



St. Francis Friends of the Poor, Inc.  
155 West 22nd Street  
New York, NY 10011

Tel: 212-947-0794  
stfrancisfriends.org

Christina M. Byrne, MSW  
Executive Director

Rev. Thomas J. Walters, OFM  
Founder; Director of Tenant Services

Fr. John M. Felice, OFM, a Franciscan friar and pioneer of the permanent supportive housing movement passed away peacefully on Monday, July 31, 2023 at the age of 81, from an Alzheimer's related illness. A funeral mass will be held on August 5<sup>th</sup> at 11 AM at the Church of St. Francis of Assisi, 135 West 31<sup>st</sup> Street.

Fr. John Felice will be deeply missed and remembered not only as a man of great wisdom but also everlasting kindness. Fr. Felice spent his life as a Franciscan friar never more than 40 miles from his hometown of Patchogue, Long Island, where he was born on Christmas Eve, 1941. He attended St. Bonaventure University, but he said the "simplicity, heart and genuine affection for one another" and "work and spirit" of the friars he had met there left such an impression, that it inspired him to transfer to the Franciscan St. Joseph Seminary, after his freshman year.

In 1962 he was received into the Order of Friars Minor with Holy Name Province and was ordained to the priesthood in 1968. He later became the youngest friar ever appointed, at age 31, as pastor of the Province's flagship, the historic St. Francis of Assisi Church on W. 31st St. in New York City. He held the position for three terms, from 1973 to 1982.

It was at the end of his third term as pastor of the Manhattan church that he teamed up with Fr. John McVean and Fr. Thomas Walters to establish [St. Francis Friends of the Poor](#) and open the first permanent supportive housing residence. He served as president of St. Francis Friends of the Poor until 2016, a 36-year run that ended when health issues caused him to step down from day-to-day operations. He maintained a presence at St. Francis Friends of the Poor until 2021.

If you knew Fr. Felice, not only did you know of St. Francis Friends of the Poor, but you also immediately felt his love for the people he served. He spent most of his life championing the work of St. Francis Friends of the Poor as a standard of care for homeless men and women who struggle with chronic mental illness. He received national recognition for his trailblazing work and bold vision of permanent supportive housing, but never stopped to bask in the accolades for too long, remaining an advocate for the homeless mentally ill at the city, state, and national levels.

"Fr. Felice recognized that caring for mentally ill homeless persons would be one of the foremost and vital charitable efforts of our lifetime," Patricia E. Harris, CEO of Bloomberg Philanthropies and Mark D. Lebow, Board Chair of St. Francis Friends of the Poor, said in a joint statement.



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In 1980, he established the first St. Francis residence in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood – permanent, affordable housing with on-site medical, psychiatric, wellness and social services for New York City's homeless struggling with severe mental illness. It was the [first of its kind](#) and the start of what is now known worldwide as supportive housing.

“Fr. Felice took the simple, direct and pragmatic approach to the homeless and mentally ill on the streets of New York City by offering them housing and help with whatever they needed. The simplicity of this solution, the cost-effectiveness, and the humanity and dignity it extends is a feasible investment for every New York City neighborhood,” said Ellen Baxter, founder of Broadway Housing Communities, and on which Fr. Felice served as board chair from 2006 to 2016.

Fr. Felice expressed himself beautifully throughout his career as a priest, but some would argue even more so when he advocated for the tenants of his beloved St. Francis residences. One such [historic plea](#) took place on national television, the eve of Thanksgiving 1984, in New York City Hall, “Tomorrow is our national holy day. Thank God for what you have, for the people and the things that surround you, that give you a sense of place and warmth and belonging. Say a quiet prayer for those that might be sleeping on your very doorstep. Yell a little at God, tell him this should not be. Yell a little louder at your elected officials, tell them, this must not be.” That very night, Fr. Felice sent ripples into the world, garnering enough financial support from the city and the unwavering support of generous donors to open the third St. Francis residence.

Fr. Felice's vision and ground-breaking work – and the success of the St. Francis residences – served as a national model for the permanent supportive housing movement of the 1980s.

“[The Fathers John](#) spent their lives advocating for funding and policies supporting the spread of the model of housing they invented. Their efforts culminated in the historic [New York/New York Agreement](#), signed in front of the St. Francis residence by Governor Mario Cuomo and Mayor David Dinkins, marking the nation's first long-term commitment to supportive housing. The city and society owe him an immeasurable debt of gratitude,” said Cynthia Stuart, Chief Operating Officer of the Supportive Housing Network of New York, which honored the Fathers John in 2016 and celebrates their [amazing journey](#).

Dear friend of Fr. Felice and author, Kim Hopper, knew him as a soft-spoken yet fierce advocate, and noted the following quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, as the most representative of his time on earth, “Start by doing what is necessary, then what is possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible.”



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He is survived by his Holy Name Province confreres, a niece and nephew, and the hundreds of men and women who have worked and resided at his "labor of love", St. Francis Friends of the Poor over its 43 years. In lieu of flowers, contributions may be made to St. Francis Friends of the Poor, 155 W. 22<sup>nd</sup> St., New York, NY 10011.