

*Come Holy Spirit
Use me to Your glory*

Precious Pilgrim,

Close your eyes and come with me to the land of St. Francis. May this imaginative travel lead us into a deeper comprehension of the holy ground each one of us occupies. It is out of this realization that this saint operated and, as a result, his life became art. May ours also become.

First, we travel to the Porziuncola, the Little Portion. It is located at the base of the hills of Assisi. In St. 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 elaborate church of St. Mary of the Angels.

As we approach the cathedral, we miss the woods which have been replaced by vendors and hawkers. But once we enter into the church, ah, it is perfect. The space is large -- although grand, it is somehow still very simple. And 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 about 12 feet by 20 feet and we wait our turn and enter. It is as if we have re-entered a womb 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 think of King David dancing with wild abandonment before the Ark of the Covenant. A run in with the holy causes creativity to flow. St. Francis had such encounters often.

St. Francis and the arts. Christ and creativity. I can't separate these two themes. 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." Wherever we retrace the footsteps of St. Francis, there seems to be a melody playing, hidden harmonies.

It is now a moonlit night and we go purposefully to Assisi's town square. We've had to wind back and forth and up and down, this weaving, walking journey was sheer delight.

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 this Little Man 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 here.

"Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee." Ah, but Pilgrim, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" and Francis saw more than most. His interior soul eyes became so sensitive that rotting 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. Ah, God's love, Pilgrim, that seemed to color all situations, circumstances, people, places, and made them beautiful for Francis. May we, brothers and sisters, experience such a life coloration painted by God's love.

We now go visit the little stucco room which holds the only known surviving painting done by the saint. St. Francis' temples were cauterized in a failed attempt to cure an eye disease. Burning iron branded on your temples. Can we imagine the pain? The smell? The unbearable was made bearable, for he had prayed that brother fire would be gentle.

Here, out of pain, mixed with his devotional love of Christ, using blind eyes, but a sure hand, he drew on the wall a cross. It is the size of a man's hand. The hues are faded red. We wonder, could this be the handprint of a saint rather than a drawing? Could the bearing of his own cross have begun to emulate our Lord's life in such a way that his handprint left such a mark?

And now, Pilgrim, we go to the caves. Interspersed throughout the saint's life are his 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. This is the world of a cave dweller. Most saints need that and we probably do too.

As we enter, some of us, including myself, go kicking and screaming and dragging our feet. It is scary going into the dark to experience the Light. But we know that we must. 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. Oww! That statement bothers me. "Creative juices from Christ flow" brings to mind Christ Crucified -- brings to mind Francis' stigmata -- brings to mind our dying to self. Ah yes, cave dwelling is necessary in order for the arts to flourish.

Our final destination on this imaginary journey is to St. Francis' tomb. We enter a cathedral. It is made up of three levels and each level is a church on its own. We descend to the bottom and the stone steps to the tomb chapel. We are entering a much smaller space packed with people. We should feel claustrophobic, but instead it is as if we can breathe again. We progress to the front where there is a simple stone altar and crucifix. We look up and there above the altar, behind an iron gate, is Francis' tomb. It seems to be suspended in midair. It is as he requested. His body's final resting place is a crudely carved stone feeding trough for animals.

It is now time for our journey's end. It is as if the hallowed world has taken root within our very being. And rightly so, for can we not take some of Francis' world with us? Can we not occasionally, Pilgrim, be cave dwellers? Can we not die to self? Can we not be marked as Christ's own?

Francis and the arts was our theme and I think a lot has to do with the creativity with Christ. We are all called to be like Christ. St. Francis saw the holy in all experiences -- in all people, in all places, and in all things. His natural response, one which he could not contain, was a joyful, effervescent bubbling up of praise and worship. It affected all aspects of his life; thus his life was art.

Pilgrim, may our lives also 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 it. May we know it. Now does that not get those creative juices flowing?

I am your sister in Christ,

Lucy