionate Presence

by Sister Delore Rockers

... We, Rochester Franciscans, commit ourselves to be a compassionate presence for peace in our world, striving for justice and reverence for all creation.

- Mission Statement

"She has a special gift." This headline in the *Owatonna People's Press* is a quote from Medford Mayor Lois Nelson, as she acknowledged Sister Franchon's generous spirit and comforting care given to individuals nearing the end of life, and to their families and friends. On November 3, 2014, the Owatonna Rotary Club presented Sister Franchon with the 2014 Paul Harris/Vern White *Service Above Self* Award for nineteen years of "compassionate presence" as the Chaplain at Homestead Hospice House. Sister Franchon ministers at the Hospice House in Owatonna, and in family homes in six counties of south central Minnesota. The residential site of this Hospice is one of only ten in Minnesota.

The Owatonna Rotary Club is part of an international organization of citizens who meet every Monday to find ways "to do good" in their own local communities. Rotary uses a 4-Way Test to assure that members, activities and award recipients exhibit its values: *Is it truth? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build*



goodwill and better friendships? Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

Sister Franchon passed every measure of this test in exemplary style. Those who know her are not surprised. The Director of the Hospice, Bill Donovan, says "She exudes compassion for staff and their families. Her demeanor is always one of genuine support. She absolutely loves what she does and is often called the "Face of the Steele County Hospice Program."

With her customary gracious but humble and humorous style, Sister Franchon received the award named for the founder of Rotary International, Paul Harris, and Vern White, a local business and community leader who died in 2010, for whom the award honors for his "Service above Self." In her acceptance speech, Sister Franchon shifted the focus of attention to a wider need. She invited the audience of Rotarians to think broadly and to consider joining the "struggle for justice" that human-trafficked children and adults face daily. To encourage an immediate effort by the local Rotary Club, Sister Franchon then handed the Rotary leader, Todd Hale, a file folder full of trafficking information and privately suggested a knowledgeable Sister of Saint Francis as a Rotary speaker. The Owatonna Rotary Club took up her challenge.

Sister Franchon's "reverence for all creation" was noted as well during this ceremony. Mayo Nelson quipped that Sister Franchon is "a go-to person if you are having problems in the garden or with your outdoor landscape." One of the many volunteer efforts led by Sister Franchon aims "to tame the Century Farm (where the Hospice Home is located)" with cultivated flower gardens, walking paths and areas of beauty for resting, grieving and praying.

Living the Mission of the Rochester Franciscan Sisters started for Sister Franchon on the Pirkl farm home called Five Oaks near Owatonna and Litomysl. Hospitality and care of the earth were core values. There was always room for one more at the table and all, including the hired men who helped with farm work, were welcomed. The two hundred year old oak trees are a "part of the family," as are the multitude of birds, cats, and others critters on the farm. The parish community of Litomysl was, and still is, the area gathering spot for companionship, spiritual enrichment, great food, the sharing of stories and laughter. Sister Franchon is often part of the planning and presentation for liturgies and festivals. Mayo Nelson recognized that the parish community counts on Sister Franchon. "Once she suggests something, you best be a part of the action because it will certainly be successful and you will have a good time working at it."

Like so many Sisters, Franchon's ministry experiences continue to help shape her gentle, compassionate approach to others, her strong justice-oriented heart, and her delight and awe in the gifts of creation. From classroom educator, to parish worker, to pastoral minister and Director of Student Affairs at the College Saint Teresa, to Congregational leadership to nineteen years as Hospice Chaplain, and eventually to the next life challenge, Sister Franchon is competent, flexible, and open. She does indeed have special gifts.

Saint Bakhita: A Humble Beginning

by Sisters Christine Stanoch and Anne Walch

The theme of humble beginnings relates significantly to St. Josephine Bakhita. She was born in the Darfur region of Sudan in 1869. As a young girl, while working in the fields with her family, she was kidnapped and sold into slavery. She was so terrified, she could not remember her given name, so the name, Bakhita, meaning "the fortunate one," was given to her by her captors.

In her early life, Bakhita was anything but fortunate. She endured torture by various owners who branded her, beat and cut her. The suffering was so intense, she often felt as though "I was going to die at any time."

After being sold a total of five times, Bakhita was purchased by Calisto Legnani, the Italian Consul in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. Two years later, in 1883, Bakhita was taken to Italy and worked as a



nanny for his colleague, Augusto Michieli. He, in turn, sent Bakhita to accompany his daughter to a school in Venice run by the Canossian Sisters. It was there that she came to know God. Josephine Bakhita was baptized in 1890.

Later, the Italian family came to take their property [Bakhita] back to Africa. She remained firm in her request to stay. And with the support of the Superior of the Canossian Sisters and the Cardinal of Venice, Bakhita won her freedom and later entered the Novitiate in 1893.

In 1896, Bakhita made her profession as a Canossian Sister and was sent to Northern Italy, where she dedicated her life to assisting her community and teaching others to love God. Bakhita was known for her easy smile, humility, gentleness and holiness. She once remarked: "If I were to meet the slave traders who kidnapped me and even tortured me, I would kneel and kiss their hands, for if that did not happen, I would not be Christian and Religious today." Sister Bakhita died in 1947.

On October 1, 2000, she was canonized a saint by Pope John Paul II. Bakhita was recognized for her life, her story, and her courageous response in faith.

St. Bakhita is an inspiration to all of us. She lived a life of faithfulness in the midst of overwhelming evil. She has been designated as the patroness of kidnapped and trafficked persons. While our contemporary society has to struggle with this reality, St. Bakhita offers us hope in the midst of the complexity of the world of human exploitation. Let us be grateful for her trust in God's care for her, and appreciate her spirit.

Reference: catholicnewsagency.com 1/13/15

The Humble Beginnings of our Retreat Center

by Sister Jennifer Corbett, Hermitage Caretaker, Holy Spirit Retreat Center

I first came to Holy Spirit for a weekend group retreat in the mid 1980s. It was then a place of humble beginnings: the bedrooms section had not been completed, some participants camped in the woods--with an occasional horse peeking through the triangle opening of the army tents--while others slept on cots in the incomplete "bedroom wing." Lake Elysian was our swimming and bathing "facility." In other words, Holy Spirit as a Center was being built little-by-little with donations. As a holy place, the basic accommodations provided funny stories, and did not block the presence of God, which was breathing in this yet-to-be-completed Center and the surrounding land.

Jack and Peggy Sexton, the inheritors of farmland in rural Janesville, Minnesota, were inspired to change the purpose of the land in order to begin a retreat center for prayer groups and those who were seeking God. They were not experienced in managing a center, but they had a large family and some children still lived at home. They began with their own savings, help from like-minded friends, and the local community of Janesville. It was not much of a business plan, in the way we have come to think of business plans, but it had all the components of the beginnings of the "Call" stories in the Bible: *Come, follow Me, and I will show you.* Their own practice of faith made them confident of the risky and directive voice of God and the generosity and hard work of others. Their trust meant they left a nice home in Mankato, Jack's secure engineering position, Peggy's social life, and the schools for the children. Their day-by-day courage remains a



stirring example for us who live here now: *Be attentive: This is what fools for Christ do.*

The land would be fruitful for the works of the Spirit, while neighbors continued to grow crops to feed the bodies of the world. This is a place where the human and divine conversation happens. Bodies and souls are fed.

In the mid 1990's, for health reasons, Jack and Peggy could no longer continue to manage the retreat center. Our Congregation was given the retreat center and we bought the family home and additional wooded property.

In the experience of our Sisters and Cojourners, our Community saw, in this place, a way to respond to the growing spiritual hungers of our own Congregation and the modern world. We would continue to support the work of the Center with a suggested donation from those who came. We decided to concretize the rule of Francis for hermitages, by building four hermitages in the woods. We purchased adjacent wooded property to preserve the quiet of the Center and made plans to build the hermitages one at a time. We updated some of the Center facilities and set plans to build the first hermitage in the woods as a residence for Sister Charlotte Hesby, one of our Franciscan Sisters, who was called to be a hermit (and caretaker of the land and computer, and all things breakable). The original plan of 1996, to build four hermitages, was completed in August, 2014. In addition to Sister Char's hermitage, we now have three hermitages available to reserve for one night or more. They have running water, a view of the lake, heat, lights, and love. One is handicapped accessible; two can accommodate couples. All were built with financial help from our own Congregation, donations and volunteers from our own community, and friends near and far.



The Retreat Center has served as a wonderful opportunity to renew acquaintances with those with whom we have worked, and those we have lived among when serving in nearby Minnesota towns and schools. Some former members also join us in this endeavor by continuing to help us with cleaning, planting, reserving a place to stay, and offering financial donations. The hermitages and Center are open to all individuals and groups who seek time with God. Many who come write a note in a journal that is in each hermitage. Those who read the words are consoled: I don't feel so alone.



"What a holy place! I've been blessed to be able to rest and be here with the Holy Spirit! It is all around in the trees, birds, water, air, moon, sunshine, rain and peace. The creatures are all part of this beautiful place too.....this quiet time away from the daily routine helps put things in perspective." H.H.

God's call to "come away" is offered in every generation. It seems this is a longing in the frenetic and violent world that is ours. Persons know they need to come for rejuvenation, and spend time in silence, away from the distractions of the modern world. We, who live here, need the same reminders: It's easy to be busy; especially with doing good things.

"It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brother [and sister]. The more solitary I am, the more affection I have for them...Solitude and silence teach me to love my brother [and sister] for what they are, not for what they say." Thomas Merton, as quoted by E. G.

Each day, every night... Humble beginnings... May it always be so...

Christmas on the Hill

By Ann Felton

Saint Francis began the wonderful tradition of displaying a crèche, and this custom continues to resonate with all of us during Advent and Christmas seasons.

Bret Thoman, OFS, of St. Francis Pilgrimages, describes that first live nativity as follows: "In 1223, just three years before he died, St. Francis recreated the nativity of Jesus in Greccio, a small village in the Rieti valley in the same region as Rome. With the assistance of a local nobleman named John, they assembled some animals including an ox and donkey, a young couple with a newborn baby, and some hay in a cave on a cliff about one mile from the town of Greccio. Francis, as a deacon, sang and preached to the people and to the brothers gathered there about the humility, poverty, and simplicity of God who came in the form of a babe. No one had ever done this before. He began a tradition called the crèche, which name comes from the town of Greccio through the French.

Francis's desire was to reflect on and re-live the historical, concrete, human dimensions of the life of Christ - in this case his birth. Through the nativity scene, Francis created the possibility of entering into the place. Through the presence of the characters - Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the Magi, and the Christ-child himself - together with the animals, the hay, the manger, Francis enhanced the possibility of entering into the mystery of the Incarnation."

On December 6, 2014, as guests traveled up to Assisi Heights, *Christmas on the Hill* took everyone back to that Christmas in Greccio nearly 800 years ago. Each of the guests experienced the sights and sounds of the Nativity Scene through live actors and music. A Roman soldier met each of us at the door and directed all to travel on to Bethlehem to register for the census. Shepherds sang of their wonderment; angels proclaimed "Gloria in excelsis deo;" and the wise men gathered with their camels to worship the newborn king. Mary and Joseph welcomed guests on their journey, and tenderly gazed on their new born babe in the manger.



The invitation to *Christmas on the Hill* promised we would be refreshed and inspired. In the spirit of Saint Francis, the tradition of the Creche proved to be the perfect place to re-live and reflect on the meaning of Advent and Christmas.



Each year, people who attend the Umbrian celebration overwhelmingly speak of the spiritual components of this evening as being a positive force in their preparation for Advent and Christmas. *Christmas on the Hill* deepens our spiritual roots as we share our love and friendship with the Sisters of Saint Francis.

Christmas on the Hill returns next December 5, 2015, to celebrate Advent and Christmas in the tradition of Saint Francis.

A Compassionate Presence

By Barb DeCramer, Cojourner, Director of the Office of Development

Of the 220 Sisters of Saint Francis, the ministries of 25 of those Sisters are supported by the Franciscan Ministries Fund. Quite often, these Sisters work as volunteers or work for an agency that does not pay them a salary that would support their very modest lifestyle. As you know, the Sisters of Saint Francis will work tirelessly when there is work to be done!

We would like to introduce you to three Sisters who are the epitome of serving as a compassionate presence, working tirelessly as advocates for those in need, and generously offering their love.



Go to: <https://vimeo.com/112724593> to watch a video essay on the ministries of **Sister Joyce, Sister Ruth and Sister Joseen**. Take an 8-minute break to contemplate the true meaning of expressing the Franciscan spirit. This video, "Sisters of Saint Francis - A Compassionate Presence," will inspire you and touch your heart.

To make a gift to the Sisters of Saint Francis, visit our recently updated website, rochesterfranciscan.org.

Assisi Heights Spirituality Center

How do you recognize your need for spiritual renewal?

Seeking quiet in the age of distractions . . .

Maybe you have noticed a need or longing for some quiet time away. Assisi Heights and the Assisi Heights Spirituality Center are open and available for you to take time for yourself. Those who have come to Assisi Heights for **Days of Solitude** often remark on the welcome and the quiet when they arrive 'at the Heights'.

Come, share in the gift that Assisi Heights can be for you!

Visit our newly refreshed web site at www.rochesterfranciscan.org to:

View upcoming events - Learn more about spiritual direction - Request a prayer.

