

## Finding St. Francis

In April, Carole, Gabe and I made our first visit to Italy. For two weeks we just winged it. We took trains and buses and stayed here and there across northern Italy. Assisi was the most personal experience.

Almost 40 years ago a friend wrote a "Song for St. Francis." It begins:

"I think of you, I often do, St. Francis.  
Your love was true, you never knew your chances."

That's also true for me. I have thought of him very often. That second line is the key: "you never knew your chances." In the life of the spirit, we can't know what there is to find or what it will take to find it. For Francis, it was everything and he gave all. He went for it- no holds barred- and the story is he found God.

My experience of Francis goes back nearly 40 years and has touched my life in surprising ways. When my adult relationship with God began in the early 1970s, Francis was an early influence. My teacher, Meher Baba, spoke most lovingly of this Christian saint dead almost 800 years. Our daughter was born on his feast day. All the years that I taught medieval history and early British history, one of my favorite classes each time was when I talked about Francis, about radical poverty and radical love and their powerful impact on the West. When I began to teach environmental history, there again was Francis. I found an extraordinary essay for my students. It was written by a great medievalist, Lynn White, and is entitled *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*. Published in 1967, it can now be found online: <http://www.earthtalktoday.tv/earthtalk-voices/historical-roots-ecological-crisis.html> It has been called the original source of the current debate. White wrote at the end of his essay:

"The greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history, Saint Francis, proposed what he thought was an alternative Christian view of nature and man's relation to it; he tried to substitute the idea

of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation. He failed. Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny. The profoundly religious, but heretical, sense of the primitive Franciscans for the spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature may point a direction. I propose Francis as a patron saint for ecologists.”

So we arrived in Assisi from Siena in a brief, ferocious storm, the only one during our trip. It seemed that Nature put on a show for us. We got off the train in a village at the foot of Mt. Subasio. Unknown to us at the time, it was here in the village of Santa Maria degli Angeli that Francis and his little band built their huts, a place called la Portiuncola, and began their chosen life of absolute poverty, and here Francis died. And there above us was his hometown. Some of you have been to Assisi. You'll remember it's stunningly beautiful- on a rainy day or a sunny day.

You could say the same thing that has happened to St. Francis has happened to Assisi. They've both been claimed by many generations with purposes less noble than his. It's very much a tourist town with many little shops of devotional reproductions of Francis and Clare and lots of cafes, restaurants and snack shops. If you love Francis, it's disorienting because it's so touristy, but Francis and Clare lived and died here. They changed Christendom in their own time, and 800 years of generations have gone back to and found their lives fresh and relevant. If you're looking for Francis, you'll find enough here to shake you. Gabe had a bad reaction to Assisi and took a couple of days to come to terms with the dissonance between the Francis he knew and what we saw in Assisi. Our first evening, an Irish nun came into our restaurant with a group, but she stopped at our table and talked to us about Francis like she was an old friend. She said “yes, Assisi is for tourists but you will find him here.”

The basilica of St. Francis is overwhelming. I think Francis would not approve. But his tomb is there along with many of his personal possessions such as his ragged habit and his sandals. Saint Clare's body is visible in a chapel in her basilica. This can bring you close if you want to go close.

Two personal experiences stand out for me. On our first morning we saw a notice of a free video on the life of Clare. I asked about it and noticed dancers rehearsing on a stage. "Yes, would we like to see a rehearsal of a musical drama on the life of Clare?" We sat with two or three other adults and a school group for a beautiful production of "Chiara di Deo," Clare of God. It really worked.

The second experience: we went looking for the Church of San Damiano where God spoke to young Francis from an icon on the altar and where he began his ministry, alone, rebuilding this small abandoned church with his own hands. Our search for San Damiano took us outside the town walls into the olive groves. All we found was a tiny, ancient, dilapidated chapel with a lock and chain and a sign saying, "back in few minutes." No one came back. It was dark and poorly kept, and we asked, "is this it? Could it be just like Francis must have seen it?" Of course not. It couldn't be that simple. As we mentally abandoned our outing with the confusion known to travelers without language skills, I wandered on deeper into the olive grove,. And down a steep hill, out of sight, there it was: San Damiano, where Francis encountered Christ, where Clare founded her order and where she died in an upstairs room.

Francis has a way of coming back again and again. The writer, Jonathan Franzen, has an essay in the July 26 *New Yorker* entitled "The Slaughter of Song Birds." It tells

the bleak, terrible story of the illegal harvesting of songbirds for fine restaurants in the Mediterranean region. He writes:

“Nobody since Jesus has lived a life more radically in keeping with his gospel than St. Francis did; and St. Francis, unburdened by the weight of being the Messiah, went Jesus one better and extended his gospel to all creation.”

Franzen draws on the image of the little cluster of huts at Portiunicola, which has been built over and round by a great basilica to conclude:

“It seemed to me that if wild birds survive in modern Europe it will be in the manner of those ancient small Franciscan buildings, sheltered by the structures of a vain and powerful Church: as beloved exceptions to the rule.”

I’m reminded again of the power that one life lived to the fullest can have on the world.