

The Canticle

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ASSISI: a Reflection by Sr. Pamela Clare

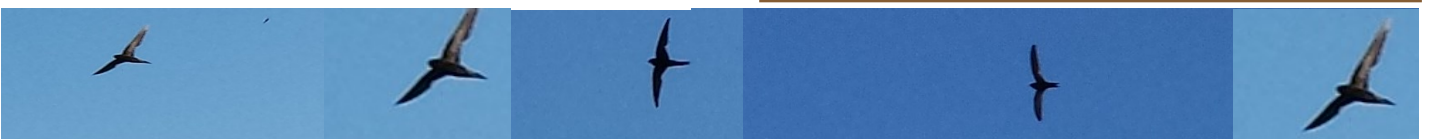
This summer Srs. Maggie and Pamela Clare went on pilgrimage to Assisi, the native city of St. Francis. It was the first visit to this holy place for both of us. Italy was in the middle of the severe heat wave that struck Europe in late June. This did impact our ability to get around the area since a sudden 40 degree increase in temperature is difficult for the body to adjust to within a week. However, this handicap did ensure that we were not running around from place to place. The afternoon "reposito" when everything closed after lunch until late afternoon was a great time to rest and reflect on the experience.

The main thing about being in Assisi was being in Assisi. Upon arrival just before sunset at the train station at the foot of the hill, the historical old city of Assisi was glowing pink and gold on the slope of Mt. Subasio. When we arrived at the apartment and went out on the balcony, the resident swallows were swooping frenetically through the air on their evening feeding frenzy, passing swiftly over and around the red clay tile roof tops. Then bells all over the city began ringing in different pitches, one playing a tune. This aerial ballet and the symphony of bells is what Francis must have experienced when he stood at his window 800 years ago.

For a city that you can cross on foot in 20 minutes, Assisi certainly has a lot of churches: at least 8 churches and innumerable chapels in religious houses and elsewhere.



The SSF Apartment in Assisi located half a block from the main Piazza of the historic city. The apartment is on the third floor. Sr. Maggie is at the front door.



Basilica di San Francesco.

We did find art that spoke to us in unexpected places. One of the churches in Assisi is built where the Bernadone family house once stood. In the basement where Francis' father stored his cloth merchandise, there is now a small chapel. Above the stone altar is a contemporary terracotta plaque showing Francis embracing Clare, who is embracing the universe (in the shape of a spiral). This piece of art captures the compassionate care Francis felt for the whole world.



The grandest church in Assisi is the Basilica of San Francesco built over Francis' tomb. It is filled with magnificent 13th century art to the glory of God and to the glory of Francis. However, as much as I can appreciate the great art, I didn't feel close to Francis there. I couldn't help but think that the poor and humble Francis would have been appalled at what was made of his simple pauper's grave.

I found Francis and Clare more easily in the old places that were in existence when they were in Assisi: the Cathedral of San Rufino where Francis and Clare were baptized; San Damiano where Francis heard the call to "rebuild the church" from the lips of the Byzantine crucifix and the place which served as home for Clare and her sisters for many years; the oldest church in the town, Santo Stefano, dating from the 11th century (and refreshingly free from monumental artwork). These were places we could relax and feel the spirit of our patrons. The little chapel of St. Mary of the Angels, the Little Portion (Porziuncula), the main headquarters of the early friars and the place of Francis' death, is still a powerful holy place, despite the huge basilica built over it, one of the 10 largest churches in Christendom.



A few yards down an alley from this little chapel is another small chapel called San Francesco Piccolino (the Infant St. Francis). It is built in what was the stable of the Bernadone house. According to legend, Francis, like Jesus, was born in a stable. The small, simple chapel was built by Francis' nephew, a Third Order member. This was one of the places we found in Assisi that was good for praying.



Refectory where Clare and her sisters ate at San Damiano.



We visited the Memorial Museum located in the Bishop's Palace, the place where Francis did his famous strip tease and returned all he had to his father after being accused of stealing. The Museum tells the story of Assisi during World War II. After the fall of Mussolini, the Germans took over northern Italy, including Assisi (1943-1944).

Pope Pius XII ordered his bishops to do what they could to offer assistance to the Italian Jews. The Bishop of Assisi, Giuseppe Nicolini, took that mandate seriously and set up a Committee of Assistance which provided shelter, food and clothing, false identity papers and assistance in getting to the American-controlled part of Italy. The Assisi Network saved about 300 Jews. The Bishop's Palace was used as a hiding places, as were some 26 religious houses, including one convent of German Poor Clares.

The German commander of troops occupying the area, Col. Valentin Muller, was a doctor and a man of faith who turned a blind eye to the goings on. He also had the non-medical German troops leave the city so it could be protected from Allied bombings as a Hospital City.

Bishop Nicolini and others in the Assisi Network were honored as Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial above Jerusalem.

After our time at the Memorial Museum, on a return visit to the Cathedral of San Rufino to pray, I was very pleased to discover that the bronze relief by Enrico Manfrini in my favorite prayer spot (a little chapel to the left of the high altar), is a memorial over the tomb of Bishop Nicolini. The Bishop is shown blessing all sorts and conditions of people at his feet, including, presumably, some Jews. His cope is held open on the left by St. Francis and on the right by a bearded patriarchal figure, whom I interpret as father Abraham.

The Episcopal Church now honors "The Righteous Gentiles" on July 16. Here is the Collect for the Day:

Lord of the Exodus, who delivers your people with a strong hand and a mighty arm: Strengthen your Church with the examples of the Righteous Gentiles of World War II to defy oppression for the rescue of the innocent; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

The Canticle

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Sr. Pamela Clare and Sr. Maggie with The Rev. Bryan Carey TSSF and his wife The Rev. Rosemary Carey. Bryan is a Third Order Franciscan from New Zealand who served as the June Chaplain at Assisi with St. Leonard's Anglican Congregation. They were hosts at the SSF Assisi Apartment for Srs. Maggie and Pamela Clare during their week of pilgrimage in Assisi.



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