

CHIESA NUOVA

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In this series about some of our most cherished places in Assisi I've written about the Porziuncola where Francis lived and died and San Damiano, where God entered his life in dramatic fashion. This month I offer you an excursion through **Chiesa Nuova**, a church and friary very, very close to my heart.

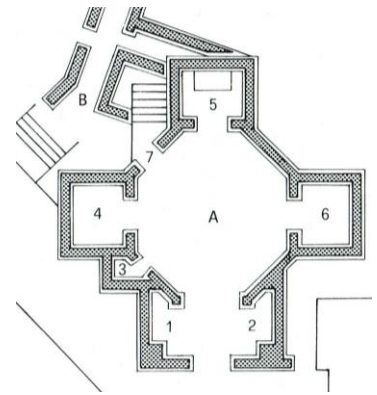
The name means *new church* in Italian and there's a very good reason it's called the *new church*. Consider that the mountaintop town predates the Roman Empire. There are remnants of the Empire in, under and above Assisi along with even more ancient Etruscan ruins. It was a well-developed medieval, strategic city by the time of Francis and Clare. *The New Church* in Assisi was only built in 1615, which is comparatively new.

The church is located just off Piazza del Comune, the very heart of Assisi. As you enter Piazza della Chiesa Nuova you see a bronze statue (Roberto Joppolo, 1984) of Lady Pica and Pietro Bernadone, the parents of Francis and his brother, Angelo. That's a hint as to the importance of this small structure. Indeed, some scholars maintain that Chiesa Nuova is constructed over what was the Bernadone family home.

The Vicar General of the Friars Minor purchased the home with money donated by King Philip III of Spain. The cornerstone of the church reads 1615 and it took nearly four years to complete the small and vibrant Renaissance revival structure. It was modeled after Sant' Eligio degli Orefici in Rome and consecrated in 1691. My pen and ink rendering to the left shows the four pilasters on a brick façade and its dome. The coat of arms of our Order and that of King Philip III adorn the front entrance.

The floor plan of the church is a Greek cross with an octagonal center. At #5 is the sanctuary for daily Mass, #4 and #6 are smaller chapels, #1 and #2, reliquaries. #3 is one of the popular places that engenders universal love for Francis; this

is the cell where Pietro imprisoned his son. We read in *Legend of the Three Companions: The news of what was happening reached his father's ears. He went out to fetch him and put an end to the matter. Furious, he jumped on Francis like a wolf on a sheep and dragged him home. He locked him up...One day, his mother broke his chains and allowed him to go free.* That occurred during the tumultuous days when he was in the throes of discernment. The image of Francis in the cell at #3 may be apocryphal but it can be cathartic for pilgrims on a journey



of conversion.



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At the upper left is B – that is the entrance down a stairwell into what is believed to be the original Bernadone dwelling, including the fabric shop that was Pietro's pride and joy where Francis and his brother, Angelo,

worked. Pietro believed his sons would take it over some day as their own business.



Above the altar in the sanctuary is a painting, *The Dream of St. Francis*, by Cesare Sermei. It reminds visitors of that turning point when the Saint realized God wanted him to serve Him and not become a knight to gain power and prestige. Truly a turning point in the life of Francis!

The church is also filled with priceless frescoes and paintings of scenes from the life of Francis and rather graphic portrayals of the first martyrs of the Order in Morocco. They've all been recently cleaned and are stunning. Chiesa Nuova and the friary were severely damaged in the 1997 earthquake. Even the dome of this little church had been twisted off its base like a light bulb. I was there in late 1997 and the friars told me it might have to be torn down. However, the whole complex has been rebuilt and restored, with a vibrant community of friars staffing it now. I stayed with them last year and it remains a significant part of my life as a friar.

Not many people are aware that Chiesa Nuova friary houses a small and spectacular library, research center and publishing house. It holds dozens of medieval psalters and music manuscripts, precious personal letters from popes to Francis and Clare, a magnificent collection of incunabulae (books made before 1501) and rare artifacts.



Why is this friary and church such a part of my life? In 1990 the Poor Clares of New Jersey asked me to translate a few Latin hymns about St. Clare. What began as a request for a few

hymns grew into a three year project! I decided it would be worthwhile to go to Assisi to find and translate the oldest Latin hymn texts I could find and the earliest 13th century melodies, wed them to each other and offer a collection of Franciscan music to the world. I lived in Assisi for months at a time, doing research at the house library and the libraries of Sacro Convento (the Basilica of St. Francis), San Damiano, the Porziuncola and the Cathedral of San Rufino. While doing all this research I asked to live at Chiesa Nuova. Six elderly friars took me in and changed my life.

I had never considered the possibility of working with the most precious manuscripts of Franciscana. Never thought I would speak in Latin (in the early days when my Italian was very weak) with elderly men about Mass settings and hymn texts from the 13th century. Never! Yet here I was residing above the room where Francis lived, reading letters from Pope Gregory IX to him and to Clare and living with one of the most famous Franciscan scholars in the world, Marino Bigaroni, and Evangelista Nicolini, Director of the Assisi Singers for 40 years and expert in all things medieval. I was given full access to anything I asked for, including Codex 338, perhaps the holiest manuscript in Franciscan literature that includes the first biographies and the first written copy of the Cantic of the Creatures. Extraordinary. I even transcribed and adapted a manuscript of Antonio Vivaldi from string quartet to harp. Incredible! I felt I was living in a movie.

The work with Franciscan treasures was pure gift but the true reason I will always cherish Chiesa Nuova was more valuable than touching history. I underwent a priceless conversion. The spirits of Francis and Clare, the charm of four seasons in Assisi, the time alone in sacred places and time to compose – all these elements radically changed my outlook on life, the Order and my heart. Because I was on a mission for Poor Clares and loved St. Clare, one friar took me under his wing. Padre Amedeo Ortenzi was confessor at the Basilica of St. Clare (and my self-appointed Italian coach.) His room was across the hall from me in the friary, he'd visited Chicago in the 1940's as a famous tenor and shared a love for Clare.

Every morning after breakfast I would walk with Amedeo to Clare's Basilica; we'd go down to her tomb to say *buon giorno* and ask her blessing. Then he would go to his confessional and I would walk all the way to the Basilica of Francis and the library of Sacro Convento to discover, discover, discover.

The six friars of that community were at least 30 years older than I. In 1990 I was living in our infirmary in Oak Brook with at least 45 elderly friars, so these boys were surprised I knew how to anticipate their needs and understand and respect aging, even with a language barrier. They incorporated me into a different rhythm of Franciscan life, introduced me to the blessings of a fireplace in the kitchen and how to make gnocchi, how to fall in love all over again with our way of life. I think there was a bit of puppy-love on their part toward me – the 'kid' needed some direction. Age has never mattered much to me at all and these holy men rekindled the fire of Francis and tenderness of Clare in my heart.

Their expertise and wisdom led me into the world of medieval beauty and they affirmed my own research and compositions. That fraternal care, prayer and sharing of life spawned (after three years of work) a 300 page hymnal called *Clare and Francis: O Let the Faithful People Sing*, published by the Franciscan Institute.

One night in 1992 I had a dream.....
I was in a very pastoral setting, in a valley surrounded by fields of flowers, small mountains and a royal blue sky. I was painting with water colors at an easel near a stream that ran under a willow tree. Francis entered the scene and began to help me capture in paint the flowers around me. He had one arm around my waist - something I'd never experienced before in imaging this man my life is patterned after.

Francis dropped his paint brush and pointed across the stream. I saw a small house on the mountainside. Music notes were rising out of the chimney, floating in mid-air like hundreds of butterflies. Francis was laughing with me; we both clung to each other, watching that sight of the flying notes. Then the Poverello held out a burlap bag and those hundreds of music notes drifted down the

mountainside, across the stream and into his bag. Francis gave me the bag while smiling with a tenderness I'd never experienced and said, "These are yours. You know where they come from. Take them and build a new church, una chiesa nuova, in Chicago." He placed the bag over my shoulder, giving me a big hug. Then he kissed me and disappeared behind the willow tree. In the dream, I cried.

The Province of the Most Sacred Heart supported the beginnings of a new ministry for the arts in 1999 and we moved into a location in the west Loop of Chicago. **Chiesa Nuova** was born in Chicago, in the sense of being a new way of being Church via the arts. 530 artists, over 400 concerts, pilgrimages to Italy, Germany and U.S. cities, and many, many prayer events later - the dream born in the beauty of Umbria lives on, though we need a new dwelling now. I will always hold *The New Church* close to my heart as a sign that I am exactly where God wants me in life, just as Francis spent years to find his path to God.

Our community of St. Peter's includes you in our daily prayer and 41 weekly Masses. It costs approximately \$3,500 a day to operate St. Peter's and our weekday collections average perhaps \$900. We are grateful for the support you offer us in so many forms. God is our rock and people like you keep our ministry active. Chiesa Nuova, St. Peter's, the Province of the Most Sacred Heart – we friars live with open hands and gratitude in our hearts. I want to extend an invitation to you to our annual fundraiser. It's a beautiful evening. Join us if you can, or perhaps help with a gift – May God fill your life with the peace, goodness and truth I found at Chiesa Nuova and may our lives as the Body of Christ recreate our world with beauty and peace. *Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm*

2017 GALA A Benefit for St. Peter's Church

Thursday, July 13 5:30 – 8:30 p.m.
Union League Club of Chicago
Silent and Live Auctions
Hors d'oeuvres & Open Bar
Tickets \$175 available at St. Peter's

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