

The Last Man Standing
Reflection by Bill (Blandin) Karabinos

A square-jawed, stern looking, crew-cut and partially frozen snow speckled and smiling 25 year old veteran shows up in the early morning at Mount Assisi Monastery the day after Christmas and no one's home.

Harold McNelis, Korean War veteran from the Wyoming valley of Northeastern Pennsylvania had taken a train that circled the Horseshoe Curve in the winter darkness and after coasting through the Gallitzin Tunnel deposited him at the Cresson, Pennsylvania railway station. With no cab or bus in sight and a verbal set of directions from the station master, he started along a snow-shouldered road and walked the entire five mile course of St. Joseph Street to Loretto.

As he rounded again another ninety degree turn under a still dark sky, he heard the sweet resonance of the Angelus bells chiming from the steeple of St. Michael Church. He thought he might be close and after another 15 minutes he came abreast of the most historic church in Western Pennsylvania. Morning had broken and the devout were entering the great basilica and so he was re-enforced by a positive point.

A point in the right direction: "just continue straight up St. Mary's street to the top-of-town, through the iron gates and you'll find the Brothers." Shifting his suitcase to the other hand, he continued on for another mile and saw lights glowing in a great stone mansion. How to get in? The doors were locked and the snow surrendered no sign of foot traffic. He circled from the front to the side and saw a door open to a covered porch. Entering, he saw lights in a kitchen and felt warmth when he opened the door.

This must be the place. A couple of men in white cooking garb were hurrying around preparing a meal and initially guessed him to be one of the "Knights-of-the-Road" who often stopped at the monastery in the 1950's for a meal, a used pair of "new" shoes, maybe a shower, and a place to rest casually before continuing their restless trek across America.

Greeted warmly by Brother Amadeus, he was quickly supplied with a chair and cup of coffee and seated near the sink while the good brother continued to crack eggs and sizzle bacon. After sipping and grinning and warming his hands and feet, a smiling square-jawed Harold McNelis explained his surprise visit and asked if he could help.

Somehow, in all the hoopla surrounding Christmas, the winter snows in Loretto and what-not, no one was expecting him, Father Francis McKinney, then the superior was called who quickly summoned Father John McGuirk, who at that time was in-charge of Lay Brother formation. They were all surprised and after reviewing Harold's letter of acceptance, extremely apologetic. He was six days early but welcome and now feed and coffee-d and dined. Candidate Harold McNelis was then driven to an empty Umbria Cottage (down by the barn) to begin his Franciscan life. He was the only resident as the other four candidates for the lay-brotherhood had all gone on a holiday vacation to be with their families, as was the custom for first year aspirants. So for the first six days of his religious life, he lived as a hermit, traveling only up the hill to Alvernia Hall for Mass, prayers and meals. Not much guidance and not a great beginning to his formation.

But Harold had been in the Army, so he had learned patience: "hurry up and wait." His arrival only two days after Christmas, 1955 was primarily to seek a hassle-free peaceful environment where he could work and pray in the Franciscan habit of the friars of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis. In fact until his arrival, he didn't even know that these Franciscans wore a black habit. He was attracted to Loretto to work out his salvation as a "Lay Brother" following in the footsteps of Brother Francis, the poor man of Assisi. Black habit or brown, old or new, it made little difference to this easy going I tnan who would prove over the next 60 plus years to be unflappable, ever cooperative and trustworthy, accepting any and man assignment as he knew it to be for the honor and glory of God.

Quietly and patiently he waited until the other brother/candidates returned and then his formation began, and has continued as if following a lighted path to his eternal home; walking as he wished, in the footsteps of St. Francis of Assisi.

To some of his classmates it seemed as if he had no particular talent or inclination for a skill, yet he accomplished all his assignments with alacrity. From farm work on the estate grounds to kitchen help to picking up ash and trash, He endured and was off to the novitiate seven months later, now as Brother Norman to harvest beet leaves and prepare them as the required vegetable for an evening meal on Sargent Road in Northeast Washington, District of Columbia. Twelve months of work and prayer, spiritual reading and guidance and even classes in Latin brought him to his knees in front of the Minister Provincial and Novice Master to vow poverty, chastity and obedience following the Franciscan Rule of Life on the 1st of July 1957.

Brother Norman McNelis, T.O.R., returned to Loretto with his 13 classmates to continue his formation, stiff looking for a special skill. The skill he sought was blocked or delayed because of his reliability and the effectiveness in the completion of any assignment. Everyone wanted to work with him or have him on their team, he was then and ever would be, just that great guy to have around.

On the grounds of Mount Assisi, there is a level piece of land, more than an acre enclosed by stone walls that the original estate

owner, Charles M. Schwab used as a truck farm. The vegetable garden included support buildings that the friars used to garage farm equipment as well as an old printing press. Type was set by hand on a letterpress and printing was done in the same manner employed by the producers of the Gutenberg Bible. Many of us took turns learning to print holy cards, ordination and profession booklets and other small jobs for grand occasions: tedious work and ·In a building with no heat. In the early 1960s we updated to modern machinery; used monolith-mimeograph printers and actually became quite skilled. Brother Norman worked right along with Brothers Pius, Sam, Kennan and Blandin in that skill development. Our orders began to grow as did our skill and so we named the operation, The Mariale Press.

One of the most successful and, for the Franciscan community, money savings operation was the Mariale Press. The Press may certainly have shored-up St. Francis College in the period from 1962 through 1980. Community colleges had exploded all over the horizon and so had the amount of Federal money thrown into education. Teachers salaries sky rocketed, Pell Grants proliferated so that more men and women could seek college credits and, believe it or not, the cost of education multiplied. With the increase of more Federal money, the increase of

higher education opportunities drove the cost up ... as did student loans and debts. This fast forward [a surrender to the anti-war liberals and pie-in-the-sky progressives] did-in any number of small liberal arts colleges and St. Francis (and Steubenville) teetered on the brink. To keep pace costs cutting was imperative and that included cutting advertising and printing costs.

Thus and so the Mariale Press ... which by 1962, when the clerics moved into the new seminary; was only Brother Norman. He stepped up to the plate. Originally intended to support the Franciscan community on Mount Assisi and turn out a few fund raising publications, the Mariale Press became an important cog in the financial column of other TOR communities. No one noticed. At

first, in the early 1960's when state lotteries began to cut into the monthly seminary raffle ticket sales, Father Michael Karabinos started a letter writing campaign to bolster flagging recipients. Hand writing letters to a few friends generated other friends and soon Father Mike was mass mailing hand written letters. He couldn't write them all so he asked the Mariale Press for help. Brother Norman had become so proficient at his task, that his multilith mimeographed duplication looked exactly like hand written notes. Success, yes. Ticket sales again broke above even and the seminary was built and occupied in September of 1962.

Soon the administration at St. Francis College was coming to Brother Norman for printing assistance, and he could match the quality of the local professional printing services in the area for less than one-third the cost. In no time at all, Brother Norman was so busy that the old chicken coop was razed and a concrete block building was added on Mount Assisi. It became the new stopping place for all the Franciscans coming home as both Brother Norman and Brother Stan and his shoe shop drew loyal crowds.

And then prosperity. The college stabilized under the guidance of Father Christian Oravec and became a highly respected and once again sought after institution of higher learning all the while Father Mike Scanlan was working a miracle in Steubenville that disconnected the life-support systems and a new Franciscan University emerged from a Lazarus-like tomb. The Mariale Press was now irrelevant and the good brothers, Stan and Norm were off to White Post to help guide, inspire and entertain the next generation of Franciscan novices as well as nurse the older friars who had worn themselves out on the highway to heaven.

But change is inevitable and Brother Norman always had a way to float with the tide. He had found and succeeded at one skill and proved ever reliable. So reliable that he was left to carry on the White Post, Virginia ministry for months, all alone. Change again. Demographics: fewer vocations and an aging population of friars forced the closing of the Winchester Novitiate and hospice-like care facility in Virginia and transferred the friars to Loretto in the first decade of the twenty-first century. All but Brother Norman.

Norm was left behind to carry off the transition of the large facility and acres of land to the Diocese of Arlington. And that didn't happen quickly. it may have taken near a year, maybe more. Remodeling, negotiations, planning, endless meetings and escorting gawking committees around the property was a constant interruption and had to be handled all alone. And handle it well, he did.

While there alone he celebrated his 50th year of Profession in 2007. By that time his class of 14 had dwindled to three: Father Christian Oravec was now Provincial, Brother Finbar Gallagher was still doing missionary work,

then in the dangerous streets of Baltimore and Norm was a hermit on an abandoned farm in the upper Shenandoah Valley.

In July of the year (2007) that Brother Norman McNelis celebrated his 50th year in Vows, I was traveling from either Pittsburgh or Loretto back to my home in Williamsburg, Virginia. I had called the good brother earlier and promised a visit. I guaranteed him a dinner at any place of his choice; price was no object, anywhere he would like to go. He deserved a grand treat.

I arrived near 4:30 in the afternoon about a week after his anniversary and we had a grand reunion and delightful nostalgic tour.

For me, it was one last time through the former novitiate/monastery and grounds. When dinner time approached, I asked him again about his choice. I even recommended the sumptuous Joe's Steak House, a highly acclaimed and really great eating place, with locations then in both Front Royal and Woodstock. Or even better, a Country Club.

For Norm, it was none of the above. He simply smiled and turned to me and said: "did you ever hear of the Golden Corral?" So, only about 4 miles up the road in a shopping center that had seen better days, and would never do so again, we found the Golden Corral. It was as usual, crowded but not overly so. It's clientele included a lot of hungry people from ever diverse economic group; travelers and locals, as well as families celebrating birthdays, reunions and simple dinner gatherings. I got off cheap; yet we both enjoyed a scrumptious meal, that we ate course by course. Laughingly we remembered our first Minister General, the great Father John Boccella, T.O.R., (later Archbishop of the ancient Episcopal See of Ismir, Turkey) who loved a great meal and lectured us on how to eat -"the only way you should eat a banquet ... one course at a time; plates removed and then the next." Golden Corral had that philosophy as well. But Norm staged a one-upmanship on Johnny Boccella and at the same time gave me a lesson in gourmet wisdom.

When it came time for dessert, Norm headed to the soup aisle. Not to eat soup, but to pick up a bowl. He explained to me, that the soup bowls hold three times more soft ice cream than the little saucers at the ice cream machine. That's the simplicity and wisdom of Brother Norman.

One sweetheart of a Brother, a great friend and a holy man. Ten years later, he has added more stepping stones on his path to heaven. Sacristy work, mail runs, visiting the sick and burying the dead. Corporal and Spiritual works of mercy that no one on this planet has counted, but has been well noted by the tally keeper at the Wilkes-Barre gate in heaven.

It has always been a pleasure to arrive at one of the T.O.R. houses and be greeted by Brother Norman. He smiles first and then greets his old friends with a simple question: "what kind of car are you driving these days?" He is the last man standing in a black habit of the profession class of 1957.