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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
110 W. Madison St., Chicago, IL 60602 ❖ Phone: 312-372-5111
E-mail: FriarsLegion@aol.com ❖ Web Site: www.stpetersloop.org

AVE ATQUE VALE!

Franciscans move around a lot, and now it's my turn to hit the road. I've been transferred and will leave St. Peter's right after Labor Day. My new assignment is as pastor of St. John the Evangelist Church in Houck, Arizona, a small town on the Navajo Reservation just off of I-40, some miles west of the Arizona-New Mexico state line. I will also be teaching the postulants, and their program is located in Gallup, NM. And just to make sure that there is as much highway experience in my new life as possible, my official residence will be in St. Michaels, AZ, another small reservation town north and a bit west of Gallup. After ten years in Chicago, it will all be different. Very different.

Franciscans move around a lot. It is called *itinerancy*, and although we take it for granted now as a normal part of religious life, it was something quite new and startling when Francis of Assisi made it one of the foundational elements of his new Order. Monks took a vow of *stability* by which they became permanently attached to their monastery. Francis, however, wanted his friars to be able to pick up and go where the need was, and since monasteries are not exactly portable, he constructed a form of life that kept the friars free to move from one place to another.

Of course, in a religious order as large as the Franciscans, you can find men who have spent a long time, decades even, in the same place, but that has not been my story. The ten years I have spent in Chicago have been the longest time I have been in a single city since my ordination, and even here I moved twice: after my first year at St. Peter's, I went down to Hyde Park to work

in a post-novitiate formation program; and two years later, I moved back to St. Peter's. I've lived in several friaries in New Mexico, and spent three years in Arctic Canada and then two years in Guatemala. When you die, they send out a letter which, among other things, lists all your assignments. I could drop dead tomorrow and the provincial secretary in Albuquerque would still have a pretty long list to type for me.

I joined the Franciscans over thirty-five years ago, and hardly anything I imagined back then has turned out as I thought it would, except for the itinerancy. I figured the friars would be good for that, and they have been, at least for me. I don't care much for travel and I very much dislike the process of moving, so this is not a case of there being a perfect fit between the individual's life-style preferences and the job's requirements. Itinerancy was attractive to me long before I knew much about the friars or Franciscan itinerancy. It had the ring of truth to it; it somehow fit. Life moves fast, faster than we would like, and it's better to be moving.

A side effect of that truth is that saying good-byes is something that we do quite a lot of, but that also seemed right. I took four years of Latin in high school, and never got very good at it and never remembered very much from it. One of the very few things that has stuck is a brief poem by Gaius Valerius Catullus (d. 54 B.C.), an elegy on the sudden death of his brother, an ode addressed to his brother's "mute ashes," all that was left of him. The last line of that poem I have always remembered and often used: *Atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale*. And so forever, brother, hello and good-bye.

Hello and good-bye. The chances are very good that if you know only a single word in a language, it's one of those two words, and more likely the "good-bye" than the "hello." Catullus expressed at his brother's death what he knew long before, what all of us seem to know as soon as we know anything: our passage through life is marked by hellos and good-byes that come so close together that at times it seems like we could almost say them in the same breath. It is true of both words, but more obviously true of "good-bye," that just saying it marks a transition, a change, and the brute fact that we are always saying it whispers that everything is in transition and that change is the only constant.

Centuries before Catullus, Heraclitus (d. 475 B.C.) was a philosopher, and his entire system can be heard in his most famous saying, "You can not step twice into the same river." You can live your whole life on the banks of the same river, you can bathe in it every day, and every day you go down into a different river, for the water is always flowing, always in motion, and your river, which you have known all your life, is always different. Heraclitus could have made his point using almost any physical object – a road, a field, a house, a tree – but even though all these things are constantly changing too, their rate of change is too slow to bring home the truth as well as the river, which is so obviously in constant motion and change.

To his doctrine of change Heraclitus added, as a necessary companion piece, the doctrine of the unity of opposites, for which he gave another aphorism: "The road up and the road down is one and the same." Since everything is in flux, nothing really is what it is in an absolute, definitive way, and given enough time everything will become its opposite, everything is in a sense already its own opposite, is one with its opposite. Applied to the crucial words of Catullus, it turns out that it is not just that *hello* will inevitably be fol-

lowed by *good-bye*, but that *hello* and *good-bye* are one and the same.

Heraclitus doesn't sound like the kind of guy who would have been the life of the party, and it is certain that the book of the Bible whose tonality most matches his has long been tagged as the most pessimistic, even bleak, work of Scripture. In the opening verses of Ecclesiastes, the sacred writer speaks his own signature saying that he will repeat often in the book's dozen chapters: "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." Like Heraclitus, he sees the universe always in motion – the sun rises and sets, generations come and go, the wind is always blowing and always changing direction, the rivers all run down to the sea and the sea is never filled and the rivers never cease to flow – and like Heraclitus, he concludes that there never is or has been anything really new. With everything in motion and change, everything seems new but is not really. It has all always been here, and if we had immensely long lives instead of pitifully short lives, we would have a better grasp of this most basic truth.

To wonder if living longer might not assist us in acquiring wisdom is to place the question of time at the center of the discussion. All of our experience, of course, is in time, is in tenses that we conveniently label *past*, *present* and *future* when we are talking about language. Time is all that we know, and yet we also know, or at least suspect, that our time-bound experience of the

world is not all there is. As Ecclesiastes 3:11 puts it, "[God] has made everything beautiful in time; also he has

put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." Eternity is not endless time. It is not time at all, but freedom from time. To experience the world in time, as we do, is to experience it piecemeal – in bits and pieces reality comes to us out of the future into the present, and then flows away from us into the past. The river image is almost unavoidable here, and time is most commonly compared to a river's flow. To experience the world in eternity, however, as



God does, is to experience it whole, all at once, all that ever was or will be in one instantaneous *now*. As the sacred writer says, we do not have the experience of eternity, we do not see the universe all at once, and yet we do have a kind of anticipatory experience of eternity in the mind, especially in the mind that contemplates the eternal God.

The bleak tone of Ecclesiastes is warranted precisely because the author finds no way out of the endless push and pull of past and future, which binds us to our smallest of neighborhoods in the universe. There is simply no bridge that can take us from our time-bound experience of the world to the fullness of eternity that is God, and God has planted this awareness of eternity in our minds as a seed that, as far as we can tell, cannot grow into anything. Absent that bridge, all we have is endless motion with no meaning, *hellos* and *good-byes* that follow so close upon each other that even we can see that they come down to the same thing. In such a predicament, itinerancy is the closest we can come to the truth, and it is a dire and oppressive truth at that.

Only it's not dire and oppressive. Francis knew it and lived it as inexpressible joy, and he is not alone. Even those of us who pretty much stay put know that we are in motion, rapid motion, and yet we do not find it wearisome, as does Ecclesiastes, but exhilarating. Certainly we know what Catullus is talking about, we have been there and we feel it, but we also know that the Roman poet's is not the final word. Something has happened in the interim, some one really, and that person is Christ.

The modern poet T. S. Eliot in his *Four Quartets* explored the mystery of time and eternity in a meditation that is both supreme poetry and supreme theology. At the very beginning he states the dilemma and hints at its resolution. What we are yearning for is to no longer be bound by time, to pass beyond it in an anticipatory way. *Only through time is time conquered*, Eliot says, so his way is no escapist romantic flight into a false consciousness of eternity, but a way that leads into the very heart of our reality, which is a reality in time. *Time past and*

time future/What might have been and what has been/Point to one end, which is always present. All time, both everything that actually happened and everything that might have happened, converges on a single point which is eternal, which is always present. The "one end," as we will see later in the poem, is also the one beginning. In the second poem, East Coker, he uses those words in two sentences which seem to say the opposite – "In my beginning is my end" and "In my end is my beginning" – but which actually reveal that beginning and end, Catullus' hello and good-bye, both emerge from and converge into that which is utterly beyond the *limited value/In the knowledge derived from experience*, and the words we use to try to capture it.

It is in the third poem, The Dry Salvages, that Eliot is most explicit as to what has made all the difference. Using the image of the river god and the river to reference time, and relying on an insight taken from Book XI of the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, Eliot insists that it is much truer to say that time is within us than to say that we are "in time." Time exists, to borrow Augustine's phrase, as an extension, or distension, of the mind, the same mind into which God has placed eternity as a seed. And so it is not just the river, the universe, that is always flowing – we are always changing. In a series of striking images, Eliot says that the person boarding a train or embarking on a ship will not be the same person who arrives at the end of the journey. Bringing the predicament revealed in Ecclesiastes to a terrible point, Eliot shows that if all we have is time, then all we have is death, and not just death as the last of life, but death in every moment of life.

Catullus had not the nerve to state it so starkly, but Eliot's unblinking courage here is sustained by the sure belief that there is more, namely *The point of intersection of the timeless/With time*, the contemplation of which is the proper work of the saints. That intersection is the Incarnation, the person of Christ. *Here the impossible union/Of spheres of existence is actual,/Here the past and future/Are conquered, and reconciled.* Christ, in his person, is the impossible union of the temporal sphere of exist-

