

Precious Pilgrim,

Today I am standing in my most favorite place at this camp in North Carolina, Camp Kanuga. It is St. Francis' outdoor chapel and it makes me want to revisit this little man's home in Assisi. So now let us close our eyes and go to the land of Francis. May this imaginative heart and mind travel help lead us into a deeper comprehension of the holy ground each one of us occupies.

First, we travel to the Porziuncola, the little portion. It is located at the base of the hills of Assisi, Italy. In Francis' day, the area was a densely forested plain. In its midst was a tiny stone chapel, one of the three that he restored. It is here that he and his followers met yearly. It is here that he died. This little chapel today is encased within the large white bright elaborate church of St. Mary's of the Angels. As we approach this cathedral, we miss the woods, which have been replaced by vendors and hawkers selling Assisi paraphernalia. But once we enter the church, ah, it's perfect. The space, the space is large, although grand, it is somehow still very simple. And the quietness, the quietness, there are hundreds of people walking around, but it is breathtakingly quiet. Everyone is in a reverent mood. Each is drawn, as if by a magnet, to the little church, the little portion. It is tiny, maybe 12 feet by 20 feet. We wait our turn and then enter. There are ancient pews along the walls. We seek one out in order to kneel and pray. We must, for in this diminutive space we are drawn to a

humbler position. It is as if we have reentered a womb or a furnace or the hands of God. We know it is holy ground. It is a place of creativity, Christ-like creativity, where walls are broken down, positive juices seem to be flowing. Our whole bodies, minds and spirits want to respond to Christ's love. We experience an effervescent overflowing. We think of King David dancing with wild abandonment before the Ark of the Covenant. A run-in with the holy causes creativity to flow and St. Francis had such encounters often. St. Francis' whole life became an art form as a result of his total immersion in and taking on of Christ. His whole life became a celebrating art form, singing, "The hills are alive with the sound of music." But also in the valleys and plains and caves, wherever we retrace the footsteps of this poor little man, there seems to be a melody playing, hidden harmonies.

It is now in our mental visit a moonlit night and we go purposefully to Assisi's town square. We've had to wind back and forth and up and down and around and about to arrive, but this weaving, walking journey was sheer delight. It was like traveling through the backwaters of Venice where time retraces itself. These ancient, storied, stonewall buildings seem to have divided just enough so that we could pass. We arrive and there are groups of young people gathered singing from all over the world. We wish we could turn up the moonlight for we just know that somewhere in our midst is the little man Francis celebrating too. He might be cold or hungry or tired

or in excruciating pain but, nevertheless, if there is a joyful meeting of praises going on, he's bound to be there. Red poppies bring out song. Soaring swallows bring out song. Swaying trees bring out song. Flowing streams bring out song. Ah, but beauty is in the eye of the beholder and St. Francis saw more than most. His interior soul eyes became so sensitive that writhing lepers brought out song. Dank imprisonment brought out song. A raging father brought out song. Hunger, thirst, disease and death brought out song. We cannot put a stopper on music, which comes from the deepest part of ourselves, it is a response to God's love.

We can now go visit the little stucco room, which holds the only known surviving painting done by the saint. We climb ancient steep steps to the second floor and we come to a suite of little rooms, one of which holds a fireplace. It is here we learn that St. Francis' temples were cauterized in a failed attempt to cure his eye disease. Burning iron brand on his temples. Can we imagine the pain, the smell, the unbearable was made bearable for he had prayed that Brother Fire would be gentle. He was then taken to this little one-room building to recuperate. Here, out of pain, mixed with his devotional love of Christ, using blinded eyes but a sure hand, he drew on the wall the Towel Cross, which is the symbol of Franciscans today.

And now we go to the caves. Immersed throughout this saint's life are cave dwelling times. He needed these dark, solitary enclosures to keep his senses finely tuned to Christ. The

ebb and flow, the balance, the pouring out and filling up, emptiness, vulnerability, surrendering - this is the world of a cave dweller. Francis was one often - most saints are. It is scary going into the dark to experience the light. We know that we must take this route for we believe it is here like no other place that the creative juices from Christ flow.

Our final destination on the imaginative journey is to St. Francis' tomb. We enter St. Francis' Cathedral. It is made up of three levels. Each level is a church on its own. The top floor has the glorious Jato paintings all around the walls depicting Francis' life. The middle church also has beautiful wall frescoes. Finally, we descend the stone steps into the tomb chapel. We are entering a much smaller space packed with people. We should feel claustrophobic, but instead it's as if we can breathe again. We internally smile. It is good. It is perfect. Francis would like this cave-like tomb room. We silently wait in line. It is a slow-moving one, which is fine because there is no need to rush, no need to hurry, all are where they want to be. There is one aisle with chairs on either side. We proceed to the front where there is a simple stone altar and crucifix. We look up and there above the altar behind the iron gate is Francis' tomb. It seems to be suspended in mid-air. It is, as he requested, his body's final resting place. It's a crudely carved stone feeding trough for animals.

It is now for our imaginary journey time to end. We start to ascend up those well-worn steps. Amazingly, this holy

ground sensation does not seem to leave us. It is as if this hallowed world has taken root within our very being and rightly so for can we not take some of Francis' world with each one of us? Can we not occasionally be cave dwellers? Can we not die to self by God's grace? And can we not be marked as Christ's own by his grace? We are all called to be like Jesus. We are to see the holy in all experiences, in all people, in all places, and in all things. His natural response was a joyful, effervescent, bubbling up of praise and worship. It affected all aspects of his life.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, may our lives so become holy ground. We have imaginatively visited such places, but the reality is that each one of us is holy ground because of who indwells us. Francis knew this. May we know it also. Peace and all good.

*I am your sister in Christ,
Lucy*