

Reflection on what St. Francis means to me, 14 November 2021

I want to thank Mark and Debra for inviting me to speak and all of you for listening to what I have to say.

And I want to commend John for his remarks last week. I have a tough act to follow, and I give you fair warning that I won't be as funny!

And while you're hear a couple of the same themes, I swear I did not pinch from John!

When Mark asked me to talk about what St. Francis means to me, I – like John (and others!) - think of community or some variation on that theme. But I want to tee up some observations from a more personal perspective and then step back and look a little more broadly at the idea of community at St. Francis and St. Francis in the world.

On the more personal front:

Many of you are aware that, in fact, I no longer live in Stamford. That's because, in February 2020, I got really lucky – and luck is the operative word - and was offered an opportunity in Washington, D.C. that I just could not refuse, as they say.

But that great stroke of luck demanded two sacrifices: One was material. I would miss my house – indeed, I would miss the “feel” of this beautiful part of our nation - but I managed to solve for that. More difficult, at least initially, was: How was I ever going to find a community like St. Francis in DC and Annapolis, where I now live? (This is not my first rodeo in DC, and I had a sense of a few of the faith communities in the DC area.) While no substitute for the human bond, Zoom and LocalLive in the age of COVID has kept a lot of us, including me, plugged in and helped keep the isolation at bay.

But, back in the spring of 2020, why stress, you may ask, about leaving St. Francis?

Like John, I was raised Catholic – *really* Catholic – but in Providence, RI. Many relatives entered religious orders; until I got to college, all the schools I attended were Catholic schools; my father made his living as a church organist. Indeed, my first job, in high school, was as a church organist, too. (I was terrible.) My family were pretty much fixtures in the parish.

But as I moved on from Providence, to college, grad school both in the US and abroad, and various jobs, I never found another parish – and there were MANY, one for each stop - where most folks knew my name or paid any attention to whether I attended. And, truth be told, that didn't bother me so much. I was busy managing my life.

When I came to Stamford in 2016, I was looking for a church, asking folks I knew for recommendations. One friend suggested St. Francis. She had heard that St Francis had a pretty good music program....

Even more surprisingly, Mark and Debra actually greeted me by name when I came back that second Sunday! (That hadn't happened at any other church in a long, long time.) And I've come to know, and care for, many other parishioners here at St. Francis. We take to heart the directive to be your brother's keeper.

So, on one level, the St. Francis community, for me, is very much about the human connection, one on one.

But every Sunday, when I boot up my laptop from my dining room table, St. Francis makes me think about the “bigger picture”; what it means to be “in community” with your fellow life travelers and what it means to make our community – and our nation - stronger.

There is much talk about rebuilding our national fabric and “Building Back Better”. To my mind, it's not just about, say, the absolute imperatives of infrastructure, climate change, and universal pre-K. But building back better can't just happen, I firmly believe, in the halls of Congress and on other national stages.

For me, that's a challenge. A seemingly daunting task for a lone human being. After all, what can I do? But what I hear every Sunday is that St. Francis – and all the people who make up the body of St. Francis - are a small, but mighty, force to make the community – and, in turn, the nation – better: That's what I hear when Mark invites us to

- Tune into the mayoral debate;
- Join serious discussions, in multiple forums, of systemic racism and how to break its toxic grip;
- Join with, for example, Building One, to determine how we can serve our brethren in a sustained way;

- Welcome Afghan refugee families to Stamford; and
- Hear the messages of those from different traditions and experiences, such as the inimitable Rev. Dawn Snell.

And I confess that, unlike John, I haven't done enough Bible study and certainly need to read the Book of Judges!

So, in sum, what does St. Francis mean to me?

Yes, it's the music;

it's the people who are keeping an eye out for each other, who might ask where you are if you haven't shown up – or dialed in – recently;

and it's the people who, through their everyday actions, I know, are working to make our community more diverse, more egalitarian, and more inclusive.

Thank you.