

## Nativity Issue

The Custos Friar Michael d'Cruz OFM, with the Franciscan Friars of the Custody, wish all our friends, benefactors and families a Holy Christmas and blessed year 2007.



St  
Anthony's  
Bread



## Franciscan values reflected in Thrift Shop tradition

More than ever in this festive season, with commercial trappings surrounding us, it is painfully obvious how much of a throw-away society Singapore has become. How frequently do we trash clothes because we are bored with them or think they are no longer in fashion? How often do we buy new electrical appliances rather than repair broken ones? How often do we change our handphone just to get the latest model, when there is nothing wrong with the one we currently have?

Reflecting on this aspect, in this issue we find out more about the Franciscan Thrift Shop, which serves as a good reminder how not all of us can afford new clothing and handphones, even at Christmas, but who would be happy to have "new" stuff that others have discarded.

## Editorial Musing

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Songs can often trigger emotions. They may be songs associated with certain events or from our childhood, and can arouse emotions ranging from nostalgia to discomfort.

Christmas carols can have that effect. A friend called me at the end of November, very irritated that she could not even go to a supermarket without being assaulted with carols blaring from the shops' music systems! She does not like Christmas carols, period. I never asked her why, not wanting her to influence my feelings toward carols. Perhaps I would not play a Christmas CD just to listen to carols (one of the friars does just that, and even dances to the tunes!), but should a carol be played on radio, I would not turn it off. It often brings out a kind of warm and fuzzy feeling within me. I can't explain why, but I suspect retailers understand that happens to many people; hence the carols at the mall. Warm and fuzzy feelings make people buy!





My point: songs, including carols, affect people. The one song that has affected me every year since I was 16 years old is John Lennon's Happy Christmas (War is Over). It goes like this:

So this is Christmas,  
And what have you done.  
Another year's over  
And a new one's just begun.

When I was 16 years old, I was at a youth camp around Christmas, and one of the facilitators used that song to try and drive home a message. It hit me, in a big way, and I did not know why. Every year, I asked myself the same question: What have we done? This year, I ask the same question again. For 2006, what have I done as a friar? And what have the friars done?

What I have done - well, that is for me to discuss with my spiritual director. What the friars have done - the leaders of the friars here in Singapore pondered that question in November. I do not want to sound like a kid writing a "naughty or nice" list to Santa Claus, but while I think there are certainly areas for growth, "the friars in Singapore and Kuching have done reasonably well." I quote our Custos, Friar Michael d'Cruz, who affirmed the friars in his address to us in October of this year. So what have we done? Here is a list, and it is by no means exhaustive.

- a greater sense of fraternal life which benefits the Church
- an ownership of our ministries, which place people before structures
- the growth of our parish ministries in Kuching and Singapore
- the enhancement of our formation programme which offers our young friars a holistic Franciscan, human and Christian formation
- prayer intercessions through St Anthony's devotion
- a continuing and strengthening of our current ministries which support the

diocese and the spiritual life of the people

The friars have also become more active in supporting other people in their ministries to God's poor. In September, we brought in Bruce Khun to bring the Gospel of Luke to us in a creative way. We raised \$8,000, which was sent to Kuching to assist our friars in their ministries as they bring the Gospel of Christ to the people there.

Our benefactors have also been sending us money for our work with the poor. We have used this money to assist foreign workers through established organisations. We have also given some of this money (\$9,000) to the Catholic Welfare Services of Sarawak, which is constructing a home for the aged and destitute. This home, Domus Pacis, will be staffed by the Franciscan Sisters.

Our benefactors have also contributed money to be used for the benefit of our friars. This includes the education and formation of our young friars as well as the ongoing formation of our friars already in active ministries.

Of course, there are many other constructive things that individual friars have done and are doing which cannot be quantified materially. The thrift shop is an example. In this issue, Kim Lim speaks to two friars about the operations and spirituality of the thrift shop.

Despite this list of good works, I am still moved when I think of the John Lennon song. While I can see why the Custos is proud of his friars for the work we have done, I still have a nagging feeling that much more could have been done, and a lot more can be done for the new year. Not just by me, or the friars, but for the whole world.

Have a very merry Christmas and a blessed 2007!

As former Singapore-based and St Mary's Parish Priest Fr Philip Miscamble explains, the concept of reselling still-usable second-items has a solid Franciscan tradition - a desire not to waste good resources. "I remember when I was a novice in Australia, one day a respected senior member of the friars community showed me an old cup and told me how, while the cup was worth nothing to him, by selling it for 50 cents, it would give him 50 cents to contribute towards something he did want. That thought has stuck with me!



Above: Fr Philip Miscamble

Right: Fr Michael de Cruz

Below: The friars working at Thrift Shop.

"The way I see it, the Thrift Shop is not about selling off rubbish"; neither is it just about raising funds. Rather, we are fulfilling a key role in the recycling wheel, and putting into practice our Franciscan beliefs about caring for our environment. We become a link between those who have things they don't want any more but which are too good to throw away, and those who have a need and use for such items. Then, those items we receive which are not suitable for our jumble sales and Thrift Shop go to the 'karong guni' man, and help him earn a living. Everyone in the chain benefits; nothing goes to waste," says Fr Phil.

The origins of the Franciscan Thrift Shop in Singapore go back some 20 years. People would leave unwanted clothing, books and toys outside the old friary, wanting them to be donated to a worthwhile cause. Says Fr Phil, "Much of the stuff was still usable, and it would have been a shame to throw them away. We started storing the items in the friary basement, with a view to holding regular jumble sales every six months or so. But we



understood early on that we had to ensure our jumble sales offered items of real worth and value. We could not put rubbish up for sale. So the process of sorting the donated stuff became a massive undertaking."

When word got around about this recycling effort, the friars were soon approached by many willing volunteers to help sort the donated items - often for weeks before the jumble sales -- and to set up and man the sales stalls on the weekends of the sales. "The sorting process can be long and tedious, especially in those early days when people were really not careful about what they gave us; we would get lots of dirty, unusable stuff as well as the saleable goods. Our early volunteers were fantastic people who did an amazing job getting everything organised; many of them are still helping out today, and we owe much to their commitment to the cause and their generosity," says Fr Phil.

The friars in formation also became involved since the early days, as a way of working to help earn income for their studies, since part of the jumble sale proceeds go to the Friars' Education Fund. As Fr Michael de Cruz explains, "The jumble sales were great opportunities for the friars in formation to contribute their own sweat to the cause. It gave our formation friars a sense of accountability for the friary budgets, as well as providing opportunities to work with volunteer helpers, and develop relationships with parishioners and the local community."

The jumble sale tradition grew quickly from these small beginnings. The bi-annual sales became big events, attracting buyers from far and wide, beyond the boundaries of the parish

even as far as Johor Bahru! "We did a lot of research on how to run such events, looking at how to administer sales, pricing, crowd control, and so on. Sorting items and pricing them is key to successful jumble sales. Our philosophy has always been to offer only good, useful stuff and no rubbish. And we keep prices low so people go away happy, thinking they have got great bargains; that way, they keep coming back," says Fr Phil.

All this was achieved with little or no advertising - no overheads to eat into the proceeds from the sales. Fr Phil notes, "We would just put a banner up on the compound fence (often made with materials donated for the jumble), yet word would still get around quickly. We used to have long queues of buyers waiting for the sales to start and people would take away van-loads of stuff. Others would come and simply make a cash donation, without buying anything; people were really generous."

The weekend sales also became a form of community outreach and support. "Totally unexpectedly, we found by far the majority of the buyers were non-Catholics. This started an interaction between the St Mary's community and local residents. Recently when I was in Singapore and went down to the market behind the friars' compound, I was happily surprised when an elderly Malay woman greeted me with 'Hello, Father'. It illustrates one way the Catholic community can offer something of significant value to non-Catholics," says Fr Phil.

When redevelopment work began on the old friary and church, the friars lost their space for collecting jumble sale items. "So we put huge containers in the canteen car park and used those as a temporary site for jumble collection, sorting and sales. The Thrift Shop was

thus born, and we continued our service in the jumble recycling chain," says Fr Phil.

With the Thrift Shop today rehoused in its own location adjacent to the canteen, potential shoppers have much more flexibility to browse and buy, aided by a team of committed volunteers - Martha, Theresa, Theresa Lim and Mdm. Lucy, as well as the formation friars. "We've noticed a change in the make-up of our customer base since we moved from twice-yearly jumble sales to a more permanent Thrift Shop," says Fr Mike. "Now we have many foreign workers buying things.



Domestic helpers during the week, when they bring children to the St Clare Kindergarten, also patronise the Thrift Shop and construction workers visit us on Sundays."

Yet despite the change in format, the same focus continues today as 20 years ago when the jumble sales started - discouraging wastefulness by recycling useful items and providing a valuable service to the community. It's an important lesson we should all think about when lured by the commercialisation all around at this time.



# Reflecting on a full year for Novices

In an earlier issue, we reported on how the Novitiate programme was restarted in the Singapore/Malaysia Custody this year. As the year draws to a close, we talked to the two Novices, Harry Chan and Vernon Chua on their feelings about how the year has gone, their experiences living as friars in St Anthony's Friary, and their plans for next year. We also get some thoughts from Minister to the Novices, Fr John Wong, as he awaits the arrival of a new group of Novices next year.

The Novitiate period represents a time of reflection for aspiring friars, to learn more about themselves, the Franciscan way of life, and the role of the friars in local communities. Fr John explains the focus of this Novitiate year was on the three aspects of human formation, Christian formation, and Franciscan formation. While this involved extensive periods of self-reflection, the Novices also studied a range of topics to broaden their experiences and thought processes.

"I was very conscious that I was accompanying two adults on a journey of discernment, and this required a different approach than a typical Novitiate programme designed to teach and lead young men. Rather, we wanted to provide a balance between academic studies, ministerial work, self-discernment and growth, community living and spirituality. So, Harry and Vernon were immersed into our community, to see for themselves what day-to-day religious life is really all about with its gifts and its limitations. They were encouraged to live at the level of maturity of professed friars, to interact and make decisions for themselves. We felt this would help them understand what the Franciscan way of life means to them personally, and stand them in good stead for the future," says Fr John.

With such an approach, Vernon and Harry said they had a very enriching and valuable year. "Perhaps it was a little overwhelming at first, with so much going on and so much to learn, but once I got into my stride, time really flew by. It may be our only opportunity to do some of the things we've done, so it was a great exploration experience," said Vernon.

Harry, who joined the friars in Australia and will return there for his continued formation, contrasted his busy year in Singapore with the quieter life in the small community in Sydney, where he completed his postulancy. "It's shown me another aspect of the friars' life, both within the friars community and in the St Mary's parish, where we helped out for feast day events, the canteen, and with the Legion of Mary," he said.



L-R: Fr. John Wong, Harry Chan, Vernon Chua

On the academic front, the Novices found their calling in specific areas of study. "While our studies focused on human, Christian and Franciscan formation, this incorporated many fascinating topics," said Harry. The two learned about personality types, social etiquette, speech and drama, poetry reading, art therapy, foreign languages, music, Christian meditation, eastern prayer styles, liturgy, justice and peace, integrity of creation, and Franciscan history, constitution and spirituality.

They also got to travel, making several trips to Malaysia for retreats and community outreach, and to learn more about intercultural relations. They attended an advanced Comprehensive Course in the Franciscan Missionary on Charism in Sri Lanka. As Fr John noted, this course is usually aimed for senior friars and formators, but he believes it was valuable in helping Vernon and Harry into deeper discernment about their Franciscan life. The Novices agreed the two-week course was a highlight of their year, and were also thrilled to get to know many local people during their outings into local communities. "The local people knew who we were and welcomed us into their homes. It was wonderful," said Harry.

With their Novitiate year almost over, Vernon and Harry are looking forward to making their first vows in January, and to continue their formation. For Vernon, this will mean furthering his studies in Singapore, with a focus on counseling courses, which he has identified as a calling. "This is a great thing for the friars we have the freedom to explore our gifts and take up a career path that seems right for us," he says.

Harry, meanwhile, will head back to Melbourne to continue his studies towards the priesthood at a theological college. "It's going to be a lot more academic, but I'm ready for it," he said.

As they pack their bags, Fr John is preparing for his next challenge, journeying with up to seven new Novices from Singapore/Malaysia and the region. "Each year, the Novitiate programme will need to be a little different, to suit the different ages, education levels, backgrounds, personalities and life experiences of the Novices," he said.

"It's certainly challenging, but also exciting and fulfilling, and a great honour to be allowed into the lives of these Novices and to accompany them on their journey of discernment."