

The San Damiano Foundation

A FRANCISCAN MINISTRY PUTTING THE POWER OF FILM AT THE SERVICE OF THE POOR



APRIL 2008

A newsletter
to our
friends and
supporters

Christ is not
asking us
to be
successful
or productive.
Christ is
looking for us
to be
present...



SAM
Serere, Uganda
August 2007

Sam, Esther, and Jane

Transformation is Possible

By Gerry Straub

Last August, I mailed everyone a story about two starving kids with polio we found laying half-naked in the dirt. The story of Sam & Esther and the photos I enclosed touched many people. During last fall and Advent as I traveled to schools and churches, I showed the scene from the Uganda film that captured the painful experience of finding those abandoned kids. Everyone who saw the scene was moved to help. We raised over \$10,000 for *Village2Village*, the organization headed by Laurie Kroll working with orphaned kids in the remote village of Serere, Uganda.

My time in Africa has given me a new way to look at life. Virtually everything I do is measured against the reality of suffering in Africa. Once you've seen the suffering, you can't *unsee* it. You might try to forget it, but you can't *unknow* it. Everything after Africa, for me, is a choice. Either I ignore what I saw or I try to fix what I saw - even though the problems appear unsolvable. But I'm too small and the problem too big. What can I do? What should I do? I don't know. I just know I must do something.

For many months, I've been pondering the deeper meaning of my encounter with Sam and Esther. Being with a child like Sam forces me to face my own poverty, my own weakness, my own insecurity, my own brokenness, my own hopelessness, my own isolation. In an odd way, while I'm trying to help Sam, Sam in fact is helping me. The lesson he

has taught me is: let go of everything. God's grace guided us down an uncharted path to an arid patch of dirt that was the bed upon which two feeble, helpless children of God lay awaiting a fate unknown. Life or death were their only options, but they were powerless to choose. We are all lying on a bed of dirt, half naked, crippled and starving. We need God. We need each other.

A little more than four months after the end of our second trip to Uganda I felt an irresistible pull to return. Even though the thought of making another grueling trip to and from Uganda was so unattractive, Jeremy and I once again headed back to Africa in January. We knew that Sam and Esther had dramatically improved since we had found them. I did not want the film to show only the horror of their lives on the day we found them. We wanted to end on a more hopeful note, one that demonstrates that one person can really make a difference.

**“When I walk with Jesus,
He always leads me to the
poorest, the lowliest and
the lost, so that I may
open my heart to them.”**

Jean Vanier

H O M E C O M I N G

When we arrived at Mama Helen's, the place was bristling with activity as everyone was getting ready to go to church. Sam's grandmother, known as Tata, was bathing Sam. We knew Sam & Esther had made great strides in their recovery



and that they were doing well. James would send us photos via e-mail once in awhile, so we could see their progress. But it was truly amazing to see them in

To see Jane not struggling to care for her siblings, looking happy and free, was a gift beyond all measure.

person; bright smiles lit up their faces, now round and full from months of nutritional rehabilitation. Their tiny bodies had been completely transformed, and their spirits lifted by being held and loved. We brought exercise balls for them to strengthen badly atrophied muscles and to stretch out ligaments and tendons bound up from years of immobility. Jane ran about Mama Helen's home, laughing and playing like a little girl of her age

should. My heart needed to see these kids in person. To see Jane not struggling to care for her siblings, looking happy and free, was a gift beyond all measure.

As with everything else in Uganda, even going to church is difficult. The walk was longer and harder than I had imagined. Sam and Esther had to be carried, and everyone took a turn bearing that burden. I was excited to get to have the experience of attending a rural church. The church was simple, just a few chairs, most people sitting on mats covering the dirt floor. Despite their poverty, everyone was dressed nicely.

I loved the upbeat manner of their worship. The exuberant music, the robust singing, the joyful dancing turned the simple church into a palace of praise. As I watched the way this entire community embraced and loved Sam and Esther, my thoughts kept drifting back to the dreadful day when we found them laying nearly naked on the ground, starving and alone. And now a true miracle of mercy finds them bathed in overflowing love, smack in the middle of a joyful community gathered together for prayer and worship. Transformation is possible. One person can make a

On the Road for Lent

During Lent, I visited six Catholic high schools in four states – Ohio, Missouri, Georgia and Rhode Island – speaking and showing clips from SDF films to over 4,000 students. At each event, I showed one or two scenes from the unfinished Uganda film. The Sam and Esther scene shocked the kids. Many pledged to sponsor an orphaned child in Uganda. I ended each of my presentations with these words:



Jane with her sponsor, Gerry

*Christ is not asking us
to be successful
or productive.
Christ is looking for us
to be present...
present to God (in prayer),
and present to each other.
Present to each other in acts
of love and mercy,
especially present to the poor
and the suffering.*

*But we don't really take Jesus
seriously.*

*We don't love our enemies.
We don't turn the other cheek.
We don't forgive 70 x 7 times.
We don't bless those who curse us.*

*We don't share
what we have with the poor.
We don't put
all our hope and trust in God.*

*We say: I am not a saint.
We say: This Gospel stuff can't be
meant for everybody.
We say: The Gospel is an ideal.*

*But the gospel is not merely an
ideal. The Gospel is the Way.*

*Lent gives us the chance to see
we have strayed from the Way.
Lent is a time for self-examination,
a time for repentance
a time for acts of self-control
and acts of charity*

*through self-emptying.
But mostly Lent is a time
to enter into the suffering and
death of Jesus
which opened the reign
of God's grace
and eternal life to all humans.*

*Lent is a time
to take Jesus seriously.*

*"I am grateful for your invitation to
pray about what our own responses will
be to the call we have received.
Our students are praying and
organizing to take action."*

IN THE NEWS.....

- Our film WHERE LOVE IS was broadcast twice in November on CTND, the Catholic Television Network of Detroit. CTND is a cable channel that reaches at least 900,000 homes in the greater Detroit area and much of South East Michigan. While this regional cable network is clearly a niche channel, they do attract loyal viewers.
- The public radio station in Berkeley, California (KPFA Radio) played 30 minutes from the soundtrack of THE NARROW PATH. The station offered the DVD for a pledge of \$100, and they mentioned SDF. 36 listeners bought the film.
- April 23rd and 24th Gerry will be in Philadelphia speaking at Holy Family College, Fr. Judge and Conwell-Eagan Catholic high schools
- May 3rd is the annual San Damiano Board of Directors meeting, so please pray that it will be a spirit-guided time for all present, that we will be one in spirit and mind, and that new life and energy will be breathed into this humble ministry to the poor through film.
- May 21st Gerry will be in Youngstown, Ohio to give a two-day retreat for the Parish Ministers Annual Spring Retreat

Pilgrimage to Assisi

I am thrilled to announce that I will be going to Assisi in September to begin work on a film that has been in my heart for many years.

In the Footsteps of Saint Francis of Assisi is a film which takes the viewer on a pilgrimage to Italy, to Rome and all the towns and places in Umbria and Tuscany which played a vital role in the life and spirituality of St. Francis, God's poor little fool who still manages to inspire people eight centuries after his death in a tiny church in the valley below the mountainside town of Assisi. As we travel, the story of the life of St. Francis will be told. In each location the film visits, we will learn about the history and spirituality of the place, and offer a reflection on what it means to us.

In the Footsteps of Saint Francis of Assisi, besides being an impressionistic pilgrimage diary "written" as I journey to churches in Rome, the Rieti Valley, Assisi and La Verna, will trace my interior steps as I attempt to journey deeper into contemplation and the spiritual awakening that took place in an empty church in Rome in March of 1995, an experience which led to the writing of a book on St. Francis, which in turn led me to many of the worst slums on Earth. The film will be a "video scrapbook" of a 35-day trip beginning in September of 2008 and ending just after the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi on October 4th. Art, creativity and spirituality will fill every frame. The narrative will "look" back over my past thirteen years, as it probes the deeper meaning of the spiritual life and what it means to truly follow Jesus. The film will progress on two levels: the physical journey through the land of St. Francis of Assisi and the spiritual journey as I try to go deeper into the heart of God.

For the past few years, my heart has longed to return to Assisi, longed to go home, longed to return to the one place where I could find spiritual refreshment and renewal. I am profoundly grateful for the grace to go on a pilgrimage that will allow

me to once again walk *In the Footsteps of Saint Francis of Assisi*.

The film's theme reflects the heart of Franciscan spirituality, which understands that while finding God in the world, in pain and suffering, is essential, we must always remember that social action needs to be tempered and nurtured by contemplation. The "spiritual journey" narration will acknowledge my own personal struggles with prayer and periods of spiritual dryness. We will travel via train and bus to various towns that played important roles in the life and journey of St. Francis.

In the midst of our fast-paced, noisy, over-stimulated secular culture, where money, power and fame are worshipped, people are hungering for something deeper, something more meaningful and real. The film will offer viewers a glimpse into what their everyday world may not be able to offer them.

The story of St. Francis of Assisi is an authentically human drama with universal appeal, a story of an ordinary man who accomplished extraordinary things while transcending his time and place on his way to become a true saint of incarnation. His life was a visible manifestation of the conversion process that was going on inside of him. His life was his sermon. And his sermon still has something important to say to us today. *In the Footsteps of Saint Francis of Assisi* hopes, in the dawn of this new millennium, to animate that sermon.

This film has a projected budget of \$67,000 and to date we have raised \$13,000; we are urgently looking for 18 individuals, churches or schools to donate \$3,000 each to complete the film. Each donor will be thanked in the closing credits of the film. The SDF is a 501(c) non-profit charitable organization, and all donations are fully tax deductible.

Gerry Has a BLOG!!

signs and wonders

by Jeremy Seifert

**“Gerry has a blog?
It’s a sure sign
of the apocalypse!”**

-Chad Mochrie, editor

A few weeks ago I asked Gerry if he would be interested in starting a Blog. His brow crinkled with confusion and distrust mounted in his eyes. He replied, “I don’t even have a cell phone; what am I going to do with a Blog?” It was pointless even to suggest it, but I saw the potential for Gerry’s writing to find a public space where a wider audience could begin to connect with Franciscan spirituality and the work of San Damiano.

I decided to create the Blog in spite of Gerry’s firmly rooted reservations about joining the Blogosphere. He had never even visited a Blog! My friend, Wess, a Quaker and PhD student at Fuller Seminary, helped get the site up and running, and I added in all the elements and convinced Gerry to post at least one blog.

For those, like Gerry, who haven’t used or visited a blog, it is simply an online journal with a similar format to a website. Most of them are free, and they allow a public forum for both text and multimedia.

After one simple posting, Gerry became a blogoholic. He’s addicted, and his Blog has quickly become a place to go for wonderful quotations from spiritual guides of both past and present, and for his own reflections on the pilgrim’s progress to God. This new site, named “Gerry’s Blog,” created by a Quaker and a Mennonite, offers up daily bread from a Secular Franciscan with something for everyone.

“I love sharing with my friends and supporters quotations that have inspired me. And each day, I welcome the chance to offer my own personal reflections on the spiritual journey.”

-Gerry Straub

Visit Gerry’s blog for his daily reflections and quotations from a wide range of spiritual writers. Plus find the latest news from SDF, including Gerry’s upcoming speaking engagements!



Quote of the Day

© Published March 20, 2008 Quotes 0 Comments Edit

“We begin to sense our poverty when we begin to sense how far away we are from the master of the beatitudes, when we begin to sense how little we love our enemies, how aggressive we are, how little we are good shepherds, how little we live in community, how little we

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ABOUT OUR FILMS



©2003 57 MIN.

Holy Pictures is an hour-long meditation on the importance of stillness and silence in our prayer lives. This exquisitely crafted film reflects St. Francis of Assisi's passion for prayerful solitude, often in far-off, mountaintop hermitages where he earnestly sought God's will for his life.

"With a beautifully rendered script that mediates the return of our noisy minds to a healing silence, Holy Pictures conveys images that recall us to what our lives could be – indeed must be in this hour of our spiritual peril – if only we learn to pay attention."

– Jonathan Montaldo,
Former Director of the Thomas Merton Center

"What an inspiring doorway to quiet reflection! The uplifting images in Holy Pictures...along with the soft-spoken inspired narration brought about an inner calmness in me."

– Sr. Ramona Miller, OSF,
Franciscan School of Theology



©2004 130 MIN.

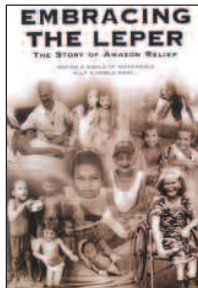
Endless Exodus exposes the unseen agony of undocumented migrants from Mexico and El Salvador who cross the border into the U.S. to escape the slow death of abject poverty. The film awakens the viewer to the life of the poor and why so many are forced to leave their homes and countries for a back-breaking, low-paying job in a foreign land whose culture differs so dramatically from theirs.

Endless Exodus is a remarkable piece of work. It gets under your skin...and doesn't easily get out."

– Joe Ferullo, CBS Paramount Television

"As sad as the visuals are, the beauty that shines through the film is unforgettable."

– Jay Ostrowski, Film Director



©2003 32 MIN.

Embracing The Leper tells the inspirational story of Jim Flickinger, a Secular Franciscan who gave up his successful law practice to form Amazon Relief, a nonprofit organization which aids the lepers and chronic poor of Manaus, Brazil, in the heart of the Amazon region. This short film brings the viewer face to face with the horrors of leprosy and introduces them to a man trying to soothe the suffering.

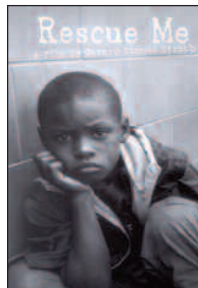
"Embracing the Leper is wonderful. People who see it are instantly moved to help. For example, last month I received an envelope full of checks from various out-of-state donors. The result was a large collection for Amazon Relief."

– Jim Flickinger, President, Amazon Relief



©2004 89 MIN.

Gerry Straub pauses in *Poverty and Prayer* to reflect on the impact of filming in the poorest places on earth. This film features the most powerful scenes from San Damiano's first five films, including some additional footage. The short segments cover a wide array of destitute places and people from around the globe, making it an essential educational tool for educators and enlightening wake up call for all viewers. This stunning collection includes the topics of global poverty, leprosy, homelessness, migration, and the desperate need for silence and prayer which leads to an active life of love and justice.

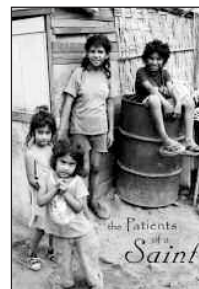


©2003 204 MIN.

Rescue Me takes a long and serious look at the tortured world of the homeless in the Skid Row section Los Angeles, where more than 10,000 people live in cardboard boxes, tents and over crowded missions, including a shocking number of women and children. The film highlights the amazing work of the Union Rescue Mission, which reaches out to the needy with food, shelter, and rehabilitation programs.

"Rescue Me is absolutely superb! This is a work of epic proportions. The film uniquely escorts the viewer through the tedium of being homeless because it captures the heart and soul of the poor in the streets of Los Angeles."

– Dr. Ralph E. Plumb, Former President & CEO,
Union Rescue Mission

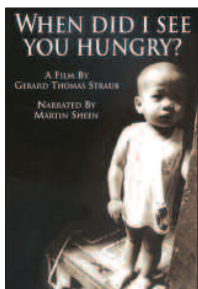


©2005 115 MIN.

The Patients of a Saint tells the inspirational story of an American doctor who abandoned the high-tech world of a university hospital to enter the harsh world of extreme poverty in Lima, Peru. The Hogar San Francisco de Asis, Tony's free clinic and home, houses 50 children suffering from an array of illnesses ranging from tuberculosis and cerebral palsy to malnutrition and leukemia. The National Catholic Development Conference (NCDC) recently awarded Dr. Tony the Good Samaritan Award for his work in Peru.

"I was a participant in the joy and the heartbreak, shedding tears along the way. Straub's gifted filmmaking allows us to see that God's grace can and does abound in a place of crippling poverty and debilitating disease."

– Hena Cuevas, *Life & Times*, KCET-TV Los Angeles

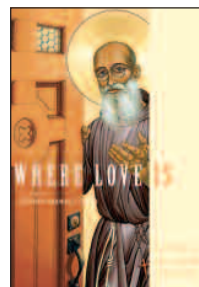


©2002 37 MIN.

Eloquently narrated by Martin Sheen, this film paints a bleak, yet hopeful, picture of global poverty through a disquieting series of black and white photographs taken in the horrific slums of India, Kenya, Jamaica, Brazil and The Philippines. Photographs from the film have been featured in the *New York Times* and the *LA Times*. It is San Damiano's best selling film and most compelling title. **A recently updated version of the film includes chapter points and English/Spanish subtitles.**

"A beautiful and wrenching meditation on the poor...comprised of Straub's 250 striking and very intimate black-and-white photographs and his compelling words."

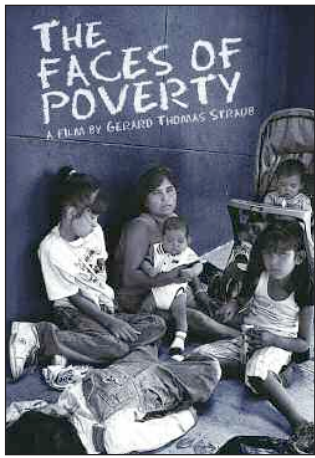
– Helene Slessorav-Jamir, *Sojourners Magazine*



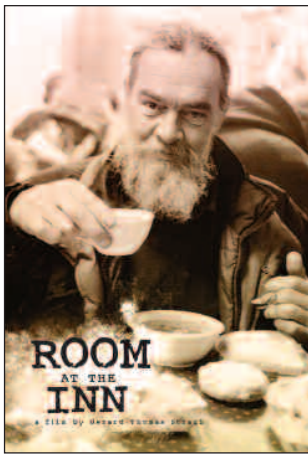
©2006 90 MIN.

Where Love Is tells inspiring stories of faith from places of deep pain. Amidst violent crime and devastating poverty, the Capuchins reach out with arms of love, offering new life and hope to many who have no one to turn to and nowhere to go. The friars and volunteers serve through acts of kindness and provision, believing that where love is...there God is.

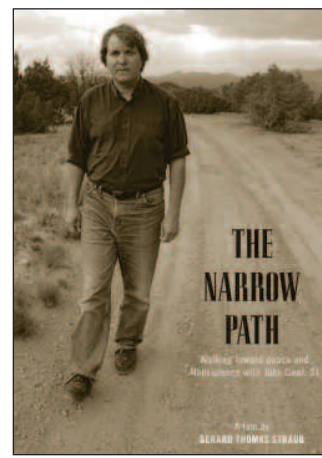
The San Damiano Foundation is a 501(c)3 non-profit, charitable organization which recognizes the power of film to touch and inspire people, making it a perfect medium to communicate Franciscan spirituality and concern for the poor, social justice, peace and nonviolence. The Foundation puts that power at the service of the poor and those who help them. Our films are both educational tools and fundraising tools—instilling awareness about poverty and attracting resources to people working with the poor.



©2007 44 MIN.



©2003 204 MIN.



©2007 108 MIN.

Featuring scenes from three San Damiano films on domestic poverty in Philadelphia, Detroit and Los Angeles, as well as new, never-before-seen material, *The Faces of Poverty* weaves a number of heartbreaking stories into a compelling portrait of poverty in America, where so many live in suffocating squalor in the shadow of astounding affluence. *The Faces of Poverty* hopes to inspire viewers to work to end the injustice of poverty – because everyone can do something.

Room at the Inn represents a summation of a journey into the bleak and grim world of chronic poverty. Besides telling the inspirational story of the St. Francis Inn, the film subtly takes on the form of an Advent retreat whose message resounds throughout: the poor, the broken and rejected are portals through which we can enter fully into the life of Christ.

“In our encounters with the poor, we must move from pity to love, from charity to justice.”
– Gerry Straub, narration from *Room at the Inn*

Following in the footsteps of the great apostles of nonviolence – Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and Oscar Romero – John Dear, SJ presents in *The Narrow Path* the challenging message of Jesus in a fresh way, speaking with new force and vision of God’s plea for peace. Fr. John Dear’s interpretation of the life and death of Jesus calls for the body of Christ, the Church, to follow in the way of Jesus to the very end, without compromise, no matter the cost. *The Narrow Path* is a bold and challenging film, a prophetic call to embody the nonviolence of Jesus and become instruments of peace.

“Words are as strong and powerful as bombs, as napalm.” – Dorothy Day

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FILM ORDER: Titles (\$30 each)

- The Faces of Poverty* *The Narrow Path* *Where Love Is* *Room at the Inn*
- Endless Exodus* *Holy Pictures* *Embracing the Leper* *Poverty and Prayer*
- Rescue Me* *The Patients of a Saint* *When Did I See You Hungry?* **NEW FILM!!!**
Poverty and Prayer II
(see website for details)

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- \$25 \$50 \$100 \$200
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- \$50 \$100 \$500 \$1000
 - \$3000 \$5000 Other _____

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501(c)3 Status



Sam in his braced chair at Mama Helen's in Serere, Uganda. He and his sister, Esther, are now on the long, hard road to recovery, with lots of love and support.

THE SAN DAMIANO FOUNDATION
PO Box 1794
Burbank, CA 91507

**To Our Friends
and Supporters.
Thank you.**

**Please email us to join our e-newsletter (sandamianofoundation@gmail.com)
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