



Forty years later, 'The Dream' lives on

BY TONI CASHNELLI

The Sisters of the Atonement have a ritual when they lead people to rooms at their guest house in Assisi.

They pause at Room 12 to announce, "And this is where **Fr. Murray Bodo** wrote his book about Francis." It's the "Washington slept here" kind of association that gives a place the aura of a shrine.

Murray laughs as he reveals this, as though it is beyond belief that a space he once occupied would become an object of veneration. But what happened in Room 12 could best be described as a minor miracle. In 1972 Murray, a teacher and an up-and-coming poet, produced a slim paperback of prose that defined his future and continues to inspire readers around the world in ways he could never have imagined.

Asked to name their favorite book about their favorite saint, many choose *Francis: The Journey and the Dream*, a work that far surpassed the expectations of its author and its publisher (St. Anthony Messenger Press, now Franciscan Media). More than 200,000 copies have been sold in English, Spanish, German, Italian, Chinese, Maltese, Portuguese, Slovenian and Korean. Last year when SAMP suggested a 40th-anniversary hardback edition, "I remember being stunned that it was 40 years" since its release, says

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PHOTO BY INGRID HENZLER

Murray Bodo writing at San Damiano in Assisi. He's been part of the team for Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs since 1976.

FROM JEFF

We friars have five "priorities" or core values that are to shape and guide our lives. Though developed a bit more in our documents, simply put, they are 1) prayer, 2) fraternity, 3) minority, 4) mission, and 5) formation. In my own experience one or the other may get more emphasis at certain times, for example, "prayer" when I am on retreat or "formation" when I am studying or taking a workshop, but in some ways they can't be separated and they all need to be part of the rhythm of our daily lives. Each influences and colors the others. When I pray, I pray as a member of a fraternity and out of my experience of mission. I bring my experience of mission back into prayer and prayer sends me back into mission. Minority shapes my living of fraternity and minority calls me to depend on the brothers. Ongoing formation strengthens all of this. I like to think of them like the transparencies often found in anatomy text books. You can study the transparency of the nervous system or the transparency of the digestive system, but they are printed on transparent plastic precisely

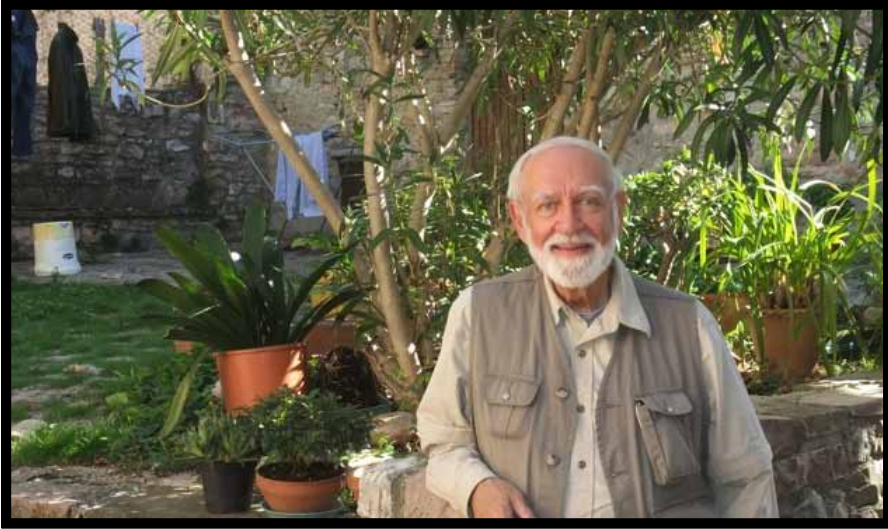
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Marking a milestone

Save the date: SJB Province will commemorate the 40th anniversary of *Francis: The Journey and the Dream* with a lecture by its author on Sunday,

April 22. **Murray Bodo** will repeat the presentation he gave in November at St. Bonaventure University for the Ignatius Brady Lecture series, "The Writer's Journey, the Poet's Passion". The time and place are yet to be determined. Stay tuned.



Murray in Assisi, the city that changed his life. "It has become a part of me," he says.

write that book here." A teacher at the minor seminary, Murray was a classic "2" on the Enneagram; fulfilling requests for help kept him hopping. "The Provincial, **Fr. Roger Huser**, knew me" and suggested a trip to the land of Francis. "I had never been to Assisi. The fact that I was going there was so extraordinary," says Murray, who had "only wanted some time off" to do the work.

Four months and counting

On Roger's advice, he took a room with the Sisters of the Atonement, up the street from the main piazza in Assisi, and settled into Room 12 with "a certain amount of panic. I had four months to get the book finished and get home. My great fear was that I would get writer's block." He spoke no Italian and had no resources. "I asked if anyone had a library," and was directed to local resident **Nesta de Robeck**, author of the classic 1951 biography, *St. Clare of Assisi*. Things fell into place.

Writer's block was rarely an issue. "From the moment I got to Assisi I felt inspired" by the palpable presence of Francis. When Murray says, "It was Francis speaking to me," he doesn't mean he was channeling a saint. The subject took over its author, words began to flow, and "I had a character who was developing right before my eyes," a composite of friars he had known and admired.

The days in Assisi fell into a pattern. Early riser Murray had Mass, ate breakfast, helped the Sisters serve their guests, then returned to Room 12 for a morning

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Murray. "It was quite a surprise and made me feel incredibly grateful that this book is still in print." In a foreword to the new edition, singer-songwriter **John Michael Talbot** wrote: "One of the most influential saints books ever...*Francis: The Journey and the Dream* continues to inspire people of all ages with its lyrical prose and depth of love for the Poor Man of Assisi."

There are other books about Francis, hundreds of them, but Murray's was the first to go behind the stern-faced frescoes and cement statues to reveal an imperfect visionary with a passion for life and the Lord. Reading *The Journey and the Dream* is like opening a window on the soul of a saint.

Prose from a poet

"I look upon this book as a gift – a gift of the Province, a gift of Francis, a gift of **Jeremy Harrington**," Murray says. "When I look back now I just have this enormous gratitude." It was Jeremy, then Editor of *St. Anthony Messenger*

Press, who approached Murray with the project 42 years ago. "It was only obedience that led me to do it. They wanted a popular book, not a biography. I protested I couldn't do it because I was a poet." But Jeremy thought otherwise. "He knew I was enamored of the Franciscan story. He knew I had it in me to write a prose book, but neither of us knew what that was going to be."

Asked to produce a chapter, Murray commandeered a table at Carter's Restaurant on Winton Road one morning and put pen to paper. "I gave the chapter to Jeremy and he liked it." Excited but intimidated, Murray wondered what to write – and how to write it.

Then came the first of many "Thank you, Lord" moments. "In my first exploration of the text, the great break was the 'frame' that came to me: The book is to begin with Francis dying. It was like an epiphany. He was going to be remembering. The framework was one of memory, and that of course helped me. It enabled me to take a point of view." The second revelation: "I knew I could not

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of writing in longhand. Afternoons were for typing with carbon paper sandwiched between pages, a messy, frustrating exercise. After dark, “I would walk the streets of Assisi, observing. I wanted to get a feel for the streets and countryside. It helped me ingest the ‘mystique’ of Assisi.”

Persnickety as he is with words, “*The Journey and the Dream* was fairly easy for me to write,” he says. “I had been ‘pre-writing’ that book since I was 14. I was always rehearsing stories of Francis in my mind. I’d read all of **Ignatius Brady**’s writings in college. So when I came to write *The Journey and the Dream*, the story itself was so embedded in my consciousness that I only needed to find only a point of view, a voice, and a title that would crystallize all of the information I had been pouring into my head all these years.”

No expectations

Typing his final page, “I remember thinking, ‘I have no idea if this is any good or will speak to others,’ but it spoke to me. I remember Jeremy was happy with it.” With drawings by **John Quigley** and a cover designed by **Larry Zink**, *Francis: The Journey and the Dream* was released in 1972 with little fanfare. No one sought an interview. “It was

a slow starter and didn’t take hold right away,” Murray says. In the beginning, “my greatest fans were my own students and Secular Franciscans. About half a year after it came out, there was a review in *Cord* magazine by [Franciscan scholar]

Raphael Brown. He said it was ‘the best kept Franciscan secret of the year.’” The biggest break was the 1972 release of **Franco Zeferelli**’s *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, the glossy, dramatized life of Francis. In an Age of Aquarius, it fueled the imagination of a generation disillusioned by war and saddened by violence. In the film and in Murray’s book, they found a real-life hero. By 1973, “People were asking me to talk about the book, asking me to formation programs,” Murray says. “I wasn’t going to question what they were experiencing reading the book. When it really hit me was when people said it changed their lives. It was very humbling, but also unbelievable.”

Asked if he ever tires of talking



Walking helped Murray “ingest the ‘mystique’ of Assisi.”

about it, like a rock star who’s always singing his greatest hit, Murray shakes his head no. “It always gives me an opportunity to talk about Francis, who along with Jesus is one of the passions of my life.”

Forty years, dozens of books and hundreds of poems later, the work that is still most celebrated, most closely associated its author, is *The Journey and the Dream*. Facing his 75th birthday in June, “It is like I did the book of my life at 35 years old,” Murray says. “Everything I have written since, its seed, its germ, are in that book. I smile at myself and wonder if I should have stopped there.”

Fortunately for us, he did not.

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so that you can put them on top of one another and get a sense of how all the systems that make up the marvelous human body work together. Recently **Roger Lopez** shared with me a reflection he heard that suggested we should consider the order in which the priorities are given. Prayer, fraternity and minority are listed first for a reason; they are foundational. In practice, in our daily lives, these are often sacrificed

as we give most time and energy to the later ones, especially mission and ministry. We can get so caught up in the good work that we are doing that we don’t give sufficient time and energy to the foundational values. It is something to think about.

– **Jeff Scheeler, OFM**