

Jan Benson

Associate since 2017

Pilgrimage to Assisi



Last month, I had the opportunity to travel to Italy with a group of 30 other pilgrims. Our group was led by Franciscan Father Bob Hutmacher, who is in residence at Chicago's St. Peter's Church in the Loop and Guardian of the Community there. Father Bob also assists on weekends at Ascension-St. Edmund Parish in Oak Park.

On the 12-day pilgrimage, we spent six nights in Assisi. We celebrated Mass at the tomb of St. Francis, as well as in the Portiuncula in the valley near Assisi. The

Portiuncula is where Francis heard God's message to "rebuild My church, which you can see is falling into ruin." In about 1210, the Portiuncula became the birthplace of the Order of Friars Minor and two years later Clare

promised her life to Christ. Francis died there in 1226. Celebrating the Eucharist in these two holy places will be a cherished memory.

One of the day trips from Assisi was to Rome, where we were able to walk through the Holy Doors at all four major Roman basilicas for this Jubilee year. The first basilica we entered was St. John Lateran, the oldest basilica in the western world, founded in 324 A.D. My eyes were full of tears all the way through the basilica as I contemplated the history and the glory given to God throughout the centuries. At the Basilica of St. Mary Major, we celebrated Mass in one of its chapels. Pope Francis is buried in the basilica, and I was touched by the simplicity of his white marble gravestone which simply read "Franciscus."

From the humble stone chapels of Francis' Assisi, radiating simplicity and peace, to the ornate mosaics and soaring architecture of Rome's basilicas, each revealed their own way of honoring God.

One of the highlights of the trip for me was to witness the premiere performance of Father Bob's musical composition of the Canticle of the Creatures honoring the 800th anniversary of St. Francis' canticle. It was outstanding! The premiere took place in Perugia, and three nights later was performed in Assisi at the Basilica of St. Clare. The orchestra consisted of 20 musical artists, 18 choir members, a soloist, and a narrator. To experience this beautiful composition honoring St. Francis by one of his friars living 800 years later was incredible.

There was not a dry eye among us, and to see how the words and the music affected the musicians themselves was beautiful.

I may not have been drawn to this pilgrimage if it were not for the School Sisters of St. Francis providing me, and others in Associate Relationship, with the experience of learning and living Franciscan spirituality. Walking where Francis and Clare walked deepened my appreciation of that Franciscan spirituality.



Jan at the stone altar on Mat Subasio where Francis went to pray.



Portiuncula Chapel within the Basilica of St. Mary's of the Angels at the foot of Assisi, Italy