

A Song of Hopefulness for Veterans & Members of the Armed Forces Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.

On a Sunday in September, I attended Mass at the United States Naval Academy Chapel in Annapolis, Maryland. After the closing prayer the chaplain spoke of September being *Suicide Prevention Month*. In his remarks he mentioned how Chaplain Major General Steven A. Schaick, US Air Force, had recently called on his chaplain colleagues to “join him in a time of prayer due to a nearly fifty percent increase in the number of Total Force suicides among Airmen this year. The goal of this collective, global, focused prayer is to defeat the spiritual dimension of hopelessness in our Airmen and replace it with hopefulness.”¹ The chaplain then led us in a prayer for all those who might be contemplating suicide, especially those in the armed forces and veterans.

This prayer brought to my mind the statue of the young Saint Francis, which sits on the front lawn of the upper basilica in Assisi. Francis, weighted down, sits upon a horse that seems to share his deep depression. Journalist Nancy Wiechec describes how, “The statue depicts a turning point in the year 1204. Francis was on his way to fight in the Crusades. He was young, about 23. Two years earlier, he had fought in a battle between his hometown of Assisi and neighboring Perugia and was captured and imprisoned for a year until his father paid a hefty ransom. Afterward, Francis suffered a long illness. Scholars believe he was left hurt and broken, possibly suffering physical ailments as well as what we know today as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). By joining the Crusades, Francis might have wanted to prove he was a worthy soldier, but on his ride there,



he received a divine message and came to realize that his aspirations as a knight were not to be accomplished by the sword. He turned around and headed back to Assisi”.²

The divine message Francis received, began with a *Dream of Arms* as depicted in a fresco just inside the upper basilica. Francis misinterpreted this dream, which was intended to help him look deeper within and see that, for him (likely suffering from PTSD), a life of continued fighting would only lead to an inner hopelessness. The Lord’s voice came again to Francis and asked him to return home, toward a life of hopefulness, although Francis did not yet know what

¹ LCMS New Jersey District, <https://www.njdistrict.org/mmmvf.html> (accessed on 29 October 2019).

² Nancy Wiechec, St. Anthony Messenger, *St. Francis and US Veterans*, 24 October 2018.

<https://blog.franciscanmedia.org/sam/st.-francis-and-us-veterans> (accessed on 29 October 2019).

that would entail. It is impossible for us to determine if Francis would have been diagnosed with PTSD, but we do know that he was profoundly changed as a result of his taking up arms and having been imprisoned. Reconsidering the life of Francis, his conversion story and years of living the Gospel, through the lens of the experience of veterans today leads us to ask several questions.

Francis gave his money to the poor and lived on the outskirts of society, becoming in many ways a homeless beggar. How many veterans, despite support systems from family and government, end up homeless living on the streets for any number of reasons? Francis chose to live among the lepers. Were these difficult living conditions, on some level, similar to being in a prison in Perugia? How many veterans return home and are unable to adjust to sleeping in comfortable environs? Did living in solidarity among the lepers offer Francis a glimmer of hope, through his ministry of care for those imprisoned by disease?

One of the places Francis often sought out were caves atop the mountains in central Italy. There he could pray and speak with the Lord, ever deepening his commitment to penance and seeking forgiveness for his sins. This reminds me of how a large percentage of American veterans end up seeking the solace of solitude deep in the woods and mountains. I know one veteran who lives off the grid in Appalachia and can recite poetry from *Lord of the Rings* and other classics on the spot. The mountains have blessed him with a home and healing. Listening to his poetry I'm reminded of Francis who would eventually write his own poetry and sing his canticle in praise of God.

One of Francis' early hashtags came about in his recollecting how initially he was not seeking accompaniment, but that #TheLordGaveMeBrothers. It was in the context of brotherhood and friendship that Francis made his journey of recovery, from the solitude of caves atop mountains to singing songs of hope in the populated valleys. Such accompaniment is key to countering hopelessness and replacing it with hopefulness in members of the military, veterans, and their families today. One of the ways this happens is through the healthcare system.

"Today the Catholic social justice tradition actively engages patients in their care decisions and possible lifestyle alterations. During their periods of service, men and women veterans were responsible for their own lives, the lives of their combat buddies and the distribution of important resources. They are very capable of managing their health care and engaging in health-promoting behaviors, working as partners and collaborators with doctors, nurses and clergy members".³ Such accompaniment can help to ease the transition, which can play out in any number of ways.

For example, Franciscan Friar Conrad Targonski served as a chaplain for the US Marine Corps for 22 years, having participated in Operation Iraqi Freedom by serving soldiers on the front lines in the battles of Fallujah, he understands Francis' "dazed look" as he sits on his horse. "That's how

³ Sr. Rosemary Donley, SC, PhD., Catholic Health Association of the United States, *Catholic Tradition and Veterans' Care*, May/June 2013. <https://www.chausa.org/publications/health-progress/article/may-june-2013/catholic-tradition-and-veterans%27-care> (accessed on 29 October 2019).

I looked when I got back from Iraq, he says. When I came back my superior asked me what I wanted to do next. I said that I wanted to be a greeter at Walmart – I wasn't kidding. I wanted to do something to process this whole idea of war and see people as people once again".⁴

A friend of Friar Conrad, Sharyn Conway, also participated in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Speaking of the Francis equestrian statue she says, "I could feel those emotions he's expressing, those emotions of coming home and not quite fitting in. I understood that."⁵ Both Friar Conrad and Conway participated in a Veteran's Pilgrimage in Assisi through the Veterans Ministry at the Franciscan Renewal Center in Arizona.⁶ This is a place that helps both veterans and their families to move from feelings of hopelessness to discovering a real hopefulness in life, in the spirit of Saint Francis.

After the chaplain led us in prayer in the midst of *Suicide Prevention Month*, the congregation stood to sing a song that is sung at the end of every Mass at the academy, the "Navy Hymn" - *Eternal Father, Strong to Save*. Although we only sang a couple of verses, printed on the inside cover of the hymnal, I wondered about the rest of the song. Later that day, a quick internet search revealed not only more verses to the song but also verses that had been added down through the years. The one that caught my attention was from 1969/70, when Galen H. Mayer wrote a verse that was later adapted by James D. Shannon:

*Creator, Father, who first breathed
In us the life that we received,
By power of thy breath restore
The ill, and men with wounds of war.
Bless those who give their healing care,
That life and laughter all may share.*⁷

I find it interesting that it was also in the 1970's when the world began to move away from describing the effects of war as shell shock or battle fatigue. In that decade, for the first time, the phrase post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was coined and used as a diagnosis. We have come far since then, coming to the realization that in justice it is our responsibility to pray for and accompany those in the armed forces, to welcome home veterans, and walk with those experiencing PTSD. To members of the military, veterans and their families, may Saint Francis pray for us all to discover how, #TheLordGivesUsBrothers&Sisters, "*That life and laughter all may share*".⁸

⁴ Ibid, Nancy Wiechec.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Franciscan Renewal Center, <https://thecasa.org/casaveteransministry/> (accessed on 29 October 2019).

⁷ Navy Hymn - *Eternal Father, Strong to Save*. https://www.navy.mil/navydata/nav_legacy.asp?id=172 (accessed on 29 October 2019).

⁸ Ibid.