

150 Years of God's Compassion

Friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm

We are celebrating 150 years of Franciscan presence at St. Peter's Church in the Loop. The first church was a little frame one built on the south side of Washington between Wells and Franklin in 1846. This map from 1833 shows the town was just a few streets and the southern-most one was Madison; the arrow points to where St. Peter's is now! In 1854 that first church was sawn in half and towed to the

southwest corner of Clark and Polk Streets. It was on that corner, then,

that a large church was built and dedicated in 1865, just a few months after the end of the Civil War. And yes, the Great Fire of 1871 spared this church because the wind changed direction and blew the fire north where it crossed the river. The church was saved also because the pastor purportedly made a vow to God: if the parish were spared he would build a church to St. Anthony of Padua. One was built at 2849 S. Wallace but... ever since October 8, 1871, God's people have prayed to St. Anthony after every Mass here at St. Peter's. What a piece of Chicago history and folk lore we share, isn't it?



The first five German friars arrived July 29, 1875, met at the rectory door of St. Peter's with skepticism and fear; people thought the five friars would cost the parish too much money. You can read some of our fascinating history at stpetersloop.org and in recent bulletins and we are proud of our involvement in the growth of our great city, Chicago. But this month, I want to focus on just one aspect of our Franciscan presence here over these 150 years.

During the 32 years I've been a part of St. Peter's I've been blessed to know some very special people. One was Joe McNulty. His plastering company created the massive angel Gabriel on the ceiling of the sanctuary and the angels above the shrines of Francis and Anthony. Another man is the late John Dwyer of Oak Park; he worked in the Loop for years with Chicago unions like SEIU. It was John who told me about people going to St. Peter's at Clark and Polk for confession. St. Peter's was created for German immigrants and John told me one of its nicknames was *Dutch Cleanser*, a nod to the kitchen cleanser, the church's Germanic origins and the Sacrament of Penance. We have a memorial case in the basement of this church that contains a wooden panel from a confessional in the old church – it's a carving of the Good Shepherd. I've always appreciated it because it's such a perfect image for the Sacrament. Jesus is reconciled with one of his lost sheep. People knew that St. Peter's was THE place to go for confession and still do today! The first Franciscan Friars almost immediately developed a splendid reputation as compassionate, understanding and very pastoral confessors.

The friars brought that reputation to the new church at 110 West Madison and opened in 1953. In order to enable that legacy to flourish, the architect included 14 confessionals in the body of the church (7 on each side) and even more in the two chapels above the church. Originally a friar would spend 3 hours at a time in "the box" as we sometimes call the confessional; since I've

been here we only spend 90 minutes for one shift. Since Covid hit, we no longer use the confessionals in the church. Twice I've written about our plans for new confessionals in the Legionnaire so we can again make use of the entire auditorium for classes, lectures, concerts and receptions. And as some of you know, a few of the original confessionals in church have been removed and replaced with new shrines. However, what is most important as confessionals change is this: we know the world (literally!) comes to St. Peter's to celebrate this revered Sacrament, we know in the past 150 years millions of people have been reconciled with God, we know our Franciscan reputation as gracious ministers of reconciliation will be honored and taken proudly yet humbly into the future life of the Catholic Church. This great gift to the Church of Chicago and beyond will always remain the capstone of our sacramental ministry.

How many people encounter God here in the Sacrament of Penance? Remember Fr. Elric Sampson? I once dared him to count how many confessions he heard in a month and it was way over 1,000! One friar, one month...multiply that by 12 months by countless friar confessors times 150 years...millions of people at peace with God all these years! I love to recall such numbers, and I revel in all that God has done with millions of people at countless Masses and endless moments in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. What a legacy here at St. Peter's in the Loop. It's one astounding story of God and God's People.

On June 15 we celebrated the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity. The foundation of my homily was that the self-revelation of God throughout history has always been *relational*. Consider the moments of creation, the indwelling of God in the Son, the presence of the Son's Spirit living and creating among the world's people today. Don't get caught up in using our psychological concepts of 'person' in attempting to understand the Trinity. See it all as one God who is always in relation to and with creation and the Godself. *Relational*. Remember that adjective.



Coinciding with this Solemnity throughout the United States were at least 2,000 No King demonstrations. Around the corner from St. Peter's at Daley Plaza, police estimated 20,000 people gathered peacefully to express something. Yes, there were political sides, overtones, creative in-your-face signage and all that. But I simply observed and reflected on what I experienced during my time in that huge crowd of very expressive humans. And what I surmised is not very far from what millions have experienced at St. Peter's for 150 years of Franciscan presence. May I expound? See my great niece, Maddie, and her day care friend from a couple of years ago? They were freely expressing their sheer delight in simply being together. Just being together. No barriers. No pretenses. Simply caring for one another and knowing they were cared for and loved.

As I watched the crowds at Daley Plaza, listened to a couple of the public speakers, read a bunch of the signs and filtered political rhetoric from genuine feelings, something dawned on me. Underneath the massive, vociferous, national expression of disdain at some of the political actions taking place around all of us...I believe one of the things most people are starving for is the exact same thing Maddie and her friend expressed about three years ago: the deepest desire to be loved and respected for who I am. That is it. Yes, it takes time (and humility) to peel off layer after layer of political agendas, personal leanings and hopes, often misplaced feelings of anger and frustrations but...I do believe, as I was taught once upon a time in university, the human being needs water, food and love to be a "fully self-actualized" person. Who among the millions demonstrating across our country on June 15 can disagree with those primary needs? And isn't the need to be accepted 'as is' a huge part of being loved, respected and accepted? Every person wants and needs love.

I have a friend who is Mexican American and serves people in Pilsen, an area of Chicago referred to as "Little Mexico." I saw him after Mass a few weeks ago and he was in tears. When I asked what was bothering him he told me of an encounter he had a few days before with people

from ICE. They'd just thrown a young married couple into an unmarked van and then tossed their 12 year old son onto the sidewalk. The boy was screaming in agony and my friend was helpless to reunite that family. Helpless. He shed tears of agony because a defenseless child was alone in the world. I've been watching a Netflix series called "Hitler and the Nazis." Don't jump to conclusions here that I'll compare that horrid history with present-day tactics of ICE and other stuff going on around us. Do that on your own. However, I've read enough history to know the common and disgusting story of amplified, institutionalized hatred. Hate only divides, destroys and degenerates.

The Trinity is a dogma of our faith. But understand it? I encourage people to simply consider God in terms of relationships. The myriad modes of Divine Presence throughout Scripture show how God reveals the Godself through creativity, the person of Jesus and the powerful fire of the Spirit who whirled through the new creation and was breathed into the disciples by the Risen Christ. *Relational*. On Trinity Sunday we heard from Romans 5:5 - *Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us*. We know the Father and Son are one and that the Spirit renews and enlivens the Church through the centuries. Scholar John Kavanaugh, S.J.) encouraged us to think like this: *The uncreated Trinity is 'othered' into creation. The created world, thought and loved into being, is empowered to reciprocate...we mirror the personal mutuality of the Trinity and reaffirm the order of all reality*.

This view of the Trinity is dynamic and in my Franciscan heart, births all sorts of creative ideas; it is the foundation of the unity of all creation. In the context of our 150 years of walking with people to be reconciled with God, one thing is clear to me. When one is given absolution and restored to a healthy relationship with God in the Sacrament of Penance, she or he is drawn back into the divine whirlwind of our relational God. There is a new-found freedom that comes with forgiveness, a deep knowledge and experience that one is loved, respected and accepted completely. The massive demonstrations these days are cries for a change in the way the present administration treats certain people. Actions that are completely incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus. Underneath that need for change in the political arena is, as I said, a common, even deeper need for belonging, for human dignity, for love and respect as one of God's myriad creatures.

It's a genuine honor and joy to celebrate Penance with any one person – who am I to be involved in such a sacred moment when a person comes before God to ask forgiveness? Who am I among sinners to be an instrument of peace? Yet this is the honor given to a few hundred Franciscan Friars who have served St. Peter's in the Loop for 150 years. It's quite a legacy, isn't it? And for us confessors, it's a great source of humility, believe me. Why did God choose this Hutmacher to share such moments with thousands of people? I don't know but I accept it joyfully because all of us involved in the ministry of reconciliation see the very action of Divine Love right in front of us, both in the penitent and in the confessor.

As for our reputation as compassionate confessors, I humbly accept that also and count my blessings for being a part of St. Peter's all these years. To be renowned for compassion? Who would be ashamed of that? My brothers in our community, in our Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe and I invite you to join ALL our planned events to celebrate 150 years of God's compassion known through Franciscan Friars. Check the bulletin and our Facebook page for details about the Gala on July 17, seven concerts, lectures, an art show and our annual Franciscan Festival September 29 through the night of October 4. We friars could never have done what we've done without your constant support...and not just financially but with your genuine care and the many ways people let us know they're so grateful that we're just here. May our God of Compassion, the love of Jesus and the Spirit of Wisdom fill you always, and pray we can serve God and God's People another 150 years!

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