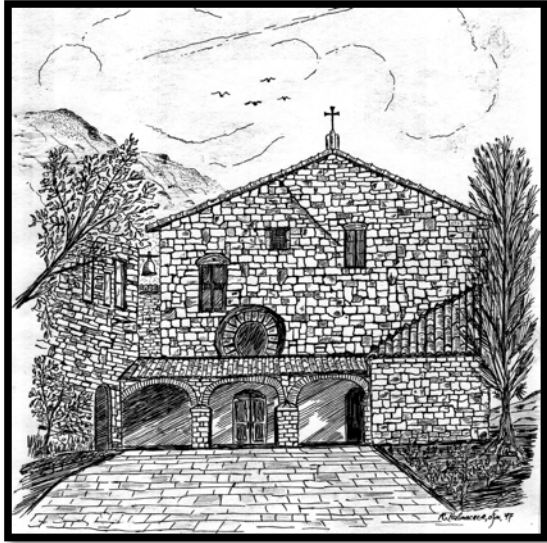


San Damiano

Friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm



I love to share our Franciscan places with you, as I did in May with the Porziuncola chapel. This month we visit San Damiano, the first of three chapels that Francis himself repaired in the earliest days of his religious life. It was in San Damiano that he had the famous experience of hearing God speak to him from the cross to “repair my house, for it is falling into ruin.”

The chapel itself is ancient, recorded first in 1030. In 1130 it was handed over to the care of the prior of San Rufino then to the bishop of Assisi. He, in turn, gave it to the Poor Clares at the death of St. Clare in 1253. After her Basilica was opened the Clares moved out and the bishop assigned the church to the Friars Minor, who continue to care for it and live there to the present.

But there’s an even more fascinating history of this sacred place that predates Christianity itself! Assisi was established about 1,000 BCE by the Umbrians, taken over by the Etruscans and then absorbed by the Roman Empire in 295 BCE. It was a perfect mountaintop defensive lookout and place of protection almost midway down the peninsula of Italy from Ravenna to Rome. In 238 AD Christianity was brought to Assisi by San Rufino. Considering that this route was in constant use by trade caravans and armies on the

move, it’s easy to see why Assisi was choice real estate! And there’s more...

San Damiano is built about half way up the mountain from the valley floor to the city walls of Assisi. The Romans used the area as a cemetery and there were still many funerary remains there at the time of Francis. Only one is still there today, near San Damiano; locals call it “the sepulcher of the Propertius family”, one of whom was a poet known by Pliny the Younger. The cathedral records in Assisi reveal that Bishop Felicianus met with the first Christians of the area near this cemetery. During fierce persecutions he encouraged the new Christians to “be strong, for after death you will have eternal life.” He died a martyr in 250 AD, the first bishop of nearby Foligno. In subsequent years this very spot became a supremely important place of healing and prayer for the local Christian community, so much so that they deemed it worthy of a small, country church in the 11th century.

Francis would have been very familiar with the chapel because the road it’s near was a necessary link to the trade routes to France and elsewhere. Most scholars agree that around 1205 Francis began to experience something within himself that caused different behaviors. When poor people presented themselves at his father’s cloth shop, Francis was moved with pity. He wouldn’t hesitate to offer help and little by little, a period of turmoil began to overtake his life. It was during this time that he was praying in the chapel of San Damiano and had that famous experience before the crucifix. His first recorded prayer was penned here in 2105/06, simply known as the *Prayer Before the Crucifix*. It’s beautiful and reveals a soul trying to discern God’s will:



Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me true faith, certain hope, sense and knowledge, Lord, that I may carry out your holy and true command.

I believe Francesco Bernadone suffered greatly as he began to break with his family. His father’s dream for him of being a businessman and fabric merchant like himself and his brother, Angelo, was fading away quickly. The early

sources clearly show the struggle he encountered – not only within himself but the break he was making with his whole family, his friends and the townspeople who'd known him as a knight, a merchant and quite the bon vivant. God was at work and Francis went into a few years of dark nights and tornadic decision making. (More about that later.) This was the period when Francis, in 1206, made that dramatic and very public break with his family and friends.

He once took very fine fabrics from their shop, sold them in Foligno to avoid Pietro's fiery anger and gave the money to the priest at San Damiano. The priest refused it because he feared Pietro Bernadone so Francis flung it all at a window. Pietro imprisoned Francis in the family home but his mother later released him. After the final, public break he resided at San Damiano and began the repairs he initially thought God was asking him to make.

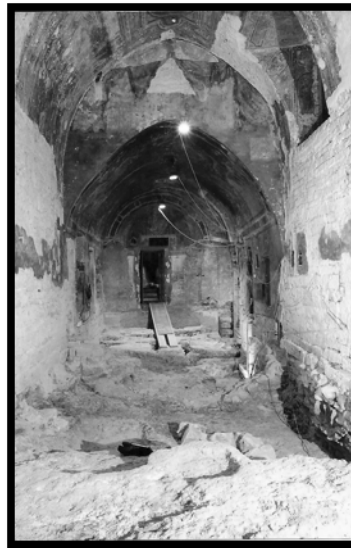
Millions of pilgrims visit San Damiano during any given year. Yes, millions! One can visit the chapel itself and various rooms used by St. Clare and the first Poor Clares. I especially love their dormitory where Clare died in 1253. I've composed more than one piece in that room and led pilgrims in prayer for healing there. A vibrant friar community occupies the complex and people join them for Mass and office every day.

To the left here you can see the chapel as it was in 1992 – caked with years of candle smoke, incense and a thousand years of use by thousands of God's people. In 1997 a number of severe earthquakes ravaged Assisi and towns around it, killing and injuring many including

two friars and two workmen in the Basilica of Francis. An ambitious period of renovation began because Pope St. John Paul II wanted Assisi rebuilt for the Jubilee Year 2000. The Basilica of Francis took precedence and other projects followed in time. That included Clare's Basilica and the protomonastery of Poor Clares, Chiesa Nuova, St. Mary of the Angels and San



Damiano. And talk about reconstruction of this revered tiny chapel!



The interior work included restoring 14th century frescoes and much stonework placed there by Francis himself. Workers outside went below the foundation and uncovered a "cave" thought to be the hiding place Francis used to escape his father and his henchmen who came to pull Francis from the hands of God.

The next photo shows it after renovation. It is once again bright and one can appreciate not only the artwork but it's noble simplicity. The original Crucifix of San Damiano hangs in the Basilica of St. Clare in Assisi; the one here is a copy. San Damiano continues to be a center for prayer and discernment for many. Discernment is the reason I want to share San Damiano with you; it was the threshold of Francis' period of conversion.



Many of the people I work with in spiritual direction ask me to help them discern God's will. Because it's difficult to describe one's

experiences with God, it is often expressed in phrases such as “how do I know what God wants me to do?” or “what am I supposed to be doing with my life.” Whatever words I, you, or anyone use, they reveal a deep desire to be closer to God and to know epistemologically the direction to be taken or decision to be made. How do we discern something as nebulous as God’s will? We pray daily “thy will be done...” but allowing that to happen is another thing, isn’t it?

Ignatius of Loyola gave us great principles for discernment. He called one approach the analytical way to make a choice: a person can make two columns of pros and cons to see exactly what to weigh on both sides of a choice. When a choice is made, then one asks for the grace to be at peace with it.

Emotions can guide discernment, which Ignatius called ‘the gift of the reasoning heart.’ I often tell people who are discerning anything to ‘trust your instincts or follow your heart.’ Ignatius taught that the world is permeated by God’s loving presence and we must learn God’s way of being in touch with us. We must see God in creation, in Scripture and in our imagination.

Here’s a scriptural way to contemplate or see God’s presence in your decision-making. Find a passage or story from Scripture that captivates you. Read the story once to get an overview, then read it again but place yourself within the story as an observer. Read the story a third time with you as one of the main characters or even Jesus....and be attentive to God’s grace. You may be surprised at what your imagination will bring you. This kind of prayer teaches us who Jesus is. It also brings us closer to God. Give yourself a period of sacred silence and try this exercise. Don’t expect instant clarity or a solid decision right away, but patience is rewarded, believe me!

Francis spent at least four to five years trying to find what God wanted him to be. He searched and prayed, wrestled and doubted during his days at San Damiano. Five years before his death he realized that he should relinquish leadership of his own fraternity. I am convinced that Francis battled depression at various stages of his life. This shows up in some writings and hagiography records periods of darkness in which he expressed being lost. Ever searching, Francis

began his journey with God in the intimate setting of San Damiano and never stopped listening until his death in 1226 in St. Mary of the Angels down in the valley below Assisi.

After a number of years of holy living and discernment, Clare Offreduccio left her noble family on the night of Palm Sunday in 1212 to join this new movement. Francis eventually had her reside at San Damiano. It became the birthplace of the Second Order, the Poor Ladies of St. Damian or The Poor Clares. She died there in 1253 and when her Basilica was built in Assisi the nuns moved there, taking with them that beloved Cross that spoke to Francis.

The command to “repair my house, for it is falling into ruin” lives on in all branches of the Franciscan movement around the world. In a letter to U.S. friars in 2016 our Minister General, Michael Perry, wrote that ours is a “brotherhood that is willing to keep moving, willing to engage in the missionary dimension of our charism, which is built on the tectonic plate of itinerancy, that movement of missionary evangelization that was in the DNA of Francis of Assisi and the early friars.”

Every three years religious orders gather members for prayer, discernment and election of new leaders. We friars of the Province of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus will gather for our **Provincial Chapter** June 18-23 in St. Louis. Many of us here at St. Peter’s will participate. Please read the weekly bulletin for our adjusted schedule for that week. We ask for your prayer support. Our province is facing crucial issues about our future and we humbly ask that you remember us so that we, like Francis and Clare before us, can discern what God is asking of us in the 21st century.

Thank you for the ways you continue to support our Franciscan presence here in the Loop and beyond. Your involvement makes St. Peter’s a viable presence of Christ in our city. You are remembered in our daily community prayers. May our God of life and beauty fill your hearts with peace and everything that is good.

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