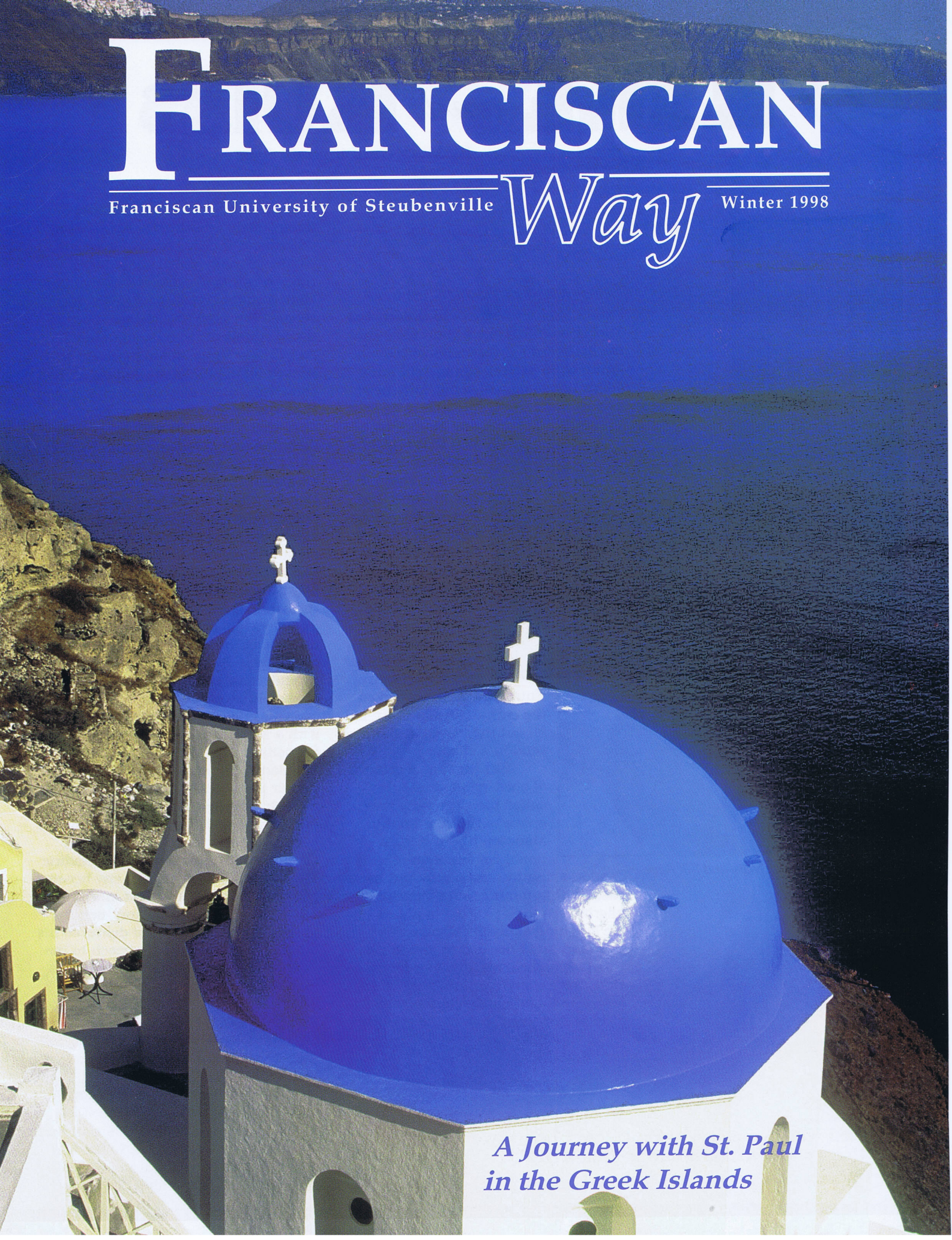


FRANCISCAN

Franciscan University of Steubenville

Way

Winter 1998



*A Journey with St. Paul
in the Greek Islands*

Of Exile and Ruins

By Mary Cunningham Agee

A pilgrimage led by Father Michael Scanlan to Greece and Turkey sounded like a great idea—but not on board a cruise ship with a group of 86 perfect strangers! I must admit to having had some fairly heavy



Mary and Bill Agee

prejudices against any kind of vacation that might be reminiscent of summer camp. I like to think that this aversion may have had more to do with my need for unstructured, quiet time than any deep-seated, anti-social tendency. Regardless, my initial reaction to a Franciscan

University Journey lacked the enthusiasm to make me fill out the travel form and send in a check.

But then, as a gesture of open-mindedness, I called the University and spoke to the coordinator, Maureen Kight. Her unusual combination of

candor, empathy, and spunk put me at ease. Within minutes, this veteran of pilgrimages to the holiest of places had me laughing at my skepticism. My husband and I decided to give it a try.

As it turned out, my apprehensions were completely unfounded. In fact, it was our fellow pilgrims who ultimately became one of the greatest

benefits of our whole trip. Almost immediately I detected some striking differences in this group of travelers. Unlike so many social encounters, there was a noticeable absence of idle chatter and nervous banter. No one seemed the least bit interested in the usual rituals of “who do you know?” and the exchange of business cards. I sensed an appreciation that we all had something more significant in common than our exotic destination. They appeared to be as hungry for spiritual direction and personal growth as Bill and I. We all knew that we were embarking upon a faith journey, one that hopefully would lead us to a deeper relationship with the Christ for whom the Apostle Paul had lived, preached, and died. No one was about to diminish the impact of this opportunity by complaining about the size of the cabin or the quality of the hors d'oeuvres. No one was going to intentionally let this chance to follow in the footsteps of St. Paul turn into an extended shopping spree or a Club Med style vacation.

Our pilgrimage officially began with a Mass concelebrated by the two Franciscan friars, Father Michael Scanlan, TOR, and his dear friend, Father Sam Tiesi, TOR. Appropriately enough, this first Mass took place at one of Athens' oldest cathedrals, which is named after one of the city's first Christians, St. Dionysius. The historic significance of this ancient city became even more evident the next morning as we visited the Acropolis and then the Aeropagus where St. Paul delivered his famous “Unknown God” speech to the Athenians. Listening to Father Mike's inspired homily on the same ground where some of the first converts heard St. Paul's words brought into focus the tremendous advantage of actually “being there” when reflecting upon the truths of Sacred Scripture.

While intellectually stimulating and spiritually uplifting, the first few days on the mainland of Greece proved to be only a gentle prelude to the life-altering experience about to unfold on board the *Triton*, our ship. The tone



Father Michael Scanlan, TOR, and Father Jerome Murphy, CSSR, preparing to celebrate Mass in the spot where Paul preached to the Corinthians.



The coast of Mykonos.

and tenor of our group was already starting to take on a warmer, quieter, and more devotional quality. I found myself looking forward not only to the enlightening homilies each day at Mass, but also to the thoughtful prayer petitions, questions, and comments of our fellow pilgrims. The transformation taking place in our group was inspiring to witness. Perhaps not surprisingly, we were also beginning to form real, lasting friendships as a result of our shared experience.

During the next few days, we covered a lot of territory but at a pace that was as well calibrated as the itinerary itself. We sailed from the arid island of Crete where St. Paul had been shipwrecked to the lush island of Santorini.

It was, I guess, somewhere about midpoint in our pilgrimage that my irrepressible need for solitude began to take over. I had figured out early on that if this need were to be fulfilled, it would be accomplished most unobtrusively during one of the island excursions when everyone else departed the ship. I took advantage of just such a chance to chart my own spiritual course when we pulled in to the scenic, rock-lined coast of Santorini. As I watched the last tender pull away from the *Triton* carrying the remnant of exuberant pilgrims, I set out in sandals with my journal in hand. I could hardly wait to spend a few precious moments alone in silence with the One who had

beckoned me to go on this Franciscan Journey so many months ago.

But first, a gift of a different kind awaited me. There, within 10 feet of the precise chair I had selected for my own solitary encounter with God rested another solitary pilgrim. Father Mike looked up without even a hint of irritation, smiled, and beckoned me to come over. We spoke briefly, but the words seemed to matter far less than what we had already communicated by our choice for an afternoon of reflective time alone.

Within one day, we were scheduled to arrive on the island of Patmos, the place where the beloved Apostle John had lived in exile for many years. I recalled that it was in Patmos, under the most difficult of physical conditions, that this great saint had written what many consider his greatest work, the Book of Revelation. His writing had weathered the storms of heresy, indifference, and confusion for almost 2,000 years—evidence enough of both its inspired origin and the intrinsic value of the solitude out of which it had been born.

Once on Patmos, I climbed the steep hill that led to St. John's cave with a speed and stamina that I couldn't recall having generated for quite a few years. As I considered the theme of exile in my own life, I found

myself anticipating this site as the probable high point of the entire pilgrimage. I had already begun to comprehend that, whether self-inflicted or imposed, exile experiences of any kind have a profound spiritual purpose all their own.

Once inside the cave, a respectful hush fell upon us all as we took in the small space, which was lit only by a few flickering candles. On the ceiling was exposed a bold, scar-like crevice that we were told by our guide had appeared as St. John completed his final work. My fingers lightly traced the indentation in the rock where St. John had reputedly rested his arm while writing the Word of God. In the stark simplicity of this holy cave, the point was difficult to miss: It matters little what the world may take away—our jobs, our titles, our paychecks, even our reputations. For when stripped of these powerful distractions, like the great saints before us, we are humbled and invited to become more malleable in the hands of our Creator.

As I slowly walked back to the ship, I couldn't help but relate these thoughts about exile to the literally thousands of broken lives that I have been invited to mend over the past 13 years at the Nurturing Network.

Our fellow pilgrims became one of the greatest benefits of our whole trip.

I thought about the perceived ruins and tattered remains of so many pregnant women's hopes and dreams. I thought about their darkest feelings of abandonment and the exiles imposed upon them by embarrassed parents, inconvenienced colleagues, and frightened boyfriends. I understood, perhaps for the first time, why their refrain of abandonment and exile had always struck me. We have all tasted exile and have thirsted to hear the healing words of our Savior, "I will not leave you orphaned...I am with you all days."

The following morning we arrived in the small town of Ephesus in Turkey. The spiritual and historical significance of this site had somehow previously eluded me. Here the Blessed Mother lived out her old age with St. John in obedience to her Son's final request from the cross, "Mother, behold your son; son, behold your Mother." This wasn't a place where the Mother of God miraculously appeared for a few hours or days to a few chosen people, but a location that she had actually called home for many years.

Standing on the holy ground next to Mary's humble dwelling, quietly watching as the altar was prepared for the celebration of an outdoor Mass in her yard, the protective armor encasing my emotions began to be stripped away as never before.



Left: Father Michael preaching on Mars Hill in Athens.
Above: On the island of Mykonos.

sense of timing, but I sensed Mary's presence in an entirely new way. There were no statues, not even liturgical vestments with her image upon them to provoke such an awareness. But the peace was palpable, I believe, to all of us. She was there in our hearts at that very moment leading us to say, "Yes," and to receive her beloved Son in the intimacy of the Eucharist, much as she had done when the angel Gabriel first appeared to her.

In the midst of that space, the contents of my overburdened gunny sack of hidden wounds and unspoken disappointments began to spill out. For the first time in my life, I felt neither the energy nor the compulsion to gather them up. I just sat there staring at them as a child might look at a fallen castle of building blocks and tried to digest the meaning of it all. I recall being grateful for the light mist that had moved in during Mass. I had hoped that it might provide some form of camouflage for the tears I could no longer hold back. The floodgate had

been opened and, not unlike Mary, I found myself pondering all these things in my heart.

A gentle hand on my shoulder, a delicate hanky slipped into my hand, reassured me that there was no cause for embarrassment or alarm. I was, indeed, among family. It was the family to which we had each been called when challenged to "love one another as I have loved you."

Without a word exchanged, my husband must have sensed the importance of keeping this moment alive forever. He bent down to a small stream running alongside the Blessed Mother's yard and filled our empty water bottle with its precious water.

It was hard to imagine that other places of physical beauty or religious signifi-

cance could possibly hold my attention after that riveting experience at Mary's house. And yet, remarkably enough, the discoveries of joy and insight were not over. Before leaving Ephesus, we viewed some of the most spectacular and well-preserved ruins of the ancient world. Each stone edifice and toppled column became a haunting reminder that even the greatest of civilizations are only transitory. As we read in Hebrews, "We have not here a lasting

*We have all
tasted exile and
thirsted to hear
the healing
words of our
Savior,
"I will not
leave you."*

city." I doubt that any of our pilgrims missed the point that echoed amidst those partially decayed ruins: Do not put your trust in the material things of this world; only the kingdom of God will endure.

If Ephesus was for me the spiritual summit of our journey, the island of Mykonos would be remembered as its nearby peak. It was on this delightful island dotted with hundreds of tiny neighborhood chapels that Bill and I privately renewed our wedding vows and celebrated our fifteenth anniversary.

Once again, the spirit of fellowship blossomed into a bouquet of thoughtful gestures by our new pilgrim friends. Several slipped anniversary cards under our cabin door throughout the day. One placed a rose on our breakfast table, and another secretly tucked a devotional prayer to the Blessed Mother in my daily missal. Two couples pooled their resources and presented a beautiful watercolor painted by a local artist to us during a candlelit dinner at one of the island's many family-owned restaurants. Before dropping off to sleep that night, I remember thinking what a difference it would make in our local parishes if we could behave toward one another more like the pilgrims on that cruise ship. It is what a faith community is supposed to be all about—learning and growing together in Christ and demonstrating his love in everyday acts of kindness.

One final benefit from this journey didn't actually occur to me until we returned home. As I unpacked my suitcase, I couldn't help but recall so many other vacations when shopping for trinkets and souvenirs had taken an inordinate amount of time and money. This trip had been different. The evidence was right in front of me. Everything had fit comfortably into my one suitcase: a few stones from the holy sites, a bottle of water from the stream near Mary's house, and a few small icons for closest friends and family members. I smiled as I realized the irony. I had actually come back from this journey...one gunny sack lighter. †

Mary Cunningham Agee is the founder and executive director of the Nurturing Network.

Dear Friend,

In reflecting upon the Blessed Mother's timely example of courage and humility, I am reminded of the healing power of Her unconditional love and tender mercy in the lives of so many mothers whose path to holiness is marked by profound sacrifice and suffering. Inspired by the ministry of the Nurturing Network, the oil painting that you see illustrated here is available upon special request as a beautifully framed, limited edition lithograph. Due to the generosity of an anonymous donor, all proceeds from the suggested contribution of \$1250 per lithograph will be given to support the Nurturing Network's life-saving program. Please feel free to call our national headquarters at 1-800-TNN-4MOM for additional details.



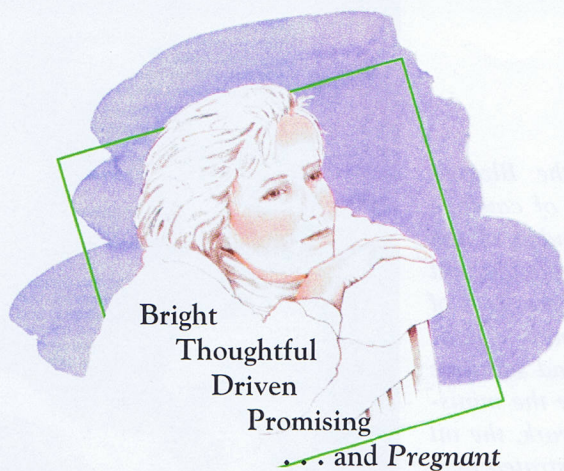
While I appreciate the many sacrificial gifts that you may already have brought to the altar of life, I hope that you will consider the worthiness of this compassionate outreach and choose to join me in this vital work to which we each have been "called by name." May Our Lady's strong and loving presence lead you ever closer to Her Son and fill your heart with renewed hope and lasting peace . . . today and always.

Your friend in Christ,

Mary Elizabeth

The Nurturing Network is an international charitable organization founded by Mary Cunningham Agee in 1985 following the loss of her first child in a mid-trimester miscarriage. Setting politics and rhetoric aside, volunteer members provide practical, life-saving services to women facing the crisis of an unplanned pregnancy. What began as a modest, grassroots attempt to marshal the energy and talent of a few caring friends has blossomed over the years into a powerful Network of over 22,000 dedicated volunteers in all 50 states and 23 foreign countries. More than 11,000 mothers and children have been served through this compassionate Network of hope.

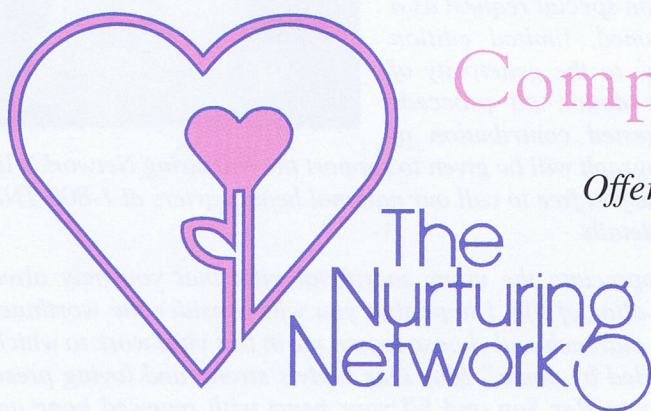
The objective of the Nurturing Network is not a political one, but a most practical one: to ensure that every woman knows that the resources she needs in order to continue her pregnancy are available by calling the Network's toll free number: 1-800-TNN-4MOM. Volunteer members form an extensive employment, medical, educational, counseling and residential network which enables a mother to continue the life of her unborn child without sacrificing her own hopes and dreams.



AN INVITATION . . . TO BUILD THE CULTURE OF LIFE

*"Place your intelligence, your talents,
your enthusiasm, your compassion
and your fortitude at the service of life."*

Pope John Paul II



Compassion in Action

*Offering the practical support a woman needs
to give her child life
. . . and make the most of hers as well.*

A vision of hope and unity

*"How could we better infuse the most culturally-defining civil rights movement of our time
with new hope and unity than from this unique alliance of practical compassion and moral conviction?
We invite you to become the leaven in the bread of new life as together we heal the broken Body of Christ."*

Mary Cunningham Agee

Executive Director, Founder and Volunteer
The Nurturing Network

A dynamic partnership

*"The Nurturing Network will offer our students an invaluable opportunity to learn first-hand
the most practical elements of pro-life counseling while serving women in need of help.
We enthusiastically welcome this well-established, life-saving apostolate to our campus community."*

Father Michael Scanlan, TOR

President
Franciscan University of Steubenville

If you would like more information, please call or write:

Mary Cunningham Agee, Executive Director
The Nurturing Network
Campus of Franciscan University
University Boulevard
Steubenville, Ohio 43952

740-284-4TNN **800-TNN-4MOM** 740-284-4860 (Fax)

The Nurturing Network is a 501(c) 3 organization and all contributions are tax deductible.

*"Let he among you who has
not sinned, be the first to cast
a stone at her."* John 8:7

♥ Nurturing Homes ♥ Employers ♥ Colleges ♥ Medical Services ♥ Counselors ♥ Donors ♥