

PRAYING OUR 'GOODBYES'

San Carlos Mission (AZ)

St. Francis of Assisi Parish (Los Angeles)

An Interview with Friar Martín Ibarra, Vicar Provincial

*With recent 'farewell Mass' celebrations, Province of St. Barbara is completing its process of returning ministries at San Carlos Mission in Arizona (June 24, 2018), and St. Francis of Assisi Parish, Los Angeles, California (July 1, 2018) from Franciscan leadership to diocesan control. **Provincial Minister Martín Ibarra** reflects upon the process involved in the relinquishment of ministerial commitments. -ct*

When and how did you first become involved in preparations for departure from / closure of various ministries in the Province?

It began in 2012 when I was elected Definitor and John Hardin was Provincial. We began the process of returning the two Our Lady of Guadalupe parishes-- one in Delano; the other, in San Jose. I think this was the first time we had a transition plan. We actually went to the parish and worked with the people in transitioning the leadership to the Diocese. We owe this process to John Hardin who, having in mind the People of God, pushed for having a transition time. He asked Robert Rodrigues to help put together an outline and materials for this. We have been using it in all the parishes ever since. By July 1 of this year, we will have returned 11 places since 2012. I have not participated in all of them, but in several of them.

Can you list some of the places where you have been involved in the transition process?

I have worked with 4 of the 11 places we have returned to dioceses. The other 7 places I have participated in indirectly or not at all. For example, after finishing the transition process in the two Guadalupe (OLG) parishes, I was assigned as Director of our Mission Casa Franciscana in Guaymas, Mexico. During that time, places such as Mescalero, Tularosa, and Ascension Parish in Portland, Oregon were returned to their respective dioceses. Then, in 2016, with the new administration was elected; we had St. Francis, Sacramento returned. They used the transition process we had developed and it went very well. After that, we moved from Immaculate Conception Chapel in San Francisco and at the same time, we were doing the process at Old Mission San Miguel in which I was involved directly carrying on the transition. Although we had only two months and things were a bit rush, it was a powerful transition. This experience thought us one big lesson: Never do transitions in just two months!

One week after finishing the process at San Miguel, in November 2017 I started at St. Francis, LA. At the same time, we withdrew from the Apache reservation at Whiteriver (May 20, 2018). But there we didn't use the transition process. It's a different culture; we listened to the pastor (Eddie Fronske). He told us that he would prepare the people personally and then arranged for the final Mass.

Recently, I went to the San Carlos Apache reservation. We are returning our ministry there to the Diocese of Tucson as of June 24. It's the same process, as at Whiteriver—the transition process would not work in Apache culture. Leaving is not a celebration for them and neither for us. Hopefully, a representative of the diocese will be on hand to receive the ministry.

Until now, our relinquishing of all of these places has been driven by the reality that there was just one “last man standing” and we didn't have another friar to send in his place. We are returning St. Francis because there is no one to send there. As of July 1, we will hopefully be entering into a time that it is going to give us the possibility to breathe a bit, and be proactive instead of reactive in the process of planning and continuing our process to renew and restructure our ministries.

Can you describe the process that you use? Has it been effective?

I believe it has been a great blessing for the people and the friars in all the transitions we have worked on. There are three stages involved:

Stage ONE: The first step--before anything else is done-- I go to the parish and assemble a "Transition Team" (TT), composed of a representative leadership of the Parish. In our first meeting, I work with the TT to create a plan and timeline for the transition. The following weekend, we officially announce at all the weekend Masses that we are beginning the transition period prior to returning the leadership of the parish to the diocese. We read letters from the Provincial and the Bishop directed to the faith community which explain the reasons why we as Franciscans are leaving and assuring, on behalf of the Bishop, his commitment to send them a new pastor. Naturally, this announcement will awake many concerns in people. Therefore, immediately after the announcement, The members of the transition team (TT) are stationed outside church at the end of Masses to begin the process of the First Stage. This will allow people to express their anger, doubts, fears, and even their feeling of abandonment. This stage takes at least two months—ideally, it take six months—to put everything into effect.

This transition group is very important because they will be dealing with all the changes--no matter who, where, or what changes brings a lot of uncertainty and many questions.

One of the main questions has been: "Are you going to close our church?"

We listen to them, we explain to them. Mainly the transition group is there to listen. We give them all the information and answers we have at the time. The work of the transition team is to lead, accompany, and hold people in this time of change and provide for the community the time, space, and mechanisms to work through this time of change.

Therefore, it is very important to give the people as many opportunities as possible to express themselves, in addition to having TT outside to listen to the congregation. So, we set "Questions Boxes" with paper and pencils at the exit of the church for them to write their questions. We answer all of these questions and comments and publish them in the next week's bulletin. We also have a news board where we post information and questions about the transition. You see, we create all these avenues for communication. Again, after about two months, we are ready for the second stage.

Stage TWO: By the end of two months, there are no more questions usually. This means that we are ready to move to the second stage. Here is where we ask the community to share with us their wisdom. In fact, we give out “Wisdom Cards” which invite people to write down the blessings, strengths, and challenges they have experienced in their community. This is an important stage because people feel they are being listened and have an opportunity to express themselves in a constructive way and to give input about their views about the parish and its needs. This stage takes about one month: one week for each question. We also leave the Wisdom Box for those who are not present, or who need time to think things over. Again, we publish the results of these. That leads us to the third stage.

Stage THREE: During this last stage towards the two last months, the TT begins to plan for three main celebrations: the Healing and Reconciliation Mass, the farewell Mass for the friars, and the Final Mass with the Provincial and local bishop. After they have gone through the process of letting go (First Stage) and envisioning a future (Second Stage), the community now begins this last stage by asking God for healing and reconciliation. This is the first Mass where the community gathers to put everything into God’s hands and ask for healing trusting God’s love and mercy. Part of this mass is “the anointing of the hands” after the homily. The symbolism of the hands are fundamental since it is our hands which embrace, reach out to each other, build, and bring healing to each other. Our experience is that people, after Mass, really appreciated this and feels like something very special has really happened in that moment. They felt the Holy Spirit working in them. These three celebration are bilingual.

The second celebration is the Farewell Mass. This is for the brothers and priests (e.g., Rene and Sebastian at St. Francis, LA) who have been living and working with the people. It is another special time; there is a real mix of feelings. People realize what is happening and have the chance to say ‘goodbye’ to the friars. We have giant Farewell Cards for people to write their thoughts and wishes. Sometimes they run out of space and have to use two! A reception follows. It’s incredible—the amount of people, coming to the friars and thanking them for their service.

This prepares us for the third celebration: the Final Mass. At St. Francis it will be on July 1, where our Provincial, David Gaa will be officially returning the parish to the leadership of the Archdiocese-- in this instance, represented by a deacon. Also, it will be a bilingual

Mass. At the end, David will come forward to return the parish to the diocese. At Old Mission San Miguel, we used a key which we gave to the Vicar General of the Diocese of Monterey. We will do the same in LA. Then, the vicar/deacon calls forward the new pastor and gives *him* the key. This is an important moment. It really signifies that the community has a future! People are so moved, often crying at this point.

What have been the blessings of this work and process?

On the personal level, this process has really given me a lot of humility. To realize that our lives and our ministry really depend upon God. I think of the humility of the friars who have given their lives to these places: Ascension 99 years; St. Francis, Sacramento—more than 100 years; Whiteriver: 90 years, the two Guadalupe involvement with social justice, etc, just to mention some of them. I have come to understand more clearly now the meaning of the “itinerant” dimension of our lives. “*Sine proprio*” has become very real to me. Another great teaching comes from the People of God-- to realize the great love they have for us. It is love that redeems us friars through the many times the people have forgiven us our errors, encouraged us, and have truly “been there” for us when we most needed them. It is very humbling to come to witness such love expressed to the friars during these transitions. The People of God are everything: they teach us, forgive us, keep up with us.... They are really the People of God. Hopefully, as we go on, we listen more closely to them. Because they are a great source of wisdom.

For me personally, perhaps the most significant gift of doing these transitions has been the great need I have experienced to keep close to Jesus, through my personal prayers and the Eucharist. I have come to trust God more completely in the midst of so much change. Being on the road constantly means that I have taken on as my own community any fraternity happen to be visiting at the time. I do my best to participate of their daily lives, and this also has become a great source of strength and support.

Letting go of these places and literally to leave with nothing only with ourselves and all the blessings we receive and go on to the next place; It gives you a great sense of freedom and renewal, I believe this is what we mean when we say we need to renew our lives, because all we have left is God, our trust in God.

Is there anything we friars can do, or do better to help in the process?

I would ask the brothers to keep us intentionally in their prayers-- in communal prayer and at Mass. Mention those places that are going through a transition and the brothers and the community going through a transition. It's a wonderful support to know that the brothers are doing that. This has been my biggest mistake up until now, not to ask the brothers beforehand for this help. It became at times a very lonely process for me. I knew different brothers were praying for me, but not as a Province. It would be a wonderful support for me personally. And for me to be able to say to the People of God that the entire Province is praying for them as well —that would be very powerful, very great.

Also, when we get close to the end of the transition. If the friars who have been associated with the place could be there for the Final Mass. If they could make the effort to be present. It would be great for them as part of their own healing. People would be delighted to see them. It happened at San Miguel and people were just delighted to see the friars. And the also get some kind of closure. And lastly, thank you all for being so kind to me—a kindness I have experienced in every fraternity I have visited. I feel completely at home wherever I am. I believe this is our greatest gift, to be brothers to each other no matter what.