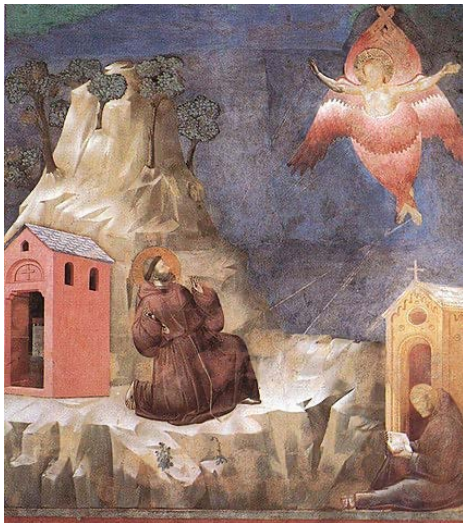


A FRANCISCAN'S WAY OF THE CROSS ON D-DAY 1944

Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.

As I sat in one of the wooden choir stalls of the chapel where St. Francis received the stigmata on, the sacred wounds of the poor and crucified Christ, I closed my eyes and settled into the silence. Meditating on the way of the cross, these numbers came to mind: 4, 5, 6, 8. Often I would share these numbers with young friars, telling them that if they want to live religious life well, they could use this passcode, to unlock a way of better following Jesus, through His passion and death to the glory of His resurrection.

The numbers correspond to the stations of the cross between the moments when Jesus walks, falls, and walks again. Why did Jesus get up each time he fell and from where did he find the strength to continue walking up the street? The answers to these questions rest in the love of His Mother Mary, the kindness of Simon of Cyrene, the tenderness of Veronica, and the tears of the



women of Jerusalem: 4, 5, 6, 8. Where do we find the strength to “keep on keeping on”? Often it is the love of a mother or a friend who is kind to us and willing to go the distance with us. Sometimes it is the tender word or gesture from a stranger who appears from nowhere, at just the right time. We also find great strength when people are vulnerable around us and show us compassion.

Bearing the sacred stigmata atop Mount Alverna, Francis resolved to stand up and continue along his path of discipleship: 4, 5, 6, 8. He found the strength to keep walking through the love of both his Mother Lady Pica and Mary, Mother of the Church. Francis felt the weight of the cross lighten through the constant support and kindness of Brother Leo, who was ever at his side. There was also the tender care of Lady Jacoba de Settesoli, as well as the tear-filled prayers and attention of Clare and her sisters, which sustained the stigmatized Francis in the last years of his life.

For Franciscans, we often find ourselves on both the receiving and giving ends of grace. There are times when we feel the grace, and moments when we give grace to others who are walking their way of the cross: 4, 5, 6, 8. These were my thoughts when the scurrying feet of pilgrims entered the chapel. I finished my prayers and moved on to join a group of American Friars, who were preparing to celebrate Mass in the cave like chapel of Saint Bonaventure, located just below the place of the stigmata. It was June 6th and the Mass intention was for one of our Polish American friars, +Ignatius Maternowski. He was the chaplain of the 82nd Airborne and died on 6 June 1944, during the D-Day invasion. For the homily, using the lens of the Gospel from the Feast of the Stigmata, we friars reflected on how our brother Ignatius found himself on both sides of receiving and giving grace 75 years before, as he followed Jesus up a rural street in northern France.

The setting for this story of the way of the cross is the hamlet of Gueutteville in the commune of Picauville.¹ In 1944 there was only one small business, a combination café and grocery store on a main street leading up to the camp of the German forces. In the early hours of the morning there came a violent knock at the door, the owner, watched by his young son, opened the door for three American soldiers. By daybreak the number of wounded paratroopers had increased to the point where the whole building became an infirmary, organized by the Chaplain, Friar Ignatius. His task was overwhelming. Among his responsibilities was searching out the wounded in the area, which he did while not wearing his helmet. The small boy overheard Friar Ignatius tell his father how the Germans had already targeted him several times but that his Red Cross armband, the only distinctive symbol that he had, would continue to protect him.²



In the early hours of the morning, Friar Ignatius had made a decision that set him on the road to his Calvary hill, as the house became completely full of wounded and others were still arriving. According to the Geneva Convention, medical staff and chaplains were to be respected and protected under all circumstances.³ It was also their responsibility, when the situation permitted, to communicate with their counterparts, to better care for and protect the wounded.⁴ So, Friar Ignatius entrusted his Mass kit to the father and son and turned to walk up the street. With a brisk and determined step he went to meet his German colleague.

Sometime later, to everyone's surprise, Friar Ignatius arrived accompanied by the German (nurse) Major. The Friar-Chaplain showed his guest the entire house and took note of the pressing need for another field hospital. They departed together, to requisition an additional building. In the mind and heart of Friar Ignatius, he had found a companion who, according to the rules of the Geneva Convention, was willing to declare Gueutteville a protected medical zone, thereby ensuring the safety of his fellow soldiers who were wounded and the noncombatants.

Then, probably more out of courtesy than out of caution, Friar Ignatius, unarmed with his helmet secured on his belt and Red Cross armband on his left arm, accompanied the Major back to the high point of the village. As the colleagues parted company, either the German Major using his revolver or a nearby sniper, shot Friar Ignatius in the back. He fell by the road and died, his head lying in the shallow stream running along the fence line. Despite numerous requests from the local population, the Germans refused to allow anyone to touch the body of Friar Ignatius. His earthly remains lay there for three days, until the arrival of allied troops and the withdraw of the Germans units.

¹ The following story comes from an eyewitness testimony of Mr. Thouroude (the son of the café/store owner) and Mr. Marion (a neighbor). Signed October 2005.

² Geneva Convention: Chapter 2, Article 6 and Chapter 4, Articles 19 & 21.

³ Ibid. Chapter 3, Article 9.

⁴ Ibid. Chapter 1, Articles 3 & 4.



Receiving Grace...

...4: As a Polish American Franciscan, I imagine Friar Ignatius parachuted into France with Hail Mary's on his lips. The love of Mary, under the Polish title of Our Lady of Czestochowa, who bears a scar on her face, surely strengthened the resolve of the Friar-Chaplain of the 82nd Airborne. Having fallen from the sky, he relied upon that love of a scared mother to help him to get up and continue along his path of ministry, under the harshest of conditions.

...5: With overwhelming tasks set out before him, a father and son became Friar Ignatius' Simon of Cyrene as they assisted him by offering information and advice, that he might better perform his duties. Their opening the door to the Americans put them in the path of the Friar-Chaplain, as he walked up his own Calvary hill.

Giving Grace...

...6: With tenderness of heart, Friar Ignatius not only ministered to the wounded in the field hospital, but also went searching for the lost. In those fields of France, he prayed for the dead while covering their faces and then tenderly carried the wounded to safety.

...8: Like the women who would weep for Jesus as he lay in the tomb, for three days the local residents wept for Friar Ignatius. They were so heartened by what he did to ensure their safety, that his story was passed down from generation to generation. Since the end of the war, a local cult of venerable love for the Friar-Chaplain continues to grow.



It is a good thing when from time to time, we reflect upon the lives of those great witnesses who offered themselves, in the spirit of the Gospel, for the protection of the common good and the securing of basic human rights. Like them, we too are called to pick up our crosses and follow Jesus.⁵ The Lord's invitation to follow Him echoed in the hearts and minds of Saint Francis who stumbled atop Mount Alverna, and Friar Ignatius who fell in the street of Gueutteville. May this invitation to discipleship also echo in our minds and hearts as we seek for strength and resolve to pick up our own crosses to follow Jesus, all the while repeating with Francis & Ignatius: 4, 5, 6, 8.

⁵ Matthew 16:24.