

**Witness** an online magazine

# Urban Friars

A Franciscan Conclave in the Bronx



Photographs & Text  
by  
Richard Falco

# Urban Friars

## A Franciscan Conclave in the Bronx

Photographs & Text  
by  
Richard Falco

*“Start by doing what is necessary, then what is possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible.” “For it is in giving that we receive.” “Remember that when you leave this earth, you can take with you nothing that you have received—only what you have given.”*

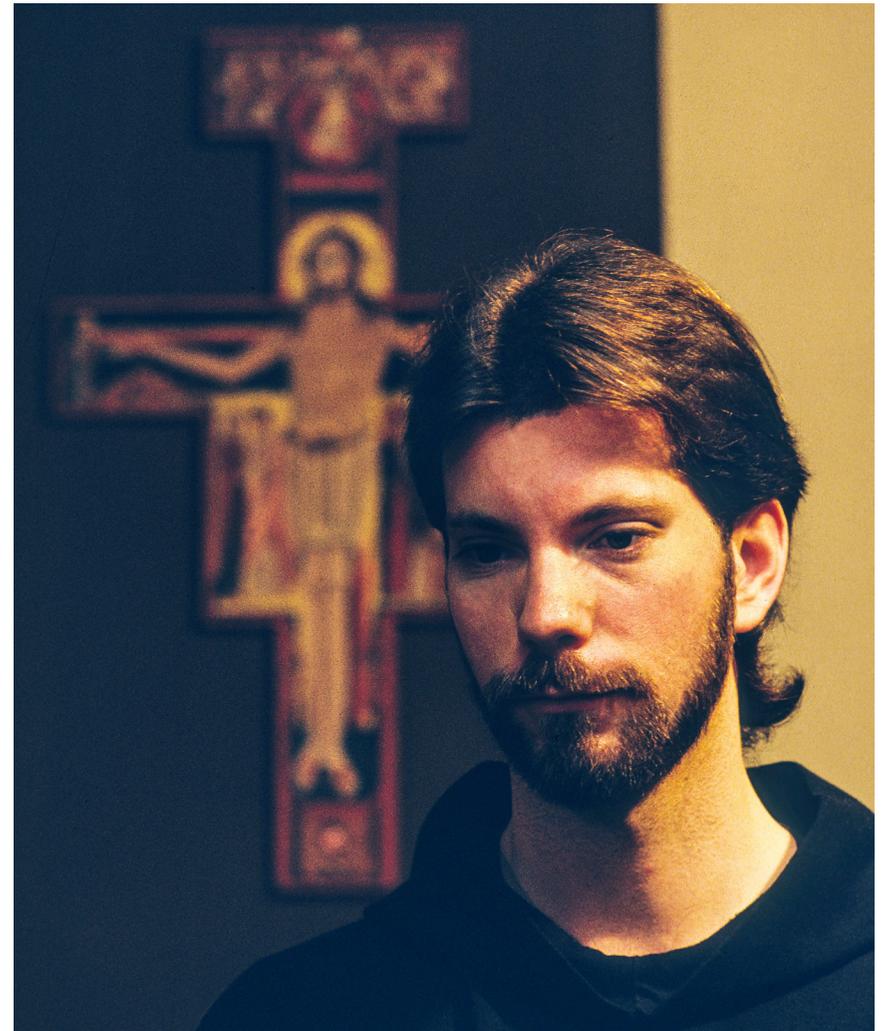
--- St. Francis of Assisi

As the morning light filters through the narrow windows, a small group of Franciscan brothers sit in quiet humility around a wood-burning stove in their common room. Franciscans lead a very structured life. The day always begins with a prayer session. This will be followed by their ministry work, communal meals, other prayer sessions, and an early bedtime.

For years now, their days have begun this way. After the prayer session, they good-naturedly joke with one another before turning their attention to their work.

Their daily rhythm is both ancient and immediate:

- 1) 7:30 am – Rise, breakfast, and Morning Prayer (Office of Readings)
- 2) Mid-morning – Ministry work (elder outreach, youth center, baking)
- 3) Noon – Midday Prayer and shared lunch
- 4) Afternoon – Community service, home visits to shut-ins, tutoring,
- 5) 5:00 pm – Evening Prayer and supper
- 6) Evening – Visiting friends, meditation, study, rest



Living according to their vows of poverty, chastity, and humility, the San Damiano friars attend to the needs of the most forgotten in one of New York City's poorest neighborhoods. They have become an integral part of this South Bronx community. Their work and care are known to many. At first, one is confused to see these young men, aged 27-38, moving about the harsh urban decay in their black robes and sandals. However, as you spend more time with them, you realize that the ideals and faith of a thirteenth-century saint have found a place in the 20th century.



The Brothers join together for a morning prayer session.



The essence of the communal prayer is connection. This type of prayer helps Christians connect with one another as well as with God and strengthens the Christian community. The Bible states that unique things happen when we pray with others. Jesus says in Matthew 18:20, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there.”

There are three major expressions of prayer: vocal, meditative, and contemplative. All three are open to everyone and should be included in your prayer life. The brothers use these expressions to strengthen their faith and better serve the community in which they live.

Prayer for Franciscans is not just a set of rituals, but a way of ‘Being’. It is a continuous conversation with the divine that seeks to permeate every aspect of their lives. Franciscan prayer also emphasizes contemplation and quiet reflection as essential practices for nurturing a deep relationship with God.





Brother David takes a moment alone for silent contemplation.



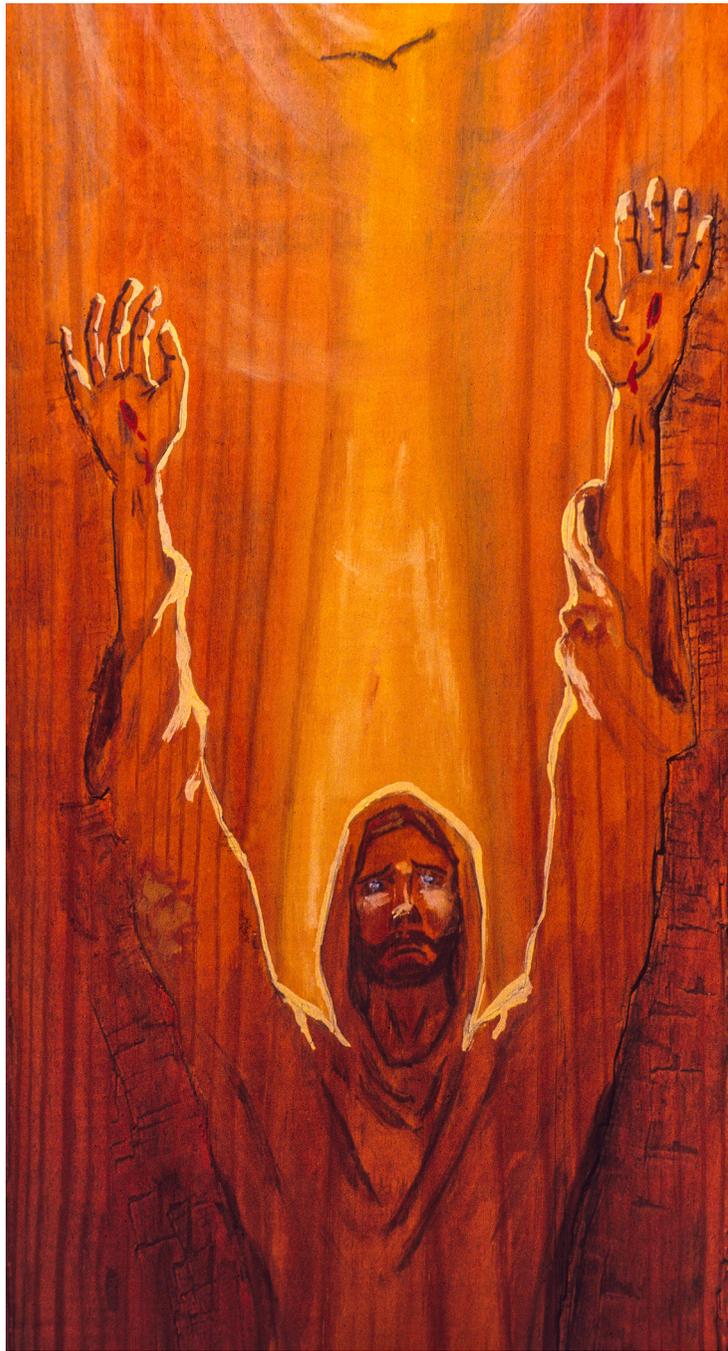
The brothers live in a red brick building across the street from St. Augustine's Church on Franklin Avenue in the Morrisania section of the Bronx. It became a friary fifteen years ago, when Brothers Walt and Giles founded it. Both men are from Pennsylvania and wanted to live closer to the example of St. Francis of Assisi. While searching for a parish that would be a good fit, they were asked to take care of the building after another group vacated it. They have been its caretakers ever since. A total of five brothers now live here.

Thus, they started a unique relationship with a New York Community that is also unique. At the time, the South Bronx had been compared to a war zone. Block after block of abandoned buildings, litter-filled empty lots, and a decay that represented the worst of urban decline. The police precinct was notoriously known as Fort Apache because of the crime, violence, and poverty in the neighborhood. Just a block away from St. Augustine's Church was one of the city's most dangerous men's shelters. It was in this environment that the brothers set out to work. Brother John would often joke, "The reason we don't get beat up, is because we wear dresses."





Brother John walks with two neighborhood kids.



## St. Francis of Assisi

Born Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone in Assisi, Italy, St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226) was a Catholic friar and the founder of the Franciscan Order. Francis grew up in a wealthy merchant family. Unhappy with his life, in his early twenties, he experienced a religious conversion. While he was praying on the mountain of Verna, Francis is said to have had a vision. In the vision, he heard Jesus say, “Francis, rebuild My church, which, as you see, is falling down.” He then stripped off all of his garments to physically cast off his possessions and give himself over to a new life with God.

Francis began preaching a message of simplicity, humility, and love for all creatures. Attracting many followers, in 1209, he received approval from Pope Innocent III to form a new religious order. This was the beginning of the Order of Friars Minor (commonly known as the Franciscans).

In 1212, he established the second order, Poor Clares, with St. Clare of Assisi. Poor Clares is an order of nuns who live a cloistered life of prayer. They, too, have taken the vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty, living exclusively behind the walls of their monasteries.

The Third Order of St. Francis is made up of laypeople. They live with the Franciscan spirituality in their daily lives.

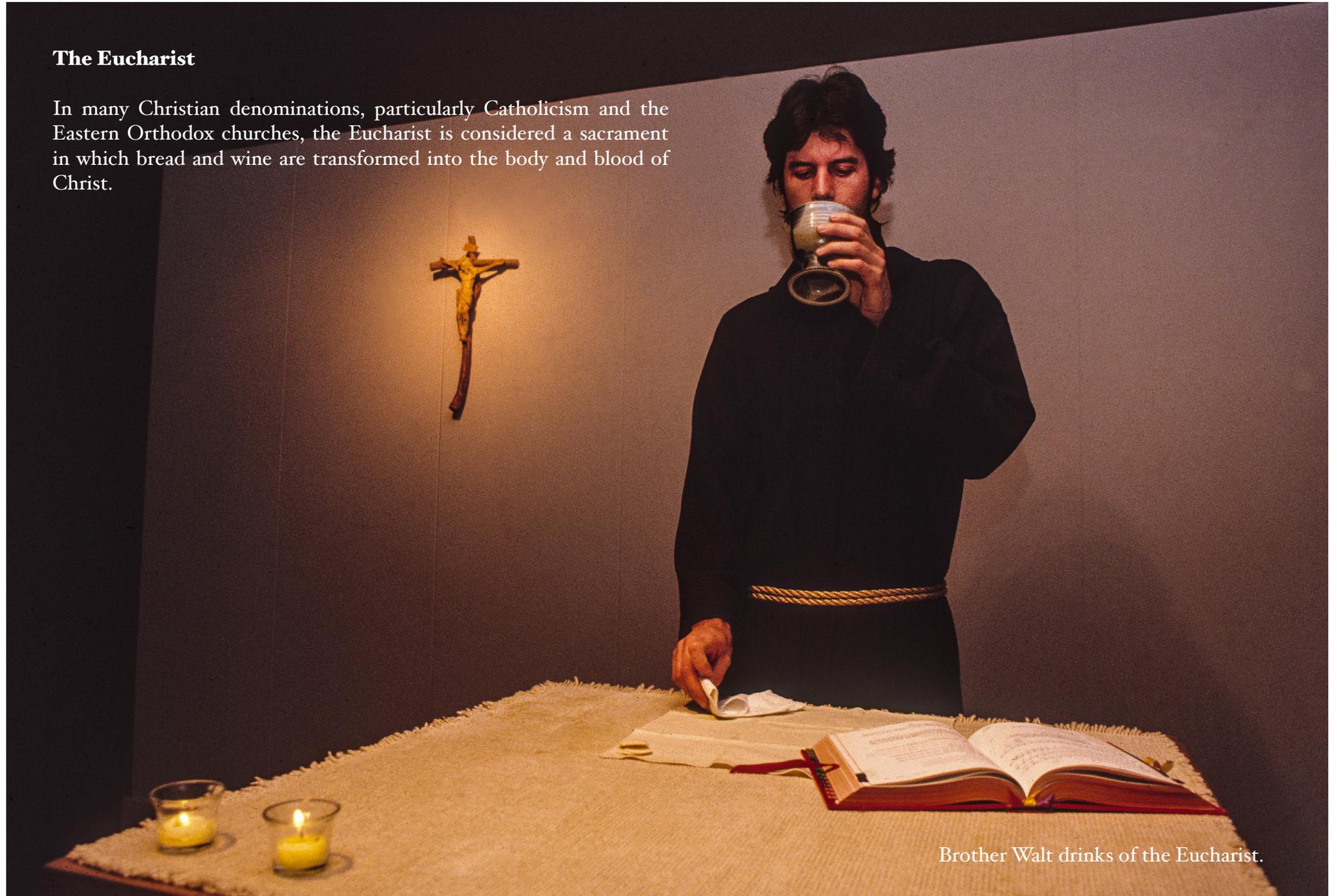
The Franciscan movement today is worldwide. It comprises a diverse array of religious orders and lay communities. Collectively, these groups number approximately 650,000 members across more than 110 countries.

Francis is known for his ministry to the poor and underprivileged, his care for nature and animals. He is the patron saint of animals, preaching to them as well as humans. His motto is “Pax et Bonum,” which translates to Peace and Goodness. His famous prayer is: *Lord, make me an instrument of your peace: where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.*

He died in 1226 and was canonized just two years later, in 1228. Today, he is one of the most beloved and influential saints in Christianity.

## The Eucharist

In many Christian denominations, particularly Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox churches, the Eucharist is considered a sacrament in which bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ.



Brother Walt drinks of the Eucharist.

## Brother John takes his Final Vows

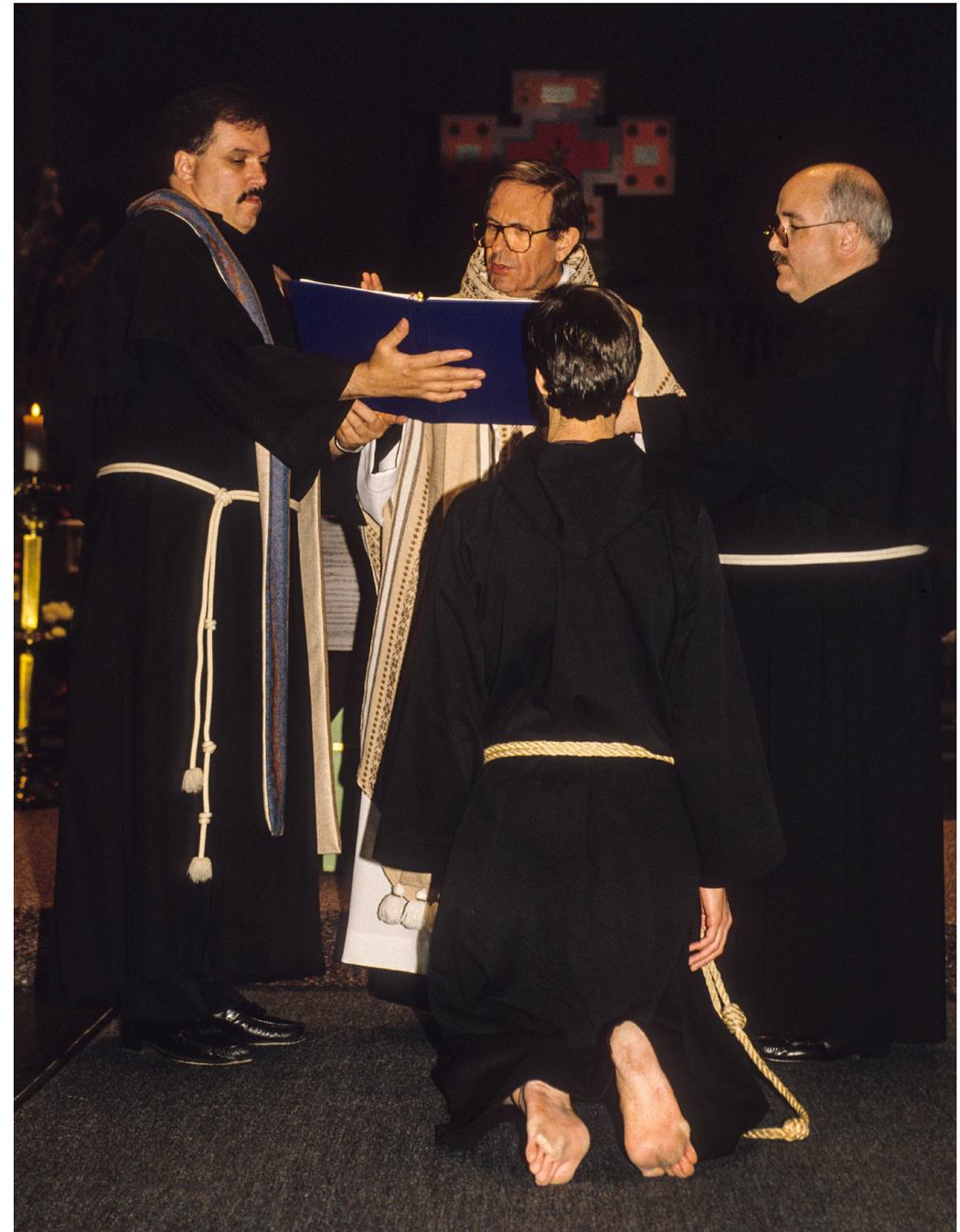
The road to becoming a Franciscan is not taken lightly. It involves a process that can take many years to complete. It begins with a period of inquiry, where a man recognizing the call to religious life engages informally with the Franciscan community. If mutual interest grows, the individual enters postulancy. Postulancy is a period of introduction, typically lasting between 6 and 12 months. During this period, he lives with the friars, participates in their daily life, and explores the rhythm of prayer, fraternity, and service.

The novitiate follows postulancy, a pivotal year marked by intense spiritual formation and interior reflection. Novices receive the habit of the order and begin to study the Rule of St. Francis. The Rule outlines how the friars are to live in accordance with the Gospel and the values of humility, poverty, fraternity, communal life, work, service, brotherly love, and compassion. The Rule, written by Francis in 1223, was submitted for papal approval. This version remains the foundational text for the Order today.

This is also the time when they begin to detach from their previous lives, preparing to embrace a radical commitment to Gospel living. After the novitiate, the friars profess temporary vows, which they renew annually for three to six years, allowing time for academic studies, ministry experience, and continued discernment.

Final profession is a solemn, lifelong commitment. The ceremony includes the prostration of a friar during the Litany of the Saints, a gesture of total surrender to God. Then, each brother recites the formula of profession, pledging a lifetime of poverty, chastity, and obedience. He then placed his written vows upon the altar.

This public act marks the culmination of a long and prayerful journey through the stages of Franciscan formation.





The day of a Franciscan is highly regimented. They rise at about 7:30 am. This is followed by breakfast and morning prayer. The communal prayer service lasts 30-40 minutes. Because fraternity is such an essential part of Franciscan life, they come together three times daily to pray. After prayer, each brother has his daily duties and responsibilities. This can include cleaning the house, distributing food to the needy, ministry work, baking bread, or visiting the homes of elderly people who are shut-in due to age, illness, or fear. The brothers will return to the house at midday for prayer and lunch. Lunch generally consists of soup and bread. After lunch, each will again attend to his community work, returning at about 5 pm for evening prayer and supper. The rest of the evening is spent visiting friends and colleagues, completing unfinished work, or meditating before bed.

*Before honour is humility (Proverbs: Ch 18, L 12)*

The friary is Spartan. The building features a small chapel on the first floor, a common room, a library, and a kitchen area. The rooms are heated with wood stoves. The brothers take turns splinting wood for the stoves. On the second floor are the sleeping cells, furnished with only a mattress and a wooden table. Conforming to the Franciscan philosophy of the ascetic life, simplicity is the rule of the day.





Though all their community work is done for free, money must be raised to support their various activities and maintain the friary. This is primarily achieved through monthly bake sales and donations. The brothers do the baking themselves in an oven donated to them several years ago. They also receive various other types of donations, including food and clothing. These, in turn, are passed on to those in greater need or used to foster their ministry work. Without donations, their ability to work and survive in the neighborhood would be much more difficult.

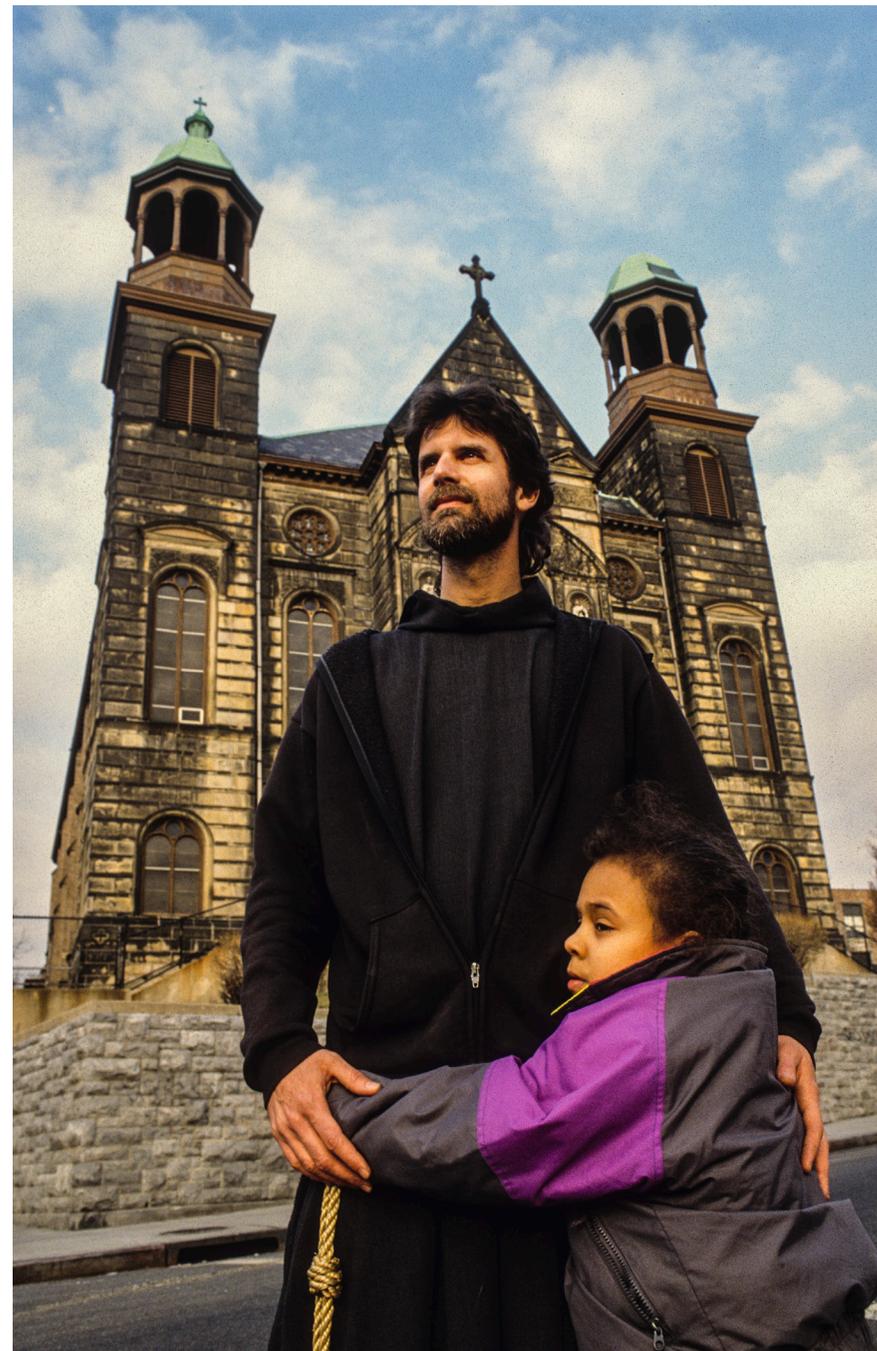
Bread is also considered a gift from God. When Moses fed his people in the desert with food that fell from heaven, it was bread. When Jesus multiplied the bread to feed the crowd, bread became a symbol of sharing. During the last supper, bread became the body of Christ.

*"The only thing ever achieved in life without effort is failure."  
- St. Francis*

If you asked people in the community about the brothers, most would have only good things to say. They are very visible in the neighborhood. Father Jeffers, the pastor at St. Augustine, says the brothers play an essential role in the church's work. "They tend to the forgotten people, who have become invisible to the rest of the world."

Brother Walt heads the household and views their community work with great pragmatism. "We are not here to create converts or initiate great change. That is not what St. Francis would want us to do. We do what we can, to the best of our ability. Our expectations are smaller, simpler." He then tells me a story about St. Francis, which typifies this attitude. One day, St. Francis asked one of his disciples to accompany him while he preached to the people about their way of life. That morning, they set out for the town. Arriving at the front gate, they made their way through the streets, occasionally passing a greeting to a friend, but mostly walking silently amongst the crowds. The disciples waited patiently for St. Francis to stop and preach, but instead, they slowly proceeded to the back gate and left the town. This confused the disciple greatly, but he was reluctant to speak. As they made their way home, he could no longer contain himself. "Master," he asked, "I thought we were going to preach about our life." Francis turned to his disciple and replied, "We just did."

Mediation and prayer are significant components of their daily activities. They combine this with their ministry work. The community service of each friar can vary from day to day. Each brother has developed his own special tasks and obligations, although they all assist one another whenever necessary. The primary focus of their work, however, falls into two specific areas—the first concerns itself with the elderly. The friars have established an outreach program, which has become their most significant ministry.





Every Wednesday, they operate a senior center in the basement of St. Augustine's. Here, seniors gather for activities, prayer, and share a hearty meal. Brother David has assumed the principal role of managing the center. His gentle demeanor underlies the humility of his vows. "Most of these people have little left in life," he says. "Some have no families and have become dependent upon our care." In addition to visiting the senior center, he visits many elderly shut-ins at their homes on a daily basis.







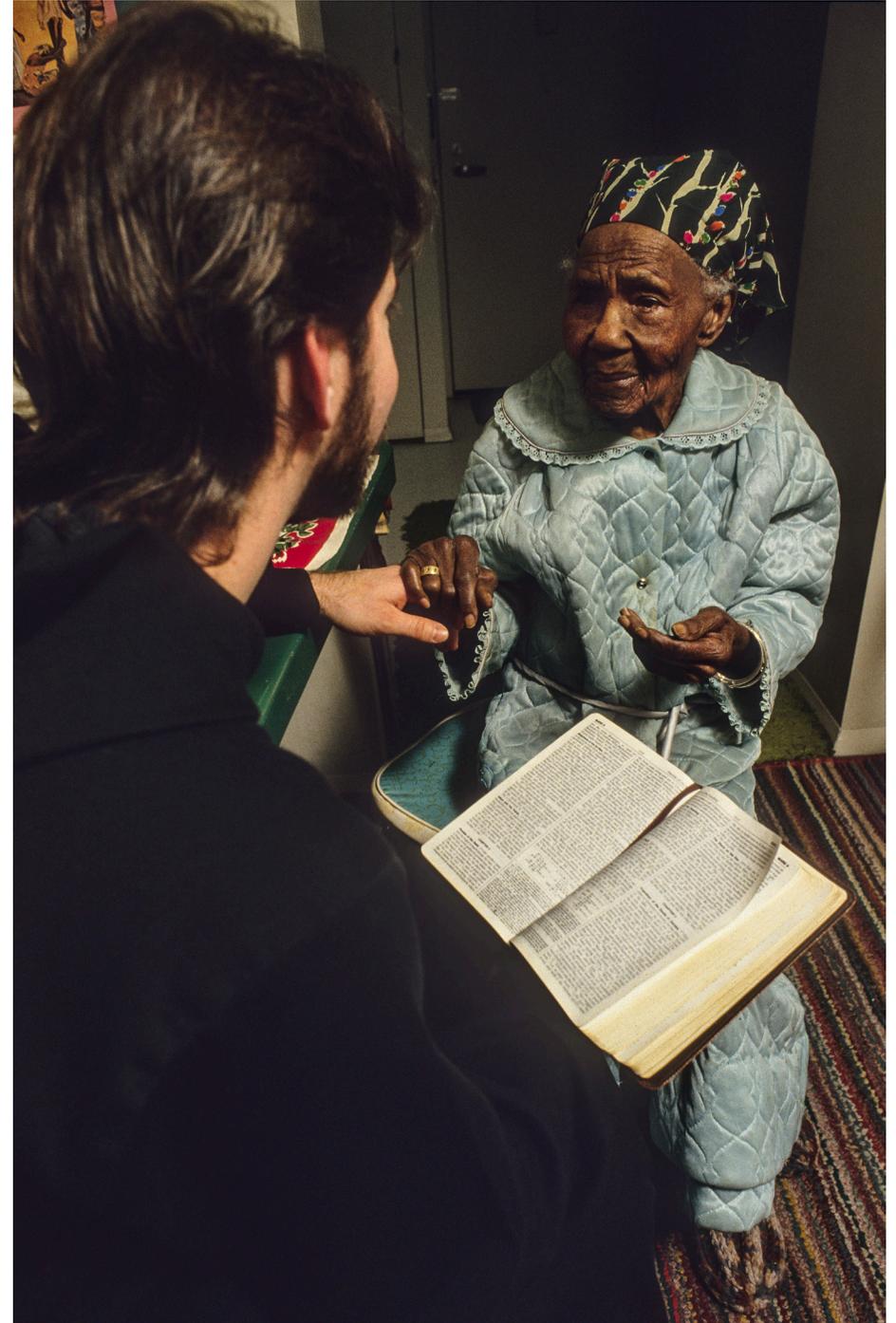
Brother Gabriel

Mediation and prayer are significant components of their daily activities. They combine this with their ministry work. The community service of each friar can vary from day to day. Each brother has developed his own special tasks and obligations, although they all assist one another whenever necessary. The primary focus of their work, however, falls into two specific areas—the first concerns itself with the elderly. The friars have established an outreach program, which has become their most significant ministry. In addition to visiting the senior center, he visits many elderly shut-ins at their homes on a daily basis. Brother John, who works with Brother David, also visits the shut-ins. “These are the people who least deserve to be in this position,” he says. “The first crime is that they are too old or sick to leave their apartments. The second is that others usually don’t know they exist to help them.” Each brother believes his community work is a vital element of Franciscan life. “I can’t just walk around with principles,” says Brother David, “Everything must be measured against itself.”





Visiting the homes of shut-ins is very rewarding for everyone.



## Yogi's crew



One family in particular has a deep connection with Brother John. There are 10 children and three grandchildren living with Yolanda Diaz. Known as “Yogi’s crew” in the neighborhood, they live in a four-bedroom apartment on Boston Road. Brother John has developed a special relationship with the family and visits them regularly. The excited, high-screamed cheers of love greet him whenever he arrives. He tutors some of the kids and has become an extended family member.

Brother John says, “It’s the streets that are my biggest concern. The impact they have on the kids is painful to witness. The neighborhood is full of drugs, the schools are terrible, crime is rampant, and the family is held together with gum. Several of the older children have gotten in trouble with the police. One is in Rikers (NY Prison). My presence seems to hold things together, but I am not sure how long that can last. I have grown to love the children very much.”













*“A single sunbeam is enough to drive away many shadows.”  
- St. Francis*

The second central area of the friar’s work is with neighborhood youths. On Saturdays, Brother Walt is in charge of the youth center. “There isn’t a lot of hope around here,” he says. And though he realizes it’s tough to change the street’s influence upon the kids, he feels he can sometimes contribute a small token to a child’s future. He believes that suffering itself is not bad. “It’s suffering in vain that’s detrimental,” he says. “Suffering and adversity can create growth if you understand them. A child often has no sense of this, and the streets consume them before they have a chance.”

Every week a number of the kids come to the youth center. It has become a safe haven for many of the children in the community. The children can also be connected to other services if needed.





Brother Walt tries to come up with different activities for the kids each week.







Fun at the roller rink and the ride home.





Amidst the noise and at times chaos of the city, the Brothers move about the neighborhood contributing where they can. It is a mission of quiet solemnity and peace.

## Richard Falco

Richard Falco has worked as a photographer, documentary filmmaker, journalist, and educator for the past thirty-five years. He has traveled extensively worldwide, working on assignments in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the United States. His photographs have appeared in major publications. Clients include *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *Business Week*, *New York Times*, *Life*, *National Geographic Society*, *People*, *Geo*, *New York Magazine*, *Stern*, and *U.S. News & World Report*, to name a few.

There are seven published books of his work: *To Bear Witness/September 11*, *Medics: A Documentation of Paramedics in the Harlem Community*; *Hunger and Rice in Asia*; *Witchcraft: Ancient Traditions Alive in Salem*; *Water, Wild & Light: The Dingle Peninsula*; *India: A Timeless Testimonial*; and *Autumn Madrigals*.

Falco is the director of the films *Crossroads: Rural Health Care in America*, *Project Music: Not A Single Dissonant Note*, and *Holding Back the Surge*, and the executive producer of the films *Josie: A Story About Williams Syndrome* and *Dorothea's Tears: The State of Mental Health Care in America*. He is also the editor & chief of *Witness Magazine*.

He has exhibited in the United States and abroad. Exhibitions include the International Center of Photography, NY; Corcoran Gallery, Washington, DC; Nikon Galleries, Tokyo; New York Historical Society, NY; and others.

Falco is a winner of the *International Media Award*, a 15-time award winner for *Excellence in Journalism* from the Society of Professional Journalists, and an *Award for Excellence* from the Society of Publication Designers.

This project is a production of

## VISION PROJECT Inc.

Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of investigative journalism, documentary photography, multimedia, film, and education.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

Vision Project seeks to reinforce the social, cultural, and historical impact documentary work contributes to society. To reach these goals, we have assembled a group of talented professionals with extensive expertise in journalism, photography, video, design, web technology, and education.

All material copyrighted by Vision Project.  
There can be no use or distribution of this material  
without the written consent of Vision Project.

Vision Project © 2005

For further information contact:

Vision Project Inc.  
[www.visionproject.org](http://www.visionproject.org)  
[info@visionproject.org](mailto:info@visionproject.org)