



THE NATIONAL FRATERNITY OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER - USA

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

National Minister, Jan Parker, OFS

Son Beam

An Easter Story

The sun was shining brightly on Sunday morning, February 7, and the air was warm. It was a surprising and welcome spring-like break from the winter cold. I was on my way to Cape Girardeau, Missouri, where St. Padre Pio Emerging Fraternity would be celebrating two professions. As I drove south from St. Louis through the wooded hills and river bottom farmland, there was such a feel of Easter in the air! And why not? The story of St. Padre Pio Fraternity is quite an Easter story, and even Sister Mother Earth was rejoicing this day!

Their story began with a phone call from Celeste Obermiller in 2006. I was the Minister of St. Clare Region at that time. When I answered the phone a cheerful voice said, "Hello, Jan, this is Celeste Obermiller calling you from Cape Girardeau, Missouri. I just moved here from Florida. I need to join the Franciscan fraternity here in Cape. Could you please help me?" There was such an earnest anticipation in her voice I could hardly break the news to her that there was no fraternity in Cape. When I told her that the closest fraternity was in St. Louis, two hours away, Celeste was incredulous. "Oh, Jan, please tell me you are kidding! My son won't let me drive that far! What will I do?" Her sincere disappointment touched my heart. Celeste's move to Cape to be close to her son had come at an unfortunate time in her Franciscan journey – she had completed initial formation, but had not yet professed. As we continued to talk I was struck by the depth of her commitment to her Franciscan call. Convinced of her sincerity, I made a simple suggestion, "Celeste, would you want to start a fraternity there in Cape?" She was so delighted! "I can do that?" she asked, and quickly added, "Oh, please, tell me how! When can I start?" Of course at that time I did not realize that Celeste was 85 years old, but that didn't seem to matter to her one bit – she wanted a fraternity.

I have seldom met anyone quite so determined as Celeste, but it is her Franciscan spirit that truly makes an impression. She naturally relates to everyone with kindness and genuine respect, and she has an amazing ability to show God's love in a spontaneous and joyful manner. Our fraternity adopted her, and our Region embraced her. In August of 2006 she was professed into San Damiano Fraternity at our Regional Retreat.

She beamed with joy.

In the months that followed, Celeste eagerly set out each day to promote the Order. Celeste is tiny herself, and at that time she drove a tiny car that was as bright a yellow as I have ever seen. Her license plate read SON BEAM. She was the only professed Secular Franciscan in Southeast Missouri but nothing stopped her. I delighted in her stories of meeting with parish priests, sending notices to the rural newspapers, putting flyers in churches, and talking with everyone she met about the joy of loving God as a Franciscan. (She is spunky, to say the least, with a sweet persistence that just makes you smile!) People started to respond and in March of 2007, an inquiry group formed.

I remember Celeste calling me to review the schedule for that first meeting. She was so excited but a bit nervous. She had received permission to meet at St. Francis Medical Center (St. Francis, of course!) They would gather on a Saturday morning for Mass in the hospital chapel, enjoy breakfast in the cafeteria and then gather in the meeting room provided them for formation. I assured her that her little fraternity was on its way! The name chosen for the fraternity was St. Padre Pio Fraternity.

When I told Celeste that she really needed to find a Spiritual Assistant she said, "Well this will be a challenge," but within a week she had one. Celeste discovered that the principal of the local Catholic high school was a Franciscan, Brother David Migliorino, OSF, a member of the Franciscan Brothers of Brooklyn. He was the only friar in town, with very limited time, but who could say no to Celeste? Br. David journeyed with the little group and was a great source of encouragement. (Later the group was blessed to meet their current Spiritual Assistant, Sr. Maureen Elfrink, OSF.)

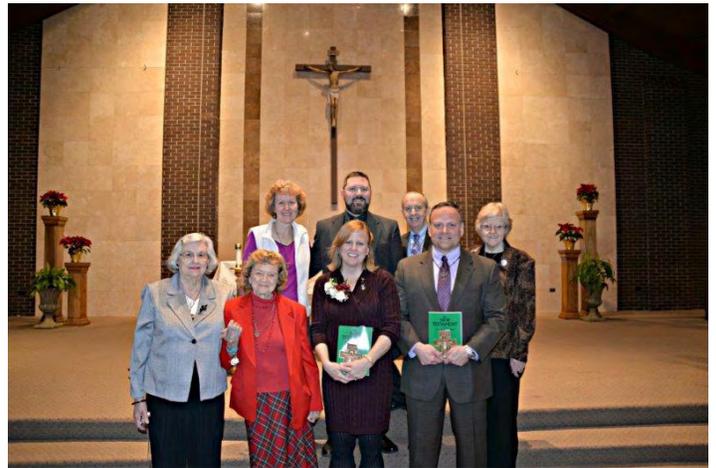
Celeste continued to be diligent, shepherding her newfound brothers and sisters and always attentive to do things "just right." In June of 2008, four Inquirers were accepted into Candidacy, and another was received in November of 2009. In October 2010 Dorothy Arnzen, Shawn Asmus and Anita Tygett were professed at a Sunday Mass at Immaculate Conception Church in Jackson, Missouri. In August 2011, all the members attended that year's Regional Retreat, where

Marvin Glueck and Mary Joseph made their profession, bringing the total membership of St. Padre Pio Fraternity to six professed. Celeste was ecstatic and so was I! This little fraternity had bonded in their 4½ year journey together. The love among them was a witness to all things Franciscan.

Suddenly, just a year later and within a six month period, two of their members met Sister Death. In December 2012, Dorothy, 82, died from illness, and tragically the following May in 2013, Mary, just 57, was murdered, along with her son. The fraternity was understandably shaken. During this time of grief and trial their love and faith in God carried them.

Fast forward to Sunday, February 7, 2016. I arrived at St. Vincent de Paul Church in Cape Girardeau, and many warm greetings were exchanged. As the 10:45 a.m. Mass began, the Pastor, Fr. David Hulshof, graciously introduced me to the congregation, welcomed the many Franciscan visitors (20 Seculars and three Poor Clares) and remarked on the importance of what would take place that day. The parish community's support was amazing and could be heard in their joyous singing. The Sunday readings were rich with meaning, and Fr. David's homily spoke of the call to the Gospel life. The candidates, Julie Schuchardt and Tony Peters, were called to the altar along with their sponsors. I was honored to be there for Julie. We knelt as Fr. David prayed, "Lord, may the Spirit of your love penetrate their hearts..."

I can only imagine Celeste's joy as Julie and Tony each made their profession that day. At 95 years of age, she finally has the Franciscan fraternity she longed for. As I stood there beside Julie, hearing once again these beautiful words, my own heart overflowed as well. "I, N.N... consecrate myself to the service of God's kingdom... and promise to live all the days of my life the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Secular Franciscan Order." Celeste wasn't the only one beaming, and the Son was shining brightly.



St. Padre Pio Emerging Fraternity, front from left: Vice-Minister Anita Tygett OFS, founding member Celeste Obermiller OFS, newly professed Julie Schuchardt OFS and Tony Peters OFS. Back row from left: National Minister Jan Parker OFS, Fraternity Minister Shawn Asmus OFS, Formation Director Marvin Glueck OFS and Spiritual Assistant Sr. Maureen Elfrink OSF.



From left to right: Deacon Steven Schisler OFS, Rev. David Hulshof, Jan Parker OFS, Julie Schuchardt OFS, Tony Peters OFS, and Gary Haller OFS

Postscript

A note to Jan Parker from newly professed Julie Schuchardt OFS

Jan, I really enjoyed reading the history of our fraternity and found it very interesting. Thank you for sharing with us! In November 2006, my husband Eric and I went on a tour to Italy with a group from our diocese. Celeste was also on that tour and that is where I met her, although I didn't get to know her well because of our large group. Now I am realizing for the first time that she was newly professed when we made that trip! I mentioned it to Eric, and he said, "Yes, don't you remember everyone was talking about how she was some sort of Franciscan, but nobody knew exactly what it was?" We visited Assisi and that is when I first felt at home with the Franciscans, although back then I knew very little about St. Francis and St. Clare. Now I really wish I had visited more with Celeste on that trip! Our lives are like a tapestry, and I guess it all comes together at the right time, not our time but God's time. Anyway, I would have never put that together without the dates and information you sent us. Thank you!