



# OFS-USA

## NATIONAL FRATERNITY OF THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN ORDER-USA

### MINISTER'S MESSAGE

*By Jan Parker OFS*

## MY STORY, OUR STORY, THE STORY

Each of us, as we follow God's path for us, find ourselves in places we never dreamed we would be, doing things we never thought we would do. I was thinking about this as I returned from Guam earlier this year. On this long flight, I sat in a state of wonder. I had traveled half-way around the world over the vast Pacific Ocean to this tiny island. Never in my life did I think I would go to Guam even once, let alone twice. Yet this is where God led me.



Members of St. Padre Pio Fraternity Council with Jan Parker at the celebration of their canonical establishment, January 4, 2020.

Now, three months after my return from Guam, the world is dealing with a corona virus pandemic. Life has dramatically changed for all of us. We find ourselves in uncharted waters dealing with unbelievable physical and emotional challenges. Who would have imagined anything like this ever happening? Life is certainly a mystery, with all its twists and turns. We trust that we are being guided but find ourselves

questioning. Where is it all leading? What is the meaning of it all?

Years ago, at a workshop on Christian initiation, I was introduced to a rainbow shaped diagram like the one pictured below. At the bottom were the words "My Story." On the half circle band above it were the words, "Our Story"; and at the top, in an overarching band, were the words "The Story". Kathy, our facilitator, explained the diagram this way: "We each have our own unique story – let's call it My Story. My Story, as important as it is, is part of something bigger. Let's call this Our Story. Our Story is the story we share with our families and friends in our homes and workplaces. It's the story of our faith community and the wider Church, and it is even more. Our Story is the story of all people, the story of our world and all creation. But above all that, there is something even greater. Let's call it The Story. What is The Story? It's a story written by and known only to God." This simple diagram gave me a way to see how it all fits together.



### **My Story**

Each of us has a unique story, and a unique experience of God. At some point, whether suddenly or gradually, we recognize God calling us to himself. This realization of God's presence in our lives is deep, real, and personal. It

profoundly impacts our lives and set us on a particular path. This is “My Story,” and it continues to unfold in our lives. My Story is no small thing to me, or to God. Nevertheless, it is part of something bigger.

### **Our Story**

My Story is part of Our Story. We are intricately connected with each other and our world. God leads each of us to play our part in Our Story, to care for each other and for all creation. What we do, or what we refuse to do, makes a difference in our worldwide community and to our planet. Old or young, believer or non-believer, liberal or conservative, we are all in the same boat. Ignoring others in the boat and leaning our own way will cause the boat to tilt and eventually sink. We cannot make it on our own. We live our best lives when we lean on each other, work together, and learn from each other.

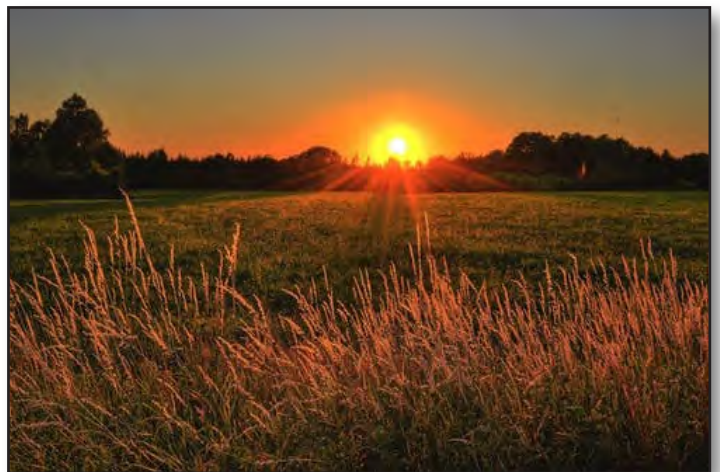
### **The Story**

As people of faith, we know we are also part of “The Story,” the story written by and known only to God. We will not know the fullness of The Story until we reach heaven, but faith tells us that God is ordering all things to bring The Story to fulfillment. In our daily lives, as we walk in that faith, we play our part in The Story.

Bishop Robert Barron talks about faith, stating, “*We have an adventurous God, and faith is the proper response to such a God.... Faith is an attitude of trust in the God who is always holding out new possibilities to us.*” Those possibilities may seem impossible to us, but they are not impossible to God. He may call us to something we are not sure we can do or ask us to accept a situation we would rather change. God’s ways simply do not always make sense to us. This is where our faith in God, and our belief in a greater story, comes in. God is with us and is guiding us. His guidance may be

unseen, but it is not unfelt. Empowered by grace, we can follow God’s call and play our part in The Story. We trust in divine providence, for “*God’s love for man will never rest until he has raised our earthbound nature from glory to glory and made it one with his own in heaven.*”<sup>1</sup>

When we look at the events of our lives through the eyes of faith, we understand that My Story and Our Story ultimately only have meaning within The Story. God has called each of us for a time and a purpose. When it comes to the big questions in life, all we need do is look up in faith. “[*God*] has revealed himself and given himself to man. He has thus provided the definitive, super-abundant answer to the questions man asks himself about the meaning and purpose of his life.”<sup>2</sup> Our belief that God is using us to write The Story gives our lives great meaning, beyond what we can know. This faith bolsters our determination to follow the Holy Spirit’s lead, even into the unknown. This faith gives meaning especially to our suffering. No matter how difficult, no matter the missteps along the way, God’s providence is there for us. We get up again, turn to God, and keep going. All this because “*God, who is rich in mercy,...made us alive together with Christ...*”<sup>3</sup> Alive together, yes, for The Story is ultimately the story of Resurrection, a story of hope and joy as we celebrate and live within the Paschal Mystery.



*“The heavens proclaim the glory of God  
and the firmament shows forth the work of his hands. Day unto day  
takes up the story and night unto night makes known the message.”  
(Psalm 19)*

<sup>1</sup> St. Andrew of Crete, Office of Readings for Palm Sunday

<sup>2</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, 68

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 2:4-5

Does looking at all this have an impact on us as Franciscans? For sure, it does. My own Story started long before I became a Franciscan. My Story is rooted in Christ, and my Franciscan vocation stems from that initial encounter. I am not in the Order only to learn about Francis and be enamored by his life, but to live the Gospel. Francis himself said, “I have done what was mine to do, may Christ teach you what is yours.” Those around me may well see Francis or Clare reflected in my life, but ultimately it must be Christ that I proclaim as I live the Gospel.

When it comes to Our Story, that’s easy. For Franciscans it’s all about fraternity and universal kinship. We are keenly aware of a story beyond ourselves. We are called to identify with the lowly and lift them up to their true dignity. We care for all of creation. Within the Order, the bonds of fraternity help us live our professions, conform our lives to Christ, and pour ourselves out as Christ did upon the Cross. When we stumble and fall, we know sisters and brothers understand and are there to help. Our fraternities depend on each of us to be active members of the Order at every level – local, regional, national and international. We cannot sit still. We need to keep moving forward, striving for ongoing daily conversion. Only in this way do we contribute to Our Story.

Finally, we look to “Our Franciscan Story” as part of The Story. It was God who inspired Francis, and God led others to follow him. God continues to guide and help us as an Order. Grace comes when we most need it, at times unbidden and unexpected, giving us the impetus to move forward as an Order. Whether Franciscans are journeying halfway around the world or standing together (six feet apart) facing the challenges of a pandemic, we know our witness is part of The Story —something greater and far beyond us, embracing all. St. Francis encourages us to “follow the Lord’s most holy

commands to the very end”<sup>4</sup> as we look towards the Son of Man’s coming in glory. In that moment, we will know the fullness of The Story, as we hear Christ saying to all who “acknowledged, adored and served him in sincere repentance: ‘Come, blessed of my Father, take possession of the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world.’”<sup>5</sup>

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### More on “Our Story” The “Q” Tee Shirt Blanket



With your help, the Q Committee has created a special tee shirt blanket for the 2021 Quinquennial Congress (the “Q”). When I first laid eyes on it, I was filled with delight! How amazing to think that each donated tee shirt was worn by a fellow Franciscan somewhere across our country, or perhaps by someone beyond our borders. Look at “us”, all stitched together. Truly this is “fraternity in a blanket” – a great image of “Our Story.” The eventual winner of this blanket is known only to God, but what a gift it will be! Details about the 2021 Q, and how to win this blanket, will be posted on our OFS-USA website ([secularfranciscansusa.org](http://secularfranciscansusa.org)) starting in August 2021. (By the way, my shirt is the yellow one, bottom row, in the center.)

Peace and all good!  
Jan

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<sup>4</sup> Office of the Passion of St. Francis of Assisi, Psalm 15

<sup>5</sup> Mt. 25:34, cf TOR Rule, Art. 2