



The Canticle

December 2013
Volume 31 No. 2

Voice of
The Community
of St. Francis,
Province of
The Americas

Ever-Widening Circles

I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.
I may not complete this last one
but I give myself to it.

I circle around God, around the primordial tower.
I've been circling for thousands of years
and I still don't know: am I a falcon,
a storm, or a great song?

--- Rainer Maria Rilke



In this issue of *The Canticle*, we have a chance to introduce you to some of the wonderful and inspiring people we encounter as we journey along the orbit of the ever-widening circles of our lives as CSF American Province.

First there is Pamela Clare's cello teacher, Sr. Karla Maria, a cellist with the San Diego Symphony who has a passion for teaching and the willingness to take on big challenges. In September she became a novice Benedictine solitary. Sr. Pamela Clare is her official mentor in this new endeavor.

Second, there is Jean Isemba, TSSF, who lives the life of a Franciscan Sister on her own in Papua New Guinea.

And lastly, there are the Korea Franciscan Sisters who are finally building a convent in the traditional Korean style of architecture after more than 12 years living in an apartment.

Our lives are greatly blessed by our friends who accompany us on this great journey. We hope you come to appreciate them as much as we do.

O Sing a New Song to the Lord

Sr. Karla Maria

If you close your eyes in the Chapel at the Little Monastery of the Way when the Angelus is rung and prayed, you may find yourself fully immersed in the beauty of this centuries-old traditional prayer. And if you open your eyes you will see that I, recently admitted to the novitiate as a solitary Benedictine nun, am using a wooden mallet to ring the Angelus, not on a bell, but on a used, nearly discarded steel circular saw blade. That saw blade, too dull to cut through wood, has a new life and a new song in service to God.

At age 64, eleven years after a conversion experience that turned my life and world around and astonished those who knew me well ("What? YOU, a Christian!?!"), I, like the saw blade, have been given a new life and a new song in service to God.

My prayer to be allowed to serve as an instrument of God's love has been answered recently by facilitating new song in others. I am a cellist and an enthusiastic cello teacher. Within a short time of each other, two new beginning cello students with special situations have come to me. One is an older person missing a hand and most of the forearm. The other is a child who suffered a very early stroke, with effects on one side of the body.

It is such a great blessing to be working with these students, witnessing the joy that making music with the cello brings to each of them, the new doors opening to them, and the positive effects on other areas of their lives as a result of playing the cello. They are singing, and living, a new song to the Lord! *O sing to the Lord, bless his name.*





JEAN ISEMBA,
TSSF *Sr. Ruth, CSF*

About forty years ago Jean Isemba was born in the tiny village of Sarimbo in Papua New Guinea. There were homes built of bush materials, pit toilets, no electricity and very little contact with the world beyond her Province. There were brothers of the Society of Saint Francis, many being ex-pats, and they were living their life at Haruro, about 1 1/2 hours travel time from Sarimbo. Papuan men began to catch the Franciscan spirit and joined the brethren. As in many places throughout the world, this Franciscan spirit spoke to people who already had commitments as spouses and parents and who were either not free, or not called to a life as a member of the First Order. The Third Order began to grow in PNG and has become a vital part of the Franciscan presence in that land.

Jean Isemba was raised in an Anglican family and became a committed Christian and, from an early age, felt called to express her love for Jesus in the service of her local community. She met the Franciscans and wanted to live their kind of life. There being no Franciscan Sisters in PNG Jean became a member of the Third Order and an active Franciscan, while still holding on to her desire to live as a Sister in the First Order.

In 2001 Jean was able to come to San Francisco and live at St. Francis House for five months. It must have been the most unusual experience of her life. It was hard to say goodbye to her family, and Jean said she was crying as she waited in the departure terminal in Port Moresby, PNG's capital city. A Papuan man came over to her and asked, "My daughter, why do you drop tears?" He was a stranger but he encouraged her as she embarked on her long journey: encouragement is a highly valued gift in PNG. Jean's first stop was in Australia where she was met by a fellow Franciscan tertiary and taken to her home. She received a warm welcome and a comfortable bed for the night. When she arrived in San Francisco, she had a pair of cotton jeans, a sweatshirt and a small half-filled backpack – such a contrast to her fellow travelers with their behemoth suitcases, stuffed to the brim with their essential items. Jean was carrying all that she possessed, and the sweatshirt was borrowed!

When the first four Sisters came to America from the UK in 1974, we had many adjustments to make and many learning experiences. (Nobody told us that the mailbox wasn't red and that the blue container on the corner was actually the place to deposit mail – not

trash!) For Jean, who had, until this journey, only traveled about twenty miles from her birthplace, everything was strange indeed: electricity, showering indoors instead of bathing in the river, western foods. Jean was bombarded with new experiences.



Jean's kitchen in Sarimbo, PNG.

One day we took Jean to a multiplex theater to see the first Harry Potter movie. The screening room was at the top of the building and we went up several escalators – imagine stairs that moved! Jean helped at Martin de Porres soup kitchen and there she met up with very poor people who were living rough in a city of excess. Of all the things that were completely new to her Jean found this the most difficult to wrap her mind around. Where were the families of these people and why were they not living with them? It was an unfathomable concept to someone raised in a clan culture where everyone knows both who you are and to whom you belong. The homeless poor of San Francisco can die on the streets but nobody is left to die alone on the muddy tracks of Sarimbo.



Jean's convent in Sarimbo, PNG.

Jean returned to Sarimbo more determined in her resolve to be a member of CSF and full of stories. Papuans love their stories, told in wind huts as they eat their meals. These tales are an oral history passed on from generation to generation by a society that doesn't keep much, if anything, of a written record. Jean's trip to San Francisco has broadened the repertoire considerably.

But that's not all that this Christian soul has done. Being trusted as a member of the Third Order and considered a

missionary Jean has been entrusted with challenges most westerners haven't been called to face. She set off on a journey by sea, in a small boat, to another province far to the north to attend a missionary school. She had no map, just trust and determination to find her way; and find it she did. When a flood hit the northern coast of Oro Province as a result of Cyclone Guba (which displaced some 150,000 people), Jean, along with some other First and Third Order Franciscans and Anglican priests, was called upon to help distribute food, water, firewood, canvas for shelters, blankets, clothes and basic necessities to those who were stranded. This involved going to the area in a Blackhawk helicopter provided by the Australian military! Jean reported a story of a woman, a dog and a snake, all stranded in the same tree and the three decided to leave each other alone!



Jean and Br. Harold SSF crossing a flooded river..

In order to give Jean some ongoing support, I have made several visits to Sarimbo. The village still has pit toilets, a river to bathe in, outdoor "kitchens", plenty of snakes and mosquitoes, and no electricity. However, on my last visit, cell phones have come to every hut. My visits with Jean and being accepted as a member of her family have enabled me to see her in her own setting. She is a natural leader, respected and trusted by the broader community. Local people often join her in her tiny chapel and pray the Office with her. When the Mothers Union have a time of prayerful retreat, they come to Jean's house and its little chapel, which is just a simple room but recognized as a sanctuary - Sarimbo's own Portiuncula! I was able to experience Jean's ability to work with, and organize, the local children, teaching Sunday School and gathering them to continue their cultural heritage with singing and dancing – and they

actually listened and did what she asked of them; an experience I've never had!

Jean has a special heart for, and ministry to, widows and orphans. There are currently 310 widows, many having five or six children, in the surrounding villages. Accidents account for many of the young women becoming widows. Men climb trees for coconuts and betel nuts and some fall to their death. Palm oil has become a very important cash crop but the work is very dangerous. Snake bites, malaria and diarrhea continue to kill people because there is very little in the way of medical support. Whatever Jean has that she doesn't absolutely need she shares with these families. These people have no income and survive on the food they grow. The widows sit on the road side and sell peanuts and vegetables and try to earn enough to pay school fees for their children. Being an orphan does not result in any government assistance and fees run from around \$50 a year for a very young child on up to \$500 for older children. Even the village schools require children to wear a school uniform – no uniform, no schooling. I think it would be true to say that these widows and their children have fewer possessions than St. Francis had in thirteenth-century Assisi. Jean encourages these people, and her presence, her time and her faith are all she has to offer and she offers them so freely. The goal would be to have a project that enables the widows to be self-supporting; not an easy task to achieve in such an impoverished and isolated area.

The Sisters in America keep in regular contact with Jean, encouraging her and being encouraged by her. We hope that one of these days she will be able to join us again in San Francisco. Until then we hold her daily in our prayers, just as she holds us. Jean is our barefoot missionary, our sister, our friend and our fellow Franciscan.

Jean's Sunday School class..



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The Canticle
is the newsletter of the
Community of St.
Francis, a religious
order for women in the
Franciscan tradition in
the Episcopal Church.



Ever-Widening Circles

KOREAN CSF SISTERS

In August all the First Order Ministers of the Society of St. Francis met in Korea. It was an opportune time because the SSF Brothers were celebrating their 20th anniversary in Korea the day after the meeting and the CSF Sisters held the groundbreaking ceremony for their convent a couple of days before the meeting. The convent is being built in a traditional Korean village so the architecture will be traditional. The Sisters began living the Franciscan life together in 2001 and were life professed as CSF Sisters in 2009. Pamela Clare was their original mentor Sister, so she was very happy to be back in Korea at such a momentous time. The Sisters have been living in a small apartment and with the new convent, they will finally have room for expansion and for guests. The building is progressing well and they hope to be finished early in 2014.



Early 20th century Anglican church in Korea built in the traditional style, similar to what the new convent will look like when it is finished.



Sr. Francis (L) and Sr. Jemma, CSF (with cross) lead the procession, with Sr. Sue and the Bishop of Busan, at the ground breaking for their new convent.

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