

The Brotherhood of Dismas

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I The Brotherhood of Dismas

The prison yard had acquired the nickname of the “Elephant graveyard.” The official name was Twenty-five Lima. Inmates doing time here had been sentenced to twenty-five years to life. They had accepted their situation and had slowly worked their way through the system to this lower custody level yard. In the Tarzan movies, the elephants would walk to a secret place to die. Ivory hunters had learned to follow a single wounded elephant to that mass graveyard. For the inmates, this was where prisoners went to die.

Each day resembled the day before. Gray-walled cells held one condemned man each. A small room containing a stainless steel toilet and sink combination, bunk, shelves steel desk with an attached stool, and a single light bulb was home to one person for the rest of their life. The inmates had earned the right to lock their cell doors, knowing that the officers had the ability to override their keys. The central control room officer could lock the rows of cell doors down at any time. Still, there was a hint of self-determination. The inmates had a life, to a point.

Father Anthony Brian sat at his government issue desk. Before him sat a small stack of requests from the inmates. As chaplain of the medium security prison yard, Chaplain Brian was responsible for the spiritual well being of nearly seven hundred inmates. He found himself relying heavily on his Chaplain’s clerk, Anthony Francis.

Inmate Francis was a quiet man in his early sixties. A

botched bank robbery resulted in the death of a young bank teller, expecting her first child. This landed Francis in prison, serving a natural life sentence. He started his third decade on the yard last week. He had become a very religious man over the years. A chaplain's assistant was a position well suited for him.

Today started differently from the others. Normally the conversation between the two men followed a pattern of polite trivia. This morning the subject matter was the result of a two-hour documentary on life inside a monastery. Francis became fascinated on the idea of a monk's chosen lifestyle. Father Brian found Francis's new found interest on the subject inspiring. "I had considered joining an order once. I was very much taken with the notion of the luxury of a simplistic life within the walls of an Abbey," said father Brian.

"What stopped you?" Francis asked now taken by the Chaplain's revelation.

"My father said something that changed my ideas of religion and the role of clergy. Now remember that we're talking about an Irish cop that walked a beat in a bad neighborhood for twenty five years. To him there simply weren't any gray areas. Everything was either right or wrong. He said that if I wanted to be one of the people that made a difference, that I should wear a collar rather than a habit."

"Father, does that mean that monks are hiding from the responsibilities of clergy?" Francis was now worried that the Chaplain looked down on the monks as selfish men, hiding out in walled Abbeys.

"In a word my friend, in a way they are only saving their

own souls. A friar on the other hand lives the same lifestyle with one main exception; they go out and minister in the community. If you chose the life of a Friar, my father would approve.”

“I don’t think he would care for a bank robber turned Friar.” Said Francis.

“Tell me”, asked Father Brian, “Did you cause her death?” “No Father, I was the fool driving the get away car. My partner in crime shot the teller when she set off the alarm, and then got himself killed, when the police showed up.”

Father Brian found himself surprisingly enjoying the conversation. They were discussing theology, in an academic forum. This normally was reserved for after dinner at the sanctuary.

“Could I join an existing order?” Francis suddenly inquired. This didn’t startle the Chaplain, as he could sense the direction of where the conversation was leading. He paused, giving the idea proper consideration.

“No, I don’t believe you would qualify. It is not because of your conviction, but rather that you could not physically attend community functions. I know of no arrangements for remote observership of a novice candidate. In all honesty, it would be more logical to form your own order.”

Francis was quite taken by the idea of forming an order. The idea seemed rather elitist.

“I wouldn’t even know how to begin such an undertaking, and besides who would even acknowledge it’s validity, or for that matter my authority as its head?”

This question was rather easy for the young priest. Without any hesitation he answered.

“If you are really sincere about this, and follow the Rule of Saint Benedict as a guideline, just about every one will. The church loves prison ministries. Historically the rule applies to the formation of Abbeys, but an order of Friars follows the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, and should receive the blessing of the Pope obtainable.”

Francis was taken by the power of the Chaplains’ answer. The conversation had started off as light academic speculation, but now he found himself at a junction. Before him a door leading to a world he had never envisioned before seeing the documentary the night before.

“How would I even begin? I have no resources. I don’t see the Vatican let alone the Department of Corrections authorizing me to build a monastery”.

The Chaplain waited for Francis to finish. He could see that the decision had been made. He had known Francis for some time. Their conversation had been valid. This attempt to start a religious order on the grounds of a prison, was not an inmate’s attempt to gain the upper hand on First Amendment grounds. Francis would honestly work on becoming the superior of this new order.

“How does the order of The Brotherhood of Dismas sound to you asked the chaplain? Every order needs a Saint. Dismas is the patron saint of prisoners.”

Francis sat in silence. He found himself suddenly cold upon hearing the name Dismas. That was the keystone. Dismas was one of the thieves crucified with Jesus. An Abbey named after Dismas sounded appropriate for an order comprised of inmates doing life sentences.

“How do I begin, asked Francis?”

First, help me get ready for today’s service. I find that

God will inspire you. By the end of the day you should know what the next logical action to be taken is”.

That night Francis slept a deep sleep. He had thought of the statement made by the Chaplain’s father. He knew of others on the yard who were tired of their life among the prisons population.

The idea of a monk’s monastic cloistered life within the serenity of a monastery’s high stone walls had it’s appeal . Perhaps they sought only their own salvation, but in prison even this was a monumental task at times. The vision of an Abbey existing within the secure perimeter of the prison complex seemed a more palatable concept. Those who truly sought to leave the secular world would gladly follow the Rule of Saint Benedict. Each member would start as a novice for a year while waiting for the opportunity to take their vows as a member of the Brotherhood of Dismas. Who wouldn’t move into the Abbey forever not wishing to step foot on the prison grounds again.

A life of peace and harmony, studying theology in a purely academic non-secular world. He knew that the Chaplain’s father would have preferred an order of Friars ministering to the prison population. He would find an acceptable middle ground. He agreed that his responsibilities as a man of the cloth would have to be met.

The first step was of course obvious, the vow of poverty. He reported to work the next day with a new youthful enthusiasm.

“Father Brian, I seek your council and blessings on the development of the Brotherhood of Dismas. I do intend to honor our fathers’ view of the order fulfilling the role of

clergy, but I will offer the inmates the life of solitude and total segregation from the prison's general population within the walls of the Abbey."

Francis' realizing what the inmates would truly strive for impressed Father Brian.

"Don't worry, I'm certain that there will be those who choose to enter back into the secular world of the prison grounds to minister and to recruit new members into the order said Father Brian.

The construction of the Abbey is the correct conclusion to come to. Now, I'm sure that you realize your first action to take. Please realize that very soon you will be observed by everyone around you, once you make your intentions made public. The church will watch you quietly through me. The prison will demand that you follow its policies to the letter. The gangs will try and profit from your order. Everything you do will have to be very open to inspection by all.

You are soon to be a very public figure. Don't even consider any short cuts. My only real advice is that the church and the prison will allow you to achieve your goals as long as you ask for nothing and offer everything they ask for in return.

After completing his work, Francis went back to his small room in the housing unit. On this particular yard, each inmate has his own room with a locked door. Only his and the housing unit officer's master key could gain entry into his tiny piece of privacy. Privacy was a closely guarded luxury in any prison. Francis had spent years slowly working his way down to this minimum-security yard.

He began the careful selection of personal property to get rid of. In order to honor this vow of poverty, he would need to go through the unit's mail and property office. Donating his personal belongings to the state.

He was careful to only keep hygiene items, stationary material and finally his bible. He then took his rosary and draped it under his belt to the left. This was the fashion in which a monk or friar would display it. He left for the mailroom with his few belongings. He would miss his television set the most. He knew he would be judged harshly from now on. Many people would be looking for any slip on his part.

The officer was surprised when he presented the paperwork donating nearly everything he owned to the state. He didn't even keep his watch or alarm clock. He would now rely on the charity of others to wake him in the morning and to keep him from being late for meals and work.

Until he was able to draft the order's own mission statement and code of conduct, he would conduct himself as a Franciscan novice. His next year was now spoken for.

The following weeks were filled with considerations of the documentary which inspired this change in his life. He tried to remember every detail of the one hour special. He wanted to recreate what he had seen on his small black and white television set.

He spent many nights at his tiny desk, writing down the highlights of the program. He began to storybook the program. He wrote of the early beginnings of the Abbeys, crude stone fortresses protecting the clusters of monks from the elements. Saint Francis began the Order of Friars

T. F. Floyd

Minor in 1208. The man set out into the countryside gathering followers. Imitating the life of Christ, he formed them into a group of clerics. The Pope Innocent III formally gave his blessings, allowing Francis to be elected Superior.

The thirteen men had nothing and yet had everything. They vowed to experience poverty and chastity. He was already honoring those conditions.

II The Vision

It is rare indeed that a man should be allowed to visit the fruits of his labor long before even the first stone is laid. As with great men before him, Anthony Francis would tonight dream of things yet to be. Such were the mysterious workings of God.

As good a Chaplain's assistant as he was, Francis was now even better. Everyone had noticed a series of subtle changes in both his appearance and mannerisms. His hairstyle was now changed to a simple page cut. More in keeping with his envisioned look to a Friar. In both the Chapel and prison library, he had found references to the historical world of monasticism.

He now walked slowly, his gaze downward, hands clasped before him. His was an aura of humble contemplation.

Now the planned order and Abbey overshadowed all other concerns and subjects of interest. Father Brian found himself happily caught up in this glorious obsession.

"I must admit, Francis, I nearly envy your enthusiasm. It reminds me of my days in seminary. Now my days are plagued with requests for free phone calls and special diets. But these things await you, of that I am sure."

The two men walked together. Francis carried a steno note pad. He seemed more of a golfer's caddie than a Chaplain's assistant. He had studied the prison's policies on religious practices. Many inmates sought his counsel on such matters.

Tonight his dreams were more vivid and detailed than ever before. He had followed the Father's advice, studying both the policies of the prison as well as the Rule of Saint Benedict. Months had passed since he had acted upon his vow of poverty.

He awoke suddenly in the middle of the night, his sheets drenched in sweat. He found himself nearly out of breath. He was still overwhelmed by the wonders of the dream, if it had been a dream at all. He turned the overhead light on in his room. Donning his reading glasses, Francis quickly began to write what he had experienced in the dream. He made several sketches of what he remembered seeing. Unlike most dreams, this one didn't dissolve upon one's awakening from slumber. Only after accurately and completely recording the events of the dream, did he allow himself to return to his restful sleep.

After reporting to the Chapel, Francis shared his vivid dream with the Chaplain. Father Brian studied the sketches and notes in detail, noting the unusual design of the structure.

"You say, you toured the inside of the Abbey?" Asked Father Brian.

"I did not venture on to the second or third floors, but I do remember exploring the court yard and chapel in some detail. I believe that this place does, or rather will exist. It's next to this yard. Well, it will be built next to this unit. I saw it as a separate unit, rather than connected to an existing one." Said Francis.

Now each night Francis studied theology and carefully crafted a model of the Abbey, which he created with Popsicle sticks. The Chaplain was correct in his advice.

The model helped him in recreating what he saw in his vivid dream. Other inmates stopped by to check on the progress of his wooden creation. He enjoyed sharing his goal and details of his dream with anyone who would listen. He had toured a huge building with one hundred-yard walls, thirty feet in height and only three feet wide.

The most notable feature was the glass-covered courtyard centered in the Abbey's walls. This created a massive pyramid shaped green house. Underneath it's center, was a stone chapel with an open roof. He explained that the Abbey's glass enclosure allowed a perfect environment to be maintained for the growing of horticultural plants, whose sale to florists financed the Abbey's operation. Beautiful lily ponds, were in fact a highly developed waste treatment plant. Not having the usual foul smell of it's more traditional counterparts, the ponds provided the Abbey with pure drinking water, rich nutrition for the exotic plants and created a tranquil setting for the Monks to live and work in. Prison food comes, orchids go out.

Francis had now completed six months of self imposed observership. He was now eating a purely vegetarian diet. He avoided coffee now. The wooden model was nearly half completed. He was ready to begin the postulancy phase of the pre-novitiate period. Now he would contact that Bishop.

"As you have impressed the Abbot with your intension to finance this project yourself, you'll be paying your way through this. As with any correspondence course, you'll first need to send them a check. Are you sitting down?"

Francis leaned forward. He knew what was coming next.

This wasn't going to be cheap.

"It looks like the Novice program, will cost one hundred dollars a month. That is, you will need to send them a check for six hundred dollars in order to get through the pre-novitiate. You will need to also send them a second check for a thousand dollars in order to complete your one year novice."

"After that you're a full fledged member of the order. You will have Brother Daniel's council for life. You will then be able to mentor those you recruit, into your own order, which will be associated to the order via Brother Daniel. Their passage through to novice is free. Only materials required for the order's religious activities, and the monk's own requirements, need to be ordered from Brother Daniel. All in all, it sounds like a bargain."

Francis smiled. Father Brian was right. Sixteen hundred dollars empowered him to form a church sanctioned religious order of monks.

After gathering up the beautifully crafted letters, Francis went off to the counselor's office, in order to arrange to send the first of two money orders to the order. All in all, not a bad day!

III The Bishop

Six months had passed since Francis began his vows of poverty and obedience. If he had been in a monastery during this time he would now have begun to attend novitiate classes. Francis sat with Father Brian. With the workday complete, the conversation could focus on the matters of the new proposed order.

“You are ready to contact the Bishop. I will be able to contend in good faith that you have completed a six-month period of observership. You must first write to me on an official basis. Your letter will state your intentions regarding the order and the Abbey. State that you have been involved in a six-month observership. Request only to be allowed to write to the Bishop, requesting his council on proceeding to the pre-novitiate phase of your becoming a candidate for papal approval.” replied the Chaplain.

Francis understood the need for such formalities. Every step of every stage of every phase would be monitored. He would be judged, by both the prison and the church. His course must be a slow one, as he now passes through uncharted waters.

“What am I to ask of the Bishop?” “I am not really certain of what I want or need,” Said Francis.

The Chaplain smiled. “The Bishop knows what you are asking for. He therefore knows exactly what you want. Knowing what you want tells him what you need. This is why you only ask for his council. Following his council assures you of his blessings which ensures papal approval.”

Francis carefully hand printed an inmate letter. Each letter carefully crafted. He had noted from his brief studies that monastic orders were admired for the sheer beauty of their documents. This first letter would have to rate such admiration.

The Chaplain accepted the letter, first noting it's finely scripted text then with the wisely worded request it contained. It was both pleasing to the eye and to the mind. He handed Francis an official letter authorizing him to contact the Bishop on this matter. In reality, Francis did not in any way require the Chaplain's permission to write to the Bishop. This request was simply considered good manners by the church. These first two letters would become part of a formal packet involving the church's consideration of a new order of monks, and their Abbot.

Francis began drafting his letter to the Bishop. It was short and to the point. He simply informed the Bishop of his being in prison and his desire to form a monastic order with the walls of an Abbey, which would be built within the walls of the prison. He then went on to describe his working for Father Brian, and the six-month observership. He ended, simply with a request for the Bishop's council on the matter, and thanked him for his time. As with the letter to the Chaplain, this letter was worth framing.

The Bishop received the letter without fanfare. It was well written, but was a mere formality. He had spoken with Father Brian on the matter at length. This had resulted in conversations with the Abbot of a nearby Benedictine order. He had decided to grant the inmate his council, which would direct him to seeking the council of

the Abbot. The Abbot was intrigued with the idea of the formation of a Benedictine order within the walls of a prison.

The postulancy could be completed with the candidate in prison, through letters. This, with the supervision of Father Brian would satisfy all of the requirements of the pre-novitiate studies, the only stipulation being, that Francis pay for all study materials and postage involved. No specific timetable had been established for this. They too, were exploring uncharted waters. Caution and detail, were the guidelines to be followed. Everyone was cautiously enthusiastic. No one was in a hurry. Haste could spell failure.

IV The Visit

The Abbot agreed with the Bishop that Francis needed to be interviewed at length, before moving on to the pre-novitiate period of his formal training. Father Brian explained to Francis about the planned meeting. Rather than having it during the normal visitation periods when the other inmates were allowed to receive visits from friends and family members, the meeting was planned for a weekday. It would be a quiet visit without the other inmates being told of the presence of the Bishop.

The day of the visit, Francis was very nervous, with so much dependent upon the outcome. He tried to make himself as presentable as possible, considering the orange prison clothing required to wear. When it was time, Father Brian walked with him to the visitation area. There, they found the Abbot and Bishop sitting at one of the tables. They stood up and walked towards them. Francis noted that they were as uneasy as he was. Both the Bishop and Abbot had little or no experience in dealing with prison settings. Father Brian spoke first.

“Well, I’m certain no introductions are needed. Shall we all be seated?”

Francis worked up the nerve to start the conversation. “Thank you so much for agreeing to see me on this most important matter. I hope that I will be able to convey my sincerity in wishing to begin an order here.”

The Abbot answered him, in a reserved measured tone.

“May I address you as Anthony?”

“Oh yes, please do.” Francis answered quickly.

“Well Anthony, why exactly do you wish to start an order at this time?” questioned the Abbot.

Francis explained in detail the special he had seen on TV about the life inside monasteries. He talked about his conversations with the Chaplain, and then about the dream.

“Sir, please don’t think that I am saying that I do not deserve to be here. I have slowly wasted away in prison for thirty years.”

This statement took both men by surprise. They knew of very few men who had done anything for thirty years, let alone sit in prison.

“I realize that I will never be allowed to leave this place. I accepted that some time ago. After seeing the life led by those monks, I realized that I could change the life I led, if not the location. I believe that there are others here that will also choose to join this new order. I ask only for your council. There is much work to do. I welcome the chance to labor this goal.” Said Francis with much enthusiasm.

The Bishop was next to ask a question.

“What do you expect to gain from this order?”

“Sir, what did the first monk seek? I hope to work and meditate in a serene setting. I believe that the order will give us a sense of purpose and a feeling of belonging. As I understand it, Saint Francis of Assisi asked only for the blessings of the Pope. With nothing more than that, he led a small band of followers to form the noblest orders we now know today. I ask nothing more than Saint Francis asked of the Pope so long ago. In many ways, I have it much easier. I am already provided with room and board by the state. I hope to model the Brotherhood of Dismas

after the orders first created by Saint Francis and Saint Benedict. I still need to work closely with the prison authorities. They haven't agreed to the order's formation, but allowing this meeting is a first step."

The bishop was impressed with the thought Francis had put into his proposed order.

"Tell me Anthony, have you made considerations regarding finances?" Asked the Bishop. I see little need for funding of the order itself, but rather with your formal education regarding your novitiate. This Abbey is another matter entirely. I should expect that the prison would not be interested in funding such a structure."

Francis was fully prepared for this question. Oddly enough, he never considered the Abbey a problem. His real concern was legally being allowed to wear the robes of a monk, while incarcerated.

"I'm glad to talk about the money issue. First of all, let me assure you that I now have the funds set aside for my education. That is rather the easy part. As the Chaplain's assistant, I am paid by the prison fifty cents an hour. This comes to one thousand forty dollars a year. My vow of poverty, ensures that I will not foolishly waste these funds, and I do not get free room and board."

This caused both the Bishop and the Abbot to smile. The Abbot asked more on the issue of money.

"I understand that your earnings will afford you, your training as a novice. I am curious as how you plan to finance the construction and operation of the Abbey. Surely, your income is not to be the only source of revenues."

Francis answered calmly and without hesitation.

“You bring up a valid point. Our simple wages cannot even begin to pay for the construction of the Abbey. However, they will be a big part in its beginning. Let me ask you this. Now, correct me if I am wrong, but this whole project will take years to complete. To be honest, it will take years before the first corner is even laid. Right now, I could not even guess of the final cost of the Abbey’s construction. I do however understand how it will be paid for and maintained.” Said Francis.

Everyone sat up. They were now very ready to hear of his plan. Hundreds of thousands of dollars would have to be spent. Perhaps even millions of dollars would be required. Abby’s were traditionally built to be large and solid structures. This ensured that they were expensive. Francis explained his simple plan.

“As I explained to Father O’ Brian, I had a dream or vision about the Abbey. Father O’ Brian advised me to gain permission to make a model from my memories of the Abbey in the dream I had. Over the next few months, I did just that. An interesting design feature of the Abbey is its roof. Rather than the traditional open courtyard surrounding the Abbey’s chapel, a large pyramid shaped roof of glass panels encases the entire courtyard area. Even the chapel is enclosed within this glass structure. The courtyard is more of a garden, comprised of interlocking ponds and pathways. I find that they have an important ecological purpose rather than an ascetic value. The park, if you will, allows for the growing and sale of rare orchids. I do believe that the Abbey will produce such plants in abundance. This will generate the revenues needed for its operation. It is obvious to me now that the