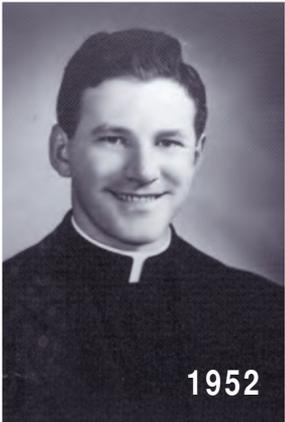


CELEBRATING
75 YEARS



An Autobiographical Sketch By

Rev. Monsignor "Fr. Ben" Franzinelli



THE BEGINNING

I was born on July 7, 1921 in the Berkshire town of North Adams, Mass. With my birth, I became the first born of my parents Joseph and Gisella Scaia. My dad was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1890 and my mother in Wilmington, Vermont in 1897. My grandparents, Benjamin Franzinelli and Melania Rosa, and Ricardo Scaia and Lucia Franceschetti were all emigres of Austria's tirol. As a newborn infant, my dad returned to Europe after the death of his mother, Melania in 1890. Shortly thereafter, grandfather returned to his native Austria where he later remarried.

The imminent approach of World War I brought my parents together. At the age of 21, to evade the active military service in Europe, my dad returned to his birthplace, Chicago. Subsequently, he moved east to be with relatives in Vermont. It was there that he met Gisella Scaia, my mother-to-be. They were married in 1920.

It was said that I was a chubby infant who both nursed and slept well. My brother Joseph was born in 1925, but did not survive infancy. My early childhood years were spent in North Adams, Massachusetts in the berkshires. In the wake of a devastating flood in 1926 (which destroyed my dad's construction company), we moved to Brooklyn,



New York. There I continued my elementary education in the city public schools. My first holy communion was received at the church of St. Agatha in 1928. That same year my sister Rita was born.

In 1929, dad died and we went to live with my mother's sister. It was in the fourth grade that I was enrolled in the Parish Parochial School of St. Frances de Chantal. While there, I became closely acquainted with the priest community of the Fathers Of Mercy. While living near the church, I became an altar boy and also sang in the choir. I was taught to dance by Father Morrison. My mother never remarried and in 1935 my sister Rita died leaving me alone with mother. In the eighth grade, I received confirmation.

HIGH SCHOOL:

I was one of the fortunate ones who was academically qualified for one of the diocesan high schools, St. Michael's—an all boys school. Extracurricular activities included track, baseball, the school play and getting into trouble. I graduated in 1940.



Ben & Rita



First Holy Communion





COLLEGE:

Following high school, college only became possible by working during the day and attending evening classes at St. John's University–College. My college career as a pre-med student was interrupted by World War II. I was inducted into the armed services in 1943.

After a series of military faux-pas and delaying tactics to keep from active duty, I was able to go from boot camp to the University of Illinois School of

Engineering. For a period of more than two months, I enjoyed contemplating my return to school. Failing to make the cut in engineering and/or languages, I was transported to California's famous Fort Ord and assigned to the U.S. Army Medical Corp Ambulance Company where I learned to drive (this may explain my driving habits to passenger critics). The common experience in the military of that day was to travel back and forth across the nation. Finally, we arrived in New York to board a huge transport vessel, the

"Queen Mary," bound for England. In England, we were assembled and waiting when my social life cost me my corporal stripes. This eventually contributed to saving my life. My memory fades when it comes to relating certain military events:



Utah Beach; Brittany; Bastogne Bulge. However, there were a few very memorable encounters with local families with whom I still correspond. The finale was in Bastogne and history records that passage. The war ended and the occupation clean up involved me in a variety of experiences among which at least one occurrence certainly affected my future. Because the military service interrupted my education, I became a candidate for the American University located in the famous beach resort of Biarritz, in southern France. I was offered the opportunity to return to college studies during the period of military occupation (before being returned to the states) and was enrolled into the American University in France (where I spent approximately seven months—first as a student then as an instructor).



It was during my sojourn in Biarritz that I identified myself as a “free thinker” —an apostate. It was my ambition to contest the need for any religion and especially the institution of the Roman Catholic Church.

LOURDES:

My spoken French was admirable to many, the offshoot of which was a request by a few of my peers to journey with them to Lourdes. During the train ride, having met an appealing young lady, I threatened to leave the group and follow the lady, but was dissuaded. Practically being forced from the train and bribed



Pilgrimage to
Lourdes 1956

to continue my commitment as translator for the group, we arrived at Lourdes. After arriving, I promptly located a bar.

Souvenirs became the first item of interest in my role as translator. At a nearby shop, reported to be owned by a relative of the visionary, Bernadette

Soubirous, I was successful in bartering for the group as well as for myself. For the miserly contraband offered, I prided myself on the acquisition of a lovely white mother of pearl gold rosary—a gift for my mother. That evening when I proudly attempted to show-off the white beaded rosary to my roommate, I was struck with a very awesome experience. Drawing from my pocket the rosary and extending it in the palm of my right hand, the beads were not white, but crimson red. I noticed my hand ached with a sharp pain. In contrast to what I saw, my companion saw only the white beaded rosary; It was I who saw the red beads. Unable to rest that night, I rose before dusk. Quietly, and unnoticed, I went over to the Basilica's Piazza. Everything was wet, the air damp, and the benches were beaded with water. Confused and alone, I was approached by a black-hooded priest whom I greeted with my best French. He returned my greeting and acknowledged my good accent. He then engaged me in a short conversation, finally suggesting that perhaps I would like to go to Confession before

Holy Mass. I replied that I found it difficult to make a good confession in French. This hooded Padre promptly broke the dampness with his excellent Oxford English, and with one great motion wiped off a wet bench with his black cloak. Amazed, I conceded. I lied, withholding all of my serious sins. He opened the lower church and went in. I followed, sitting in one of the back rows. I waited, more confused than before—and now afraid. The service began, but the celebrant was not him. I looked about and discovered the priest with whom I had spoken was kneeling behind praying. Caught in this dilemma at communion time, I went up to receive the host. I remember returning, but not stopping at the pew I had occupied. I remember no more, other than a few hours later, recoiling from my aching knees, I found myself before the grotto of apparition. The experience was forged upon my memory. Though my life did not change, Our Blessed Mother was patient with me. In time, she would triumph over my weakness and pride.

BACK TO THE STATES:

I went back to school, back to work, and I was able to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts Degree from St. Johns University College, Brooklyn, NY. World War II had provided the G.I. Bill—a free bill for education. I promptly went on to continue seeking a

My Ordination, May 31, 1952 Church of Our Lady of Lourdes, Brooklyn, N.Y.



My first Mass on
June 1, 1952 at
Franceske Chantel,
Brooklyn, N.Y.



career in psychology at Fordham University's graduate school. If I couldn't get medicine, then let me try psychology. Proud and ambitious, my hopes for a career in the helping services were to be dove-tailed. Not making the grade, I started to look for other alternatives. Encouraged by the grace of god, I found it during the holy week of 1946. Visiting the repositories of different churches on Holy Thursday in adoration before the Holy Eucharist added to the next day's accidental invitation to consider a vocation to the priesthood. The day was Good Friday.

Failure turned me on to the Seminary to satisfy my ambition for a vocation in the world of the helping services.

I was invited to study for the priesthood in the Society of the Fathers of Mercy. That choice fit well. Appropriate, because the symbol of this religious community was the "Prodigal Child returned."

I spent five uneasy years at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., flunking Latin three years in a row often tempting me to leave year by year. Challenged spiritually, emotionally and even physically, I nevertheless, was ordained May 31, 1952. The day happened to be the Vigil of Pentecost. Where else could I go?



Two weeks after ordination, I was given my first assignment in Monroe , North Carolina. In the Fall of 1952, I was installed Pastor of St. Joseph's Church, a predominantly Afro-American parish. Racial segregation was at a fevered pitch. Problems with segregation compromised my stay in the Carolina's. In 1954, I was assigned to New York City's Church of Notre Dame, West 114th Street (off the campus of Columbia University). It was at that Parish that I experienced the Hospital Apostolate (St. Luke's Episcopal).

I also worked with graduate students from the school of arts and drama, producing plays and creating stage sets, etc. This became my introduction to the potential to create a sanctuary out of a saloon. My tour at the Church of Notre Dame in Manhattan ended tragically in 1960 when my community, the Fathers Of Mercy was disbanded. I was given the option to stay in New York or go elsewhere. I stayed in New York City, only to suffer with a serious pneumonia infection shortly afterward which nearly claimed my life. As part of my recovery, I opted to accept the invitation of the Bishop of Reno, most Rev. Robert Dwyer, to recuperate in Las Vegas.



Preaching from pulpit of Notre Dame, N.Y.C.



Dominican Sisters

LAS VEGAS:

My indebtedness goes to the Dominican Sisters at St. Rose Dominican Hospital in Henderson for their care—especially the first winter of my stay in Las Vegas in 1961. During that winter, I suffered a relapse of a pneumonia that had seri-

ously threatened my life in New York. It was that illness which motivated my coming out West to the dry climate. The good Dominican Sisters made that special effort to discover the “bug” which allowed me to complete my recovery, and take up a full schedule in Las Vegas. After a few months in Vegas, I was asked to accept my first assignment, St. Joan of Arc, as an Associate Pastor. That was followed by Our Lady of Las Vegas and St. Christopher Parishes. These posts introduced me to the great pioneer efforts and spirit of those founders of the Catholic Community in Southern Nevada. Their spirit motivated many of my actions and the successes attributed to me.

My installation as Pastor of St. James the Apostle Parish, Las Vegas, NV



In 1968, I accepted the Pastorate of St. James the Apostle in West Las Vegas. There I became actively involved in the civil rights movement and the local segregation turmoil. This brought me into the arena of non-partisan politics.

In 1972, I became the first Roman Catholic Priest to be elected to political office in the state of Nevada. I won a seat on the Nevada State Board of Education. Living in West Las Vegas and involved in politics, these were popular and unpopular days walking a tight rope.

THE ROMANTIC STORY OF HOLY FAMILY PARISH “SALOON TO SANCTUARY”

In 1975, after seven years at St. James, Bishop McFarland asked me to build him a parish in East Las Vegas. The romantic story of Holy Family Parish going from saloon to sanctuary happened at this time.

Holy Family Parish was established in June of 1975, when Bishop McFarland assigned me to found a new parish East of Pecos and south of Desert Inn. The very first Sunday service was the occasion of a 50th wedding anniversary (John & Rose Lucia) in a parishioner's home. Weekday masses and Baptisms were celebrated in parishioner homes. I began advertising: "Have Chalice, Will Travel".

Our gratitude recalls the ecumenical spirit of that hour when we were welcomed by the Mountain Vista Congregational



Mother Franzinelli, Valley of Fire,
Las Vegas, NV



Bishop McFarland
and James Abraham
asking for a church
to be built



Church to use their facility for our first parish meetings. Subsequently, weekday masses and Saturday evening mass were held at Saint Matthew's Episcopal Church at Sun Valley and Nellis. The first Christmas Eve and Holy Day services were held at the location of the Italian American Club Hall on Sahara.



As our country prepared to celebrate the Bicentennial of our Nation in 1976, our Parish Community reflected on the historical event being remembered. Reminiscent of pioneer days of the old west, it was recalled when religious services were conducted in saloon dance

Making up the church



halls. It seemed quite appropriate to consider using that kind of a location for Sunday Services. A proprietor of the Sundancer Country Western Saloon and Dance Hall (a local physician) allowed us to use those facilities on Sunday mornings only. Holy Family Parish started public worship services in the Sundancer Country Western Saloon, located on Boulder Highway and Indios Street on Sunday, July 27, 1975.

The Las Vegas environment of spectacular entertainment at the big hotels provided the talent and skill for theatri-

cal production to transform a saloon (familiar to the days of the Old West) into a contemporary worship space. Stage hands from a Las Vegas Strip Hotel were enlisted to make the Sundancer Saloon look like a church sanctuary. This singular, and unusual experience, lasted for 3 years.

Within a short period of time the acceptable country western saloon went from a dance hall to a topless discotheque. At the same time our growing membership found St. Matthew Episcopal Church's sanctuary becoming too small.



Nathaniel Crosby,
Mary C. Crosby,
Kathryn Crosby & Bing
(left to right)

An urgent effort was undertaken to raise funds for building a new, larger facility. Our small community effort to raise sufficient funds to erect a building would have fallen very short of our needed funds. However, we had good response to many of our memorable Spaghetti Suppers and we gained the help of friends for our first parishioner building fund drive in 1976. Motivated by the immediate and the critical need to get out of the saloon, now turned topless discotheque, I was spurred on in our search for extraordinary resources for funds. It was the late Bing Crosby (with family and friends) who learned about our dilemma. They responded to "help the Holy Family get out of the saloon." On Thanksgiving Weekend 1976, Bing Crosby and family



Mrs. "Frankie Carr",
Opal Carozza,
Luau Benefit

gave a Las Vegas Benefit at the Aladdin Hotel to move us from saloon to sanctuary. When you think about it, the country western and topless discotheque experience paralleled the changing times of entertainment experienced in our present day.

A 1977 survey of our parishioners found a strong

need for a building to accommodate the multipurpose use of both church and hall. In planning the original multipurpose building, I was inspired by a wood sculpture of the Holy Family in naming the Parish, Holy Family. The original multipurpose sanctuary for Holy Family Parish was completed in 1978 and was dedicated on the first anniversary of our benefactor Bing Crosby's death, October 18, 1978.

Father Ben in the
bulldozer



Reflecting on the progress and population growth

of our town, our own short history of twenty-one years mirrors the present. In 1982 we expanded the multipurpose building with meeting rooms off the entrance. The function of the multipurpose sanctuary and hall was then completed through the design of movable partitions that

segmented the floor space into three (and eventually five) more spaces in order to be able to conduct the multiple activities demanded as well as the worship services.

THE MEDJUGORJE EXPERIENCE, 1986

This is the way I came to hear and learn about Medjugorje and what was happening there. In August of 1985 I was visiting friends in Queens, New York who had recently returned from a family tour of Europe. They told me of their visit to Yugoslavia, and in particular to the village of Medjugorje. My attention was drawn to the emphasis they placed on the large number of clergy hearing confessions and the numerous faithful receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation.



It was only after my return home from the vacation that I was impacted with additional reports of happenings in Yugoslavia. Some parishioners requested the use of the parish meeting room for a presentation on the life of Padre Pio. On this occasion some young women in attendance interested me in a video account of the occurrences. The video presentation on the happenings at Medjugorje moved me beyond comprehension. After viewing the video, and hearing reports from individuals who had recently travelled to Yugoslavia, I was indeed impressed. A short time afterward, I learned of the connection between Padre Pio and the alleged apparitions of Our Lady in

Medjugorje. My reaction was amazement. If this were true, the experience of Lourdes and Fatima could be dwarfed—like a pimple on a pumpkin. Though my reaction initially was casual and cautious, the repeated reports of eyewitnesses furthered my curiosity. I reviewed the video tapes, read the two publications available at that time, and compared notes on Lourdes and Fatima as well as Bayside, Garabandal, etc. Furthermore, I inquired about the many other reports of visions and visionaries.

Medjugorje just seemed too real and too authentic, which created within me an insatiable desire to experience it for myself. My initial plan was to organize and lead a small pilgrimage. But the attempt was frustrated by the curt advice of Sr. Isabel Bettwy. She cryptically responded to my inquiries with the astute discernment that I should seriously consider going there alone before attempting to lead others; I followed her advice. I felt an urgency and an irrational need to go. I was strangely impelled to find out for myself, but at the same time skeptical.

Following Easter Sunday of 1986, on Monday, I took off for Medjugorje. My flight to Yugoslavia was by way of Zurich, Switzerland. After the layover in Zurich, I arrived in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia on the Wednesday after Easter in 1986. Cautioned by my skepticism, I rented a car and reserved a hotel room in the city of Mostar, about 30 miles outside of Medjugorje. It was late afternoon when I finally arrived at the St. James Church. My contact, Sister Isabel Bettwy, was to inform Sister Janja Boras of my arrival. Upon arriving, I was instructed to look for

Sister Janja. While there, I observed people were already entering church and many were lined up (apparently going to confession to more than a few Franciscans) out in a large meadow beside the church.

Feeling quite lost and tired, I went inside looking for a nun. I knelt down to pray—toying with my Rosary. Being very distracted, I closed my eyes. Unexpectedly, from within myself, I became aware of an inner voice repeating, “Don’t be afraid, Don’t be afraid.” I arose quickly and retreated to the back, shaking my senses. While the church was filling up, I looked about anxiously hoping for a familiar nun or friar. Again, I returned to the side of the sanctuary, knelt, and with eyes wide open staring at the altar, I was distracted by the inner senses repeating, “Don’t be afraid”. Rising again, I turned to discover a familiar robed Franciscan who happened to be Fra. Slavko Barbaric. I asked for directions to Janja and he directed me to the sacristy. I went there and introduced myself to the nun I found there. I learned that Sr. Janja would be there after Mass. After my learning this, she offered me an alb and stole, wherewith I joined about 20 or 30 other priests concelebrating Mass in the Croatian venacular.

Following Mass, I found Janja with one of the visionaries putting away the priest robes. After introducing myself, she scolded me for being late and instructed me to meet her at the rectory. She directed me to follow another sister to where I was to stay. I objected, informing her that I had accommodations in Mostar. She would not hear of it, insisting that I go

with Sister Catherine Sims from Boston (thank God, I had a toothbrush in the car).

Sister Catherine led the way to the home of Simon Barac where I was welcomed with great warmth and invited to have dinner. During the meal, Sister Catherine asked bluntly why was I was in Medjugorje. The strangest thing happened: I blurted out with a deep sob, "I have come to see my Mother." I cried almost hysterically, not being able to control myself. Finally calming down, I explained that I did not know what had come over me. No one seemed surprised at my behaviour.

The next morning I returned to Mostar, retrieved my luggage, checked out and returned to Medjugorje. That same afternoon Sister Janja asked if I had any clerical clothes with me. I replied that I had. She informed me I was to be at the rectory no later than 5:00 p.m. in order to join the visionaries in the room for the Apparition. As I knelt next to Maria Pavlovic, the experience was awesome. On leaving the room, and going over for the evening concelebrated Mass, I was aware at one point of a sensation of floating down the stairs. Call it what you will, I cannot forget

it nor deny it. On another visit to Medjugorje with my cousin Eleanor (traveling by bus from the airport not far from the crossroad entering Medjugorje), while I was looking out the window of the bus, my eyes witnessed the sun pulsating

Sr. Margaret Kreuper
& Fr. John McShane



toward the earth, spinning. When the sun stopped spinning, there appeared a magnificent halo of crimson red. The halo then parted from the sun to make up a beautifully formed heart. To the heart shaped halo I could only exclaim, "I love you too."

Medjugorje gave me an extraordinary witness to its authenticity; I cannot in any way diminish its impact upon me personally. This experience has extended its aurora to impact the Holy Family Parish. I will give a full accounting of it all in a book I am planning to write.

Two weeks after my return from Medjugorje, on April 26, 1986, an arson fire destroyed our church sanctuary (the same memorable day as the Russian nuclear fire in Chernobyl). Parishioners found themselves worshipping in a 100 foot tent. Our fire was a purifying religious experience. Onlookers marveled at our calm acceptance of this disaster. For eight months we worshipped in a tent during the restoration of our church. Faithful members endured the sum-



mer's heat and the winter's cold rain and wind. Grateful to God, we returned to our restored sanctuary Christmas of 1986.

Since my initial experience in Medjugorje, I returned eight times; rebuilt the church and in 1987 I established the Medjugorje Information Center of Las Vegas. In 1992, "to tell of God's infinite mercy," I presented a Marian Conference at the Las Vegas Convention Center. It is amazing what God's grace can accomplish; the Holy Spirit is never to be outdone.

Also in 1987 we began planning to build a Parish Hall and Day Care facility. However, after study and consultation with Bishop Walsh, it was decided that it would be more feasible to build a proper sanctuary and church. The present multipurpose church and hall could then be remodeled to serve as our parish hall as well as accommodate a daily mass chapel.

Divine Providence and His mercy has brought all our beginnings to completion. On March 25, 1995 our Holy Family Parish Community was blessed to have our new worship facility consecrated by Bishop Daniel Walsh. On that same day of dedication, Bishop Walsh announced that Our Holy Father Pope John Paul II had conveyed the honor of "Monsignor" upon me.



Subsequent to these autobiographical pages that celebrate my seventy-fifth birthday and twenty-one years as founding pastor of Holy Family Parish, I will retire as Pastor August 1, 1996.

MY RETIREMENT

A time of reflection and contemplation of the past,
the present, the future.

Allow me to begin with re-reading the wisdom
described in the ancient Book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 3.

“There is a season for everything,
A time for every occupation under heaven,
A time for giving birth,
A time for dying,
A time for planting,
A time for uprooting what has been planted,
A time for killing,
A time for healing,
A time for knocking down,
A time for building,
A time for tears,
A time for laughter,
A time for mourning,
A time for dancing,
A time for throwing stones away,
A time for gathering them,
A time to embrace,
and a time to refrain from embracing;
A time to seek,
and a time to lose;
A time to keep,
and a time to throw
away;
A time to tear,
and a time to sew;
A time to keep silence,
and a time to speak;
A time to love,
and a time to hate;
A time for war,
and a time for peace.
(A time for letting go,
a time for stepping
aside;
and a time for Retirement.)



Father Ben in Cologne
(Mother Franzinelli's
Ancestral Countyside)

My gratitude to God and to His people, His church, can be best expressed with the words of the gracious testimonial of Our Blessed Mother, in Her Magnificat.”

Allow me to acclaim the magnificent mercy of the Lord for the wonderful things He has done to me, for me, and with me.

THE MAGNIFICAT

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
For he has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness;
behold, from now on all ages call me blessed.
The Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is His name.
His mercy is from age to age to those who fear him.
He has shown might with his arm,
and dispersed the arrogant of mind & heart.
He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones,
but lifted up the lowly.
The hungry he has filled with good things;
the rich he has sent away empty.
He has helped Israel his servant,
remembering his mercy,
According to his promise
to our Father,
to Abraham and his
descendants forever.”



