Hope Arising from the Ashes

By Rachel Daly

For many, the name "Our Lady of the Angels" has long been considered synonymous with trauma, grief, and devastation. In the decades since the tragic school fire that killed 92 students and three Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs) fifty years ago, Our Lady of the Angels Church on the west side of Chicago has been closed, the convent vacated, and the community engulfed in increasing levels of poverty and violence. That is, until recently.

In 2006, at the invitation of Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I., Fr. Bob Lombardo, C.F.R., came to Chicago to re-establish a Catholic presence in the neighborhood, and in the seven years since, new hope has begun to rise from the ashes of a devastated community.

An Impossible Task

The charge Father Bob was given was virtually impossible, and at first, he resisted coming. It took several

attempts on the part of Cardinal George to convince him to accept the challenge and when he did accept, Father Bob found before him obstacles more numerous than he had even realized. Years of abandonment had worn away at the buildings and multiplied the labor that would be needed to put them in working order. And Father Bob didn't have a dime in his pocket.

But come he did, and for the first year he lived at a nearby parish while the rectory was renovated. Meanwhile, one step at a time, Father began to build bridges with neighbors, benefactors, and organizations of varying faiths, and projects began to take shape.

As a Notre Dame graduate, Father Bob was able to enlist University alumni and students to come and volunteer with the endless renovations. As word spread, volunteers from all over added to their ranks, coming and going as they were able. He formed partnerships with the YMCA and the Greater Chicago Food Depository, and began to host food and clothing distribution for the neighborhood.

Meanwhile, young men and women discerning religious vocations approached Father Bob, looking for a community much like the one he belonged to, the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal (CFRs), but feeling that the CFRs were not quite the right one. These discerners felt called to Chicago, and also to teach. As a founding member of the CFRs and having already experienced the many martyrdoms that accompany founding a new religious institute, Father Bob was not in a hurry to do it again. But he judged that the needs of the Chicago community were different from what the Franciscan Friars and Sisters of the Renewal were founded to do. Among these needs were religious education and Perpetual Adoration. When it became clear that God was asking this of him and with the blessing and approval of Cardinal George, he oversaw the founding of the Franciscans of the Eucharist.

Restoration Has Begun

Now, just seven years after his arrival, there are six sisters and two friars living, praying and serving at Our Lady of the Angels. All of the buildings have been restored to a simple but beautiful working order, thanks to all kinds of donations, from construction-related services, to furnishings, to floor tiles that others deemed too irregular to use (though they look as good as new), to enough plates, cups and silverware to feed 600 people, and everything in between. The Franciscans of the Eucharist offer food and clothing, after-school programs,

summer Bible camps, neighborhood block parties, and a ministry of presence to a community much in need. The sisters are currently working on master's degrees at the University of St. Mary of the Lake (Mundelein Seminary), and they soon hope to teach in poor Catholic schools and religious education programs. They also have begun periods of Eucharistic Adoration, with the hope that with the participation of laity, they will eventually be able to have it perpetually.

The sisters' religious habit has come to be known in the neighborhood as a signal of welcome and good will and, according to Sister Kate, elicits smiles and friendly waves, even from those she does not know (especially children). In what is formerly one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Chicago, the Franciscan presence has brought out the already-present goodness of the people, and facilitated a bonding among the neighbors.

And while looking toward a brighter future, the Franciscans of the Eucharist have certainly not forgotten the past. A monument in front of the former Our Lady of the Angels rectory stands in remembrance of the 95 lives lost in the fire of 55 years ago, on the very same lawn where bodies were laid as the fire was being fought. Furthermore, the Franciscans maintain a very positive relationship with the BVM Sisters who served at Our Lady of the Angels at the time of the fire, sharing with them meals and stories of the new signs of life emerging at Our Lady of the Angels, and allowing the BVMs to share with them their memories of Our Lady of the Angels, including the fire.

Like all charisms in the Church, the charism of the Franciscans of the Eucharist reflects the image of God in a particular way, like a ray of light passed through a crystal at a particular angle. While no one could possibly exemplify all charisms perfectly, each charism has

something to teach us, and that of the Franciscans of the Eucharist is no exception.

Life Lessons to Learn

One of the lessons of their witness is faith. It is something which many of us would claim to have already, but there is a different level of faith altogether that is required if one is to rebuild a church and a community from the ashes, with no money in his pocket and nowhere to lay his head. It is the difference between believing that Jesus can enable a person to walk on water and actually stepping out of the boat. Certainly we've all heard it said, and probably said it ourselves, that "God will provide," but something about the story of Our Lady of the Angels gives that a whole new meaning. These religious placed all of their most important needs—indeed, *all* of their needs—in God's hands, and God blessed them abundantly—enough food to feed themselves and their entire neighborhood, a rebuilt church building and a

rebuilding Church community. This kind of faith is nothing short of heroic, and yet it is the very same faith that is asked of all of us.

A second lesson boldly proclaimed by their undertaking is mission, or missionary-mindedness. As Father Bob repeatedly says, "We have to go out." We have to shatter

(continued on page 22)

Selfless Courage Amidst Fire

Chicago natives who experienced the 1950s remember December 1, 1958, as one of the most traumatic days of their lives, for on this cold, dark day a fire broke out in Our Lady of the Angels Catholic School, killing 92 young students and three Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Housing 1,600 students, the school had recently passed a fire inspection but had not been required to adhere to modern fire-safety standards because of the age of the building.

The fire broke out in a stairwell, quickly consumed the wooden main staircase and sped to the attic, filling the second floor with smoke. By the time the sisters and the students on the second floor realized the seriousness of the situation, their means of escape had been cut off. Forced to wait for help that would prove to be too late, or else jump the 25 feet through the small windows to the pavement, many of the children and sisters had no chance. The victims perished in the fire or because of their injuries. Nationwide changes to fire safety laws were enacted after this tragedy, but for this community it was too late. Grieving families left the area, the neighborhood demographics changed, the Catholic school was closed and the sisters left the parish.

The BVM sisters who died in the fire, Sr. Mary Clare Therese Champagne, Sr. Mary Seraphica Kelley and Sr. Mary St. Canice Lyng, could have saved

themselves but chose to remain with their students. One of the saddest and most famous images from the fire shows a weary fireman carrying the lifeless body of John Jajkowski, Jr., from the building. The boy was 10 years old and an accomplished musician who had wanted to become a priest.

When Fr. Bob Lombardo, C.F.R., moved into the old rectory, in order to rebuild anew, he did not forget the past. On December 8, 2007, Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I., dedicated a new monument to the victims of the fire outside the rectory. Inscribed with the names of all the victims, it is capped with a giant marble teardrop containing an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Cardinal George reminded those in attendance that love is stronger than death, and where there is love there is life. "It is not for us to be captured by death, tragedy and sorrow, but for us who have faith to walk through those moments with courage."

Hope Arising *(cont. from page 5)*
Lombardo repeatedly says, "We have to go out." We have to shatter our personal comfort zones, because in the words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, "You were not made for comfort. You were made for greatness." It has nothing to do with pushing our beliefs on others but, rather, with being so full of joy and love for the Gospel that it spills out and draws others in. Saint Augustine said, "The truth is like a lion. You don't have to defend it. Let it loose. It will defend itself." If the Gospel truly pervades us (our speech, our actions, our attitudes), we will have set the truth loose in our own lives, and it will indeed speak for itself. But we can't be afraid of encountering those who are different from us, or even those who are the same but lukewarm, for God is the one who makes our efforts fruitful, and it is not for us to deny Him the opportunity. Father Bob and the Franciscans of the Eucharist stepped out with a mighty faith. They extended and continue to extend a hand, both to other Catholics and to others of completely different faith backgrounds, saying, "Let's do something beautiful for God, shall we?"

A third lesson is the preferential option for the poor, which, as it has wittily been said, is not an option. Indeed, having an eye to seek out the vulnerable, the suffering, the neglected, and the little one in every situation is a hallmark of Jesus Christ, and our Holy Father Pope Francis has already given impeccable witness to this in just a short time in the papacy. We all know who those people are in our lives—the socially awkward people in our circles of friends, the people who often get pushed aside or drowned out, the

ones who need to be lifted up by others. Furthermore, the materially poor in our communities are in no short supply. We need to encounter these people, that they might challenge our complacency and teach us, in the words of Pope Francis, to "say, 'You are important to me,' and not necessarily in words." The Franciscans of the Eucharist practice this special sensitivity to the needs of the poor, one person at a time, and we likewise are obliged to examine our hearts before God and ask if we are truly fulfilling this part of our calling according to our state in life.

There are many more lessons that could be mentioned, but one last one for now is what Pope Francis, in his homily to seminarians and novices, recently called "coherence." By that, he meant a continuity between what is practiced and what is preached. In Father Bob's words, "We serve the poor, we live among the poor, and we are poor." We erode our credibility and we erode our Christ-likeness if we divorce our words from our lives. Christ didn't just say, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends," and then leave it at that. Likewise, we can't preach the Gospel and fail to live it. *All* of it.

God has truly accomplished great things on the West Side of Chicago, with willing, faithful, and self-surrendering individuals as His instruments. Yet the mission is really only just beginning, and it is a mission that Pope Francis has indicated belongs to all of us in our given measure. May we be bolstered by the flourishing of the Mission of Our Lady of the Angels and receptive to the ways in which it challenges us to be ever-better witnesses to the person of Jesus Christ.

For more information, visit FranciscansoftheEucharist.com.

Rachel Daly is a senior at the University of Dallas. She served as a summer intern at the Institute on Religious Life *working on various social media and writing projects.*

The Beatitudes:
Faith in Action
by Rev. Bob Lombardo, C.F.R.

In this inspiring audio presentation given at the 2013 IRL National Meeting you will discover how the Beatitudes, as contained in the Gospels, ought to be the guide for all Christians, especially those vowed to the consecrated life, to heroically live their commitment to Christ in service to others.

Only $5.00 + S&H
To order call 847-573-8975