

By Patrick Carolan

Fanning the Flame of the Franciscan Charism



Nora Pfeiffer participated in a 2017 pilgrimage to Latin America dedicated to caring for creation.



Nora and fellow pilgrims brought icons of Francis and Clare, pictured here at the equator in Ecuador.



One of Nora's projects while on mission in Bolivia involved repurposing old tires as compost bins.

Nora Pfeiffer grew up in Virginia with her three siblings. She was raised in the Catholic faith, was a Jesuit volunteer after college, and later participated in a JustFaith program. As is the case with many young people, Nora has a spark inside of her. She has a strong commitment to justice centered in her Catholic faith but wasn't sure how to turn the spark into a flame.

Around this time, Nora attended a retreat at her parish. It was the first time she met a professed Franciscan, Joe Nangle, OFM. Friar Joe shared his experience as a missionary in South America and his work on justice in the United States.

Nora left the retreat a different person. "As Joe spoke about his values and experiences, I felt like a candle that was just barely lit was being fanned into a flame inside me," Nora recalls. While she knew she was not being called to become a professed Franciscan, Nora wanted to be part of what Friar Joe had.

Nora continued her friendship with Friar Joe. He helped guide her through a discernment process that led Nora to quit her job and become an overseas lay missionary with Franciscan Mission Service (FMS). The process started with an intense three-month formation. It was here that she learned that Franciscan identity was about being with people, not doing for people. During her formation, Nora encountered another Franciscan, Sister Ilia Delio. One night after bratwurst and beers, Sister Ilia shared with the group

that the solidarity of Francis is conversational: sitting face-to-face with someone as he or she is, naming the good in the midst, exchanging the good, and returning the good to the source—God.

"I will never forget that evening with Ilia and her words, 'We don't really believe in our own divine vocation—salvation cannot be fully complete without our participation,' which compelled me to view the potential of both my life and that of every other person in a new way," says Nora.



Nora Pfeiffer

For the next three years, Nora served as a lay missionary in Bolivia. It was here that Nora met another Franciscan friar, Iggy Harding, OFM. Friar Iggy guided Nora and her fellow missionaries through their challenges, fears, and joys of living in a different land and culture. For Nora, it was a time of spiritual growth and learning more about the Franciscan lifestyle. For her, the experience was a true gift, leaving her place of security and comfort in order to more fully

enter into exchange and be able to receive. During her time on mission, Nora accompanied children recovering from severe burns, produced two weekly radio shows in Spanish on ecological and social issues from a Franciscan perspective, and collaborated on a project to promote domestic composting in old tires and small family gardens in a poor area.

"Being able to answer the call to go on overseas mission was a privilege, since most people in the world cannot afford to not work, but the thing about mission is that, in reality,



"The challenge to live out the Gospel of love is ongoing across all borders and phases in life," says Nora.

it is not a compartmentalized time in one's life that requires moving to another place; rather mission is part of our baptismal call," Nora says. "The challenge to live out the Gospel of love is ongoing across all borders and phases in life."


BACK TO BOLIVIA

After her three-year missionary commitment was over, Nora decided to return to Bolivia. She went to work with her friend and mentor Friar Iggy, first with the Bolivian Franciscan Family's Movement for Justice and Peace, then with Franciscans International (FI). In working with FI, Nora was able to help build relationships with the Franciscans working at the United Nations in New York and Geneva and the Franciscan family in Latin America. Nora worked on issues such as violence against women and children, extreme water and soil pollution from mining and other extractive industries, and safeguarding the indigenous communities and protected areas from these lucrative interests. During this time, Nora married her husband, Alvaro, and they had a daughter, Evelyn.

After living in Bolivia for nine years, Nora returned to the United States and began exploring what it means to live out a lifelong mission in one's country of origin. A chance meeting at an FMS reception led to Nora's next path on her journey. She was offered a position with the Franciscan Action Network (FAN).

She was hired by FAN to serve in shaping and guiding the building of a movement of faithful engagement in the public sphere, rooted in the Franciscan tradition—the Franciscan Solidarity Tables. These tables are open to Franciscan-hearted individuals and people from all branches of the Franciscan family tree to take part in this grassroots advocacy initiative that intends to move them toward being a community of love in action.

Rooted in the rich Franciscan tradition of walking alongside the marginalized and holding a deep reverence for all of creation, the Franciscan Solidarity Tables are empowered to engage the issues that are important to them in their communities, seeking to restore just relations. The process guides people toward addressing the root causes of social sinfulness that persistently compromise God's hope for all creation. "If you have a thirst for justice and for nurturing Franciscan values in your life, we invite you to join the Franciscan Solidarity Table community!" Nora exclaims. The tables are a way to respond to Pope Francis' call to create a "culture of encounter" and imitate both Francis' and Clare's examples of taking seriously the challenge to becoming a living Gospel right where we find ourselves.

Like so many who have been touched by the spirituality of St. Francis and the presence of Franciscans all over the globe, Nora will tell you that once the Franciscan spirit gets inside, it's hard to take it out! 

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FRANK ASPER, OFM

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