



**A FRANCISCAN'S WAY OF THE CROSS ON D-DAY 1944**  
**Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.**

As I sat in the wooden choir stalls of the chapel marking the spot where St. Francis received the stigmata, the sacred wounds Christ. Meditating on the Stations of the Cross, I wondered where Jesus found the strength to get up and keep walking, each time he fell. These numbers then came to mind: 4, 5, 6, 8. The answers 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.

After receiving the sacred stigmata atop Mount La Verna, 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 sustaining love of both his Mother Lady Pica and Mary, Mother of the Church. Francis felt the weight of his cross lighten through the support and kindness of Brother Leo, who was ever at his side. Then 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.

For Franciscans, we often find ourselves on both the receiving and giving ends of grace. There are times when we feel the grace on our journeys 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. It was June 6<sup>th</sup> and the Mass intention was for one of our Polish-American friars, +Ignatius Maternowski. He was the chaplain of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne and died on 6 June 1944, during the D-Day invasion of northern France.

Friar Ignatius' way of the cross began as he parachuted into the small hamlet of Gueutteville. At that time there was only a combination café and grocery store on a street leading up to the camp of the German forces. In the early hours of the morning there came a loud 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 Franciscan Chaplain, Friar Ignatius. His task was overwhelming. Among his responsibilities was searching out the wounded in the area. The 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.



According to the Geneva Convention, medical staff and chaplains were to be respected and protected under all circumstances. It was also their responsibility, when the situation permitted, to communicate with their counterparts, to better care for and protect the wounded. So, 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. Realizing the pressing need for another field hospital, the two chaplains went 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.

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 sidearm 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. He laid there for three days, until the arrival of allied troops and the withdrawal of the Germans units.



Receiving Grace...

...4: As a Polish American Franciscan, I imagine Friar Ignatius parachuted into France with Hail Mary's on his lips. 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.

...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, the 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.



It is a good thing when 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. The Lord's invitation to follow Him echoed in the hearts and minds of Saint Francis who stumbled atop Mount La Verna 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.