Reflections from Joan Gannon

“. . . in the heart of the world we must build fraternal communities centered in Jesus Christ . . . “

In 1972 we closed Elmhurst in Portsmouth, RI. Before that some of us had begun to do some work in the parish and in a parish across the river (actually St. Madeleine Sophie Parish where we taught catechism on Saturdays). When we left, the pastor of our parish asked me if a few of us might not stay to work at St. Barnabas. “We don’t do parish work,” was my reply.

However, back at Stuart CDS in Princeton, that phrase from the 1970 Chapter kept haunting me and I found myself thinking more and more about the possibility of living in the midst of “real folks” and serving them. Retsy Piper who was becoming a good friend was in a hermitage at Gloucester for a year and I asked her if she would be interested in joining me. She was, and in typical Retsy fashion took the next opportunity we were with our provincial (Jean Ford) to ask her if we might consider it. To our amazement she said she and her team would discern the possibility.

To make a long story short, they told us if we would find another person for our community and take a summer course in parish ministry at BC they would send us to St. Barnabas Parish as sort of pioneers to see if parish work could be in our future as a congregation here in the US. We invited several people to join us and they said “no,” but Phyllis Heuisler (75 years old at the time) said if we could find no-one else she would come. And so she did.

We lived our life in a small apartment in the town of Portsmouth for two years, then moved to low income housing in Middletown (not far—small island!) joined by Susan Regan who was fresh from her studies to become a psychotherapist and had gotten a job in town. Retsy and I were Religious Ed /Parish assistants at St. Barnabas. Phyllis, who had had a difficult couple of years, went to Kenwood.

Increasingly during the 4 years at St. Barnabas I had become involved with a newly opened Christian Action Center in Newport—was on its board, started, with a couple of other folks, a prison outreach group; did some prison visitation, harbored a fugitive (!) and generally felt drawn to ministry with people who were outcast from society. Carol Putnam was in Boston at the time, in a thriving ministry with poor people, so I contacted her to ask if she would find me something to do in Boston. Instead, she said she had been there long enough and many other people were doing the kind of work she was doing, so she suggested we get together once a month and discern a future together in a new place.

And so we did. Half way through the year we looked at the two groups of people in the country we felt were the most disadvantaged—native peoples and migrant farmworkers—and decided that since the provincial team had been talking about another ministry to balance the school in Miami, we ought to choose the latter. The outgoing team had endorsed our discernment, again asking us to find a third person to be part of our community. Connie Dryden, who was scheduled to go to Uganda but had been asked to wait a year, agreed to join us. Although I had written a letter to the priest in the Miami Diocese asking if he knew of parishes working with migrant farmworkers who were looking for sisters, he had never responded, so by the Feast of St. Madeleine Sophie when we gathered in Boston for our celebration the team just told us to move to Miami and hang loose for a year, seeing what might surface for us to do.

Labor Day followed, on which week-end Mercedes Scopetta, a good friend of ours in Miami, (to whom Susan or Retsy, both of whom knew her well, had spoken) called the priest with whom I had been in touch and discovered there were, in fact, three rural parishes that “desperately needed sisters.” Mercedes, knowing our interest in the UFW, called me and told me about the three, stressing that the one in Indiantown had the pastor interested in justice for the farmworkers and therefore the UFW.

A phone call to him, resulting in false information about how close Indiantown was to Miami (I had told him we wanted to be able to interact easily with our community there) and about how much there was to do, a new provincial (Clare Pratt) whose philosophy was “you go where the ministry is rather than going to a place looking for ministry” and a quick trip there where we were welcomed with open arms by parishioners and priest alike clinched it and by the Feast of the Sacred Heart we were set to go to Holy Cross Parish in Indiantown Florida.

There is so much to tell about the whole adventure of it—from our little house across the tracks in a subdivision where only poor black people lived, to helping to create a school and a service center, to living a 24/7 sort of life fighting for the rights of undocumented people, trying to provide for the needs of people who arrived with nothing but the clothes on their backs, to helping to build a true rainbow parish community—white, black (Haitian and US of American), Hispanic (from Mexico, Guatemala, Puerto Rico, Salvador . . .) . . . but that would take a book.