

## **Formation: Novices Share Experiences** by Jocelyn Thomas

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*After several months in the novitiate, the six novices have gotten to know each other. Front row (left to right): Luis Manuel Rosado, Antonio Luevano and Michael Lomas. Back row: James La Grutta, Jason Damon and Troy Hillman. (Photo courtesy of Octavio Duran)*

SANTA BARBARA, Calif. — Six men – ranging in age from their 20s to their mid-40s and hailing from areas around North America – have spent the last eight months learning about Franciscan life and about themselves. As members of the 2017-18 novice class at the interprovincial novitiate, they are participating in workshops, working at ministries, and collaborating with other Franciscan communities. They have also lived through a natural disaster.

The novitiate experience is intended to be an apprenticeship to this life as a lesser brother, said **Michael Blastic, OFM**, one of three members of the leadership team at Old Mission Santa Barbara, where the novitiate has been located since August.

**Living Franciscan Life** “With entrance into the novitiate, the novice becomes a part of the Order and a province,” he said. “This means that the novice begins living the life of the friars as the means of initiation into the Order’s charism, traditions and mission. The focus is on personalizing one’s call to be a lesser brother within a fraternity of brothers, through self-reflection and self-development, personal and communal prayer, manual labor in the friary, ministry, and theological reflection, within the context of community living.” The team teaches classes in modules from Monday through Wednesday, which allows flexibility for presenting required topics. Given that the Friars Minor are collaborating with the Conventual and Capuchin novitiates, this involves joint meetings of the teams to plan what they will do in common.

“This collaboration has been a real enrichment for all of us and has allowed us all – novices and formation teams – to establish relationships of support and friendship,” said Michael.

An average week for the novices includes study, ministry work and opportunities for personal and spiritual growth: Monday through Wednesday are days of input, either through workshops or through classes. Special work projects take place during one or two of the afternoons when no input is scheduled. Thursday is ministry day – with St. Vincent’s Home, pre-schoolers and seniors, Catholic Charities, Showers of Blessings with the homeless, parish home visits, and the like. On Friday morning, the novices have a session on group dynamics, communication skills, conflict resolution, and similar topics. Friday afternoons alternate between friary chapter, spiritual chapter and theological reflection. Saturday morning after Eucharist is given to regular house chores, and the remainder of the day is free for the novices until they come together for Compline at 9:15 p.m. On Sunday, after morning prayer, the novices go to Mass at a parish of their choice. After evening prayer on Sunday, the novitiate hosts preprandium with the professed community, and after dinner, they have some form of common recreation.

Each day includes morning and evening prayer, with Mass scheduled at different times of the day. The novitiate celebrates Eucharist with the professed community on Wednesday afternoons, followed by preprandium and dinner.

The location of Santa Barbara has provided accessibility to the Capuchin and Conventual novices.

“We have been able to arrange joint experiences among ourselves,” said Michael. “For next year, together we have developed a program that will allow us to share many workshops in common, times for prayer and reflection, as well as for fraternity and recreation.

“Another significant advantage is living and praying at Mission Santa Barbara itself,” he added. “Our friars have had a continuous presence here for more than 200 years. There is something spiritually powerful about being surrounded by the living legacy of these brothers and their commitment to live the Franciscan mission, that invites us all – formators and novices – to deepen and commit ourselves to embody and keep alive the charism and mission of Francis in our world today.”



Antonio, James, Jason, Michael, Troy and Luis after the investiture ceremony. (Photo courtesy of Octavio Duran)

This year's novices are:

**James Damon, OFM**, a native of South Wales, N.Y., and a member of Holy Name Province. He graduated in 2016 from St. Bonaventure University in Western New York.

**Troy Hillman, OFM**, a native of Hinsdale, N.Y., and a member of Holy Name Province. He graduated from St. Bonaventure University in 2015.

**James LaGrutta, OFM**, a native of Goshen, N.Y., and a member of Holy Name Province. He graduated from Siena College in Loudonville, N.Y., in 2011 and from George Mason University in Virginia in 2012.

**Michael Lomas, OFM**, a native of San Jose, Calif., and a member of St. Barbara Province. He graduated from Holy Names University in Oakland, Calif.

**Antonio Luevano, OFM**, a native of Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., and a member of St. Barbara Province. He graduated from Humboldt State University in Arcata, Calif., and the Franciscan School of Theology

**Luis Manuel Rosado, OFM**, a native of Puerto Rico, and a member of Holy Name Province. He graduated from Pontifical Catholic University of Puerto Rico in 1992.

The six student friars, who began their 2017 novice year in August and received their habits in November, recently reflected on their experiences. Each provided feedback to several questions.

### **What have been the highlights of the novitiate year so far?**

*Antonio:* One of the highlights has been the emphasis on inner self-work that is integral to forming our Franciscan identity. To be whole and integrated individuals, our fraternal and ministerial life foundations are fostered so that in years to come, we maintain an awareness of well-being. As novices, we have had a number of enriching workshops. One that I especially liked was given by Fr. Jack Clark Robinson, OFM, on the history of the Franciscan presence in the United States. His passion was moving and encouraging.

*James:* There have been many memorable moments during this year. One that particularly comes to mind is the evacuation we experienced a few weeks before Christmas. After the Thomas Fire had reached Santa Barbara County, just a few miles south of the novitiate, and after we had already evacuated and returned two days earlier, Br. Jeff Macnab, OFM, instructed us to prepare to leave for an indefinite period of time. We caravanned to St. Francis Retreat Center in San Juan Bautista, where we spent the week and a half. This evacuation gave us the opportunity to experience the novitiate and Franciscan life at a different angle. I was amazed at the incredible Franciscan hospitality we received from our brothers, who initially had seemed more like our distant relatives. That alone is something very special about Franciscan life. Additionally, this was the phase where we, as a class, began to thrive and grow closer to one another in ways we hadn't before. Despite our unexpected circumstances, this phase was a turning point in our year, at least thus far.

I found Fr. Jack Clark Robinson's presentation on the history of Franciscans in the United States to be a very informative workshop. Furthermore, our silent retreat, which was held mid-February, really presented an opportunity for me to learn even more about myself on a deeper level, and how to respond to the challenges that often deter my relationship with

myself, my fellow novices, and God. I learn time and time again how Franciscans have each other's backs through both the good and most challenging of times.

*Jason:* Novitiate year has been a challenging one at times, but nevertheless it's been a year in which I'm finding a lot of grace. I feel that I'm growing not only as a friar, but as a man and as a human being. In the process, though, there are a lot of roadblocks and obstacles within my heart that I'm finding I must deal with if I ever want to truly live a life for others.

*Luis:* I have enjoyed, and felt enriched by, the workshops shared with the brothers of the First Order — the Capuchins and the Conventuals. Our gatherings make it clear to me that our vision is shared by all who live the Franciscan charism. Union and communion are stronger than just following St. Francis. I have felt happy and I can tell that my family is happy that I am following the Lord, especially with the Franciscans.

Many of the workshops have been not only enlightening, but fascinating as well. I think my favorite so far was a workshop on American Franciscan history given by Fr. Jack Clark Robinson. The presenters have all been good, with an impressive level of dedication and passion for the subjects they speak on.



Jack Clark Robinson leads a workshop for the novices on American Franciscan history. (Photo courtesy of the novices)

### **What aspects of the Franciscan charism are you finding unique and/or impressive?**

*Antonio:* I am particularly struck by the intellectual tradition and how it fosters a whole-hearted experience of the incarnation. As I reflect on my initial formation, I realize that, as we continue to unfold the beauty of the Franciscan story, I feel more drawn to this way of life and the possibilities it can transpire. We have a story that is life-giving and restorative.

*Jason:* It never ceases to amaze me just how rich and deep the tradition is. Having someone like Mike Blastic as a formator is a blessing for a lot of reasons, a big one being that there are very few people who know that tradition as well as he does. I think that the Franciscan charism has a lot to bring to a world that is hurting in so many ways, and growing in that charism is pretty exciting. It's imperative to be aware that the Franciscan movement has its roots as a movement with the marginalized. Francis saw that various systems and societal forces were depriving those on the edge from having their humanity valued or even acknowledged, and sought to live as one of them. In doing so, he found a path to a God who, in Christ, was marginalized, outcast and poor. I think in understanding the roots of the

Franciscan movement, we as friars can seek to form more deeply bonds to our brothers and sisters who are maltreated, overlooked, abused and forgotten by our society. That remains – and always should remain – at the core of our collective and individual identities as lesser brothers ourselves. This year has allowed me to realize these things on more than just a superficial level.

*Luis:* I'm impressed by the Franciscans' calling to help those on the margins – those who feel discarded. My Franciscan commitment is for people who are discarded. Serving them is very important to me. My parents seem happy that I am with the Franciscans because I have always been inclined to work in marginalized neighborhoods, with people who are displaced or discarded by society. Serving Jesus Christ by helping those on the outside gives me satisfaction.

*Michael:* For me, the most unique aspect of our Order is that we are to be joyful. St. Mother Teresa said, "One filled with joy preaches without preaching." Joy is vital to our charism and when our work and ministry are rooted in so rich a soil, the fruit yielded will be "thirty, sixty and a hundredfold." Joy is the inspiration and beauty behind our fraternity, and I love that it is essential to the Franciscan life and charism. The friars' effervescent joy is what attracted me to the Order and its palpable presence in the community is what gives me new life every day.

*Troy:* It is one thing to live in a community – we do this in our jobs, in our neighborhoods, in our churches, in our society, and so on. It is another thing to live in a fraternity, or a *fraternal* community. Living in a fraternity means that we spend time together, we rub elbows together, we journey together, we pray together, we sing together, and we eat, laugh and cry together. It means that at the beginning and end of each day, we always come back together to reflect and be with each other, in prayer or otherwise. When it really clicks, a fraternal community can be a *family*.



From left to right: James, Luis, Troy, Michael, Antonio, and Jason after the investiture ceremony. (Photo courtesy of Octavio Duran)

**What have you experienced regarding the collaboration of Franciscan communities?**

*Antonio:* Being part of the transition novitiate class to this new location at Old Mission Santa Barbara has been a gift. The close proximity to the Capuchin and Conventual novitiates has given us a worthwhile experience of the First Order range of Franciscans. We

have partaken in a number of gatherings – social celebrations, workshops, prayer and fraternal sharing. My hope is that more friars from across the provinces would gift future novices with their fraternal visit.

*Jason:* The collaboration with other Franciscan communities has been wonderful. We've had the chance to join with our Conventual and Capuchin brothers for things like workshops, classes, liturgies and religious celebrations – including most recently hosting them here in Santa Barbara for the feast of St. Joseph – as well as for more recreational things like soccer. The three novice groups are joining forces to take on the Los Angeles archdiocesan seminarians in a soccer game on the Saturday after Easter. It's really great to hang out with them and share in our Franciscan life. It feels natural; sometimes I think it's easy to take for granted just how historic this year has been in collaborating with them.

*Luis:* I have appreciated having common encounters with the Franciscan brothers of the First Order. It is enriching because we all follow Jesus Christ in the Franciscan style. When I am at friaries of the other communities, I feel at home. The values of the fraternity always manifest themselves.

*Michael:* It has been wonderful having classes and social gatherings with our Capuchin and Conventual brothers. The love of brothers and the spirit of Francis and Clare are as much a part of them as for us, but expressed in a slightly different way. I have come to appreciate the richness that is given to our Franciscan family through our similarities, but more importantly through our differing interpretations of the charism.

*Troy:* One of the biggest blessings of this novitiate year has been our relationship with the Capuchins and Conventuals, particularly with their novices. We come together often – for feasts, for soccer, Mass or prayer. We share some classes and conferences together, we sing together, and we celebrate together. My first experience of the Franciscan family was at the Franciscan Institute several years ago, and later in postulancy through Graymoor and other inter-Franciscan events, so my concept of not only the First Order but of the whole family is simply that: as one, unified family. I sometimes forget, especially with the other novices, that we are separate branches of the same order, because we all have so much in common, and we are all Franciscan.

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The novices and novitiate team members of the Friars Minor, Capuchin and Conventual orders. (Photo courtesy of the OFM novices)

**Looking Ahead** The novices are working toward simple profession, a ceremony scheduled for Aug. 6. That will begin the next phase of their Franciscan formation. Their novitiate program will finish in July, and they will have time off before beginning studies in Chicago as part of the interprovincial post-novitiate program. They expressed enthusiasm for the next phase of their Franciscan education and experience.

“I am looking forward to completing my studies and to diving into what’s next with openness and desire to minister where needed,” said Antonio. “I am very open to continue receiving more of this Franciscan spirit and the theological formation that I will receive,” said Luis. “I look forward to living in community with more brothers and to live in another environment of study, prayer and ministry.”

Troy said, “I am looking forward to getting back to school, taking classes and learning with my classmates. It will be an interesting shift to go from this year to a more active friar life – ministerally, academically and communally.”