

Brief TESTIMONY of FRIAR NATHANIEL MARIA AGNEAU



BEFORE



AFTER

1. I WAS NEITHER BAPTIZED NOR A BELIEVER	P. 1
2. FIRST EXPERIENCES OF THE INTERVENTION OF A "PROVIDENTIAL HAND"	P. 1
3. THE GRACE OF FAITH	P. 2
4. IN SEARCH OF A CONTEMPLATIVE, POOR, ITINERANT COMMUNITY	P. 3
5. THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE LITTLE FRIARS AND LITTLE NUNS OF JESUS AND MARY	P. 3
6. SOME FRUITS RECEIVED AFTER JOINING THE COMMUNITY	P. 3

In the Name of the Lord, peace and good to you all. I am Friar Nathaniel, born Guilhem Gadalia. I am 36 years old and I have been part of the Community of the *Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary* (pfsgm) for 16 years. I have obtained a Bachelor's in Sacred Theology in foresight of the *Ministerial Priesthood*, and a Licentiate in Spiritual Theology to carry out the task of formator in the male formation house of the pfsgm in the USA. Here is a short story about how the Lord led me from ignorance of God to faith, and how, through the community of the pfsgm, He gave full meaning to my life, responding to my deepest aspirations and going far beyond my expectations, as Jesus says: "Whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst" (Jn 4:14).

1. I WAS NEITHER BAPTIZED NOR A BELIEVER

I was born on March 2, 1984 on the outskirts of Paris and raised in Orleans. Several members of my family had been involved in the Communist militancy for many years, some of them with important responsibilities; many of my family members were influenced by rationalist scientific ideologies, which led them to stay away from any form of religiosity.¹ Despite this, they tried to maintain a certain tolerance towards those who believe. I was taught altruistic values but was not baptized and did not receive any religious formation.

As a child I became passionate about drawing, with the growing conviction that I should become a painter, so I set about painting canvases and frescoes. History and mythology fascinated me; I received the grace of making numerous trips abroad, and was involved in various theater groups, but the more I dug into the soil of my projects the more I felt a ravine of emptiness widening within me.

From the age of fifteen to seventeen I was involved in the use of "smiling cigarettes", as our founder calls them – that is, "joints". At sixteen, I had dreadlocks. My wandering led me to a group of militant anarchists called "libertarians". One day, I asked one of them if physical violence was necessary to change things for the better in society. He replied yes, adding that only Christians think they should struggle without physical violence, but they are unrealistic. Between that conversation and other events, I realized that my search was not yet finished.

2. FIRST EXPERIENCES OF THE INTERVENTION OF A "PROVIDENTIAL HAND"

Going back a bit, at the age of fifteen, after an argument with a member of my family, I left the house and walked for a long time in the city of Orleans, which was covered in snow. As the night progressed, I started looking for somewhere to sleep. Wandering among gardens and squares, I could not find rest, disturbed by the persistent cold. Then I went under the portico of a Catholic church that bore the name of "Our Lady of Miracles."² I stretched out on the threshold of that house (which I didn't know anything about), and remained there until dawn feeling joy and ineffable peace – so much so that I no longer paid attention to the onslaught of the cold. A few years later, I began to understand that event when I found written in the Bible: "Better one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere. Better the threshold of the house of my God than a home in the tents of the wicked" (Ps 84:11).

Towards the end of my sixteenth year, I went to Amsterdam. There, after using some hallucinogenic mushrooms, I got lost (geographically as well as spiritually!). At one point, I felt pushed to walk down a couple of tram tracks for several kilometers – and although tram tracks are very numerous in that city, it was following that very set of tracks³ that I reached the inn where I was staying! After my conversion, I appreciated the truth of the psalmist's words: "If I lie down in Sheol, there you are... Even there your hand guides me, your right hand holds me fast" (Ps 139:8.10).

¹ In fact, they did not know the Church's teaching on the necessary complementarity between faith and reason (Cfr. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, [14 September 1998]).

² I discovered then, that this church holds a black statue of Mary Most Holy to which several miracles have been attributed throughout the history of Orleans (Cfr. PÈRE JAUNET, *La vierge noir d'Orléans*, in: RCF RADIO, *Les Sentiers de l'Histoire*, program presented by Jean-Pierre Carrera, 10 Septembre 2018, 11:30 am). Two years later, I often went to pray in front of that statue, in order to understand the Will of God.

³ After I became a friar, I understood this event through a reflection of our founder who compares the Word of God and the teaching of the Catholic Church to two train tracks on which we must remain in order not to derail the vehicle of our soul. (Cf. LITTLE FRIARS AND LITTLE NUNS OF JESUS AND MARY, *Standard methodical structure SLC*, in: Official website on the PFSGM, <http://www.piccolifratiesorelledi gesuemaria.net/8,2h%20How%20to%20recite%20the%20meditated%20Holy%20Rosary.pdf> [accessed 22 October, 2020]).

This last event marked the beginning of my encounter with God. In the same days, my girlfriend at the time, who had strayed far from the Catholic faith of her childhood, returned to the Lord through a retreat made in the “Community of the Beatitudes.” She passed from sadness to intense and continuous joy. Listening to her testimony, and reflecting on other unusual coincidences, this question came back to me more and more insistently: “But can it be that everything happens only by chance (as I have always been taught)?”

3. THE GRACE OF FAITH

These facts, and others, led me to accept to accompany my girlfriend to a 10-day retreat with the “Community of the Beatitudes” in August 2001. During that time, I had the opportunity to speak with a priest and I asked him more or less the following question: “How does your Jesus pretend to change the world for the better without using physical violence?” The priest, inspired by the words of Christ (cf. Mt 7:15-20; Lk 6:43-45), replied to me with similar words: “Look at the fruits of physically violent revolutions in the history of humanity, and see if they are good fruits.” This response began to reveal to me the peaceful sacrifice by which Jesus of Nazareth and whoever follows him conquer the world (cf. Mt 26:52-54; Is 53). At this point, I said to that priest: “I am not baptized, so you cannot confess me, but if I tell you some bad things I have done in the past, can you maybe give me a blessing?” The priest accepted, and so we did. As soon as I received that blessing, I felt in me a strength, a joy, and a peace, in an intense and different way from what I had ever experienced until that time.⁴

In the same retreat, during a Holy Mass for young people, the celebrant, knowing that many of these young people were taking drugs, strongly denounced this vice in his homily. Among his words, I remember three – “you are slaves!” – which struck me so much that the same evening, with God's help, I decided never to touch any narcotic substance again. And to this day, God has given me the grace to fulfill this purpose. During that retreat, the Lord granted me the grace to believe with certainty that He exists – and that He works, especially through the Catholic Church.

4. IN SEARCH OF A CONTEMPLATIVE, POOR, ITINERANT COMMUNITY

Back in Orleans, I began the Catechumenate with the *friars of Saint John*. For about 4 months, I prayed to understand what I should do after the last year of high school I was completing: that is, to understand my calling. On January 1, 2002, the Solemnity of the Mother of God, during the Eucharistic Consecration, I had the **strong conviction of being called to the ministerial Priesthood**. With this event, God gave me a new strength, both to establish a new relationship with my girlfriend (just as friends) and to tackle the high school studies that I had left out. During this first year of Catechumenate, I began to read the Bible and especially the Gospel. Gradually, I began to be attracted to the **contemplative dimension of the Christian life**.

I also started reading the story of St. Francis of Assisi and the first Franciscans. While I was reading these accounts, those early friars seemed to come alive through the pages of the book: real, very lively, full of a wonderful joy and freedom. I too wished to live like them and have such sublime gifts. Their example of life brought me to look more carefully at **the total poverty and itinerancy in the service of evangelization that Jesus Christ lived and recommended to his followers: “He sent them to proclaim the kingdom of God... He said to them: ‘Take nothing for the journey, neither walking stick, nor sack, nor food, nor money, and let no one take a second tunic’” (Lk 9:2,3ff)**. I therefore set out in search of this evangelical lifestyle; I had various experiences in several communities, but never fully found what I was looking for. Then I was told by some religious brothers that I should have a work experience; I complied with the request by choosing to work for a year as an apprentice stonecutter, in an organization connected with the *friars of St. John*. It was there that I completed my Catechumenal journey and, during the 2004 Easter Vigil, I received Baptism, First Communion and Confirmation.

But the need I felt to become poor would not leave me in peace, and the journeys I embarked upon in order to evangelize, on foot and by hitchhiking (though I did still carry a backpack), were for me like a cry for help...

5. THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE LITTLE FRIARS AND LITTLE NUNS OF JESUS AND MARY

The time came for the Lord to give an eloquent answer to the search that He had caused to well up in my life: He allowed me to meet some consecrates from the *Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary*.

In June 2004, I hitchhiked to a priestly ordination to which I had been invited. While I was waiting for the celebration to begin, I saw some consecrates dressed in sackcloth. For a moment it seemed to me like a mirage, but I was immediately told that these friars and nuns **never touched money, like St. Francis of Assisi** (not that it is bad to touch money, since the Apostles also had a money bag), and that **they were going about the world without anything, on foot and by hitchhiking, striving to live and preach the Gospel**. I immediately went to them. They seemed to come from another world (Cf. Jn 18:36), yet they inspired me a singular trust. They introduced me to their founder: Friar Volantino Verde, who told me some words that later turned out to be prophetic. From then on, I felt invaded by a great joy and the intuition of having reached the “longed-for port.” A few days later, I went to these friars, still by hitchhiking, to start my first experience with them. When

⁴ Obviously, I had to wait to finish the Catechumenate before receiving the Grace of Baptism by which (and only then) I was fully forgiven and purified of all guilt (Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1213).

I first “got on board” with this Community, I was struck by the joyful and fraternal welcoming that animated all the members of the “crew” (so to speak), thus heralding the festive but real destination of their journey (Cf. *He 13:14*). During the rich spiritual sharing, Friar Volantino would offer us a multitude of creative examples or simple and luminous keys of interpretation which were useful in helping us understand how to concretely imitate Christ in His Church. I was edified by the humble and attentive manner of listening (Cf. *Phil 2:3*) and the divine sense of fear (Cf. *Acts 2:43*) which I observed in all the brothers and sisters. With the grace of God and his good will, Friar Volantino managed to realize an evangelical lifestyle by living out, not only **total poverty and itinerancy** in the **service of evangelization**, but also **a joyful and loving community life** and **a profound contemplative dimension**. All these were elements that I had been looking for over the course of three years – but this community went very, very far beyond my expectations! In a few weeks, the God of the Universe confirmed me in many ways and gave me the unshakable certainty that this community of “Little ones” was the vehicle through which I was called to travel and bring others to His Eternal and indestructible Kingdom (Cf. *Dn 7:14*). This is one of the many events that the Lord allowed in order to help me to pick up on His voice:

One morning, while all the brothers and sisters got up and went as usual to the chapel for the daily hour of adoration-vigil before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, I had stayed asleep. Friar Volantino was waiting for me, sitting on the stairs in front of the open door of the chapel and facing the Blessed Sacrament. He was wondering whether I was seeking the Will of God fully or not, and (therefore) whether I should conclude my experience or continue on with the Little Friars. He made a short prayer to Jesus in Sicilian that went something like, “Signore, *ch'am a fare cu chistu caruso?*” that is: “Lord, what should we do with this boy?” Then he added: “and why didn't he come this morning?” After he had formulated this prayer, he dozed off and heard a voice that in a certain way said: “the boy did not come to the chapel this morning because the Lord is talking to him and is telling him that he has been chosen to work in the V.V. bank.” Waking up, Friar Volantino wrote these words in a notebook. At the same time, as I was sleeping in the cell, I saw in a dream that I was in a garden of olive trees; it was night, and about three or four meters in front of me I saw Jesus dressed in a long red mantle. He was looking at me and speaking to me, but though I saw him opening his mouth, I could not hear the sound of the words he spoke. Immediately after this vision, I woke up. I did not speak of this dream to anyone throughout the day. When evening came, while we were in front of a window through which, in the night, we could see olive trees, Friar Volantino turned toward me and affirmed, “But the Lord has spoken to you today!” Amazed, I answered, “Yes, yes, He spoke to me! Really, the Lord: I saw him in an interior perception, but I could not hear the words he said to me.” Then Friar Volantino (even though, I repeat, I had not recounted the dream to anyone), smiling, said to me: “Don't worry, because He spoke the words to me at the very hour that you saw Him.” Taking the notebook out of his pocket, he showed me the written and dated sentence from the same morning, where the Words of Jesus were written: **“The boy did not come to the chapel this morning because the Lord is talking to him and is telling him that he has been chosen to work in the V.V. bank”**. From this event, I understood better and better that the One who was calling me from Heaven intended to make His voice reach me through that of Friar Volantino.

Later, I received the task of translating into French some documents written by our Founder. There, I began to understand more and more that the **spiritual V.V. bank** (not of money, but **of Grace**) in which I had been “hired” contained the “'map' of an infinite 'treasure' that shines with immortality”⁵: that is to say, it contained some **very valuable meditations**, fruit of the concrete experience of the Gospel-inspired life of their author. So I too was invited by Our Lord Jesus Christ to help these meditations **bear fruit** by placing them, as we say in the Community, in the “bank” of many hearts that are searching for heavenly goods. All this is in order to find one day in Heaven the greatest possible prize: that is, **to win brothers to the Lord** (Cf. *Mt 18:15*) and indeed, **many cities** (Cf. *Lk 19:17*) – in each of which, as our founder deduces, **a large number of brothers** will live!

6. SOME FRUITS RECEIVED AFTER JOINING THE COMMUNITY

✓ **The “indescribable and glorious joy” of working for the salvation of souls.** In this Community, I understood a fundamental element of the Christian life: the fact that our work can be taken on by Christ in His Body as a contribution for the Salvation of others! In fact, Saint Paul explains: “Attend to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in both tasks, for by doing so **you will save** both yourself and **those who listen to you.**” (*1Tim 4:16*; Cf. *Col 1:24*). Padre Pio, too, taking up the words of his spiritual director, exhorts a soul by saying: “All that is happening to you is the effect of love. It is a trial; it is a vocation to **co-redemption** and hence a **source of glory**”⁶. The experiences of evangelization on the streets, both during pilgrimages (on foot and hitchhiking, totally dependent on divine providence) and during our missions on the streets, in shops, bars, hospitals, schools, homes, and parishes, helped me to understand this mystery more clearly. On such occasions, we give Divine Providence free reign to set up fruitful “appointments” with people in need, and have the opportunity to

⁵ FRIAR VOLANTINO VERDE, pro manuscripto, “Sacred” License of the Christian, 2000-2001, cover.

⁶ PIO OF PIETRELCINA, Letter to Margherita Tresca, 30 August 1918, in: *Id., Letters III. Correspondence with his spiritual daughters (1915-1923)*, edited by Melchiorre da Poblatura, Alessandro da Ripabottoni and Mariano Di Vito, Ed. “Padre Pio da Pietrelcina”, San Giovanni Rotondo 2017, p. 212.

listen to the questions, the moral problems, and the bitter realities that exist among people and that disturb many consciences. In such situations, the Holy Spirit pushes us to make profitable use of the simple and concrete keys of interpretation – based on Sacred Scripture and Catholic doctrine – that we have learned during our religious formation and especially from our founder. These, combined with our personal testimony, are like tools to cut the brambles or bushes of confusion and help many wounded sheep walk through the Catholic Sacraments towards the boundless pastures of Eternal Happiness. Thanking God and those who taught us, I was able to see how much good these reflections have brought about: many suicides avoided, those in depression re-motivated, slavery broken, families reconciled and etc....!! I therefore rejoice to be part, in my small way, of the “gust” of the Consoler of which Benedict XVI speaks: “The Spirit of Pentecost brought with him a strong impulse to take on the commitment of the mission in order to witness to the Gospel on the highways of the world.”⁷ All this makes St. Peter's exhortation echo in me: “Rejoice with an **indescribable and glorious joy**, as you attain the goal of [your] faith, the **salvation of your souls**.” (1Pt 1:8-9).

✓ **Faith in the Mystery of obedience to God through the Catholic Hierarchy.** As I already mentioned, before coming to the faith, I had been among militant anarchists who reject any kind of hierarchy. On the contrary, Friar Volantino, with words and deeds, and through many tribulations, helped me to better understand, esteem and practice loving obedience to God through the Hierarchy of Service of the Roman Church (Cf. Mt 20:24-28).

✓ **The grace of participating in a solid and joyful fraternal communion.** Before joining the pfsqm community, I had often wished to have a group of strong friends, yet I found that sometimes even the most enduring friendships fell apart. On the contrary, in this Community, although many members come from tumultuous pasts, from independent mentalities, from (in some cases) high levels of studies, and from different countries and histories, they form a compact community in faith. I gradually understood that this precious harmony is the result of the hard work of each one and in particular of the founder. The latter, despite his limitations, is gifted with attentive listening, great understanding, and mercy towards everyone – combined with firmness in the face of the devious assaults of the evil one. Moreover, when any moral, spiritual or other problem arises, he undertakes with great determination to solve it and then to explain the solution he has found with simplicity and rationality, always trying to base his every word and action on the Word of God and Catholic doctrine. These factors and many divine graces contribute to unite the members of the community in a loving and intelligent submission to the full truth. In the course of my journey, I had the opportunity to see how this evangelical harmony, passing through the crucible of various persecutions and trials (Cf. 1Pt 1: 7), emerged ever more resplendent. This experience brought me to understand better what Pope Francis says: “Contrary to the growing consumerist individualism that tends to isolate us in a quest for well-being apart from others, our path to holiness can only make us identify all the more with Jesus’ prayer ‘that all may be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you’ (Jn 17:21).”⁸

✓ **The certainty in the Glorious Resurrection in body and soul.** The teachings I received in the Community helped me immensely in acquiring a clear awareness of this basic element of the Catholic Creed, without which all our faith is emptied of meaning (Cf. 1Cor 15:32). By means of this certainty we can overcome any test and say together with St. Francis of Assisi: “suffering is small, glory without measure”⁹.

In conclusion, I renew St. Paul's wish for all of us: that “The Father of glory, may... enlighten the eyes of [your] hearts, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of glory in his inheritance among the holy ones” (Cf. Eph 1:17-18)¹⁰. Such riches of glory increases according to our commitment, as St. Ambrose says: “The more we try in this world to give ourselves completely to God our Lord by obeying his commands, the greater will be our happiness in the life to come, and the greater the glory that will be ours in the presence of God.”¹¹ And speaking of this celestial Glory in which God wants us to participate (Cf. Jn 17:22.24), St. Maximilian Kolbe explains: “The most resplendent manifestation of God's glory is the salvation of souls, whom Christ redeemed by shedding his blood. To work for the salvation and sanctification of as many souls as possible, therefore, is the preeminent purpose of the apostolic life.”¹²

May the Holy Trinity help us make His gifts all the more fruitful, so that, with the help of Mary, we may imitate Christ as much as we can, according to our call, in order to “win” in him the greatest number of brothers and sisters possible (Cf. Mt 18:15) for the boundless joys of Glorious Immortality!

Houma
June 7, 2020
Solemnity of the Holy Trinity

IN FAITH

NATANAELE MARIA AGNEA.

⁷ BENEDICT XVI, *General Audience*, Saint Peter's Square, Wednesday, 15 Novembre 2006.

⁸ FRANCIS, *Apostolic Exhortation Gaudete et Exsultate*, n. 146, 19 March 2018.

⁹ THOMAS OF CELANO, *Second Life of Saint Francis of Assisi*, translated by Placid Hermann, n. 191, in: *St. Francis of Assisi. Writings and Early Biographies. English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, II, edited by M. A. Habig, St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati (OH) 2008, p. 516.

¹⁰ After I wrote this verse, the next morning, I found the same passage in the *Office of Reading* (Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity).

¹¹ AMBROSE OF MILAN, *Office of Readings*, Friday XXVI Week O.T.

¹² MAXIMILIAN MARY KOLBE, *Office of Readings*, 14 August.