THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Lent - Easter 2018

"I want to stay!"

I'm at my desk writing this letter with the Gospel reading from Mark for the second Sunday of Lent fresh in my mind. I'm always taken by St. Peter's exclamation at the Transfiguration: "Rabbi, it is good that we are here". I'm confident that at some time in our life of faith we have all had that type of moment where we could "taste" the sweetness of God's blessing and the awesomeness of the Lord's loving presence.

Choice moments at the crossroads of our "Pilgrim Way" - encountering each other and being surprised by God.

This time last year, I had a wonderful encounter. On a Friday of Lent, as I prepared for the first of several Masses and devotions, I met a young Chinese woman as she entered the Shrine church. With a slight bow of the head and with a big smile she greeted me. It soon became apparent that she did not speak a word of English, but it was also apparent that she was eager to share with me something. Her face was radiating a joy and serenity that engaged me with a growing desire to know what was on her mind (& heart). Soon, she pulled out her iPhone and began to type feverishly with a dexterity of thumbs that could rival Fred Astaire with his feet. Now she spoke into her phone and I heard it begin to "Speak" to me in English: "I'M CATHOLIC!." "I ENTERED THE CATHOLIC CHURCH 9 MONTHS AGO." *(She was visiting San Francisco briefly with a tour group from China.)

My friends that began a beautiful visit of prayer, faith sharing, and fellowship. Using the young woman's iPhone Audio Translate we were able to communicate - going back and forth talking into the phone. I was greatly humbled and edified by the genuine joy and devotion the young woman exhibited as she spent the afternoon and evening attending Mass, assisted with the Stations of the Cross and held reverent vigil before the Lord during Exposition.

As the evening drew to a close and I began to prepare for closing, I approached the young woman as she sat quietly in a pew. She turned to me for a moment then she raised her phone speaking a few words slowly and thoughtfully. I soon heard her phone say: "IT IS GOOD TO BE HERE - I WANT TO STAY." She smiled once again, gently made the sign of the cross and went on her way.

My good sisters and brothers, I wanted to give you a glimpse of what unfolds almost daily at the Shrine. Many people, from across our City and across our world, pass through our doors and enter the beautiful sanctuary of the Nat'l. Shrine - adorned with an elegant simplicity of art and stained glass but more profoundly imbued with the charism of the "little poor man" Francis. Many times, I have visitors admit to feeling compelled to witness to the effect St. Francis has on their lives of faith.

I have met many people who come to the Shrine initially motivated, perhaps, by solely a need to seek shelter from the cold, or intrigued by the unique beauty of the stained glass, and others moved more explicitly by their faith - being beckoned by their God in joy and in sorrow. In each case of encounter, I have been made aware of the varied face of the "Pilgrim" in all of us - on the way. It is humbling to see the Spirit at work in people's lives. Here at the Shrine often a simple greeting or a friendly glance or taking time to just truly listen - will open the way for healing, reconciliation, comfort and rest or a renewal of hope and peace.

As with the experience of the young Chinese woman, time and again visitors to the Shrine speak of their gratitude for the Shrine as a true sanctuary of prayerful peace and welcome. "It is good for us to be here" could not be expressed more clearly.

There will always be a need to appeal to your generosity in assisting me as Rector in addressing the needs of the Shrine in the various demands of maintenance of the physical plant or in the development of pastoral ministries and outreach. However, it is important that we all appreciate and never lose sight of the fruits of the Spirit continually shedding the light of hope in the Risen One amidst the everyday of life. I humbly attest, that although the Shrine may have meager financial and material resources, it is richly endowed with the fruits of the Spirit.

I am very grateful and wish to thank the many who are continually willing to assist and support the Shrine with prayers and monetary donations. I hope you appreciate that you are not just someone who supports my efforts here at the Shrine - You are truly part of the National Shrine's efforts of outreach to welcome the Pilgrim in the spirit of St. Francis. It is said that the Shrine church has some of the best acoustics for music. If you listen carefully, I am sure that you will "hear" a constant chorus in our Shrine: "**RABBI, IT IS GOOD THAT WE ARE HERE**."

Good people, be assured of my prayers for you and your loved ones - as I offer my prayers and Masses at the Shrine. May your journey through Lent to the Easter celebrations unleash a great joy and peace in the Risen Lord Jesus that guides and upholds you in the day to day of life. AMEN!

Sincerely,

Fr. John De La Riva, O.F.M.Cap.

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Shrine Rector