

## ARE WE LEARNING? FRIAR BOB HUTMACHER, ofm

Early in May I had a striking dream. I was in my hometown of Quincy, IL and was scheduled to preside at the 9:00 a.m. Sunday Mass at St. Francis. I was a few miles away and, fearing I'd be late, called ahead to let the friars know. I arrived at 8:55 and entered the sacristy to prepare. Well, I could not find anything. The pastor came in and he was upset because I was late and the other friar working there also came in, just as wired as the pastor. We frantically searched for green vestments in the sacristy, throughout the friary, even in the attic and basement and over in the parish center. No green vestments anywhere! It was 9:15, people were upset and they all decided to leave! They just got in their cars and drove away. I felt exhausted, humiliated. I awoke with those feelings. It took a few hours later in the day to figure out that this was a dream expressing my own frustrations and anxiety during these days of *stay home, save lives*.



I'm writing this in the third week of May and St. Peter's has been closed for nine weeks now. The church has remained dark all this time except when our friar community celebrated Easter Sunday in it. Our daily prayer is in our small chapel above the church, and some of us walk through the dark church via the second loft to get to chapel. This has certainly been a period right out of an apocalyptic movie, hasn't it? Thousands and thousands of people work in the downtown

area of Chicago and at least 36,000 (2019) live here. It's considered by many to be the second most active financial and retail district in the U.S., just behind mid-town Manhattan. And the Loop has been empty for these 9 weeks. Empty! I took the photo in the left column at 12:30 p.m. Usually thousands of workers are on lunch break, some come here for Mass; this day I saw one car and two pigeons. The only things open now are banks, office buildings without those thousands of workers, drug stores, a couple of small restaurants for takeout and Target because it's the only food source in the Loop for those who live in this area other than the drug stores. Our cars are kept in a ten story parking garage nearby and it's only now that two or three floors are full on weekdays and even less on weekends. No traffic snarls, just city buses, delivery trucks and a bare minimum of cars. It is unbelievably quiet. I've worked here at St. Peter's since July of 1993 and could never have conceived that our neighborhood would be this quiet at midday on a Wednesday. Never. And Sunday afternoons are even more quiet!

We friars miss the hectic pace of seven Masses on weekdays, hours in the confessional or counseling people and the major city center noise. And YOU are missing! However, we have taken this huge step out of time to revivify our life together in some creative ways. Our foundation: we gather for Office and Eucharist. We realize how blessed we are to have such gifts when millions of people have lived without the central act of our faith. Some of us take turns cooking and take advantage of extra time for table talk; more time for reading is another gift. I've written some new music and had plenty of days to brush up on piano technique. And many of us are happy to have more time for private prayer. I believe we've done well fraternally even with an uncertain future. We are just now beginning to discuss the very involved procedures the Archdiocese has given every parish to follow for reopening.

The Loop is practically empty so daily walks around the Loop help – and have you noticed the radical change in air quality without endless traffic? When it's hot and

traffic chokes streets there is a floating the Loop. This significant and has noticed air and in water. time in years



our narrow blue haze smothering is highly the world changes in For the first people can

see the bottom of the canals in Venice, even though pollutants may likely layered on the bottom. For the first time in nearly fifty years Mt. Everest and the Himalayas are visible from Kathmandu in Nepal. **Are we learning?**

Yes, according to scientists and those eloquent in all things green, Mother Earth is healing herself because of the pandemic and people around the world staying home. Less cars, less emissions. Even though the world economic structures are suffering long-term effects, we can see the results of cleaner living and hopefully learn to live with less car travel and consumption of fossil fuels. The price of crude oil fell dramatically but is again rising as people with cabin fever get ready for Memorial Day and perhaps limited return to the roads.

Will businesses allow 'work from home' most of the week to be the norm? It appears that many have been successful on Zoom and other platforms. An article in the New York Times of May 12 claims that many of the businesses housed in Manhattan's towers may not require workers to return and they can continue to work from home. For example, the real estate giant, Halstead, has had great success with video calls and is considering reducing its footprint. That prospect around the world would have drastic effects on the economy again with restaurants, shops and mass transit all taking huge hits. What will be the shape of future ecosystems within central city areas like the Loop or Manhattan? No one knows but things have and will continue to change. **Are we learning?**

We celebrate the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Pope Francis' landmark ecological encyclical, *Laudato Si'* this year. In the Catholic news service CRUX Charles Collins writes on May 20: *42 faith institutions from fourteen countries announced they are divesting*

*from fossil fuels, the largest ever such joint announcement by religious organizations. Operation Noah of the UK recently reported that none of the major oil corporations are compliant with the 2015 Paris agreement targets. They continue to invest in extraction of new fossil fuel reserves. Fr. Damian Howard, superior of the British Jesuits wrote: Climate change is the most pressing challenge the world faces as climate disasters wreak more and more destruction, hitting poorer countries the hardest - despite them having done the least to cause them. The decision to divest is principally a response to the clear moral imperative of acting to safeguard our planet for future generations at a time when scientific evidence is mounting that we are facing a grave climate emergency, We can't forget that **Laudato Si'** are the first two words of *Canticle of the Creatures* by Francis of Assisi, patron of ecology. If we are to praise God through our Sister, Mother Earth, we must act on our Franciscan values and the moral imperative Pope Francis and Fr. Howard proclaim; we must cherish, respect and renew her natural treasures. So once again, I ask: **are we learning?***



Now, back to that stress dream...I realize from family and friends, especially those with young children, how these weeks of isolation and sacrifice have taken an immense toll. I've buried two victims of Covid 19 whose families painfully bid farewell in cemetery chapels without the Mass of Christian Burial and its cherished rituals. I've seen the ravages this virus has on the human body. And we've all witnessed the immense effects lockdown has had on every single aspect of our lives, locally and throughout the world. I don't know what it's like to chase a one year old around the house all day, or care for three elementary students who have had to learn online while simultaneously doing one's job online. But each of us has had to adapt to

being alone, afraid and living with a very uncertain future. The millions who have lost jobs know new pains of genuine hunger and embarrassment. It is common to link what one does for a living with one's self-concept, so take away a job and many people lose their self-respect and direction in life. We are deluged with stories of overworked people in health care and essential services.

Sadly, this pandemic has uncovered the racism so deeply embedded in the U.S. It surfaces in stats that reveal the majority of victims in large cities like Chicago are people of color. Franciscans International, a United Nations NGO issued a massive statement that challenges the world to learn from our experiences as the human family: *we should draw lessons from past failures; build on some good practices that States came up with during the pandemic; push for a change in our model of development; shield social services and rights from business interests and greed and, last but not least, cultivate the fraternity and solidarity within and across communities that we are seeing amid the global governance crisis. Are we learning?*

The ravages of this plague and death itself have left scars that will last for ages. But acknowledging these stress factors and scars, though, can be a foundation for renewing the human psyche. Let's leave psychology and politics aside and look to the faith we share as Christians.

The Great 50 Days of Easter present us with brave stories of witness and preaching in the Acts of the Apostles. And some of my favorite passages are heard both weekdays and Sundays – selections from John 14 – 17, the Farewell Discourse of Jesus at the Last Supper. Throughout this massive and profound address to his disciples, Jesus promises that they will never be alone because he will send the Paraclete, a Greek word meaning advocate when it's used as a noun; as a verb in Greek it means to comfort or to console. This is the basis for the Lord's promise ~ the Holy Spirit will be within the Christian community in the myriad ways believers care for one another and promote the common good.

Jesus did not "leave us orphans" but fulfills this promise to send his Spirit among us constantly.

We can see that all around us as people get



creative in how they care for others while being very touch deprived. Parades, celebrations and many tributes, multi-media

parties, religious events and family gatherings are everywhere. Interiorly, we can also open ourselves to the promised Consoler, the Comforter who is always present among us. As churches and other institutions reopen watch for the ways people continue to creatively bring the peace of Christ to one another. Most everyone has had to live without the Eucharist and other sacraments, without the community of believers around the Lord's Table. We will have to live with human imperfections and masks and gloves and restrictions for some time. But we will **always** have the Comforter among us. So never despair. The human family has lived through persecutions, plagues, world wars, even apartheid and genocide and we will live through Covid 19! We must confront the evils among us, particularly racial hatred in the U.S. and beyond, call big businesses to justice and rebuild faith in our democratic structures. If a handful of disciples can grow from a few at Pentecost 2,000 years ago to over a billion Catholics now, you and I can continue to bring God's goodness, truth and beauty to people as we reshape our lives, our Church, our world.

### **We are learning!**

We have never stopped praying for our benefactors while St. Peter's has been closed. We ask that you continue to help the friars because we have lived without income for ten weeks now and need your support. Do watch our web site, [stpetersloop.org](http://stpetersloop.org), for the day we gradually reopen to receive you for the sacraments and prayer. We must be extremely patient with the Archdiocesan procedures, and someday.... For today, may God's ever-present Spirit fill you with his "peace that is beyond all understanding" and with all that is good.

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