

The Blessing of the Agape Chapel--November 22, 2009

The chapel that will be blessed today is a great and mysterious occasion. Dedicated to Dan Lawrence, chief builder and generous giver of his life to the building of Francis House, Dan Lawrence, pray for us.

The inspiration to build the chapel originated during Suzanne and my time on sabbatical, over a year ago. The six chapels we frequented in the US, Ireland and Scotland, inspired us--so carefully, so creatively, so prayerfully were all the chapels conceived and constructed. I was motivated to return home and fulfill a twenty-two year old dream--to build an Agape chapel. We would use this space for daily prayer, special occasions, retreats and liturgies. We began building in August and finished November 1st.

What does it mean to build a chapel, a sacred space? A special sanctuary is a place to listen, for a calling, for reassurance, for the nonviolent Jesus to speak the Truth. But certainly, neither Suzanne nor I had ever conceived together the brazen idea of actually constructing a community chapel.

We did have a long and wonderful history with friend and Agape architect, Bob Wegener who designed Francis House, Brigid House and The Hermitage. Add to this core of creators, Fran Reagan, carpenter, musician, prayer-filled Christian and close friend of Dan Lawrence, who became our master builder. So, on one level, we were all Catholics who stay within our own tradition, but on the margins. We somehow maintain our church allegiance, through the good times and the bad.

We come to this moment shaped and formed by the mystical tradition of the sacraments. We have been molded in the powerful legacy of social justice, nonviolent witness and solidarity with the poor that lie at the heart of Catholic Christianity. Although we have been a part of the larger sense of universal church, our uniqueness at Agape is that we are a small, lay community. As we began to be called to literally build a chapel, we had nothing to go on but our years of spiritual experience and nonviolent living as Catholic laypersons.

The bedrock uniqueness of this chapel is that four cradle Catholics, church-going (for the most part) contemplative types (help our unbelief Lord), and followers of the nonviolent Jesus (hopefully), conceived, designed and built this sacred space for worship. Because we at Agape are accustomed to trusting ourselves and how we are called, we never really felt the impulse to venture outside the foursome to determine how actually to build a chapel. There were no established rubrics to follow, to define the space, no traditional rules of chapel architecture to guide us in building this place of worship in the Catholic tradition. We received no input from the local priest, diocesan Bishop--no permission requested or denied.

We had continually to fall back on our experience of faith, our trusting in the gut level of our inner life and the creative impulse. Through the building process, we kept dialoguing back and forth, Suzanne, Fran, Bob and me. The chapel resided in our souls, somewhere and, once committed to building it, it began to reside on the land as an extension of Francis House.

Suzanne provided the lens of feed back and tirelessly "fed" the crew--Paul Lavalley, Paul Chevalier, Peter Anderson and Fran. Bob's skill and quiet perseverance disciplined the ideas and provided the footprint. As

the helmsman, he could turn the ship in an instant, to yield or offer a new idea. There was always order and integration to maintain. The chapel must be a perfect outcropping of Francis House.

Fran was the virtuoso, the creator and builder of the inspired nook that houses the cross and stain glass window, and the face of Jesus. As for me, I constantly agonized, to conceive, assist and of course run to get materials.

And what do we want this chapel to be? A bridge to the future. There is fundamental uncertainty in our future as Catholics and Christians. As religious life dies back, the role of the laity and women moves up and in. Can we model, in this newly conceived sacred space, a vibrant and authentic faith in Jesus that speaks directly in our times of war, violence and environmental peril? Can we be truly Christians in whom Christ is risen and be a place where young people and especially women find a true home and discover their own prophetic voice?

Please God, let it be done in your name of compassion and love.

Brayton Shanley

Profound Appreciation

Becca, a senior at Assumption College here in Worcester, asked me a question during an interview for a course she is taking, one that many young interviewers have asked over the past 30 years of life in community, since those early days when Paul Hood, Quaker friend and co-conspirator in our first resistance community, Ailanthus, built the first Agape chapel in Charlie McCarthy's living room in Brockton, MA: What made you want to choose this way of life?

Immediately the nostalgia juices get going, as they do more frequently with every passing year and each new sign of aging. I remember that John Leary was 20 or so then, alive and vigorous, and the feeling among us was that a chapel for Divine Liturgy after Charlie's ordination as a Melkite priest, was the most powerful manifestation of our commitment to the nonviolent Christ. Prayer must be at the center, together with community.

Moving to the woods of Hardwick, over many cups of coffee and lots of pastry at Dan Lawrence's favorite restaurant in Clinton, MA, I believe, after Dan got out of jail for an act of Divine Obedience, led to a partnership with Dan and the building of Francis House, designed, of course by Bob Wegener.

We crafted the small sanctuary/chapel, which was intended as a living room and began our daily prayer routine three times a day, 18 months of those days with Dan Lawrence who lived on the second floor, in one of the rooms that he built.

And now, we honor Dan, whose birthday is in a few weeks, by dedicating this chapel to him and the sound rings true: The Dan Lawrence Chapel.

Dan's spirit, Brayton's vision, Bob's skill, were guiding lights in the building process, fraught with all of the complications of such ventures, as I have learned all too well over the years, living in one construction site after another, including having a sheep pen built by Dan in our Francis House living room, to protect Teresa, our daughter, then a year old and crawling around, from the 50 dollar wood burning stove in the middle of the living room.

My role, as that of women over the years, was the nourisher, provider of coffee, soup, salad, hosting with other women and men, the throngs of volunteers, and always, before, after and during, cleaning, cleaning, cleaning. One imagines the ceaseless activity of the women, mostly written out of Scripture, in the early church, the background music of most of the great movements that have occurred in it.

But, as always, this project is and will be, larger than the individual players--Bob, Fran, Brayton, Paul, and Paul, Peter and me, and of course, the spirit, ever-pervading of Daniel Lawrence.

The experience of what Dan's energy, spirit and selflessness mean today has already occurred two weeks ago, when 20 young adults, ranging in age from 23-40, some of them former Agape interns and volunteers, gathered here at Agape and we used the chapel for public worship for the first time.

Finding a priest, searching for a Mass presider becomes more and more elusive and less and less an option, except for the likes of a John Sullivan, who has traveled back and forth to Agape over 25 years for retreats and gatherings. For our inauguration of the chapel, this time, however, we had Edgar Hayes, a former intern and our first and only African-American intern. I mention this only because with his wife, Ann and their two children Josiah and Micah, in their bi-racial marriage, they have as a family, co-founded a Christian community in upstate New York modeled after Agape, called Freedom Farm.

Edgar, a talented musician, used our native American drum as an African substitute and sang, recited, chanted and drummed the creation story from Genesis, right here in this chapel. The sights and sounds made all of our hearts soar and yours would have too. That evening, Casey Stanton, a Notre Dame grad and former volunteer, created, with the help of Autumn Cutting who currently interns at Agape, and many of the young people on retreat here, an Agape Meal, worthy of this place. My heart sang to see Casey, a compelling, gifted leader, hold up Scripture and lift up bread, symbolizing our unity.

Profound appreciation goes to John Sullivan and so many terrific priests who have served Agape over the years, including David Gill our chaplain of 12 years, and their openness to the changing church. This chapel may hold in the future, long beyond our fleeting lives as co-founders, many more such para-liturgies and actual ones, God-willing, with women as celebrants.

In the meantime, the Spirit moves and She cannot be repressed, as people gather today in Georgia at the annual SOA witness, led by prophet-priest, Roy Bourgeoisie. We pray for them in solidarity as we bow our heads and lift up our hearts to read the signs of the times that you asked us, Jesus, to do.

We are reading them and they spell--change, love, youth, prayer, beauty, earth, sustainability, resistance, movement, creativity.

We are ready. Thank you Jesus, thank you Dan, Bob, Brayton, Fran and all of the spirits of all of the women cooks, bakers and nourishers who dwell herein.

Suzanne Belote Shanley

