

FRANCISCAN BROTHERS OF PEACE

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Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest."

(Matthew 9: 37-38)

Devoted to the Gospel of Life



Brotherhood Update

By Father Seraphim Wirth, fbp
Community Servant

I would like to extend a wholehearted thank you to all our friends and benefactors who support us in any way, be assured that we keep you and your intentions in our daily prayers.

- The Brothers are striving to be open to the Holy Spirit's plans as we continue to grow as a community. Some big events happened that we would like to share with you.
- We had a grace filled Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi and shared in the liturgies with other Franciscan groups from around the Archdiocese.
- On October 4th, 2022 we were filled with joy at Br. Didacus's profession of Lifetime Vows.
- I was traveling overseas for one month to check on our St. Francis Mission boarding house in Myanmar and then to visit Br. Antonio in the Philippines many sufferings and graces were received from this trip.
- In November - December we were busy with our Thanksgiving and Christmas distribution and many charity needs at the front door.

Enjoy the photos and articles from all our activities !



Congratulations to Br. Didacus Gottsacker on the Profession of his lifetime vows. October 4th, 2022. May God fill you with joy and inspire you to plant seeds for the harvest



Send out laborers for His harvest



Franciscan friars gather together for the Transitus of St. Francis of Assisi on Oct 3rd 2022



Br. Conrad answering the phones for the Thanksgiving and Christmas food distribution program



Br. Didacus with his family celebrating his profession



Brother Didacus Gottsacker receiving blessings during his profession of final vows Oct. 4 at St. Patrick in St. Paul.

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we may be made worthy of the...
pray.

40 years and counting

Brian Gibson met Michael Gaworski in February 1981 at a charismatic prayer meeting in Shakopee. It was right before Gaworski founded Prolife Action Ministries, which is where Gibson works today, as its executive director.

Story and photos by Dave Hrbacek | *The Catholic Spirit*

“We became friends very early on,” Gibson, 66, recalled. “He was very inspiring in his call to action to be *pro-life*.” At the time they met, Gaworski was seriously considering religious life, and eventually started his own religious group of men a year later, the Franciscan Brothers of Peace. It is designated canonically as a public association of the faithful, and this year is celebrating its 40th anniversary. Gaworski said he felt drawn to the Franciscans, and he felt God speaking to him about starting a Franciscan group of religious men.

The Franciscan Brothers are the first religious group of men founded and organized in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis as a Catholic entity. Modeled after traditional Franciscan orders, the brothers take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Over the last 40 years, they have remained stalwart in their defense of life and in serving the poor and vulnerable, operating a weekly food shelf and opening the doors of their two friaries in St. Paul for anyone in need. They serve members of the Karen community in St. Paul, have an AIDS ministry and provide housing for victims of torture from other countries.

They also have worked through tremendous hardships, including sickness, life-altering events and even death. But through it all, they continue their joyful service to the archdiocese, and say the difficult and painful trials have helped them grow and mature, plus deepen their relationships with one another. The effort started one man at a time.

When Gibson and Gaworski saw each other again at another charismatic conference, this one at the University of Notre Dame in

South Bend, Indiana, Gaworski, who eventually became Brother Michael, approached Gibson with an invitation to join his new group. His argument for joining was convincing, but too late.

“Brother Michael, I’m engaged; I am getting married,” Gibson recalled saying to the group’s founder. And, with a laugh, Gibson added: “He was recruiting me right up to the day of the wedding.”

Brother Michael honored and supported his friend’s vocation to marriage, and he served as a lector at Brian and Julie Gibson’s wedding on Oct. 30, 1982. Soon after, Brother Michael recruited Paul O’Donnell, a friend from their days at St. John Vianney College Seminary at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, who became Brother Paul O’Donnell. The two served side by side for nine years, growing the group’s membership to nine and making an impact with their pro-life work.

Gibson, meanwhile, stayed connected with the brothers and started working for them at Prolife Action Ministries. As the brothers’ various outreach efforts grew and spread, Gibson became executive director of PLAM in 1989.

Tragedy strikes

In 1991, the first of several tragedies struck the brothers. Brother Michael contracted pneumonia that caused cardiac arrest and a lack of oxygen to his brain. Doctors revived him, but he was left with a severe brain injury. The brothers cared for him at their original residence, called Queen of Peace Friary, next door to St. Columba in St. Paul, for 12 years until his death in 2003 at age 45.



Fr. Seraphim baptizes a baby from the Karen Catholic Community during mass at St. Casimir in St. Paul - Sept 11th. Assisting him are Brothers James Voeller, right, and Paschal Listi

The loss was felt deeply. Brothers had taken turns caring for Brother Michael round the clock. Brother Paul, who before Brother Michael's illness had been working with him at a residence they started for AIDS patients called Samaritan House, stepped into the leadership role of the group, at that time called "guardian overall."

As the brothers split time between caring for Brother Michael and maintaining their ministries, tragedy struck again. Brother Joseph Katzmarek, a hard-working handyman with strength enough to move boulders about the grounds to improve landscaping, suffered a fall while walking in an area of road and sidewalk construction near downtown Minneapolis in 2001. It left him a paraplegic and wheelchair bound. Since then, he has spent hours a day in prayer, and needs the continual help of other brothers to handle daily tasks like bathing. The tragedies continued. Brother Paul, who dealt with his own health issues, died in his sleep in 2015. At that point, after just 32 years of existence, the group had to move forward without its founder and without a man who had served in the primary leadership role for more than two decades.

Moving forward

Move forward it has. Despite these difficulties, the Franciscan Brothers of Peace continue to grow and bear fruit in the archdiocese. They started with five men and remain at nine in St. Paul, with one — Brother Didacus Gottsacker — making his final vows Oct. 4, the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, their patron (a 10th brother is living in the Philippines, his native country, and awaits a visa to return to the U.S.). Their ministries have grown to include outreach to the Karen community (refugees from Myanmar, formerly known as Burma) at both St. Casimir parish in St. Paul and St. Jerome Catholic School in Maplewood, in addition to sidewalk counseling at Planned Parenthood in St. Paul and a presence at other pro-life gatherings, plus regular visits to patients at the VA Medical Center in Minneapolis.

In addition, they have added a second friary, which is adjacent to the church of St. Patrick in St. Paul. And they built a spiritual center in northern Minnesota about 10 miles inland from Lake Superior, a place where the brothers, other priests, friends and supporters can go for renewal and relaxation.

On top of that, they gained their first priestly vocation — a desire of Brother Michael's from the very beginning — when Father Seraphim Wirth, 42, formerly Brother Seraphim, was ordained in 2019. Father Seraphim, who joined in 2007 and made his perpetual vows in 2013, is today the overall leader, now called community servant. He is heavily involved in ministry

to the Karen community, celebrating Masses and doing baptisms and weddings, along with Brother James Voeller, 59, who joined the brothers in 1998.



Brothers James and John Mary ministering at the food shelf.

Father Seraphim got to know Brother Paul during his early years in the community, and both went to Rome for the canonization of Sts. John Paul II and John XXIII in 2014. Being at the friary when Brother Paul died and seeing and hearing about the other trials the men have faced over the years, he and the other brothers have pondered what God's plan and purpose could be. "There's a great mystery in this," Father Seraphim said. "It's not an easy question for us to answer." As leader of the brothers, he tries to help the men look forward to what God might have in store, while at the same time continuing their present ministries. One of these outreaches, the food shelf, operates every Monday morning and as needed on other days. It traces its roots back to the earliest days of the group when Brother Michael and Brother Paul, having served at Mary Jo Copeland's Sharing and Caring Hands in Minneapolis, started their own food shelf to serve the poor in their St. Paul neighborhood.

'Like family'

The ministry offers tangible fruits of their efforts. Last year, the food shelf at Queen of Peace Friary served 3,500 individuals, including regulars like Louis Hurd, 48, who lives near the friary in an apartment with his 12-year-old daughter. He has dealt with several struggles since 1996, when he moved to the Twin Cities from Memphis, Tennessee, and he has been coming to the friary for 13 years. It's a place where he has found physical and spiritual support and formed bonds that run deep.

"They've always had my back," said Hurd, 48, who is battling cancer and has only one lung. "They're like family. I really consider them my family."

For a while, he would hang out with one of the brothers and do things like go to the movies. He said they have treated him "like I was one of them."

Whenever he is struggling, they always take time to pray with him, while also teaching him simple lessons like “have faith and believe in miracles.”

“I love them,” Hurd said. “They’re good people.”

Skip Olchefske first met the brothers in 1982 when he was a volunteer at Sharing and Caring Hands. For more years than he can remember, he has been helping at the brothers’ food shelf on Mondays, putting together hygiene kits they give to people in need along with food. In addition to coming every Monday morning, he helps on other days when asked.

“Whatever they want; they’ve got my phone number,” said Olchefske, 79, a Catholic who lives in Shoreview.

“They’re good friends. I’ve known these people a long time and they’re a good organization.”



Br. Joseph praying for vocations

Brothers have come and gone over the last 40 years, but a core group has been together for much of that time. Brother John Mary Kaspari, 64, the group’s oldest member, joined in 1989 and does accounting for the brothers and serves at the VA Medical Center.

Brother John Mary said the brothers made one decision that has had a lasting impression and shaped how the men view suffering.

After Brother Michael’s illness left him bedridden and needing daily care, the brothers were urged to move him to a facility like Little Sisters of the Poor’s Holy Family Residence in St. Paul. This idea was brought to Brother Paul, who had practical reasons to place Brother Michael into the hands of professional caregivers.

“But Paul wanted him home,” Brother John Mary recalled of the decision to keep Brother Michael at the friary, “as the model of the suffering Christ in our midst.”

Taking his turn caring for Brother Michael, plus

caring for sick and dying patients at Samaritan House and at the VA Medical Center for the last 19 years, have given Brother John Mary a “heart for the sick and suffering” and cemented his passion for this ministry.

Today, suffering still resides within the friary walls. Brother Joseph lives with daily pain that has been his companion since his accident in November 2001. Over the last 10 years, it has gotten worse. He worked tirelessly the first 10 years after the accident to strengthen his arms and shoulders after he lost the use of his legs. He pushed himself hard with rigorous workouts and rehab that included lifting weights. He poured himself into any physical tasks at the friary that he could handle. He even found a way to hold and move his body in an upright position using a special chair. Eventually, it all took a toll.

“After 10 years of being really active ... I ended up having to stop walking, and I had to stop lifting weights, and then I had to stop standing on the chair even, because of the pain I was getting that felt like being sawed in half,” said Brother Joseph, 63, the middle of seven children who grew up in the Twin Cities (Golden Valley and later Bloomington) and joined the brothers in 1991.

Today, his “real ministry” is “prayer and suffering,” something he never imagined 31 years ago when his journey toward joining the group began while his father was praying that one of his children would choose a religious vocation.

During that time, Brother Joseph developed a desire to volunteer at Sharing and Caring Hands, and his dad “got excited” because he had met Brother Michael and Brother Paul and knew they were serving there. He urged his son to contact the group.

“I called them, and they invited me for dinner and evening prayer,” Brother Joseph said, “and the rest is history.”

That visit was the only time he ever talked with Brother Michael, who just weeks later suffered his catastrophic illness.

Brother Joseph’s accident radically changed the way he serves the Franciscan Brothers of Peace. He went from the go-to handyman and friend of the homeless to the go-to prayer warrior. He dutifully intercedes for people’s intentions during his daily prayer, which can last three or four hours. At the top of his daily list are his two primary intentions — the souls in purgatory and the lost souls on earth.

Intense prayer

Doing this intensive prayer routine helps him place a value on the suffering he endures every day and likely will have to endure for the rest of his life.

“Uniting our sufferings with our suffering Lord is what I feel God’s calling me to do,” he said.

“There’s an intimacy there that makes you oblivious to the pain because of the power of his love and feeling that closeness to him.”

This is one example of how the brothers feel their community has matured over the last 40 years, as they work through their trials and continue to serve the poor day by day. Along the way, they have been refreshed and renewed by newer members, like Brother Didacus, who brings zeal and dedication to their ranks.

When he joined in 2017, Brother Didacus, whose birth name is Steven, joyfully engaged in the process of picking his religious name, a long-time tradition of the brothers that involves submitting three names to the community servant, who makes the final selection. Didacus was Steven’s top choice, partly because the saint’s feast day is the same day as Steven’s birthday, Nov. 7. The new name serves as a daily reminder of the life in Christ he now lives, which is a significant deviation from his life before joining.



Brother Didacus Gottsacker signs an oath during his profession of final vows Oct. 4th at St. Patrick in St. Paul
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At one time, he was considering job prospects in his field of international development, while in a serious dating relationship that he thought might lead to marriage and family. But, the relationship ended, and he found himself “kind of in a rut.”

“I didn’t really know where to go or what God wanted me to do,” Brother Didacus said. *“So, I just picked up my rosary, and I was praying. I heard Jesus speak to me through the Blessed Mother. She basically said something akin to ‘Chase after me more than you’ve chased after any woman, and I will reward you more than any video game you’ve ever played. That sounds like a weird thing for most people, but for me, that’s exactly what I needed to hear.’”*

After “pushing God in the background” for six or seven years, Brother Didacus recognized that “the Lord



Br. Didacus with Fr. Tom Wilson (right), Pastor at All Saints Catholic Church in Lakeville, MN and Deacon Gordon Bird (left) from St. Joseph’s in Rosemount

was moving.” He researched religious orders and zeroed in on Franciscans, which eventually led him to check out the Franciscan Brothers of Peace. Their long and dedicated prolife ministry especially drew him.

He is in a unique position, being the only brother who never met either Brother Michael or Brother Paul. But their passion for prolife ministry has been implanted deep in his heart, and he now works to carry on that significant part of their legacy.

“I appreciate the courage and heroism of these two brothers to know that this (prolife ministry) was the right thing to do,” Brother Didacus said. *“And, in many ways, I feel that both of them are interceding for my vocational journey.”*

From prolife ministry to food shelf service, the Franciscan Brothers of Peace keep going as a spiritual force in the archdiocese. Gibson, for one, sees their shining light of prayer, dedication and service.

“They continue to love God, they continue to be that radical love of Christ that it was intended to be from the very beginning,” he said. *“It’s amazing — amazing what they’ve gone through and what God is still using them to do. ... This is an amazing religious order.”*



The Harvest Is Abundant

On February 1st 2021 the new democratically elected members of Myanmar were deposed by the oppressive Myanmar military known as the Junta. The event created an uprising around the country and the result was the continuation of grave human rights abuses committed by the Myanmar military against civilians. This event led to the shut-down of the country and a civil war that goes on to this day. The result of this current crisis created great difficulty getting food and supplies into the country for those that need it most.

History:

During my first trip to Myanmar in 2019, I was taking a boat across the river connecting Myanmar and Thailand trying to visit a village from which most of our Karen friends in Minnesota came. Due to some potential problems upriver I never made it to my destination but was instead dropped off on a beach of an Internally Displaced Persons Camp (IDP) on the Myanmar side. At this point I was considered an illegal immigrant and I did not know where I was, but was given the instructions to walk up the beach and that there was a Catholic boarding house somewhere in the camp.

I eventually made my way to the Catholic boarding house now called St. Francis Mission. I spent two nights in this locale administering the Sacraments and trying to understand the place where God had brought me. My bed was the floor of an old bamboo house with a big hole in the roof. At night I would look up and see the stars and the mosquitoes very clearly thinking to myself how amazing God is that these jungles of Myanmar are housed with our Catholic brothers and sisters so hungry to receive the sacraments.



Fr. Seraphim visiting our St. Francis mission in Myanmar

Mission 2022

In November of 2022 I was inspired to go back to Myanmar despite the grave challenges this could entail. The motivation was to check on the status of our St. Francis Mission located in this remote region of Myanmar. There were many children at the mission who wanted to make their first confession and first communion and there were also many villagers who requested to be baptized. So the decision was easy for me, I needed to go.

This mission work is a continuation of our Karen Catholic Community apostolate and I have incorporated the Karen people from St. Paul, establishing this mission as a way for them to help their suffering people still living in Myanmar. A mission team of five was assembled knowing the risks and dangers that this mission could

involve, but they were confident in their decisions to accompany me and to spread the love of Jesus.

Our mission was simple: we would land in Thailand and, through various ways, make our way to St. Francis Mission in Myanmar. We had a plan to put on a Bible camp for the students at the mission. I brought a small monstrance with me so we could have Eucharist Adoration. After one week in Myanmar we would have a closing Mass with baptisms, first communions, and marriages.



A Three Hour Walk:

What impressed me the most was how far people would travel just to come to Mass and receive the Eucharist. I remember one day two women showed up at the mission. They wanted to talk to me and, with the help of a translator, they told me that they walked three hours to come and receive the Eucharist. One of the ladies had a sick child and it was difficult to leave him behind, but she wanted to go to Mass. I gave these women a rosary and asked them if they knew how to pray it. They had a difficult time remembering the prayers so I told them to just say "Jesus I Love" on each bead. I invited them to stay for Mass in the morning and, with boldness in their response, they said they "would not leave without receiving the Eucharist". There were several other people like this who traveled up to five hours on foot and boat through hostel areas just to come to Mass. It was a humbling experience.



They Trusted That God Would Protect Them:

Our time at St. Francis' mission was fruitful and peaceful and as the days went on I mistakenly forgot about the war that was going on in the country. One night an event happened that brought this back to reality. Every evening the students would gather in the chapel for evening prayer and rosary. On this night I noticed that the children were gathering in the chapel early which was unusual. A few moments after this, one of the men who was with me said to me, "Father, there might be a problem for us tonight, a Burmese Jet fighter bombed a village 20 miles from us and we need to be careful, we may need to leave the village and go and hide in the jungle tonight, we will have to wait to see what the village leaders say." After I heard this news I simply went into the chapel with the students and we started to pray the rosary.

It amazed me that there was no panic in the children's voices because they trusted God would protect them. I was also amazed that I was completely at peace and said to the students that if we had to sleep in the jungle that night God would take care of us. After we finished praying everyone went back to their dorms like normal and the village was very quiet that night.

In preparation for potentially having to flee the village, I began to pack what I call my 'jungle bag' just in case I needed to leave in the middle of the night. I remember that all the things I thought would be important for surviving in the jungle no longer mattered. All I packed was my Mass kit, flash light, water bottle and some clothing. Fortunately no airplanes came that night and we were left in peace, but it was a reminder to me of the reality these people face everyday.

I share this story with you to not only appeal for your prayers and support for this and each of our ministries but to also show you how we, the Franciscan Brothers of Peace, choose our ministries. In reality we don't choose what we think we should do but we respond to what the Holy Spirit brings to us.

Sometimes in life God drops us off on a beach or brings us to a people to whom we are not sure how to minister, but we are just asked to start walking and He shows us the way.



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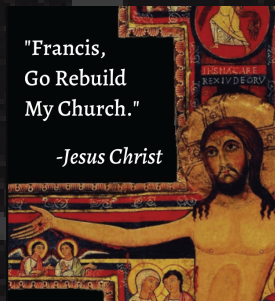
1. supernatural grace for mission
2. a missionary gift from the Holy Spirit at the founding of a religious community

5 Central Charisms of the Franciscan Brothers of Peace

1. Radical love and zeal for Jesus Christ and the service of His Kingdom
2. Ambassadors & missionaries of Christ's peace & mercy
3. Prayer, & the cultivation of prayer among all people
4. Franciscan simplicity through a life of poverty, chastity, & obedience to the Lord & the Roman Catholic Church
5. Called to be prophetic witnesses, whether it is popular or not

www.brothersofpeace.org
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Congratulations Br. Didacus!



"Francis,
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-Jesus Christ

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