Signs of the Times: America’s Sense of Exceptionalism
by Joseph Nangle, OFM

The essay below is part of a series of “Franciscan Response” reflections by friars and partners-in-ministry of the Holy Name Franciscan Province (NY) about issues facing our culture. The series is part of the province’s response to the call to revitalize Franciscan life and ministry in the United States — a key objective of the leaders of the American OFM provinces, who are evaluating ways to reconfigure Franciscan life in the U.S.

These essays are meant to provide social analysis as part of the many considerations aimed at creating a preferred future for the Franciscans of the United States. It is hoped that this initiative will generate dialogue among friars. The essay is reprinted, with permission, from HNP Today, newsletter of the Holy Name Province. The author is a member of the Provincial Council, stationed in Washington, D.C.

As we U.S. Friars Minor move toward our revitalization and reorganization and discern an appropriate Franciscan role in America’s society and church, one reflection should center on this country’s sense of exceptionalism.

In many quarters of the United States, there exists an almost iron-clad conviction that our country holds a preferential place in the family of nations. Rarely is this “doctrine” challenged in public discourse. Rather, it has come to be something of an “article of faith” among us.

No doubt there are reasons to celebrate the “American experiment.” Our tried and true constitution with its built-in system of amendments to address inevitable new realities; our peaceful political processes; the ability of ordinary citizens to have their voices heard, thanks to First Amendment rights — the list of such positive social and political structures is long. We do have a remarkable, participatory democratic system.

What is more, the separation of state and church here has worked well; both to assure that neither body will impinge on or interfere with the other, while at the same time safeguarding the rights of both. This has allowed the United States to avoid any sort of “theocracy” or takeover by specific religious convictions — and, at the same time, has preserved the independence of all religious tendencies.

Given these enormously positive benefits imbedded in the American system, it is understandable that over time our citizens and leaders would conclude that we indeed are “that city on the hill” spoken of in Holy Scripture — a beacon, model and, indeed, goal for all nation states. But in the end this is a very dangerous
self-description. The notion of American exceptionalism has led to an imperial mentality on the part of successive government administrations here, with at least the implied complicity of our citizenry.

Examples include our military presence in virtually all parts of the world; our control over mechanisms of economic and social development in organizations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund; our overriding presence at the United Nations and other such regional groupings; our interventions into and attempts to control less developed countries. Again, the list of our imperial power is long. We justify these aspects of a totally outsized American influence in the world by citing our “exceptionalism.”

For Franciscans, this is the antithesis of our world view. We subscribe to a conviction that no one should lord it over another – in personal or societal relationships. We describe ourselves as “lesser brothers” to all humanity, particularly to the poorest of God’s daughters and sons. We follow in the footsteps of the Poverello, who challenged even the Catholic Church when that body took on imperial powers. In a word, we stand over against any human institution which would accrue to itself any “right” of domination.

As we grapple with the many issues facing us in this revitalization process, surely one fundamental challenge is for us to live as a counter-cultural presence here — to preach the “full Gospel,” emphasizing a preferential option for the poor; to advocate wherever we can on behalf of the poor, marginalized, discarded peoples of our country and the world. In a word, we must consciously challenge American exceptionalism.

**Friars celebrate 65 and 70 years of religious life**

In addition to our brothers who are observing their golden (50 years) and diamond (60 years) religious jubilees this year, three friars will observe their 65th anniversary, and two will celebrate their 70th.
As the percentage of senior friars continues to rise, religious congregations find themselves relying more heavily on the skilled nursing care provided by facilities not administered by their own members. Our brothers, like our counterparts in secular society, are living longer and often in need of care that a friary simply cannot provide. Our province has been blessed by our relationship with St. Paul Home in Kaukauna which cares for several of our brothers by dedicated and compassionate health care workers.

Friars who reside at St. Paul Home — or in other skilled nursing care facilities — are “attached” to a provincial community in an effort to provide fraternal support and regular communication. And many of our senior friars living in these venues also find an additional “connection” to the province via electronic communications.

Reginald Lawrence — who is approaching his 91st birthday — is a member of the St. Conrad Community in Milwaukee, and for the past several years has resided at St. Anne Home, run by the Salvatorians. The dedicated staff at this facility attends to our brother’s regular physical and medical needs, and Reggie’s relationship to the province is maintained through his membership at St. Conrad’s, and his activity in cyberspace. Like several of his peers, Reggie takes advantage of electronic communications to keep informed of provincial business and news about the friars and their ministries.

Weekly re:Cap salutes our provincial health care employees, as well as those employed in facilities like St. Paul Home and St. Anne’s. Their professional and compassionate care, combined with fraternal support of the friars, assures a genuine and continuous connection to the life of the province.
Linda Andrews, administrator at Capuchin Retreat in Washington MI, broke her ankle during the recent holidays and is involved with physical therapy, hoping to return to work soon.

**Strangers No Longer:**
**Together on the Journey of Hope**

In 2003, the Catholic bishops of Mexico and the U.S. issued their pastoral letter concerning migration. Today, their message takes on new urgency as our political leaders struggle to address immigration issues.

“Increased migration from the Americas is part of the worldwide phenomenon of globalization which brings both promises and challenges,” insists the pastoral letter. “The bishops,” the statement reads, “seek to awaken their people to the mysterious presence of the crucified and risen Lord in the person of the migrant and to renew in them the values of the Kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus.”

“We, the community of faith, are judged by the way we treat the most vulnerable among us. We must seek to implement the principles of Catholic social teachings and offer a moral framework for embracing, rather than rejecting the reality of migration. Our church communities must find pastoral and legal ways to welcome our brothers and sisters in faith.”

The Eastern world it is explodin’,
Violence flarin’, bullets loadin’,
You’re old enough to kill but not for votin’,
You don’t believe in war, what’s that gun you’re totin’?
And even the Jordan river has bodies floatin’.
But you tell me over and over and over again, my friend
Ah, you don’t believe we’re on the eve of destruction.