

FIDDLESTICKS

Issue 125

Epiphany 2018



Inside this Issue:

- Words From The Council
- Brother Rat's Rule
- Peace: A Reflection
- Christmas in The Southern Hemisphere
- A Word About Stewardship and Gratitude
- 500 Years of Reformation
- Fellowship News
- Formation Station
- For The Record: A History of Chapter Locations
- "A Messy Christmas"
- A Christmas Benediction
- "A Blessed Eighth Day of Christmas to You"

Words from The Council

Dear Siblings in Christ,

Peace and Good in this penitential season of Advent.

In all honesty, I once considered Advent simply a candle-lighting countdown to Christmas. In all honesty, when I first began formation in our little Order, I actually had to look up the words "penitential" and "penance".

They were not in my Quaker vocabulary.

Each and all, we begin where we begin.

Each and all, we grow -- step by step --

as we follow ever more faithfully in the footsteps of Jesus,
as we fall ever more deeply into the mystery
of Christ's life-giving love and light.

So welcome, siblings, to Advent,

this subversive season of silence, solitude, penitence and prayer
that the Church, in her wisdom, has given us to prepare for
the ever-new, ever-breaking-through birth and rebirth of Christ
into the depths of our beating hearts,
and into the middle of our mixed-up, messy, ever-hopeful lives.

"Happy New Year!", exclaims our priest,
every year, on the first Sunday of Advent.

That, too, is true.

And so, as we enter this subversive season, we also begin a new year.

It is in this spirit of newness and new beginnings
that we turn now to a question recently raised by one of our newest members.
Reflecting upon our General Rule, he is puzzled by #16
and asks for clarity in how the professed are to comply.

General Rule #16:

*As Members of the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans,
we covenant to draw up and live by a Personal Rule of Life,
based on the Rule of this Order and falling into these disciplines:
Worship, Prayer, Penitence, Work, Lifestyle, Mission, Obedience, Community.
We shall always be under supervision and accountable to an advisor.*

Yes, we covenant to draw up and live by our personal Rules.

Yes, we pledge that we shall always be under supervision and accountable to an advisor.

(Continued on page 2)



From the Council, continued....

What does this mean: "under supervision?"
 What does this mean: "accountable to an advisor?" What is this something new that begins with profession ?



Let us dig deeper into our current Statutes (2016 Revision):

VI Membership; B. Disciplines:

Recalling that Franciscans are called to rebuild Christ's Church, at every stage members and postulants will:

- 1. Have an updated personal Rule of Life, and will strive to follow it.*
- 2. Exercise a discipline of prayer and biblical study/reflection.*
- 3. Engage actively in a local Christian faith community.*
- 4. Meet regularly (monthly) with a Spiritual Director.*
- 5. Attend annual Chapter/Convocation and regional gatherings.*
- 6. Make regular financial contributions to the Order, as well as contributing of time and talent, prayers and passion in accord with the Order's needs and modes of service.*

Good counsel to keep us growing, to keep us going...
 We make these commitments as postulants.
 We keep them as novices.
 We deepen them as professed.

Let us look more closely at our further commitments as professed members:

VI Membership; D. Journey into Membership :

4. Profession:

Profession by nature is a permanent commitment to the community.

a. Formation:

- i. Formation is ongoing.*
- ii. Professed members are expected to continue in their disciplines as outlined in VI-B.*

b. Engagement with the OEF Community

- i. Professed members will report quarterly, as assigned, to another in the Order during Advent, Lent, Pentecost and Francistide.*
- ii. Professed members are invited and encouraged to offer their gifts in service to the Order.*

More good counsel to keep us growing, to keep us going...

Happy New Year, siblings, and welcome to the penitential season of Advent. May we tend to what needs tending as we begin again and await the new.

.....

We, your Council, recently gathered in Minneapolis/St.Paul for our annual face-to-face meeting. A number of members had asked to whom they should be reporting. Turning our

attention to this, we began the process of compiling a list of who reports to whom, filling in the blanks -- one by one -- as we received the info. We are making good progress, but the list is not yet fully complete. Here is all you ever wanted to know and more:

* If you are in an active reporting relationship, please keep going with it.

* If you would like a change, or still have no one to report to, please let us know.

We have made some recent assignments. We have more to make.

* A growing number are finding an "Anam Cara" relationship to be beneficial. (Two members covenant to do mutual reporting)

* Others prefer the previously more traditional "one-way" reporting.

* Several members have agreed to receive multiple reports, finding deep joy in this receiving and in the responding.

* Some members thrive best in the trust that grows over time in a stable reporting relationship.

* Others find the freshness of an occasional change to be beneficial to growth.

* Some have sought out, on their own, someone to report to.

Others have asked to be assigned, or were assigned long ago.



All of this is to say: This can happen in a variety of ways. The important thing is for each professed member to report to another professed member in the Order. To be engaged. To be accountable. Our current Statutes do not use a specific term for this person. In the past, some continued to report to their original formation counselors. Later, members reported to an "area chaplain". Although we are no longer using that organizational structure, some still use that term. Other names currently used or suggested include: "reporting partner", "accountability partner", "journey partner", "Order companion", etc. Regardless of the name, the task of this companion is: to graciously receive the report of the sending member, to hold it prayerfully, and to respond in ways that will support the spiritual walk of the sending member.

It is an accompaniment, a member-to-member "walking-with".

It is Not spiritual direction.

It is an Order relationship in addition to our regular (monthly) meetings with our chosen spiritual directors.

As we walk with one another through this Advent into Christmas, may we share honestly, may we listen tenderly, and may we pray deeply, one for another.

In Christ's Love for Each and All,

Your Council: Shoshanah, Elijah, Louis, Markie and John Son of Syvert

Brother Rat's Rule

Worship

I refrain from attending Sunday services. My excuse is that my physical appearance will frighten younger worshippers.

Prayer

I only attend Morning Prayer when it is said in the room I am in and I cannot find a way to escape.

Penitence

Having strongly considered penitence. I have decided I would rather not.

Work

I do as little work as possible.

Lifestyle

I am not eating meat. This is solely because I am living in a vegetarian household. However, a nice tasty Kiwi bird would go down well.

Mission

Ostensibly, my mission is to keep the house pest free. However, either because there are no pests to banish from the house or they have all run away at the sight of me, I am relieved of the need to do mission.

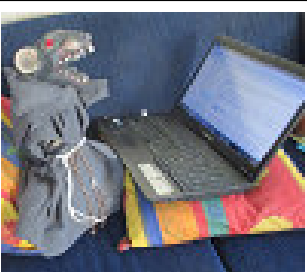
Obedience

I give every appearance of being obedient and of being accountable while secretly and slyly doing what I want to do anyway.

Community

I willingly engage in community as long as everyone else does what I want to do.

Brother Rat



Peace:

A Reflection by Stephan Gerhardt, n/OEF

Peace is the joy of nothingness, the feeling of warm sand under my toes as I watch the sun fall into the sea.



Peace is the smell of sleep that exists when I and my loved one are entwined and at rest. Peace is the emotion that envelopes me as I watch the clouds cross the sky. Peace is one of the greatest achievements of the interior self; a place where the problems of the past can be laid to rest and the problems of the present can be examined and appreciated for the challenges and insights they will provide. Peace is the willingness to accept the things I cannot change as I revel quietly in the freedom to change the things that I can. Peace is what happens when I choose to observe, embrace and accept all that God has created for us. It is in fact a celebration of creation. Peace is the willingness of my interior self to be forgiven just as it is the willingness of my interior self to forgive and love without condition. Peace is the ability to care without worry for the outcome, a gift from God for those of us who are willing to seek it out. To know my place in the world and die a good death is to achieve the ultimate peace. As Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."





Christmas in the Southern Hemisphere



In my experience the light imagery is down played although not altogether lost, after all Christ is the light of the world. We do do candles but as it is only getting dark around 9:30 pm candles have the most impact at Midnight services. Carols by candle light take place late in the evening or in churches which have been blacked out.

We often don't eat traditional Christmas Fare (though some do); Mum and I are going to share a meal with friends on Christmas day which will be ham and salad followed by traditional Christmas pudding. Many families gather at the beach, lake side or in the back yard for a Christmas barbeque. Swimming and back yard or beach cricket are common entertainments.

Because Christmas is in the summer the whole country closes down for quite some time as many people start their Summer Holidays on Boxing Day and the traffic out of the cities is phenomenal. It once took us four hours to reach Palmerston North which is normally a two hour journey. One year my family rented a holiday house over the road from the camping ground. The camping ground was almost empty pre Christmas But by the end of Boxing Day every site was filled with family tents, kayaks, surf boards, bikes etc. Most offices and factories are closed between Christmas and New Year and quite a few businesses are shut well into January. It is called the silly season when there is little real national news and we get all sorts of seasonal padding in newspapers and on the TV news. Except people like shop workers who are busy with Boxing Day sales which, I think, are our equivalent of Black Friday.

After 50 years of living in NZ I am still not used to it and long for the British Christmases of my Childhood. Dad even tried to get the Christchurch Anglican Synod to change Christmas to midwinter but his motion did not succeed. However there is a tradition of having mid-winter Christmas parties in June or July with a traditional meal and attendance by Santa.

I could go on

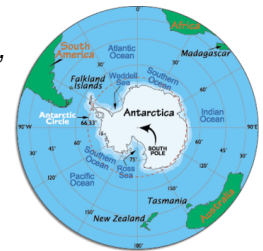
But I wish Youse ones a blessed Christmas season
Kiwi (Sr. Helen Bathurst, New Zealand)

Sister Kiwi has given a good description of what the Christmas season is like in Aotearoa (New Zealand) and while the coming of light doesn't feature as much as in the northern hemisphere, it does give an interesting challenge to local hymn writers.

In a recent email a friend posted these words:

In the carol 'Come to This Christmas Singing', by our own Shirley Murray, the second verse is:

*Wealth of our land and water,
riches of race and culture —
these be our gold and incense
offered for Christmas day:
Where we make peace, declare it,
where we have much let's share it,
aroha warm our hearts, and
aroha be our way.*



© Shirley Murray

She also wrote:

*Carol our Christmas, an upside down Christmas;
The snow is not falling and trees are not bare.
Carol the summer, and welcome the Christ Child,
Warm in our sunshine and sweetness of air.*

*Sing of the gold and the green and the sparkle,
Water and river and lure of the beach.
Sing in the happiness of open spaces,
Sing a nativity summer can reach!*

*Shepherds and musterers move over hillsides.
Finding not angels but sheep to be shorn;
Wise ones make journeys whatever the season.
Searching for signs of the truth to be born.*

*Right side up Christmas belongs to the universe,
Made in the moment a woman gives birth;
Hope is the Jesus gift, love is the offering,
Everywhere, anywhere, here on the earth.*

(Continued...)

Christmas in the Southern Hemisphere, cont.

*Carol our Christmas, an upside down Christmas;
Snow is not falling and trees are not bare.
Carol the summer, and welcome the Christ Child,
Warm in our sunshine and sweetness of air.*

Peace and all good
Reg Weeks (New Zealand)

**Aroha is the Maori word for 'love' in the broadest sense, and with the addition of 'nui' becomes great or big, as in arohanui. Whanganui means 'big harbour'.*

Along with English, Te Reo Maori is an official language in NZ. Public buildings are labeled in both, and a growing number of Maori words are in common conversational use, such as 'whanau' for family, 'iwi' for tribe, 'kai' for food. 'Kia ora' is an informal hello, and a more formal greeting to one person is 'Tena koe', while a 'hui' is a meeting for discussion some issue. 'Tangata whenua' are the people of the land (ie Maori) while Europeans are referred to as 'pakeha'.

And some further trivia – Te Pateke is the brown Teal, a small brown dabbling duck endemic to New Zealand, which I hold in some affection.

Meri Kirikimete

(Merry Christmas)



Pohutukawa (AKA New Zealand Christmas Trees)

A Word About Stewardship and Gratitude by Nancy Menning, OEF

In a "stewardship moment" masquerading as a children's sermon in some church I attended a long time ago, a member of the church sat down on the floor among the children holding a big piece of paper that was decorated to look like a \$100 bill.

He gave them a little lesson in home budgeting, cutting a chunk off the bill for taxes, a larger piece for rent, another piece for groceries. You get the idea. As he ran through all the monthly household expenses for a family -- "don't forget toys!" one child shouted -- more pieces fell away from the currency. When there was just a tiny sliver left, he said: "Well, I guess that's what we'll give the church!"

Then he picked up another oversized \$100 bill and repeated the exercise, cutting off a section that represented the money to be given to the church first, before cutting away pieces for the other expenses. Everything seemed to get funded this way as well, but the church sure came out ahead.

As you read this, I'll be wrapping up the financial record keeping for 2017. Despite the story I told you above, I'm not asking you to send in your 2018 donations right now. I'm grateful for all the different ways your generosity reaches me throughout the year.

I am hoping you'll pause for a moment and think about how you plan for your contributions to our beloved little Order. And if there is any way I can help you better live up to your good intentions, do let me know!

An Important Reminder

Reminder! Nancy Menning is the OEF Treasurer. Contributions can be made by sending a check (made out to "Order of Ecumenical Franciscans") to Nancy at:

**Order of Ecumenical Franciscans
Nancy Menning, Treasurer
521 N Aurora St
Ithaca, NY 14850**





500 Years of Reformation



**The following is a discussion among OEF siblings on the OEF e-mail list*

500 years ago an irate monk posted 95 items for debate concerning the sad state of affairs of the Church in his day. 'What hath God wrought?' might be a good way to express our perspective on that era and what has transpired since then. Now we live in another era where another list of 95 concerns could be posted, but there is no central community bulletin board, no printing press to be invented, no language translation required. What, to state it most simply, has become of the Church? What has become of Christ's prayer that we all might be one? What has become of the pacifism of the first century Christians? Some would say Martin Luther did not go far enough in his hermeneutics. Clearly the man had a few 'character defects' that distorted his efforts. Political pressures bent the Reformation back toward a social revolution as much as an ecclesiastical one. Freedom of faith and thought were suppressed by Luther, Calvin and other reformation-minded people as much as by Rome.



So, what do we seek for the Church Universal as Franciscans? What are we "rebuilding"? What are we trying to heal? What is our mission to the Body of 'Christ Ecclesiastic'? I'm just wondering where the community is with these issues? What are your thoughts?

David D.



Great question for this ecumenical order, Br. David. One thought that I've had is that Christians throughout the centuries have tended to think of unity in terms of *uniformity*. Everyone must sign on to a specific creedal statement in order to be in the right about God and Christ;

and the statements tended to get more detailed as time went along. The Reformation did not undo this tendency; if anything, it reinforced it. On the Roman Catholic side, the fear was voiced that if the reformers succeeded and went all the way, there would be chaos, with everyone putting forth their own interpretation of scripture and theology, and the unity of the church would be ended.

Now, I come from that wing of the reformation (radical or Anabaptist) that indeed thought that Luther, Calvin, and their cohorts did not go far enough in emphasizing a biblical discipleship to Jesus or in re-forming the church as a voluntary community of faith separate from the larger society. That wing, which has indeed often emphasized the competence of each individual to interpret scripture on their own, while also having its own tendencies toward conformism, brought forth the Mennonites and Amish and related groups, and somewhat less directly the Friends and the Baptists. Within many of these traditions, the tendency to split up into more and more groups divided by less and less significant theological differences has been notable, and sometimes lamented.

But here's my point: the Catholic side in the Reformation era was right, the lack of a central authority in Protestantism and the sharing out of the task of biblical interpretation among multitudes of believers did indeed lead to all kinds of schism and multiplying of denominations, sects, etc. And what if *that was what God wanted all along*? What if the differences among Christians represent the fact that no one can identify God's reality and God's truth to the last detail, and that we will inevitably disagree as we seek *faithfully* to understand and practice the way of Christ? What if God is OK with us having different understandings of that which we could never perfectly understand anyway? What if God was and is nudging us to think deeply and creatively about the things of the Spirit, and at the same time to *love one another across the boundaries of our thinking*?

(Continued)

500 Years of Reformation, continued

What if the kind of unity God desires exists in *diversity, not uniformity* (you know, sort of like a God that is Three and One at the same time).

Maybe what seems (and often feels) like chaos is really the flowering of a beautiful meadow of diverse thought, worship, and practice, in which each of us can stand faithfully within our own particular patch of daisies, peonies, or blackberry brambles, give forth our own beautiful scents, produce our own luscious fruits, and rejoice at the thought of how gloriously variegated it must all look from on high, from the vantage point we can imagine but never quite reach.

That, to me, is one aspect of the mission of the OEF: to show how Christians with quite strongly different ways of theology and worship and discipleship can stand and sing and dance together, love one another deeply, and joyfully seek out ways of unified (if not always uniform!) action in the service of the God of Love. That (to me) is one of the beauties of an *ecumenical* order, and one of the ways in which what seems like a weakness of the Reformation turns out to be a strength.



Peace and blessing,
David Rensberger
Associate of the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans

I've been struggling a lot with the reformation this year. The legacy of anti-Semitism sowed by Luther coupled with his bowing to structural/political power are challenging. The whole notion of a great man's theory of history doesn't align with my understanding of how God works. Then I read this amazing article on the influence of the Ethiopian church on Luther's thinking (see below). My post-modern thought has me wondering if even the reformation was cultural appropriation

Through all the faults of 500 years ago, and all the legacies of those faults carried through to today, God has remained faithful. It was God inspiring change among God's people -

Behold, I am doing a new thing! The ecumenical spirit is the strongest gift of the close of the last century and the opening of this one. I appreciate being in both conversation and fellowship with a diversity of people and theologies. It makes me a better pastor and more importantly a better Christian.

THANK YOU SIBLINGS!

Peace, Steve Jerbi

*[Honor the Reformation's African roots](#) by David D. Daniels, Guest columnist, The Commercial Appeal



I heard a great thought from Richard Rohr on the idea of Jesus' teachings. He said that when the Emperor, Constantine, took the Church to the level of legalization that it took the Church into a new light. Because the Church was derived from and on the basis of war, it changed all the teachings of Jesus from what he truly taught to what it has somewhat become from denomination to denomination. It seems we must turn back to the true teachings of Jesus. Love!! unbridled, pure, divine Love. If as a whole we are the church universal, we must love as God loves, as Jesus loves us, to love all of creation as one. No difference no color.

Galatians 3:28 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

May God give you peace,
Rev. Tobias Caskey



Luther was a mixed bag, for sure. (No offense to our Lutheran brothers and sisters here!) When I read that article, I saw Luther picking and

(Continued on page 8)

500 Years of Reformation, continued

choosing items congenial to his movement from Ethiopian orthodoxy.

Perhaps (I really don't know) this was occasioned by the visit of Deacon Michael, and the fact that the Ethiopian church could be traced to a biblical origin. But of course so can the Greek church, which shares many of these same items, as does Eastern Orthodoxy in general (communion in both kinds, Bibles in the common language, no purgatory, etc.). Perhaps (still guessing!) Luther found it convenient to latch onto a less familiar Orthodox tradition, one without a complicated history of relations with Western Europe, while also overlooking less congenial beliefs found in Ethiopian and other Eastern churches, such as the strong devotion to Mary and other saints and the use of icons.

So, cultural appropriation ... very likely some. But I don't think most Western Protestants would walk into an Ethiopian Orthodox service and say, "Oh, that's just like us." I suspect Luther was doing some politickin' here, as cultural appropriation generally does.

Peace and blessing,
David Rensberger



Sisters and Brothers,

I thoroughly appreciated the discussion of Martin Luther (not the King) as a "mixed bag". As a graduate of a Lutheran college (now a University... or so they say!) in which I took 9 hours of then-required theology laced with Lutheran doctrine (it is amazing how much of Paul and Luther can emerge in an Old Testament course)... I would concur that Luther was indeed a mixed bag and confessed that readily, relying upon salvation by faith and not works. (Also amazing how his followers insisted upon specific works as outward works as a sign of that faith... but that is another discussion.)

In any case, to continue the discussion, I think some of you might appreciate Stanley

Hauerwas' piece in the Washington Post on the 500th anniversary of the long-completed/depleted Reformation.

pace e bene
James Schwarzlose, oef

***"The End of The Reformation" by Stanley Hauerwas, Washington Post, October 27, 2017, outlook@washpost.com



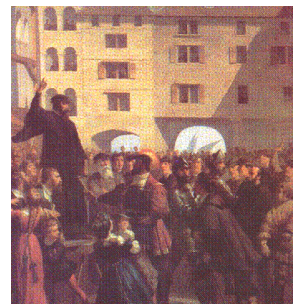
A good send, Brother James! So the Reformation is over except for the parts that aren't, yes? Peace! (The Reformation sure didn't bring much of that!)

- michael vosler, oef.



Thanks for sharing that, James. I find that I have no trouble explaining why I'm a Protestant (which I would be happy to do when I'm sitting quietly at home, rather than riding across country in a car, so that I have time to think of how say it humbly and without contentiousness). I also can't quite agree with Hauerwas that "Roman Catholicism represents a commitment to Christian unity" as long as I can't take communion at Mass (officially, that is, and not wink-wink nudge-nudge). **But:** I would *like* to take communion at Mass; and I resonate strongly with Hauerwas's ecumenical life experience, which resembles my own. I've been deeply shaped (in some ways, while continuing to protest in others) by Catholics like Thomas Merton, not to mention our dear brother Francis. Hauerwas also asks a question that Mennonites have to deal with too in some respects: what happens when the revolution is over and you've won? What's your second act? I appreciate the food for thought this article gives.

Peace & blessing,
David Rensberger



Fellowship News

Let me add a quick note here to say our Northeast Regional Vermont Gathering, beginning on Friday, November 3rd was a warm and gentle blessing. We were graced with a delightful stay at Mercy Farm (Sisters of Mercy).

Present: Anjelika, Carol Stiver, Doris Tellis, Shoshanah, Bruce James, John Michael, Just Plain John, Fred Jaxheimer and Daniel Miller. Our highlight was receiving Daniel as a Novice. Another highlight was hearing (and seeing!) of Anjelika's recent pilgrimage to Assisi. Yet another was that the gathering coincided with John Michael's 10th anniversary of ordination. We made a "field trip" to Rutland for the Saturday evening service at the church he pastors. Just Plain was in Vermont delivering wolf pups (and has more available!). We rejoice that he is healing -- slowly but steadily and surely -- from broken ribs sustained during a bad truck accident, from which he rather miraculously survived. (The pups stayed with a friend, just in case the Sisters of Mercy might have been a little wolf-shy). Wherever we be, wherever we go, let us pray, one for another. In Christ's Love for Each and All, ~ shoshanah

A helpful report, Sister Shoshanah!

Mercy Farm is an aptly named OEF Gathering Place — thank you Sisters of Mercy!

I look around at the faces you named and say, "Ah, yes!" to the New England regulars, each of you the gift you are to us! And Fred traversed the length of PA, bringing with him his energy and the imagined smell of "Sugarloaf!" A wounded and healing Just Plain John, so Indiana was present. And Doris, the surprising California presence! Her, "I'll be there!" is just awesome and underlines the open invitation to all at our Fellowships. Daniel, we all embrace you as a Member of the OEF having spoken your Vow to these Sisters and Brothers. John Michael, on the celebration of 10 years ordained with a Sat. night gathering in your current place of ministry. With you and those who gathered, we rejoice!

Peace to all! and blessings of wise discernment on our Council! -michael v.

Formation Station

Good and Blessed Epiphany Season my dear brothers and sisters in Christ and the OEF! I'm sure we have all used the phrase "I've had an epiphany" or a revelation when we have an "ahha" moment or when that light bulb comes on in our heads about a circumstance, event or happening in our lives. As we all well know, as Christians, we celebrate the Epiphany every January as the realization and revelation that Christ IS the Son of God! Our Blessed St. Francis certainly experienced his own epiphany and conversion to living a Christic life, preaching the Gospel, and sometimes using words!

With that preface, my husband and I would like to introduce ourselves to the OEF community! We are newly accepted as Novice-by-Transfer into what we see as a wonderful band of brothers and sisters in Christ. Mark Scott and I are thrilled to be able to sit at a table where there is room for everyone of all denominations and walks of life! Our "epiphany" is that Francis is a Saint for ALL people. He embodies "Gospel to life and life to Gospel" of which there are no boundaries or walls. Mark and I look forward to getting to know everyone and growing by leaps and bounds in this family called the OEF.

Debra Snider-Scott n/OEF



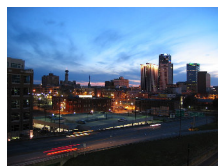
**Welcome, Deb & Mark!*

And welcome to Daniel Miller, who took novice vows at the Northeast regional gathering in November! We look forward to getting to know you all, and hope to see you in St. Louis in June!

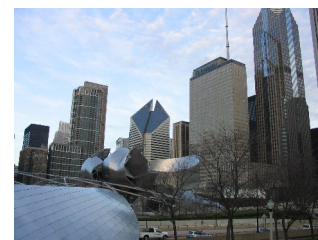
For the Record: A History of Chapter Locations

**In our 30th Anniversary issue published in May, 2013, we included a history of Chapter locations since the Order was founded. There were some errors in that list, so, just for the record, we are printing a corrected history here. Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of professed and novices in attendance. In later years, those numbers have not been included.*

- 1st -1984: Parshall, ND (3)
- 2nd -1985: Parshall, ND (4)
- 3rd - 1986: Alcester, SD (5)
- 4th - 1987: Denver, CO (9)
- 5th - 1988: St. Paul, MN (11)
- 6th - 1989: Mt. Sinai, NY (10)
- 7th - 1990: Cleveland, OH (17)
- 8th - 1991: Louisville, KY (17)
- 9th - 1992: St. Louis, MO (19)
- 10th - 1993: St. Louis, MO (12)
- 11th - 1994: St. Louis, MO (11)
- 12th - 1995: Cleveland, OH (13)
- 13th - 1996: Albuquerque, NM (23)
- 14th - 1997: Little Rock, AR (15)
- 15th - 1998: Richardton, ND (15)
- 16th - 1999: St. Louis, MO (15)
- 17th - 2000: St. Louis, MO (17)
- 18th - 2001: St. Louis, MO (15)
- 19th - 2002: St. Louis, MO
- 20th - 2003: St. Louis, MO
- 21st - 2004: Chicago, IL
- 22nd - 2005: St. Louis, MO
- 23rd - 2006: St. Louis, MO



- 24th - 2007: St. Louis, MO
- 25th - 2008: Indianapolis, IN
- 26th - 2009: Indianapolis, IN
- 27th - 2010: Belton, TX
- 28th - 2011: Detroit, MI
- 29th - 2012: Indianapolis, IN
- 30th - 2013: Detroit, MI
- 31st - 2014: Detroit, MI
- 32nd - 2015: St. Louis, MO
- 33rd - 2016: Indianapolis, IN
- 34th - 2017: Chicago, IL





A Messy Christmas



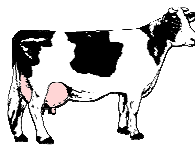
Yesterday I saw the most immaculately decorated home. It was altogether perfect! Three Christmas trees, each uniquely adorned with ornaments. A crèche, a Santa, a train, a charming old sled—it was all so beautiful! A fire crackling, carols jingling, cookies displayed on Holly & Ivy platters . . . even a red Christmas bow on the dog! No signs of messiness or sadness or struggle. Immediately, I mused over the irony that this setting stood in stark contrast to my imagining of a chilly stable night in that obscure little Palestinian village, where Mary and Joseph huddled around a trough surrounded by smelly beasts and curious onlookers. For several moments I marveled in this exquisite display of festive cheer. I even felt nostalgic, remembering my own childhood traditions, recalling in particular my father's insistence on a "Charlie Brown" spruce tree rather than a statelier Fraser fir. For years I thought such a dud of a tree reflected our family's necessity to "live within our means" (no doubt partially true), but I've since come to realize it also reflected the reality of celebrating Christmas amidst the imperfections and hardships of life. We used to joke that our tree was the least wanted, most overlooked misfit on the lot!

In ministry, our most important Christmas preparations come in remembering and reaching out to those too easily overlooked. Every year in the pastorate I would make a list of those who were suffering—the grieving, the broken, the unemployed, the sick, the depressed and despairing. In crafting my Christmas messages I kept them close to my mind and centered in my heart. This year, some of you have suffered. My prayer is that the love of God, made known to us in the Spirit of the Christ child, will bring a measure of comfort and some moments of peace despite it all. One of the most precious Christmas pageant memories I carry happened in the late 1970's. We decided to hold the annual Children's Program in a real barn, on a working dairy farm just a few miles out of town. In addition to the usual imperfections and stumbles, it was



all so raw. The smells of manure and silage filled the cold wintry air. The sound of a bellowing expectant cow provided a backdrop as the children sang Away in the Manger. My fellow shepherds and I huddled for warmth and laughed while stepping in cow pies. It was so imperfect, so very messy, yet wondrously sacred and unforgettably beautiful. Somehow, this is true Christmas—the place where our lingering sadness meets deep joy, where our troubled and disheveled lives find calm where our lingering sadness meets deep joy, where our troubled and disheveled lives find calm grace beyond our imagination. Wishing you a blessed Advent and a joyful Christmas!

Franz Rigert, Conference Minister, Wisconsin Conference UCC, Wisconsin Life Newsletter, Dec. 14, 2017



Hear Ye, Hear Ye!

Submissions for the Lent/Easter 2018 issue of "Fiddlesticks" are being accepted immediately.

Deadline for submissions is March 15, 2018.

Send submissions to Sister Chris at
capoef@solarus.biz

or snail-mail to:

Christine Petersen, OEF
853 Norwich Ct.
Nekoosa, WI 54457

Thank you!





Fiddlesticks
c/o Christine Petersen, OEF
853 Norwich Ct.
Nekoosa, WI 54457
U.S.A.

A Franciscan Benediction

May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers,
 half-truths, and superficial relationships,
 so that we may live deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger at injustice,
 oppression, and exploitation of people,
 so that we may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer
 from pain, rejection, hunger and war,
 so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them
 and turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with enough foolishness
 to believe that we can make a difference in this world,
 so that we can do what others claim cannot be done,
 to bring justice and kindness to all our
 children and the poor.



**Submitted by Br. Joseph Thomas Downey*

shutterstock - 131959781

A Blessed Eighth Day of Christmas to You.

*I saw a new heaven and a new earth;
 for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the
 sea was no more. —Revelation 21.1*

In the early church baptismal fonts were eight-sided
 because your baptism is the eighth day of Creation: God is
 creating you anew.

How apt that the eighth day of Christmas is New Year's
 Day. Whether or not you have New Year's resolutions, be open
 to the mystery that God is creating you anew, new each day,
 created not by your effort but God's grace, not according to your
 desires but God's.

In the darkness and chaos a voice calls out, "Let there
 be light." You don't have to work to re-invent yourself,
 just let God create you, give you life, give you purpose,
 give you gifts.

Be mindful that God is creating you
 anew today, and walk with joy, gratitude and
 trust into the new world.

Deep blessings,
 Steve Garnaas-Holmes *Unfolding Light*
[Unfolding Light | Daily Reflections by Steve](#)
[Garnaas-Holmes](#)

