

The Reluctant Pilgrim

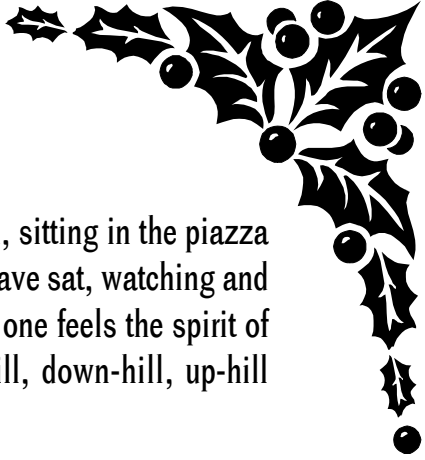
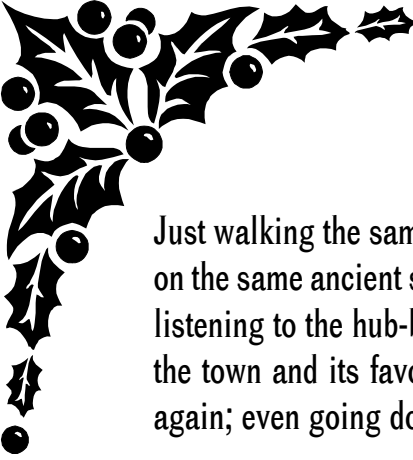


This year finally something happened worth writing about in a Christmas letter. After persistent nagging by two friars in particular, I joined a pilgrimage in May 2007 to Assisi and Rome consisting of 20 Third Order Regular (TOR) friars. The adventure of flying was “perfect joy,” especially negotiating through the Frankfurt airport for connecting flights, going and returning. Let’s just say, for the Germans being thought of as precise and ordered, venturing through Frankfurt disproves that notion.

We arrived in Rome and stumbled onto a bus for a groggy two-hour ride north to Assisi. After a good night rest, upon opening the shutters, I was stunned by the breathtaking view of the Umbrian valley stretching below the hillside town of Assisi. The entire panorama was filled with fields, vineyards, the ubiquitous olive groves, patches of bright red poppies, and not a modern, tall building in sight. It is something to behold in dawn’s early light, like waking up in the 13th century. What a beginning!

The next seven days our pilgrimage benefitted from the vast knowledge of our tour guides—Sr. Joanne and Fr. Tom, my classmate—as we covered the history, spirituality and legends of Assisi and the surrounding areas that impacted on the life of St. Francis of Assisi. What was so helpful was actually seeing the sights in geo-spatial reference to each other. St. Francis did some major walking in his time. Trips that took an hour or two by bus on decent roads must have taken weeks or months for Francis to travel, and then there’s the going UP the mountains. These are real mountains, too, not like the hills we refer to in eastern Ohio or western PA.

We visited most of the significant places of Franciscan history—San Damiano, the Basilicas of St. Francis and St. Clare, the Porziuncula, Rivo Torto, Greccio and Laverna. In addition, we had the opportunity to visit a spectacular out-of-the-way Franciscan site of particular importance to Third Order Franciscans—Monte Falco. This was the chapel in which the first general chapter of the Third Order took place. We were blessed to celebrate Mass in that chapel the same morning of the opening of 110th General Chapter of the Third Order that occurred in Loretto, PA. The local people were so excited to learn that TOR friars from the USA were coming to their chapel that they cleaned it up, put down a tapestry carpet and added flowers to brighten the ancient walls. It was such a peaceful “little” chapel, and as we were informed, “This is your (TOR) Porziuncula.” A very special moment.



Just walking the same cobblestone streets of Assisi that Francis walked, sitting in the piazza on the same ancient steps of the Temple Minerva where Francis would have sat, watching and listening to the hub-bub of the local people going about their daily life, one feels the spirit of the town and its favorite son. Oh yeah, it was a lot of walking—up-hill, down-hill, up-hill again; even going down-hill felt like up-hill.

And then there was learning to eat *rea*/Italian food! What a gastronomical-epicurean delight that was. Every day was a different type of pasta, different sauces and cheeses. We had red sauce only a few times, and the same type of pasta only twice. This was delicious. Likewise, roasted sliced potatoes, sauteed in olive oil with rosemary, were considered vegetables. Marvelous! Definitely not Bertolli. **By the way...**..did I tell you how good was the food?

As well, I made a special point of tasting as many gelato shops as I could find. For those who have never had gelato, it is not at all like our ice cream, nor like sherbet. Gelato is a unique flavor and consistency, usually made fresh with fruits, and is *delizioso*. In the evening, sitting in the central piazza of Assisi, noshing another gelato, under the moonlight with the night-sounds of the town surrounding you, was an experience not easily shared in words, very surreal.

Leaving behind Assisi's serenity, we journeyed back to Roma for a few days of guided tours of St. John Lateran, St. Peter's, and the TOR Motherhouse—Ss. Cosmas e Damian. Rome was a jolt after leaving Assisi. It was big, crowded, hot and a frenetic pace. Visiting Ss. Cosmas e Damian helped situate our house with the rest of Rome. It, literally, adjoins the Roman Forum and around the corner from the Colosseum. Going up to the rooftop patio, one looks down into the amphitheater of the Forum, where major concerts occur. Shifting your gaze left or right, one takes in the entire expanse of the Forum ruins, and hillside villas. Spectacular backyard!

After returning home I wrote: "I was the 'The Reluctant Pilgrim' for the journey, traveling is not something to which I look forward. However, this pilgrimage was the best experience in 31 years! When Sr. Joanne, our co-director for the pilgrimage, asked me for a reflection at a gathering the night before we were departing for home, all I could say was, 'I need a new thesaurus, the one I have does not have enough superlatives to describe my feelings about Assisi.'

As I was wakening, the morning after arriving back in Steubenville, words started forming: *Assisi—an awe-filled wonder surrounded by the quietude of sacred spaces immersed in a sacred presence.*"

Wishing You a Blessed and Merry Christmas and a Joy-filled New Year!

