



THE ST. ANTHONY COMPANION

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Divergent paths bring three friars to the same destination



(From left) Friars Tim Blanchard, Franck Lino Sokpolie and Richard Rome have experienced different journeys, but have ultimately arrived at the same destination.

The road to vocation with the Franciscan Friars Conventual is a journey of self-awareness, education and promise.

Although these elements are constant, the path traveled can be as unique as the individuals who undertake the journey.

To illustrate this point we are sharing the stories of friars Tim Blanchard, OFM Conv., Franck Lino Sokpolie, OFM Conv. and Rich Rome, OFM Conv., who professed their Solemn Vows together in June.

The profession of Solemn Vows follows a deep reflection on one's call to ministry. Here is a little bit about how these young men found their way to this most important time in their lives.

A recipe filled with faith

Tim Blanchard grew up outside of Albany, N.Y., in a small town where he was home-schooled when he was young and he credits that experience with helping shape his faith.

"Home-schooling tends to have this connotation of being an academic path for 'odd balls,'" said Tim. "That has not been my experience. We were given the freedom to explore how our Catholic faith was shaping us and where it played a role in our life."

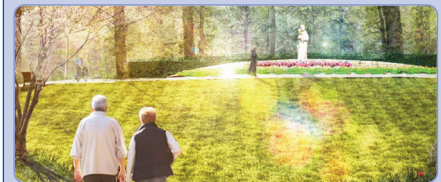
Living in a town he described as "Little House on the Prairie (with) WiFi," Tim developed an interest in culinary arts.

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“The first ever serious interest I had in my childhood was cooking,” he said. “I learned a great deal from my mother. It soon developed into a passion that still excites me to this day; the feeling of creating, tasting, perfecting, then sharing is my favorite part.”

Tim spent eight years as an altar server for a Conventual Franciscan priest, but his curiosity was raised when a group of lay ministers affiliated with the Militia of the Immaculata, an organization founded by Franciscan saint Maximilian Kolbe, visited to conduct a confirmation retreat.

“After the retreat ended, they invited me to join them for retreat at the Shrine of St. Maximilian Kolbe in Chicago to meet the friars and dive deeper into Marian devotion. I don’t know why I said yes, but I did and that following month I was off to Chicago.”

Although this experience was a great introduction, Tim said his call to vocation was a gradual process.

“I always say that my decision to join the Franciscans did not happen overnight. The first time I became aware that religious life might actually be for me was when I attended my first “Come and See” weekend in Syracuse and prayed with the friars. There was something about joining my voice of prayer with theirs that made me feel like I belonged.

“Basically, the more I prayed with the friars the clearer it be-



Br. Tim has many passions, including cooking, music and his professional training in media and communications, to his ministry.

came, my place is here as a Franciscan brother.”

When asked what his profession of Solemn Vows means to him, Tim reflected on the deep discernment process he has undertaken.

“In short, to me it means living as Christ did while he was on this earth and upholding the values that he instilled in his disciples,” he stated. “Values such as human dignity, charity, concern for the other, and a love that does not want in return.”

A soldier for God

Born in the West African nation of Togo, Franck Lino Sokpolie split the majority of his childhood between Europe and Africa before his family came to the United States at the age of 10 and settled in Richmond, Virginia.

From a very religious Catholic family, which includes two uncles who are priests and

an aunt who is a nun, he always felt the call to religious life, but his journey to becoming a Conventual Franciscan is one he ultimately put in God’s hands.

“Whenever I saw priests, as a child, they always seemed happy,” said Franck. “It was always in my mind that I wanted to pursue religious life.”

Franck’s calling to religious life shifted to the back of his mind in high school, as he began to pursue his passion for sports. He played rugby and went on to be a part of the varsity tennis team at J.R. Tucker High School in Henrico, Va. While at Tucker, he also became very active in JROTC, which drew him to consider a military career.

“I loved everything about my time in the JROTC,” he said of an activity which he pursued with his older brother Frederic and a dear friend. “We were part of the color guard and many other activities that I enjoyed.”

After high school the three of them began to pursue some of the in-processing procedures to join the Marines. At the last possible moment, however, Franck pulled out to give himself an opportunity to pursue what he believed to be his true calling.

The other two went forward with their military careers and eventually fell in love and married, producing Franck’s treasured nephew, Galen.

“Family is also at the heart of my religious calling,” he said. “Although one of my uncles is a Diocesan priest and one of my

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Friar Franck with his brother Frederic (above), a United States Marine.

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great inspirations, my other uncle and my aunt are both Benedictines. I knew I also needed to be part of a community, part of a larger family.”

Researching orders, he was stuck between the Benedictines and the Franciscans, because of his affinity for St. Francis.

“I was leaning towards the Benedictines, but my mother felt I would be a better fit with the Franciscans because of my extroverted personality. I could not choose, so I decided to leave it up to God. I sent two emails, to the Benedictines and to the friars at the Shrine of St. Anthony, and whichever group got back to me first would be my choice.”

The friars got back to him the very next day. He visited the Shrine and immediately felt the sense of community he cherished.

“The sense of the coin toss I did at the beginning, really worked. There is Divine Province, which is how it is supposed to be. God leads us to where we need to be.”

Sailing towards the Lord

Whereas his fellow conferees come from divergent destinations, Rich Rome, a member of a Naval family, hails from many ports.

Of course, life in a naval family means a lot of time around the water and Rich developed a love for swimming and sailing, as well as a great interest in preserving the Chesapeake Bay. He also has a passion for history, his college major, which he continues to pursue.

He spent most of his life in public schools but did get to spend a year studying in Italy while his father was assigned there. After graduating from Kempsville High in Virginia Beach he attended William & Mary University. Rich eventually earned his Master’s degree from Towson University, while working for the Army at Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Bel Air, Maryland. This ultimately led to his introduction to the friars.

“I was very involved with my parish, St. Margaret’s, and the friars would come to say Mass,” said Rich of his time in Bel Air. “As I started discerning religious life, I approached the friars and they started inviting me to events at (Archbishop) Curley and the Shrine of St. Anthony.”

Those visits brought into focus something Rich had been pondering for most of his life.

“Ever since I was little, I felt this general pull towards religious life, but it was never clear,” Rich said. “I briefly looked into diocesan priesthood, but nothing seemed like the right fit. So I

graduated, got a good civilian career with the Army, and just went on with life.”

Still, something was missing.

“The work I did with my parish was infinitely more fulfilling than my career. I made a few trips to different Benedictine abbeys, which helped me to discern I was not called to be a monk. Whenever I met with the friars, I felt like I was at home. And, when I went on my Come and See Retreat, I realized this was where God wanted me to be and I wanted to pursue it.”

Professing his vows is an act of making some very positive statements, according to Rich.

“It’s a yes to God, who I believe guided me on a very long, and beautiful journey to this moment. It’s a yes to the friars, who welcomed me, treated me as a brother, shared this amazing Franciscan heritage with me, and now invite me to become a part of it. It’s a yes to this way of life. It’s a yes to the Church and the People of God, whom I’ve always had this longing to serve.”



As part of a Navy family, Friar Rich developed an early love for being on the water.

I Me Mine – Professing Solemn Vows

By Fr. Nicholas Romeo, OFM Conv.



Fr. Nick Romeo, OFM Conv., prone on the floor during the Mass in which he professed his Solemn Vows, affirming his commitment to follow the path of St. Francis of Assisi as a Conventual Franciscan Friar.

George Harrison is my favorite Beatle. His song *I Me Mine* is easily in my top five favorite tracks from the Fab Four. From their *Let It Be* album, the song is George's lament of the selfishness and inflated egos he saw as the ultimate cause of the band's demise. More broadly, its lyrics function as a condemnation of obsessive individualism of Western culture, wherein self-reverence flows more freely than wine. Simple. Piercing. Effervescent.

It's a perennially appearing tune on the personalized playlists Apple Music creates for me. It was the song I chose as one of my "objects" for a show-and-tell assignment during a course I took as an undergrad. And it was the alternative rhythm that sounded within me, while without me another hymn —

part of many a friar's vocation playlist — was being sung: John D. Becker's arrangement of the Litany of the Saints.

It was a bright and chipper September Saturday in Baltimore. Just outside, the late summer silence was harshly broken by the intermittent wailing of police sirens. Inside the limestone walls that frame the edifice of Saint Casimir Church, my chest was pressed against the maroon carpet of the center aisle, forehead nestled on the backs of interlaced hands, toes grazing the trodden pile as they slid from my sandals. I lay prostrate before the altar. Stomach doing cartwheels in my guts. Becker's melody vibrating on the stuffy air. Harrison's critique setting on my mind.

The prostration before the altar, most friars would attest, is the most intense moment in

an already intense Rite of Religious Profession. During this poignant ritual amidst the Eucharistic liturgy in which a friar professes his solemn vows, he places his body on the ground in front of the altar; he literally embodies what he is preparing to do: consecrate himself to Christ in sacrifice and adoration, for the entire time of his life.

This richly symbolic ritual is accompanied by the congregational chanting of the Litany of Saints; as the friar offers himself before God, the whole Body of Christ — the Church in its totality, living and deceased — prays for him, that he might be able to live a life worthy of the call he has received to profess vows in religious life. It is impossible not to be overwhelmed as this tide of prayer washes over you. Equally impossible is not confronting a moment of existential dread, as you ask God what exactly He's called you to, while simultaneously recognizing your woeful inadequacy for the task. All the while you hear the voices of people, whose singing faces you cannot see, invoking the intercession of people, whose holiness you cannot grasp. You are part of a reality much bigger than yourself, surrendering to a Reality bigger still; your life is no

longer yours, but the Lord's. George would be pleased, if maybe a bit confused.

In a wealthy society where the multitude of options in the cereal aisle overwhelms, zeroing in on a singular choice about anything can become a daunting challenge. In a pop culture where self-invention is serial and sacrosanct, making a final decision about anything can be a startlingly counter-cultural move. To say you are committing to something is to say you want a revolution.

A young man professing his solemn vows, a lifelong commitment to a particular way of life and a concrete group of brothers, is a revolutionary act. It's veritable rebellion. But it is also a catalyst for hope and a harbinger of a cultural and generational shift. Commitment has not, in fact, been relegated to the dust bin of history; it is not a nostalgic relic. Young people bubble with the desire to give themselves over to something greater than themselves. They languish for meaning; in the quest to discover it, they are still willing to carry the weight of steadfast commitment.

Lurking beneath the surface of the society we've constructed for ourselves is a deep dissatisfaction with the resulting architecture, a weariness of the helter skelter that has resulted from the constant pressure toward status and upward mobility that accompanies the myth of progress. Downward mobility is the new flower power; a tiny house parked near a mountain lake is the new Woodstock. In this shifting milieu, the witness of the Franciscan life—downwardly mobile since 1209—is increasingly relevant and appealing. The witness of a friar's solemn profession shows that genuine peace, authentic joy, and lasting refreshment emerge, not from adhering to the caprice of the Self, but from following the commands of the Son.

"Your 'yes' helps me say 'yes.'" These pithy words of friarly wisdom remind us that commitment is shared. We need the support and encouragement of a broader community to follow through on the promises we've made; we can only get by with help from our companions. Your "I will" helps me say "I will." And vice versa. Thus, a friar's vows are testimony to the Church

"All the while you hear the voices of people, whose singing faces you cannot see, invoking the intercession of people, whose holiness you cannot grasp. You are part of a reality much bigger than yourself, surrendering to a Reality bigger still; your life is no longer yours, but the Lord's."

in its entirety; it points toward the value, not only that to which a friar is committing, but the act of commitment itself. This is why the entire Body of Christ chants together the Litany as a friar prostrates before the altar: lending the support of the we, as he surrenders all that is he, him, his to the tender sweetness of the Lord.

About Br. Nick

Fr. Nicholas Romeo, OFM Conv. ("Br. Nick," or "Bromeo" to his former students) is the Vocation Director for the Our Lady of the Angels Province. Born and raised in Baltimore, Br. Nick joined the Franciscans right out of high school, professing first vows on July 21, 2007. From 2009-2018, he ministered at St. Francis High School in Buffalo, during which time he completed his M.Ed in Religious Education at Boston College. He taught for two years at Archbishop Curley in Baltimore, before beginning his current assignment in June 2020. Br. Nick enjoys reading, hiking, dark beers and tasty cigars.

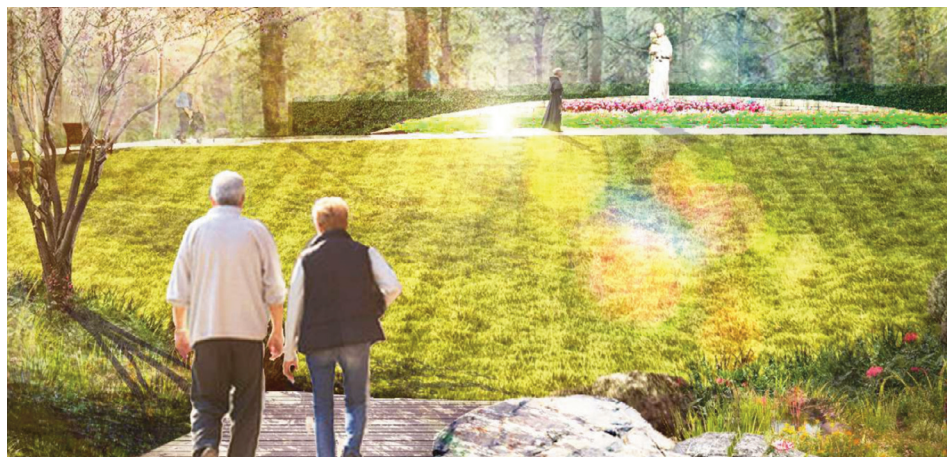


St. Anthony Garden of Eternity

The Friars are excited to announce a spectacular new project, which broke ground this summer – The St. Anthony Garden of Eternity.

Located on the grounds of the Shrine of St. Anthony in Elliecott City, Maryland, this stunning and inspirational project was funded by a generous gift from Mrs. Kathleen Cavanaugh, as a lasting tribute to St. Anthony from her and her late husband William.

The garden and its surrounding path have been designed to replicate the journey of life and the soul's journey to God. The path includes 13 reflection stops, each representing thematic milestones on life's journey. By the time a visitor has made his or her way through the path and entered into the garden, he or she will have a fuller understanding of his



or her relationship with God and God's creation.

The 13 reflection spots, based on themes and principles from the life of St. Anthony, are *Journey, Faith, Hope, Love, Prayer, Mercy, Creation, Humility, Suffering, Silence, Peace, Joy and Eternity*.

"We are extremely grateful to Mrs. Cavanaugh for this generous gift, which will make an amazing addition to our grounds here at the Shrine of St. Anthony," said Joseph Hamilton, the Director of Mission Advancement for the

Companions of St. Anthony.

"Many Catholics feel a deep personal bond with St. Anthony and that bond will become even more palpable in this garden."

Mrs. Cavanaugh, who is 97, originally planned for her gift to be bequested in her will, but she was so moved when she saw the architectural renderings for the project that she decided to move forward now so that others can be inspired by it as soon as possible.

The project is slated to be completed in the Fall of 2021.



The St. Anthony Garden of Eternity (depicted upper left) will be located just a short walk from The Shrine of St. Anthony (lower right).

MISSION REPORT

Infectious Joy

What is more pleasant than the infectious sound of children laughing?

This sound is at the heart of some amazing work being done by the friars in the eastern European nation of Romania at the Sociale Centre (Social Center) in the town of Roman, which is in northeastern Romania.

The center is operated by the Fundatia Umanitara Pacea (Humanitarian Foundation for Peace) and dedicated to the education of poor children. It was founded in 2000 by the friars in Romania and also provides services related to proper hygiene, skills training for job creation and social skills dedicated to helping the poor and illiterate citizens of Roman.

“Part of the Sociale Centre is an education unit that holds 80 children,” said Fr. Lucian Bobarnac, OFM Conv, a native of Romania’s capital city of Bucharest who joined the order in 2001 and who was ordained a priest in 2008. “Half of them are enrolled in our kindergarten and the other half are in the primary school. Every day they are transported back and forth by our school bus and here they receive,



Completed in the Fall of 2020, the St. Anthony of Padua Playground, commissioned by the friars, is bringing pure joy to the impoverished children of Roman, in northeastern Romania.

apart from an education, two meals per day.”

The children also find something very rare in their daily lives... pure joy.

In the fall of 2020, construction of a beautiful, modern playground, commissioned by the friars, known as the St. Anthony of Padua Playground, was completed.

“All of these children come from a poor and dirty environment. They have no other means of playing outside, just mud and dirty premises,” added Fr. Lucian, who serves as the President of Fundatia Umanitara Pacea. “When they come to school they feel like they are in paradise and we noticed in them a big desire to play in our garden and on our sports field.

“Before this playground we had an old, basic and deteriorated playground that the friars built, as they could, some 15 years ago. Therefore we thought that a new and bigger playground would do them very good and indeed it did. It’s hard for the teachers to get them back into the classrooms.”

Fr. Lucian expanded on the impact the playground will have on these children’s lives.

“These kids are marginalized by the Romanian society. They are often physically abused at home. It’s an oasis of joy here at school, having something to eat and being able to play. We never thought a playground could bring so much joy, but it is exactly what they, just like every other child in the world, need.”



FMA
Franciscan Mission Association

From the beginning, the Companions of St. Anthony have supported the missionary works of the Franciscan Friars Conventual around the world. Help us share the hope of the Gospel. Please give today! www.franciscanmission.org.

Securing Your Enduring Legacy

As we reach the later stages of our lives, it is natural to plan so that our accumulated assets are well positioned to support those we love and the causes we hold dear, long after we are gone.

A gift in your will to the Franciscan Friars Conventual, who continue to follow their founder, St. Francis of Assisi, in spreading the gospel of Jesus and ministering to the poor, is a way of securing an enduring legacy.

The Friars, with your support, are a critical lifeline to so many unfortunate souls, providing access to education and fresh drinking water as well as medical facilities and supplies, just to name a few. Your gifts also support the education and formation of young friars, giving you a role in all their amazing work.

If you do not yet have a will, it is very important that you have one in place. Without a will, your assets will be divided based on state and/or federal laws, instead of according to your wishes.

An attorney can assist you in preparing your will.

If you already have a will and wish to add a gift to the Friars, your attorney can help you with this as well. Here is some suggested language, for one of four options, to ensure your legacy of support to the Friars.

1. A Percentage of Your Estate: To leave a percentage of your estate to the Companions of St. Anthony, please state in your Will: "I give, devise and be-

queath to the Companions of St. Anthony of Ellicott City, Maryland, ____% of my estate."

2. Specific Property: To leave a specific piece of your property, please state: "I give, devise and bequeath to the Companions of St. Anthony of Ellicott City, Maryland, (description of property), located at (exact location)."

3. Residue of Your Estate: The portion of your estate that is left after specific bequests to your family and loved ones have been distributed is the "Residue."

To do so, please state: "All residue of my estate, including real and personal property, I give, devise and bequeath to the Companions of St. Anthony of Ellicott City, Maryland."

4. Specific Dollar Amount:

A bequest of any amount will be deeply appreciated and would have an important impact in caring for the poor and needy.

To leave a specific dollar amount, please state: "I give, devise and bequeath to the Companions of St. Anthony of Ellicott City, Maryland, the amount of \$____."

Thank you for considering a bequest to the Friars as a part of your enduring legacy.

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