

Assisi Treasures

Friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm



Church of Santo Stefano

This is a tiny church in Assisi, always one of my favorites. It has been recorded as a parish since 1166. It seats perhaps fifty people, modest as it is with just four arches and a small campanile with two bells. It's presently cared for by the Diocese of Assisi and German women religious. Like the entire town of Assisi, **Santo Stefano** is built of the pink marble that is Mt. Subasio. While living there in the early '90's Santo Stefano became one of my hiding places, perfect for listening to God for musical inspiration. According to Franciscan legend, the night Francis died down in the valley at the Porziuncola, the two bells in the campanile rang on their own to honor his entrance into Life.



Interior of Santo Stefano

Outside the walls of Assisi yet still on the mountainside is **Abbazia di San Pietro**, the Benedictine Abbey of St. Peter. It is a noble and large construction that housed a community since 1029. The present monastery and church were consecrated in 1253, the year Clare died. It is

Romanesque in style and the façade bears three splendid rose windows that contain clear glass. One striking attribute is that a 1954 revision removed the Baroque altars and almost all the plaster covering the walls. A few 13th century frescoes were preserved but the nave, apse and dome are bare stone. Benedictines had



Interior of San Pietro



Dome of San Pietro

ingenious designers who built these splendid churches for spectacular aural experiences. I've heard choral concerts by Cantori d'Assisi and other choirs; polyphony reverberates to the heights of the dome. It is directly above the altar and is constructed of 31 layers of concentric stone circles. When one sings under the dome the voice rises to the top of the dome then soars down throughout the entire nave and apse. One of my pilgrimage groups sang in harmony under the dome and it was an extraordinary and holy experience! Francis and Clare knew this holy place and the Benedictine presence is very much appreciated by the people of Assisi.

The oldest traces of human habitation in the area around Assisi date from the Bronze Age, 1900 years before Christ. Nearby Perugia and Assisi were settled by Etruscans and the entire area of Umbria was claimed by the Roman Confederation in 89 B.C. The walls surrounding the entire city were begun 100 years B.C. and a Roman temple dedicated to Minerva was also built then. The façade of that temple is the crown jewel of the central piazza today. Perhaps one third of present day Assisi was extant during the time of Francis and Clare but the Roman walls, an amphitheater above town and a forum under Piazza del Comune still testify to the power of an Empire and incredible construction.

The transition Assisi made from a Roman city to a Christian one happened when its first bishop and martyr, San Rufino, was killed by the Romans in 238. Assisi actually has a very violent history as it survived barbarian invasions, passed to Lombard domination and became part of the Duchy of Spoleto. The armies of Charlemagne destroyed the Roman walls. I once spoke to an historian who described that period (about 800 AD) like this: “The streets of Assisi ran with blood.” The Emperor even had salt poured into fields to halt agriculture for years.



Map of Assisi by Giacomo Lauro, 1599

Frederick Barbarossa claimed Assisi for the Holy Roman Empire in 1160; that lasted just a few years when an uprising in 1174 turned it over to Conrad of Urslingen who claimed the imperial castle for himself (La Rocca) atop Mt. Subasio. In 1198 the Church claimed it had the right to control the territories of the Duchy of Spoleto. This led to an uprising in which Francis participated and the castle was destroyed.

Assisiani established their city as a self-governed comune. However – it gets even more tangled! – internal battles between the nobility of Assisi and the rising merchant class and disagreements with Papal power took a terrible toll. A final war with Perugia ended in the defeat of Assisi in 1202; this was the battle in which Francis fought, never even made it to Perugia, was captured on the battlefield at Collestrada and imprisoned for a year in Perugia. That led to years of battling and arguing with his family, himself and God.



Walls of Assisi from atop La Rocca

I share all this history with you because the city walls involve another small gem not too many people get to see in Assisi. In the northwest sector of town lies the **Monastero di San Giacomo de Murorupto**. It is the home of a community of Franciscan Sisters who staff a



Interior of San Giacomo

home for poor women of the area. Part of the complex is a very small chapel that was built in 1088. It was a gift from one Ubertino di Guitonne of Assisi to fulfill a penance of 300 years given him by the bishop of Gubbio. And you thought a rosary was a tough penance? Ha! Try 300 years of prayer. Now that’s tough!

In English the name means *St. James of the Broken Wall*. It was built in its location to plug up a hole in the city walls. Seriously! If you have a hole in your fence, put a chapel in it, right? You probably won’t see an episode of “This Old House” doing that, but this was

practical because it 1) repaired protection for the town and 2) fulfilled part of Ubertino's penance. Take a look at the arch of this chapel and its oddly placed windows and you can see the irregular shapes that literally plugged a hole. If you look out a side window you can, indeed, see more ruins of the ancient Roman walls. San Giacomo de Murorupto. I love this sanctuary.

Francis of Assisi. Little man for the poor, champion of peace and reconciliation. Like so many of his contemporaries, he had romanticized knighthood and, instead, witnessed the brutality and mutilated bodies of warfare, class conflicts, gross injustices and terror created by humans for other humans. I want you to know this part of Assisi's history. It is not pretty, nor is it spoken of very often. We tend to put a saint on a holy card and forget her or his experiences of life that led to a halo from the Church. Assisi is called *City of Peace* now, but it was birthed through centuries of violence, hatred and bloodshed.

Francesco Bernadone took part in that 1198 insurrection against imperial power and helped destroy the castle atop Assisi. His father spent a small fortune to outfit him with a horse and armor – twice! – so he could fulfill a dream of being a military hero. He got swallowed up by that medieval thirst for blood and fame. But the battlefield at Collestrada destroyed him until he allowed God to reconstruct his life.

As I write this we just completed a week of celebrating the genteel feasts of Clare and the Assumption of Mary. We were also presented with images from Charlottesville, WV and Barcelona, Spain. Who are we as people of the 'Land of the Free'? as children of God? as the Body of Christ? I, as I hope you do, have myriad questions about the state of our country and world. Coming from our background with Francis and Clare I am becoming more and more brave in my preaching. There is no reason whatsoever to hold back in bringing people together in Christ, in peace, in dignity. We must return Mother Earth to her pristine and original innocence as created by God. We must.



In his *Christian Perfection* St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote: "Since we possess Christ who is peace, we must put an end to this enmity and live as we believe He lived. Christ broke down the separating walls, uniting what was divided, bringing about peace by reconciling in his single person those who disagreed. In the same way, we must be reconciled not only with those who attack us from outside, but also with those who stir up dissension within." Gregory died in 394. Have we learned anything since his time?

I am working on a play with three friends in Italy, two musicians and an actor. It's called 'Francis, Messenger of Peace'. We want people to experience how brave Francis was in his conversion from medieval soldier to one who unashamedly preached the very Peace that is Christ. Francis and Clare offer us clear examples of how we can turn away from a life of privilege or power to an existence of being at peace within ourselves and with others.

When you and I stand at the Table of the Lord we have one foot in the Kingdom and take upon ourselves the moral responsibility of living what we share at that Table. There can be no room for racism or injustice, my friends. When we offer our hearts to God in return for the gift of his Son, God fills us with joy and the knowledge that all God's children deserve dignity and that, just as all are welcomed to the Table, all can live together in harmony. No matter what civil leaders say and do, no matter the ignominy and death that seemingly smothers us some days – I believe with all I am that God's ways will prevail. We must show the world that good will overcome evil and we must be very consistent in our faith: either we are Christ or we are not.

The walls of Assisi were torn down by hate and yet it was a chapel, the presence of Christ, that filled that place of hatred with love and security. We must learn from history, which began when God loved the universe into existence. Racism and its monstrous forms are not from the heart of God; they arise from fear and selfishness. We pray for you each day and ask God to grant us all the grace to be Peace and everything that is good.

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