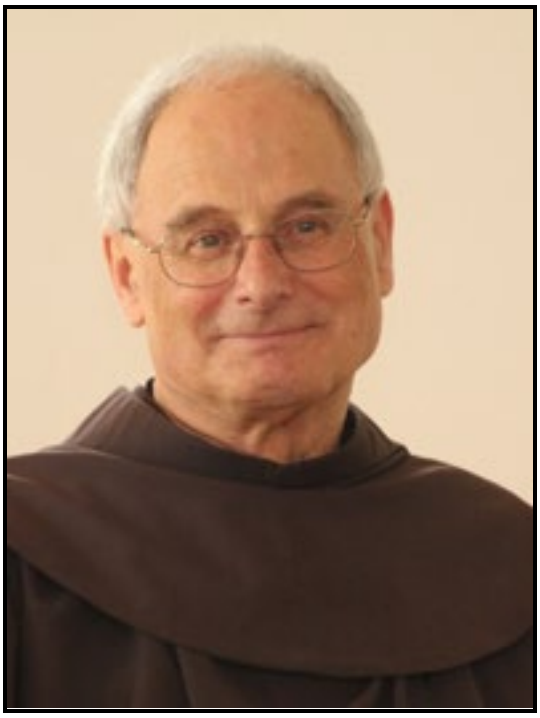
Entering the Bloated Belly of Poverty

A Reflection on My "Calling" to Walk with the Poor

Gerard Thomas Straub

Preface: ***The Bini Effect***



Giacomo Bini, OFM
(August 23, 1938 – May 9, 2014)

My engagement with the life of St. Francis of Assisi should have ended with the publication of my book, *The Sun & Moon Over Assisi*, about the saint and his most ardent follower, St. Clare of Assisi. I could have easily transitioned from my unexpected, unexplainable conversion in an empty Franciscan church in Rome to spending four years writing a book about the life of the beloved saint and his impact on me to writing a string of spiritual books on saints. But that did not happen. Instead, I attempted to understand St. Francis' unfathomable love of not just the poor, but poverty itself…which made no sense in our materialistic world. The last 25 years of my life took me further and further along poverty road as the result of receiving a letter from a Franciscan friar named Giacomo Bini. This is the story of how that happened.

I was told during a meeting with some Franciscan Provincials from around the world, Br. Giacomo, who was the head of the Franciscans at the time, said, "The friars should love the poor the way Brother Gerry does." Without his heartfelt support, none of what happened in my life during the last 25 years would have happened. His giving me the means to live with friars serving the poor gave birth to my photo/essay book on poverty, *When Did I See You Hungry?* The book was made into a short film of the same titled that was narrated by Martin Sheen.

Entering the Bloated Belly of Poverty

Shortly after *The Sun and Moon Over Assisi* was published, I received a letter from the head of the Order of Friars Minor in Rome, Giacomo Bini, OFM. He wrote that he read the book and liked it very much and he asked me to visit him the next time I was in Rome. I could not believe that the Minister General of the Franciscans, the 118th and current successor to St. Francis, had written me such wonderful letter. Here is part of the letter:

> You have put much of yourself into what you have written. It is a narrative, a travel book, a *Confessio* in the manner of Augustine - a song of praise to God who has been present in your life, a rich compendium of spiritual wisdom, and in all and through all a celebration of Francis and Clare and all who caught fire from their passion down through the years and centuries. You have the gift of making everything actual - Clare and Francis are as much in the present tense as Don Aldo or Fr. Liam.
>
> It's a book to savor and to dip into from time to time: pieces which pop up unexpectedly, like Espresso and Saints, or The Cave of Brother Rufino, or It's the Economy, Stupid - I've chosen them almost at random, and could choose many more - are gems to make us think and ensnare our hearts. Another great joy: the little snatches from the Liturgy of the Hours which you've sprinkled through the text. We've prayed these texts so many times - but seeing the texts in completely fresh 'con-texts' makes them come alive in a new way. Gerry, for all this I want to thank you.
>
> I look forward to our next meeting, when you're in Italy to make the film. I hope we can find time for a meeting and a chat. With the blessing of our father and brother Francis,

On my next trip to Rome to teach at Pontifical Gregorian University, I found the Franciscan Curia on a map and walked to it. It was located just outside the walls of the Vatican. I had no appointment; I simply rang the bell at the entrance. I was wearing jeans and a Yankee baseball cap. A friar opened the door. I told him I was hoping to see the Minister General. He looked puzzled. He asked if I had an appointment. "No." He seemed agitated. He wanted to know who I was. I told him that I had written a book on St. Francis and that the Minister General had written to me and invited me to visit him when I was back in Rome. He said talking with the Minister General was impossible. He was in a series of week-long meetings with all the Provincials from around the world. The subtext was: get the hell out of here. I gently asked him if he would simply get word to the Minister General that "Gerry Straub was here."

I was too naïve to realize how crazy my request was…yet, the friar told me to wait. He closed the door, leaving me standing outside. A short time later, the door opened. The friar said that Minister General was busy, but he asked if I would wait and he would have lunch with me. I could sense the friar could not believe what he was saying. I entered the Curia. I was shown to a sitting room where I waited for about an hour. Suddenly, the Minister General came to warmly greet me.

I followed him to a huge refectory with row after row of tables. The friars gathered for lunch were in leadership, the heads of Franciscan Provinces from all over the world. It was a buffet lunch. I followed the Minister General down the display of food. I took very little and was suddenly nervous and feeling completely out of place. The Minister General walked to a corner table and we sat down to eat. I really cannot recall the conversation. But I was keenly aware that all the Provincials were looking at me and wondering who was this guy eating with the big boss.

I told the Minister General that I had wrestled with the subject of poverty throughout my book [*The Sun & Moon Over Assisi*], and yet I felt I truly did not fully understand St. Francis' attitude toward poverty, adding that I understood it on a theological level, but from a practical point of view I did not know how it should impact my life. Then I presented him with a crazy and highly impractical idea. It had just popped into my mind. I said I wanted to enter "the bloated belly of poverty." I was not even sure what that meant, the words even surprised me. I continue to say I wanted to travel around the world and spend time with the friars who ministered to the poorest of the poor. The Minister General asked me what I would do. I said that I was not sure, that I would just look and listen and take some photographs, adding that I hoped being with the friars serving the poor would help me better understand the Christian response to poverty and hopefully I could write more effectively about it.

Hardly a plan! Certainly, any Jesuit would dismiss it—no syllabus, no plan, who is this guy wearing jeans and a Yankee baseball cap? But for the Franciscan Minister General, what I had said was enough of a plan for him, and so he blessed my "plan." After the meal, the Minister General escorted me through a labyrinth of halls to a door that had this sign on it: The Office of Justice and Peace and the Integrity of Creation. I had no idea what that meant. We entered and the Minister General introduced me to a friar from Ireland who was the head of the office. He told the friar he should coordinate a plan for me to visit the brothers around the world who minister to the poor and that the friars should house me and take care of me. And so, it came to be. Just like that.

What Am I Doing Here?

Within three weeks, I landed in Calcutta, India, and over the course of the next 15 months I visited 39 cities in 11 nations. All that travel resulted in a photo/essay book entitled *When Did I See You Hungry?* For me, India was an immense wake-up call. It was my first taste of extreme poverty and the daily suffering of the chronically poor. Here is a brief excerpt from a journal I kept on the life-changing trip into the unknown netherworld of extreme poverty.

> The plane's wheels touched down in Calcutta at 10:46 in the evening. With stops in Taipei and Singapore, it had been a long, grueling trip from Los Angeles—consuming a total of twenty hours on planes and ten hours between flights. I was exhausted, yet filled with excitement at being in India. I had absolutely no idea of what I was about to see and experience, no idea of the rough road ahead, a road which was going to be physically, emotionally, and spiritually challenging. The plane came to a stop a short distance from

the terminal. As I looked out the window into the darkness, I felt a trace of anxiety...I was about to step into the unknown.

At the foot of the steps, soldiers with rifles directed the passengers to an old, dilapidated bus. The driver seemed to have a difficult time starting the engine and an even more difficult time shifting into first gear, and when the bus finally lunged forward, the engine sounded like an old washing machine. We only drove a few yards and the bus stopped in front of the international arrivals building. I wondered why we could not have walked the short distance.

The interior of the building was dimly lit and looked as if it had not been painted in thirty years. There were no custom forms on the plane, and so everyone scrambled to find the appropriate form and a flat surface on which to write. I had been in India less than fifteen minutes and I already knew the gulf between my safe, comfortable life in Los Angeles and life in India was enormous. I could sense the anxiety turning to fear before I even left the airport.

Outside the airport I was greeted by the Franciscan friar from Ireland whom I met at the Franciscan Curia in Rome. He was in India to visit the friars working throughout India. The friar escorted me to a line of waiting taxis.

We walked to a line of very old taxis. From a distance, I thought they were part of some of display showcasing British cars from the early 50's. For a guy from Hollywood, everything seems like a movie prop. We got into one, and I quickly realized this was no movie, this was real life. A spring protruded through a hole in the back seat upon which my backside was seated. The taxi seemed on the verge of falling apart. The driver could not start the engine. He got out and shouted to some pals who rushed over and began pushing the car until it reached sufficient speed for the drive to pop the clutch, which managed to get the engine to start.

At first, the priest and I were consumed with travel stories about our long journeys and the itinerary ahead of us. But as we approached the city, my attention was being increasingly drawn out the window. The streets were lined with homeless people. Every inch of the sidewalks was covered with bodies sleeping on the ground. I saw one young boy, perhaps five years old, sleeping naked on the ground. The closer we got to the city, the more intense the scene became. We drove past decayed buildings and people standing around large fires burning in barrels. The streets became more and more congested. Cows and wild dogs shared the road with cars, antiquated trucks, and twenty-foot-long ox-drawn carts hauling bamboo trees. Sidewalks were totally covered with bodies buried under old blankets. The drive was draining me of words and emotions. I sat in stunned silence.

The taxi drove through a short, dingily lit tunnel taking us under the main road. The narrow tunnel was so crowded with pedestrians that the taxi could barely move. The glass window was the only thing separating me from the mass of tormented humanity. I could see their faces, their pain. We emerged from the tunnel into a densely congested maze of streets.

The streets were so jammed with people and vehicles, that the taxi frequently came to a complete stop. People were cooking on open fires along the curb. A truck backed into the taxi. The driver got out to inspect the damage. The headlight had been smashed. The taxi became engulfed in a sea of people. Many looked in the window at us. I felt very vulnerable, naked. I had a big bag in the trunk loaded with two weeks' worth of clothes. Many of the people outside the taxi were nearly naked. On my lap, I clutched my camera bagged containing a 35mm camera and a digital video camera whose combined value was around $7,000, which was more money than all these people would see in a lifetime. The priest said the people live on less than a dollar a day. I had 20 years of income in my camera bag. Reality was slapping me in the face. The stench and sound were overpowering. The streets vibrated with a constant noise, a painful wail. I was very frightened. I wondered what the hell I was doing here.

After worming our way through the streets for about fifteen minutes, the taxi stopped and the friar said, "We're home." In stunned disbelief, I responded, "We're home? Where are we? We're nowhere!" I could not believe we were getting out of the taxi. We walked to the back of the taxi to get my big, fat bag from the trunk. I felt like an idiot carrying so much stuff past so many people who had so little. We squeezed our way onto the side walk. People were seated on the ground, their back leaning up against a sheet metal fence. The friar pounded on the fence. Minutes later, it slowly slid open. We walked into the courtyard of an old church. I learned that we were staying here tonight, the guests of two diocesan priests. An elderly Indian man led us up a flight of rickety stairs along the outside of the building and into a room on the second floor of the rectory. The priests had retired for the evening, and so we were confined to our room.

The dusty, dark room was virtually empty, except for the two wooden pallets on the floor, each with a very thin, straw mattress. The bathroom, lit by a single, naked light bulb, was filthy and had 50-year-old plumbing. The toilet leaked all over the concrete floor when you flushed it. A noisy overhead fan had little effect on the hot, heavy night air, but it did circulate the air enough to make it more difficult for the mosquitoes to land on you. There was a poster tacked to one wall: *Change your thoughts and you will change the world*. It was going to take a lot more than changed thoughts to fix what I had seen in less than 90 minutes in India.

The friar laid down and within minutes he was sound asleep. Sure, he has been to the worst slums on earth. He was used to this. To me, it was a nightmare. I laid silently on the straw pallet all night, never falling asleep. My mind was too busy trying to sort out all I had seen. What am I

doing here? What can one person do? The problem is overwhelming. I thought of my safe, quiet home in Los Angeles, where I am surrounded by my books and music and films. The contrast to this stark room was hard to process. I could hear the constant clamor from the streets. It never became quiet. Dogs barking, kids crying, men shouting. I tried to blot out the worst word in human language—hopeless—by constantly repeating, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner." At six in the morning, the church bells rang, briefly bringing a sense of peace to the chaos within me and outside the fence. After breakfast, we walked to Mother Teresa's home for the dying. Calcutta looked worse in daylight. I was overwhelmed. I could barely lift the camera. I wanted to go back to the airport and catch the next flight to anywhere in the United States. I had stepped into a vast unknown and had no idea of the rough road ahead, a road that would be physically, emotionally, and spiritually challenging. For the next two weeks we traveled together country on planes, trains, old buses, and rickshaws visiting the poor in Chennai, Bangalore, Guwahati, and Rangjuli.

So began my journey down poverty road. Gone were the days when I used to drive down Sunset Boulevard in Beverly Hills. There was no going back after India.

Poverty Road

You can see disturbing pictures of poverty and suffering on TV or in books, and while they are able to convey some of the emotion, it is impossible for any photograph to hit as hard as the taxi ride from the airport in India. Before landing, the airline played a video depicting India and its exotic, exciting tourist attractions. We saw wealthy people climbing the Himalayas and white-water rafting down majestic rivers. We saw safari's, food, culture, history, and famous landmarks such as the Taj Mahal—but we saw no poor, no mind-numbing poverty. At the airport in Singapore, I bought a copy of the International Herald Tribune because I wanted to see how the New York Yankees did in the second game of the World Series. As I laid in the darkness of our room in Calcutta, my concern over whether the Yankees will win the series seemed ludicrous. We love diversion, shun reality. We live in an illusion and have no interest in leaving it. But I could not ignore the reality outside the rectory: sidewalks littered with sleeping people, naked children, bugs, disease, open sewers, and the unbearable stench of hopelessness. It looked worse in daylight.

So began my journey down poverty road. Gone were the days when I used to drive down Sunset Boulevard in Beverly Hills. There was no going back after India. I spent about two weeks in India, crisscrossing the country on planes, trains, old buses, and rickshaws visiting six more cities.

After similar distressing trips to Kenya, Mexico, Jamaica, and the Philippines, the photo/essay book was completed. But my need to be among these people living in poverty was just beginning. The photo/essay book—*When Did I See You Hungry?*—was published in 2002. The Minister General, Fr. Giacomo Bini, O.F.M., wrote the introduction. It ended with these words:

> Francis tries everything he can think of to jolt us into seeing and feeling the truth that is so clear to him. We need that jolt, badly. We need to see with new eyes the blasphemy of

being comfortable while God's children suffer and starve to death, of daring to pray to God when we are indifferent to the fate of the sisters and the brothers God has asked us to cherish. "Receivers of stolen goods" is Francis' phrase for us when we cocoon ourselves in comfort when millions have nothing.

The book you are holding in your hands is dangerous and should probably carry a government health warning. Gerry Straub is a modern-day Francis, jolting us into the truth by the power of images. You may be glad or sorry you opened this book, but you can't set it down and remain as you were before you picked it up: Whatever you do now is a decision. There's no neutral option. You will either do something - or you reject your truth, our truth, the truth at the heart of everything.

When Francis looked back, at the end of his far-too short life, on the decision he had made twenty years before, he tells how it affected him. "What I used to find so disgusting," he said, "was changed into my greatest satisfaction and joy." When I stop being a "thief" and begin to go straight, the same will happen to me. Try it and see.

All of this was the early fruit of one fleeting moment of grace in an empty church in Rome. I still can't believe it happened and have no idea where the journey will end. Every day is a gift.

The Middle of Nowhere

After returning home from India, it was extremely difficult for me to process what I had witnessed there. It was the Thanksgiving/Christmas season, and I recall going to a mall and being overwhelmed by the vast array of goods on display. I could not get the images I captured on 35mm film out of my head. Even a trip to a supermarket left me beleaguered by the sheer abundance of choices we have.

A few months later, in May of 2000, I traveled to Nairobi, Kenya. In a nation of 27 million, at least five percent of Kenyans lived as squatters, most occupying very small strips of land—rarely wider than 20 feet—on which they build illegal huts. In Kagoshi, near Mount Kenya, 1,500 people lived in the gutter along a narrow strip of land adjacent to road. Crime in Nairobi abounds. Almost half the population was unemployed. Power outages are commonplace. Phones work sporadically. Infrastructures are crumbling. Illness from tainted food is constant. Nothing works. For persons fleeing poverty and starvation, forced migration has become a way of life in Africa.

For eight hours a day I walked through Nairobi's massive Kibera slum, which is the largest slum in Africa, where thousands upon thousands of people lived without running water or toilets or electricity. I saw miles upon miles of misery and disease. To be a migrant in Africa is to be a nonperson, unwanted and unneeded. After five full days of witnessing the misery of extreme poverty, famine, drought, hunger, illness, suffering, and death, I had reached the limits of my endurance and I asked the friars if they would help me arrange to go home a few days early. During my time in Kenya, I did not see any wildlife; I only saw life wildly out of balance.

Some ten years later, I would return to Nairobi, Kenya to make a film for Jesuit Refugee Service. Here is part of my journal from that second trip.

> On my 9th day in Kenya, I boarded a small plane for a flight to north-east corner of the country. I wasn't too thrilled about getting on a plane with propellers. But I was more worried about the drive from the airport to the massive Kakuma Refugee Camp, which is in of a vast and very harsh desert area. Just before boarding the plane, I learned that the ride from the airfield to the camp is so dangerous we will have armed guards with us. Hopefully, my overworked team of guardian angels will be making the trip across the desert also.
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> I was greeted at the airfield by a JRS staff person. After collecting my luggage, we drove to a nearby market where the armed policemen were waiting for us. The two-hour drive across the desert to Kakuma was a long, lonely stretch of barren desert known for bandits who randomly terrorize and rob relief workers heading for the camps.
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> As we crossed the desert, I felt the pace and panic of contemporary life that lives in the shadow of illusionary wealth melting under the hot sun and that I was I entering a new reality. In spiritual language, the desert is a place where humanity is handed over to God, a place where a person is totally submitted to an immense and intimate encounter. For the refugee, the desert is a place where they are stripped bare of their country, their fields, their friends, their family, their home. It is a place of total isolation and marginalization. It is hell. In the Swahili language "Kakuma" means "nowhere." An apt name as the camp is located literally in the middle of nowhere, about as isolated as you could get.
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> The camp itself defied my expectations. I had envisioned a sea of white tents. But most of the Kakuma camp is so settled that the refugees have constructed more permanent homes. Many people have lived in the camp for more than 20 years and over time the camp was transformed from the impermanence of tents to more stable and secure structures…including shops and businesses. The place felt more like a slum than a refugee camp. Nonetheless, there are still plenty of tents…which are occupied by newly arriving refugees.
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> Unlike refugees in urban settings, these refugees have nowhere to go, as they are surrounded by endless miles of desert in every direction. In the Kakuma camp the refugees have settled in for the long haul. About 95,000 people call the Kakuma camp home. Each year, only about 2,000 refugees from the camp are fortunate enough to be resettled to other nations, including the United States; but sadly, each year another 5,000 new refugees enter the camp…and so the population is constantly growing.
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> The camp is a relatively safe haven for people from nine different nations and over twenty ethnic groups; but most of the residents come from South Sudan and Somalia.

Upon arrival at the camp, refugees will spend a few weeks in a holding station where they will have access to a limited amount of food and water. Once they have been screened and admitted to the camp, they will be provided with adequate food and water, educational and medical assistance, and some materials to build a shelter. Most people live in mud huts that provide little protection from the extreme weather conditions in the desert, where dust, sandstorms and seasonal flooding are common.

Once inside the camp, the refugees are not permitted to leave, unless they are repatriated or relocated or if they receive a special permit to leave for such things as an educational opportunity. JRS does offer scholarships for refugees to attend schools located outside the camp.

Food is distributed twice a month to those with a food ration card. For some in the camp, this is the first time in a long time that they had a dependable supply of food. The daily diet consists of about 2,100 calories a day from cereals, oil, salt, peas, beans, lentils, and a soy blend. Refugees are also given sheeting, blankets, jerricans and soap when they arrive at the camp. Still, all a family's necessities cannot be met by the United Nations or by the NGO's. Sometimes refugees trade their food rations with other refugees in exchange for something they need. Much of a refugee's day is spent waiting for and hauling water. JRS offers many programs that focus on the physiological impact of a refugee's forced flight and subsequent life in the camp where only their most basic of human needs are met.

A Death Sentence

One of the most powerful scenes in a film *The Fragrant Spirit of Life,* which was set in Uganda, featured an overcrowded and understaffed hospital which I described as a warehouse for the sick and dying. At the end of the scene, I said that I prayed that I didn't get sick. But I did get sick. I contracted malaria. I was staying with The Columbian Sisters, an order of nuns from Italy when it hit. I had a temperature of 103 degrees. I was sweating and shivering at the same time. Moreover, I had unending diarrhea. My small cinder block room had one luxury: a bathroom.

One of my crew notified the sisters. When they came to my room, they said they needed to take me to a hospital. After filming in two hospitals, I had not desire to be a patient in one. I said to an old nun who had been in Uganda for nearly fifty years, "Any chance you could take me to Lourdes instead." She assured me they would take me to a sophisticated clinic designed for international aid workers. I received a super strong shot and within hours of was feeling better. After a day's rest, I was able to resume filming.

For me, malaria was just an inconvenience. For the people I was filming Malaria was often a death sentence as they did not have the 25 bucks for the medication.

The Vastness of the Desert

In thinking back on my experiences in Kenya and Uganda, I recalled how the subject of mass migration played a huge role in the stories I told in the films I made featuring those two nations in East Africa. Years before making *The Fragrant Spirit of Life* (Uganda) and *We Anoint Their Wounds* (Kenya), I had a crash course in mass migration while making my film *Endless Exodus* in Mexico and El Salvador.

I opened *Endless Exodus* with an aerial shot of the wide, barren desert south of the U.S. border. I was in a small three-seat propellor plane. The pilot was a crusty, older woman. She took the window off the front passenger seat so I could film as we flew over the endless miles of desert. In the back seat was a Holy Cross priest from the University of Notre Dame, who invited me to come to Mexico to tell the real story of the undocumented migrants risking their lives to come to America. I made the film in 2003-04; making the film taught me more about life than any other film I made. Here is the opening narration of the film; I spoke these words over the shot of the desert.

The vastness of the desert
is endlessly mysterious,
enveloped in silence.

The Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross
used to say that the desert
was a great training ground for the spirit.
The desert yields precious little
satisfaction for the senses,
and so it is a wonderful teacher
because in the desert we quickly learn
that God alone suffices.
In the silence and solitude of the desert,
we experience our own weakness.
In the desert,
we learn to see that
God is the true fountain
of living water.

Nice thoughts.

But while the desert may have been
a wonderful teacher for St. John of the Cross,
for many this desert
is a cruel killer.

Since 1995

more than 3,000 immigrants
have died trying to cross
the nearly 2,000-mile-long border
between the United States and Mexico.

The film then cuts to footage from Tijuana, Mexico, including a massive garbage dump outside the city. The statics I quoted were accurate at the time we edited the film in 2004. They are much worse now, as the undocumented migrants crossing the southern border of the United States come from all the deeply impoverished and violent nations of Central America, as well as nations in South America.

Migration is part of the very fabric of human life
and has been so throughout human history.
Escaping poverty is one of the main reasons people migrate.

Globally more than 1.5 billion people
are forced to subsist
on less than a dollar a day.

Every year some six million kids
will die of illnesses that are directly or indirectly
attributable to malnutrition.

Such conditions are what push
people to migrate,
to leave their homes
and even their families behind
for a more dignified life…
or even more basically –
a chance to survive.

Today more than 100 million people
are migrating around the world.

Migration is now, sadly, is a way of life
for many Mexicans.

Chronic poverty and economic instability forces
many people in Mexico and Central America
to flee hunger in their homeland,
only to encounter sickness in the difficulties of the journey,
imprisonment by the Border Patrol or, worse, death in the desert;
and those who make it to America

will face estrangement in a new and foreign land.
This is the journey of the undocumented immigrant.
This is also the presence of Christ, who said,
"I was hungry and you fed me."

Writing this "short" memoir give me a chance to reflect in a more focused manner on the films I made. As I made *Endless Exodus,* I was still a baby Christian, as it had been only eight years since the mysterious moment in the empty church in Rome transformed my life. I was still growing in the way of Jesus as it was illustrated in the parables. Matthew 25 became the foundation of my still evolving "ministry." When I was not filming, I was consuming spiritual books, including the works of St. John of the Cross, which were often difficult to comprehend. When I saw the vastness of the desert, his stark words about desert spirituality's ability to strip away distractions stood in stark contrast to the death in the desert of so many struggling people searching for a new life. Two hours into the film, the words of St. John of the Cross powerfully illustrated how American ambition can keep us from seeing, or even looking for, the Christ in the poor. Today, the sorrowful plight of migrants around the world is greeted with increasing hostility rather than hospitality. Mistrust of and anger at migrants has become a political tool in the hands of dishonest politicians.

We Have No Potatoes

Resurrection beckons
whenever we make space for the needs.
deficiencies, and potential of our fellow pilgrims.

-Joseph Grant
Wandering and Welcome

Making my poverty films was like getting Ph.D. in intense human suffering caused by unjust poverty and the insufficient humane response to it. The film dimension of my "ministry" to the poor began in January of 2002 when I formed the San Damiano Foundation. San Damiano was the little church outside the walled city of Assisi where St. Francis heard God ask him to rebuild the Church. We made films that featured individuals and organizations that were helping the poor. They used the films to raise funds. I showed the films at universities and churches to raise awareness about the plight of the poor and the need for Christians to do something to relieve the suffering. We sought nothing from those we helped. I begged for the funds needed to make the films. Professionals often donated their services. Martin Sheen narrated our first film which was based on the photo/essay book. Bono contributed a song to another. By 2015, the San Damiano Foundation, which became Pax et Bonum Communications in late 2010, had produced 25 films. It was emotionally draining and hard work. I made very little money but I was never happier or more fulfilled…until I began living in Haiti and fully entered the bloated belly of poverty.

While filming the poor in homes that had no electricity, no toilets, or running water was not hardest part of my job. The hardest part was begging for the funds to produce the films. I used to joke that I made films no one wanted to see with money I did not have. In an odd way, I learned

how to finance my films at the St. Francis Inn. There was a friar there named Brother Xavier. He was a simple man and all the street people loved him. One day, he was cooking dinner. A volunteer entered the kitchen and asked, "What are you making, Brother Xavier?"

He answered, "Potato soup."

The volunteer looked around the small, cramped kitchen and didn't see any potatoes. And so, he asked, "Where are the potatoes, Brother?"

Brother Xavier answered, "We have no potatoes."

The volunteer asked, "Then how are you making potato soup?"

He said, "The Lord will supply."

Well, you can imagine the volunteer rolling his eyes and thinking: what a sweet, pious thought, but the people are lining up in the yard and we need to serve them in an hour. A few minutes later, there was a knock at the side door. It was an off-duty Philly cop. He had been at the farmer's market and spotted 50-pound bags of potatoes on sale. He knew he would be passing the Inn and so he bought two bags and threw them in his trunk.

I made my films (and operate the home for abandoned kids in Haiti) the way Brother Xavier makes potato soup…by trusting God will supply what I need.

I have learned a lot about poverty since I walked into that empty church in Rome 28 years ago when my life was changed. Poverty is painful. But far beneath the surface, you find the priceless seed of hope. Not just a fairy tale hope, but a gritty hope rooted in total dependency upon God. As I walked with the poor, I encountered my own true poverty and the radical truth of the Gospel: only empty hands can hold God.

My encounter with the bloated belly of poverty helped me remove the veil of comfortability from the Gospel and revealed the radical nature of Christianity. Jesus showed us how to love, how to love unconditionally and without limits. According to Christ, how we love the hungry, the lowly and the lost, is how we love him; and how we love Christ will be the only litmus test for our entrance into our heavenly home with God for all eternity. Until we enter our eternal home, we are all homeless, even if we live in a palace, because everything on earth is perishable...except love.

We are all brothers and sisters, children of the same Creator, and to set ourselves up as higher or better than others is a subtle form of blasphemy. We are all connected, one with all of creation and the Creator. If one amongst us is diminished, we are all diminished.

When we relieve the pain and suffering of others,
we make God's love visible.