



MULTICULTURAL AWARENESS



FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS....

St. Francis of Assisi Deaf Fraternity
by Consuelo Wild, OFS

“Start by doing what’s necessary; then do what’s possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible” St. Francis. It is good to begin with a quote of our Holy Father St. Francis. In this simple quote, I find what our Deaf Catholic Fraternity, is all about. It is a seed planted and still growing. More than 40 years later, we may still be the only Deaf OFS fraternity in the United States and elsewhere.



Founding Members, 1979

Our humble beginnings started with Deacon Paul Pernecky, OFS, who was also among the first deaf persons to be ordained a deacon. He is our group’s founder. Forty-one years ago, on January 14, 1979, the St. Francis of Assisi Fraternity of the Deaf was established in the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. at the Catholic Deaf Center (now dedicated as Pope Francis Center) in Landover Hills, Md.

The fraternity was started in 1978 with Francis Cannon as its first Minister, who served until 1985. In January 1979, the first members were professed. This included Deacon Pernecky and Francis Cannon, as well as Elise Pernecky, Patricia Porreca, Alan Porreca, Lucia Equiguen, George Bisaha, Paul Blicharz, and George Babinetz.

Another member of our Catholic Deaf Community joined OFS not long after the original members. Dorothy Steffanic began her formation in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1977. Later, she relocated in the Washington, D.C, area and became a professed Franciscan in St. Francis of Assisi Deaf Fraternity in 1979. Ms. Steffanic became the second minister of the fraternity in 1985. Another five members became newly professed between 1981 and 1999. Since then, many of these professed members have gone home to their Father, and others have moved away. Dorothy

shared how much becoming a Franciscan meant to her at the 25th Anniversary celebration of St. Francis of Assisi Deaf Fraternity. She said, “I am very interested in and marvel at St. Francis of Assisi’s way of life and his depth of love for God and his people, no matter where he was. He was a lover of animals and nature. He built a strong Church by the power of God through his weakness

and great love and trust in Him.”

It was our Dorothy who, now 91 years old, remained faithfully with her community and welcomed five new candidates who were eventually professed. Around 2004, in prayer and with hope, Dorothy reached out to Janice Benton, OFS, who is currently the Minister of St Francis Fraternity in Washington, D.C., and part of the St. Margaret of Cortona Region. Together, Fr. Hugh MacSherry, OFM, (a friar at that time and spiritual assistant) and Janice worked with Mary O’Meara as interpreter to guide the formation of the current candidates. On December 14, 2008, the following made their profession: David Koch, Eleanor Culas Ward, Godwin Ofodu, Peter Noyes, Janet Noyes, and Sally Mooney. It was our sister-in-Christ Dorothy who, persevering in her Franciscan vows, once again brought the fraternity to life.

While several of the members have moved, the fraternity continues, with God’s grace, to learn and flourish. Two additional members, Paul Sweeney and Consuelo Wild, were in Formation in 2011 and professed on April 19, 2015. Peter Noyes was elected to the Regional Council around six years ago as treasurer. Peter shares that he became a Franciscan because “God knows how difficult it was for me to be deaf in a



2003 Thank You Dinner

Left to right: Joe Jarboe, Lucia Equiguen, Patricia Porreca, Dorothy Steffanic, Alan Porreca, Henry Beckert and Verta Beckert

hearing world. I met every challenge thrown in my life.... I looked for a way to deepen the intimacy between myself and God. A friar suggested that I might be looking for ways to improve my prayer life"... and so "the most important thing about being a Franciscan is serving others through servant leadership. We Franciscans are formed to serve one another in a big or little way."

While we do not currently have a Spiritual Assistant, we have been blessed with our "nurturing mother" sister-in-Christ, Janice Benton, who has continued to walk with us through every blessing and challenge. In many ways she is the glue that teaches and supports us. We currently have seven professed and two Inquirers meeting monthly. We have been in a 'transition mode' since I became Minister last April. We are all learning together; as deaf individuals our challenges are many. We are learning to be "understood and to understand"... our culture, our language, our diversified ways of communication, our education (not only schooling but religious upbringing or lack of it) and personal experiences with and among Deaf and Hearing.

But it goes beyond that now. Half of us live in other states, and so we cannot always see each other or do things together as Franciscans. How to solve the problem? Technology has helped. As deaf individuals, we use a system such as you would for video conferencing. In this way we bring all our members together for monthly meetings. We see each other and can use our ASL (American Sign Language) to communicate. We pray the Divine Office and have formation and business meetings. In order to spend more time together, we have another optional meeting every Thursday afternoon. We share reflections and prayer intentions and support each other on our life journey. We also encourage each other and share ways to be Franciscan in our local communities. It is through God's wisdom and power that we bond. Janet

Noyes shares "I like the Franciscan way of life and the beautiful prayers." And Paul Sommer, an inquirer, says "Right now I am in discernment. I love the simplicity of Francis' spirituality. I want to learn more. Francis seems to keep his focus on God and how God reveals Himself in the scripture, which helps us know how to live our lives."

Together with our sister fraternity, St. Francis, in Washington D.C., we have fed the homeless and joined in special Masses and prayers. With our Regional Fraternity of St. Margaret of Cortona, we share in their retreats and days of recollection, as well as other special events that arise. This is all possible through the hiring of interpreters some of which are paid by our Regional Council and others by donations to our fraternity. "To love as to love"... a very positive perspective of being Franciscan is that among other Franciscans we are so warmly accepted and loved. It is such a blessing to be greeted and feel welcomed and to have a voice with our hearing peers. God is Good, ALL the TIME.

There is so much that we would love to share with you about our deaf fraternity. It is in prayer that we hope what you read here gives you a glimpse of how much deaf people, just like you, want to know and love God and see Him in everything as did our Brother St. Francis. Pray for us! Pray that we can persevere faithfully in our vocation as Franciscans and help open many doors for more of our deaf brothers and sisters to experience the Franciscan life. It's a true and perfect fit for us to know and serve God. Humbly we thank St. Francis and you for opening the first door. "Lord, help me to live this day quietly, easily. To lean upon Thy great strength, trustfully, restfully. To wait for the unfolding of Thy Will, patiently, serenely. To meet others, peacefully, joyously. To face tomorrow, confidently, courageously." St. Francis

❖ Resources: NCOD's Vision magazine on OFS early history, 2003

