

# Communio

That All May Be One

Newsletter of the Brothers and Sisters of St. Francis Region  
Secular Franciscan Order

Spring 2016

## St. Francis Celebrates the Beauty of Creation

Fields and vineyards,  
rocks and woods,  
and all the beauties of the field,  
flowing springs and  
blooming gardens,  
earth and fire, air and wind:  
all these he urged to love of  
God and to willing service.

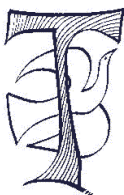
Finally, he used to call  
all creatures  
by the name of  
“brother” and “sister”  
and in a wonderful way,  
unknown to others,  
he could discern the secrets  
of the heart of creatures  
like someone who had  
already passed  
into the freedom of the glory of  
the children of God.



“The Life of Saint Francis” by Thomas of Celano,  
*Francis of Assisi, Early Documents: Volume I, The Saint*, p. 251

### The Four Pillars of Secular Franciscan Life

Spirituality



Formation



Fraternity



Apostolate





## Editor's Journal: Adventure time

I don't know if it still does, but the Navy used to have a slogan: "It's not just a job, it's an adventure."

For me, the same is true Secular Franciscan: It's not just a way of life; it's an adventure."

We get to meet and reconnect with interesting people when we visit fraternities other than our own and when we attend our Annual Regional Gathering each year.

If we can travel to other countries we may meet our OFS brothers and sisters, so we are in fraternity wherever we go.

In this issue, we have the opportunity for some armchair travel to Uganda with Stephen Smith, OFS; and to two fascinating Franciscan sites in Italy's Marches Region: Renacavata, the mother convent of the Capuchin Order; and Santa Maria di Val di Sasso, a place that had already experienced perhaps 500 years of human habitation before St. Francis spent time there and is now embracing an expanded future.

We can enrich our lives in initial and ongoing formation, especially if we really get into it, seeing what we study as discovery or rediscovery of particular aspects of our way of life.

There's so much to explore, whether we do that through reading or through physically traveling to Franciscan places. I read somewhere that St. Francis has the longest bibliography of any person in history, after Jesus. So, we could read a different biography of Francis several times a year and get all sorts of different perspectives.

Carolyn Townes, OFS, invites us to take another sort of journey: to explore mercy and how we can be more merciful to others and to ourselves.

I'd like to suggest here that we can even journey in praying the Liturgy of the Hours, taking the time to absorb each line of each psalm. Look at all the places to which those psalms and canticles take us, and all we can see. How do they bring us closer to God? What pictures come to us as we pray the canticle from Daniel on the first and third Sunday mornings of the four-week psalter? As we pray Psalm 104, the psalm for Sunday of Week II in the Office of Readings?

Let's take some time to explore this wonderful OFS way of life. I wish you happy travels.

*Pace e bene*

*Joanita*

*Joanita M. Nellenbach, OFS, is Communio editor. She is a member of St. Francis of the Hills Fraternity in Hendersonville, N.C., and spiritual assistant to Franciscan Martyrs of Siroki Brijeg Fraternity in Blairsville, Ga.*

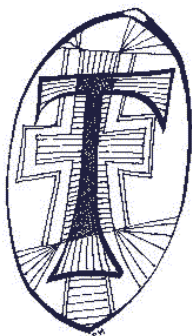
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**We are collecting  
words of wisdom or encouragement  
that you recall from Father Linus,  
anything from emails, conversations,  
talks, or homilies  
you remember him giving.**

**If you have quotes or paraphrases  
that you could share, please send them to  
Cricket Aull through [Jerryaull@gmail.com](mailto:Jerryaull@gmail.com).**

**We will be sharing them  
at the ARG this August. Thank you.  
Peace and all good, Cricket**



## Minister's Message: Easter Rejoicing

Dearest Brothers and Sisters,

He is risen! Alleluia!

What joy we experience in knowing we have the gift of eternal life, in our belief that we are beloved sons and daughters of our God, created in his image and likeness. How beautiful and humbling to know the incredible depths of our triune God's love and purpose for each one of us as we go about our day-to-day doings to build up the kingdom of God!

I hope that your Lenten journey was a fruitful one; that your daily reflections allowed you to grow spiritually and increased your desire to be holy.

I have been reading *Rediscover Jesus* by Matthew Kelly, which our pastor gave to each family as a Christmas gift. This book offers 40 chapters, each to be read during the 40 days of Lent. We met for the last four Wednesdays of Lent to discuss and share 10 chapters each time.

At the end of each chapter, there's a point to ponder, a Gospel verse to live, a question to consider, and a short prayer.

Does "daily conversion" sound familiar? How about going "from Gospel to life and life to the Gospel"? Perhaps we've heard this message before, hundreds of times, told differently by whoever is the author of the words, as repetition is the mother of learning. Do we truly believe and apply the "WORD"?

From one particular chapter, entitled "Forty Words," I'd like to share the following: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 22:38–39). So very simple but so hard to do as Jesus did on a daily basis.

So, yes, I am a sinner, and I am aware of my daily need for conversion and repentance! I cannot do it alone, and I'm thankful for my Secular Franciscan brothers and sisters who walk this journey with me.

And I say to you: "Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, Rejoice! (Philippians 4:4). In this Holy Year of Mercy may we "be merciful as [our] heavenly Father is merciful."

May the Lord bless you and keep you! Happy Easter!

Your sister in Christ and St. Francis,  
DorothyAnn

*DorothyAnn Rowland, OFS, is minister of the Brothers and Sisters of St. Francis Region and a member of Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary Fraternity, Hilton Head Island, S.C.*

### Secular Franciscan Websites

**Brothers and Sisters of St. Francis Region — [www.bssfsfo.org](http://www.bssfsfo.org)**

**National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order  
in the United States (NAFRA)  
[www.nafra-sfo.org](http://www.nafra-sfo.org)**

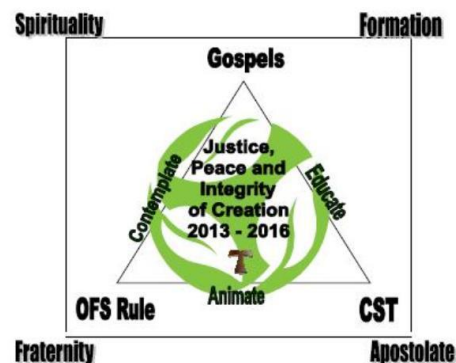
**Consilium Internationale Ordo Franciscanus Saecularis (CIOFS)  
International Council of the Secular Franciscan Order  
[www.ciofs.org](http://www.ciofs.org)**

## Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation: Choose Mercy

By Carolyn D. Townes, OFS

“To let go of anger, wrath, violence, and revenge are necessary conditions to living joyfully. Let us therefore heed the Apostle’s exhortation: ‘Do not let the sun go down on your anger’ (Eph 4:26). Above all, let us listen to the words of Jesus who made mercy as an ideal of life and a criterion for the credibility of our faith: ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy’ (Mt 5:7): the beatitude to which we should particularly aspire in this Holy Year.”

Pope Francis,  
*Misericordiae Vultus* (The Face of Mercy)



We have just completed another 40-day journey in the wilderness, ending with the triumphal paschal mystery of our Lord Jesus. We have done our Lenten duties of prayer, fasting, and giving alms. Now we celebrate that whatever we gave up for Lent, we can resume and pick back up again. Of course, if you gave up bread, chocolate, or coffee, you probably could not wait to take your first bite or sip in 40 days.

But what if you gave up anger? What if you gave up resentment? Or, violence, as I did? Can we pick those up again now that Lent is over? I think we all know the answer. As Pope Francis tells us, letting go of those vices is a necessary condition to living joyfully.

Now, we know this. I know we know it. But do we truly act upon it? To know is to do! Have we consciously and deliberately let go of violence? Or are we still being sarcastic to someone we do not agree with? Have we let go of anger or do we fly off the handle when a fraternity member disagrees with our point of view? Have we let go of wrath or do we give the silent treatment to one of our Secular sisters or brothers?

Most times, we are not aware of our insidious acts of violence towards others. These behaviors have been so ingrained in us that, sadly, they are second nature.

So, here is my challenge for you: BE mindful of your words and your actions. Stop and take a 10-second Franciscan Sacred Pause before you respond or act on something. In that 10 seconds, invoke the Holy Spirit to intercede in the situation. Do not respond or act if you are angry. Take a timeout, breathe deeply, and ask the Spirit of the Lord to animate and guide. Do this enough and it becomes a spiritual practice. Remember, conflict is inevitable but violence is not.

In all things, choose mercy. “Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy,” says the Lord. I don’t know about you, but I need all the mercy I can get. Therefore, I will do mercy to obtain mercy.

I don’t know what is going on in the life and heart of another sister or brother. But I do know that God did not create anyone to be wrathful and violent; those are choices. Being merciful and doing mercy are also choices. When it comes down to it, I choose mercy; I choose love; I choose peace and I choose joy!

May the Lord give you his peace.

*Carolyn D. Townes, OFS, the Brothers and Sisters of St. Francis Region’s JPIC animator, is a member of Our Lady Queen of Angels, Emerging Community, in Columbia, S.C., the National JPIC Commission; the International Commission for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation; and the Franciscan Action Network Commission.*

## Renacavata: Birthplace of the Capuchin Order

Story and Photos by Bret Thoman, OFS

The motherhouse and birthplace of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin is located in the hills outside the city of Camerino, about one hour from where we live in Loreto.



**Courtyard of the hermitage of Renacavata.**

A number of years ago, I was visiting the Poor Clares of Camerino (whom I wrote about in the winter 2016 *Communio*) when I asked the sisters about the Capuchin hermitage. Having taken a course in Franciscan history, I knew a little about the origins of the Capuchin Order. I knew that it began in Camerino, but I didn't know if there was anything left of its origins. It turns out there was.

Mother Chiara Laura Serboli, OSC, the abbess, told me about the hermitage of Renacavata, which is located a few kilometers outside the city. There was, indeed, a lively permanent community in addition to the novitiate.

The abbess told me that her father could drive me over there if I wanted to go. Signor Serboli was delighted to go the hermitage, as he was quite fond of the friars. So, the two of us set out in his rather beat-up 1970s-era Fiat 600 (equipped with four-wheel drive to handle the rough winters).

We made our way outside the city walls, past some university buildings, down into the valley, and back up into the hills through some farmland. As we worked our way up a potholed road toward the hermitage, we passed a sign saying "Renacavata: 2 km."

I looked around and admired the sheep grazing and farmers working the fields. A native of Georgia, I would refer to such country as the "boondocks." I imagined what the area had been like back in 1528 when the Capuchin Order was officially founded.



**Pilgrims enjoy a meal in the friars' refectory in Renacavata.**

After we made our way up a steep hill (and waited our turn at a traffic light used to space out two-direction traffic as the road narrowed to just one lane), we arrived at the hermitage of Renacavata. I admired how the simple whitish stone structure fit in perfectly with the green hills and blue sky in the background.

Signor Serboli pulled a rope next to the door and a bell rang inside. In a few minutes, an elderly friar with large belly, shaved head, and long white beard down to his cord opened the door.

"Padre Giulio!" exclaimed Signor Serboli as they embraced and kissed cheek-to-cheek Italian style (left cheek first, then right). He then introduced me as his American friend, and I

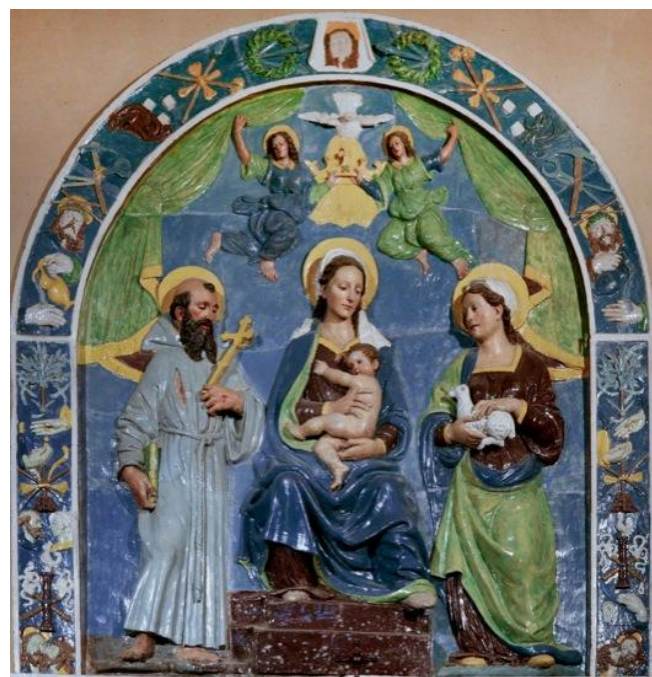
was welcomed with a warm “Buongiorno” and the same customary greeting. Signor Serboli told me that Padre Giulio was the guardian (superior) of the community.

We were then led into the kitchen where another friar, Fra Nicolino, was preparing lunch. It smelled scrumptious. Coffee was prepared and served; it was strong and sweet.

Since it was midmorning, we were invited to stay for lunch. I have a personal rule: never turn down a lunch served at an Italian monastery, friary, or convent. The food is always freshly prepared, delicious, and abundant. However, since I was not driving, I looked at Signor Serboli with an expression acknowledging I was in if he was. He made a quick call on his cellphone and his wife gave him permission. He was in, too.

As the morning wore on, we met some other elderly friars in the permanent community in addition to the young novices who were there for one year of formation. They were a joyful lot, and they were enthusiastic to show me around.

I learned a lot about the church, the friary, and the history of the Order. In the 1520s, a handful of Franciscan friars from this area — Matteo da Brascio, Ludovico and Raffaele da Fossombrone — desired to live as hermits.



**Della Robbia altarpiece in the hermitage church, with St. Francis of Assisi and St. Agnes flanking the Virgin and Child. The altarpiece was installed in the church in the 1530s.**

Though they were part of the reformed Franciscan Observant Order, they were seeking a more austere and ascetic life.

As sometimes happens, however, the leaders of the Observant Franciscans were not enthusiastic about a new breakaway reform movement from within their ranks (the ink was barely dry on their own official separation from the Conventual Order, which had taken place in 1517).

However, the young friars from Camerino had the support and patronage of the local duchess, Caterina Cibo, who happened to be the niece of Pope Clement VII. She was eternally grateful to the friars for their tireless service and ministry to the townspeople of Camerino who had just suffered a devastating plague epidemic. She gave them the land and church of Renacavata and also convinced her uncle, the pope, to grant their movement official recognition by the Church.

Thus, with his papal bull, “*Religionis Zelus*,” on July 3, 1528, Pope Clement VII granted the fledgling movement official recognition and separation from the Observant Franciscan branch. They were free to dedicate themselves to prayer, hermitage, and penance.

The name of the Order came from the slender capuche (hood) worn by the friars; the children of Camerino used to call the friars “little hoods.” (Incidentally, their name was later borrowed to describe the cappuccino coffee — with its brown, frothy “hood” (covered with cinnamon) it looked like the friars’ hoods).

The newly instituted third branch of Franciscans, the Capuchins, had a charism somewhat different from the Conventuals or the Observants. The Conventuals tended to live in the centers of the towns and cities, in large “convents” endowed often with libraries (*convento* means friary

in Italian); they dedicated themselves to study and theology. The Observants, on the other hand, lived in simpler friaries on the outskirts of the towns and sought to “observe” the Rule of Francis more closely.

Capuchins, however, chose their dwellings well outside the villages in remote locations up in the hills and mountains. Though they were still friars, their lives were so secluded that they took on monastic aspects, even sometimes referring to themselves as monks.

The friars showed me their original friary, the lovely 15th-century church with a brilliant Della Robbia ceramic altarpiece, and a welcoming museum with religious artwork and other items collected from closed friaries in the area. Of note were handcrafted wooden ciboria and reliquaries in addition to a number of stunning tabernacles: carved by friars in centuries past they were made to look like Renaissance-era palaces.

Finally, lunch was served in the 17th-century refectory, and we were not disappointed. The friars still live off the land just like they have for five centuries. We were served homemade tagliatelle pasta with fresh vegetables and chicken. The bread was made from grain harvested nearby; the olive oil pressed from olives on their land; the wine prepared from local crushed grapes. (Even the chicken had apparently been roaming around in a pen behind the friary only a day earlier.)

From that day onward, Katia and I developed a good friendship with the friars of Renacavata. Over the years, they have welcomed numerous pilgrim groups to the friary where they share their way of life with us.

*Bret Thoman, OFS, is a member of Immaculate Conception Fraternity in Jonesboro, Ga., and director of St. Francis Pilgrimages.*



**Handcarved tabernacle in the hermitage museum.**

### **Called to Total Availability**

In Philippians 2:5–8 St. Paul says that Christ emptied himself for the sake of humankind. Though he was God, he was born of woman and became man. When we follow Jesus as our model, and say our “Yes” to God’s call, we need to recognize that our “yes” includes the offering and surrendering of ourselves in giving ourselves back to God. St. Francis wrote in the *Letter to the Entire Order*, that we are to hold back nothing of ourselves for ourselves, so that he who gave himself totally to us may receive us totally. By our choice, our yes, we become God’s property to be used for the specific mission God has planned for us.

Can I willingly offer the total and best gift of myself without conditions and time limits? Vocation demands one’s entire life. In Scripture we find models of those who answered God’s call with that kind of desire to serve:

Samuel: “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening” (1Sm 3:10).

Isaiah: “I will go, send me” (Is 6:8).

Mary: “Be it done unto me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

Marie Amore, “Vocation: God’s Call” (p. 9),  
*For Up to Now: Foundational Topics for Initial Formation*

## Secular Franciscans on To The Nations trip to Uganda

By Stephen H. Smith, OFS

“In the spirit of minority, they should opt for relationships which give preference to the poor and to those on the fringe of society, whether these be individuals or categories of persons or an entire people; they should collaborate in overcoming the exclusion of others and those forms of poverty that are the fruit of inefficiency and injustice” (OFS General Constitutions, Art. 19.2).

Last July, I was in the heart of Uganda, the “Pearl of Africa” on a To The Nations journey.

My companions included Father Indigo Lopez, and 11 others: young and old, Secular Franciscans, Knights of Columbus, ordinary Catholic men and women. They did not know how their lives would be changed forever, not to mention the impact their lives would have on countless Ugandans.

Convinced that this journey was indeed part of their ongoing conversion, they spiritually prepared themselves each day by beginning with a Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament followed by Morning Prayer and Mass. Each day concluded with journaling, sharing and Night

Prayer. Of course, prayer was part of each breathing movement throughout the 17-day mission.

What To The Nations Inc. does, I think, is best expressed by its mission statement: “The mission of To The Nations is to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick and those in prison, stand beside the broken, all while showing the love of Jesus Christ to all of His creation.”

We completed construction of two brick homes and initiated and funded for a full year four feeding programs that are now providing a meal every day for 1,300 street orphans. They also received the beautiful new clothing and shoes we had brought with us.

In addition, we conducted a clinic in the village, providing them with medication for deworming and malaria. We also gave vitamins to malnourished mothers. Baby food was provided for severely malnourished infants. We even took Mass and Bibles in the Lugandan language to the prison.

Tears, sometimes of joy, often of sorrow, were a regular phenomenon among the missionaries. On the last day, children sang a song for us that they had written for us. And as they sang, they danced. When it was over an adult translated the words into English:

“You filled our empty bellies with food.  
You clothed our nakedness.



**On a mission trip to Uganda in July 2015, Stephen H. Smith, OFS (fourth from left) joins Sister Margaret Awor, a Little Sister of St. Francis, founder and director of Young Franciscans of Uganda and national coordinator of Franciscan Family of Uganda; and members of YouFra, including Kugonza Kirigwajjo Nicholas, president of YouFra Uganda (second from right).**

You gave us medicine because we were sick.

You built homes for those who had none.

You even visited and prayed with the sick and those in prison.

These are all good things, but they are not what was most important.

What was most important is that you came from so very far away  
just to be with us, to love us, to teach us how to love,  
and to teach us how to serve the poor.

Thank you.”

In May and June of 2016, Dr. Theresa Christie, OFS, minister of St. Elizabeth of Hungary Fraternity, Augusta, Ga.; Dan Goering, OFS, Our Lady Queen of Angels, Emerging Community, Columbia, S.C.; and I, along with 40 other missionaries, will journey to Uganda on mission to proclaim Franciscan values by words, actions, and presence.

*Stephen H. Smith, OFS, is a councilor in Franciscan Martyrs of Siroki Brijeg Fraternity in Blairsville, Ga.*

This Easter is a special one for us, for this year is a special year. Celebrating is always special, but sinking in the mercy of God and giving thanks to him throughout a whole year is something more particular. God grants us his mercy and invites us to be merciful like him. ... I'd like to invite you to fill our joy of Easter with the decision to be more committed to be witnesses of the Resurrection, delivering the love of the merciful Heavenly Father. ...

I know the testimony of those many sisters and brothers, who **feed the hungry** and **give drink to the thirsty** in many ways: in soup kitchens, by collecting food, by inviting those in need to their homes and to the fraternities. What a blessing it is to be instruments of the Lord, *when your heavenly Father feeds them* (Mt 6:26). This kind of solidarity and compassion has to characterize our fraternal life inside the Order, too. We have to be attentive to the needs of our sisters and brothers, both in our proper local fraternities and also on the international level. The differences among the national fraternities, who involve our brothers and sisters, are great, and as sisters and brothers, we always have to work on this worldwide work of solidarity and fraternity.

Many, too many all over the world, lack the human dignity and the social security that should be marked by having the essential material goods. Having a place to stay at home, a shelter to hide and a home for the family is what each human being deserves. Our intention to **clothe the naked and shelter the homeless** is a part of how to **build a more fraternal and evangelical world so that the kingdom of God may be brought about more effectively** (Rule, Art. 14).

We also have to take care of those who do not have the freedom to move, as those who are homebound for various reasons, or are in hospitals or in prisons. The sick, the elderly are our close sisters and brothers. **Visiting the sick and the imprisoned** is a privilege to express how God loves us: it is him who takes the first step, and regardless our abilities, it is him who is approaching. It is him who loves us first, and a true love is his, that does not expect any compensation. Also, this is a privileged moment to experience what does freedom mean for God: the freedom of spirit, the freedom of the soul, the freedom to love.

Tibor Kauser, OFS, minister general,  
from his Easter 2016 message

**BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF ST. FRANCIS REGION CALENDAR**  
**SCHEDULE OF VISITATIONS AND ELECTIONS**  
April through September 2016

* confirmed	V+ follow-up visit	(Observers in parentheses)
2016	Fraternity/Location	V Fraternal/Pastoral Visitors E Presider/Eccles. Witness
*April 2–3	Fr. Solanus Casey, Morehead City, NC	V Frank Massey/Pat Wilkerson
*April 9–10	St. Elizabeth of Hungary, Elizabeth City, NC	V Frank Massey/Joanita Nellenbach
*April 15–16	Our Lady of Good Counsel, Greenville, SC	V DorothyAnn Rowland/ Dcn. Tom Shaver (Margaret Horan)
*April 23–24	Seven Dolors of the BVM, Franklin, TN	V Barbara Garrison/Faye Martin
May 10	Fraternity of St. Clare, Winston-Salem, NC	E Frank Massey/Margaret Horan (Sr. Kathleen Ganiel)
*May 13–14	Immaculate Conception, Jonesboro, GA	V Barbara Garrison/Dcn. Tom Shaver
*June 4–5	St. Maximilian Kolbe, Huntersville, NC	V DorothyAnn Rowland/ Margaret Horan (Willie Guadalupe)
*June 12	Fraternity of Brother Francis, Newton, NC	E Charles Meyer/Audrey Binet
<b>June 30–July 4: Quinquennial, St. Louis, Mo., Renaissance Hotel — Fr. Dan Horan, OFM</b>		
July 14	St. Clare, Asheville, NC	E Sara Nell Boggs/Dcn. Ed Rademacher (Fr. Roberto Perez)
<b>Aug. 12–14: Annual Regional Gathering, Ridgecrest, NC — Chapter of Elections</b>		
Sept. 10	Franciscan Martyrs of Siroki Brijeg, Blairsville, GA	E /Joanita Nellenbach
Sept. 18	The Spirit of Francis and Clare, Conyers, GA	E

St. Francis tells us in his Testament that “the **Lord himself led me** ... Francis takes no credit for the promptings of the Spirit. The Trinity called and Francis answered the call. What happened to Francis can happen to us. There comes a point when we listen and begin to respond. We realize that something different is happening. A new way of living is beginning to make sense. The path to becoming a whole person captures our hearts. Fresh ideas attract us and practices move us to say: **The Lord himself led me** ... We follow the Lord and begin our Franciscan journey. The Trinity begins to reshape our attitudes and perspectives” (p. 3).

Lester Bach, OFM Cap.,

*Giving Life to the Words: Secular Franciscan Constitutions — A Spiritual Commentary*

## Santa Maria di Val di Sasso: A hermitage takes on new life

Story and Photos by Joanita M. Nellenbach, OFS

As tradition has it, Brother Francis and Brother Giles, about the year 1210, were looking for the hermitage of Santa Maria di Val di Sasso, near the village of Valleremita, in Italy's Marches Region.

At the village, they stopped a farmer, plowing a field with his cow-drawn plow.

Did he know of the hermitage and would he take them to it?

Yes, the farmer knew: it was halfway up the mountain behind the village, but he had to get this field ready for planting.

Persuaded, perhaps ordered, by Francis, he finally agreed; and they trudged up the mountain to the hermitage.

Leaving the friars there, the farmer returned to his field, where he found the plowing finished and the cows resting.

How long Francis and Giles stayed isn't known, but according to local tradition Francis visited at least once more, in 1215. People had already been living there for several hundred years.

Seventh to 11th century, Count Sasso and family had a castle there, providing a strategically important view of the valley. The last surviving member of the family gave the property to

Benedictine nuns for a monastery in the 12th century. Harsh winter conditions and dangers from bandits finally forced the nuns to move to Fabriano, about 20 miles from Valleremita.

Eventually, around 1405, Chiavello Chiavelli, lord of Fabriano, paid 172 gold ducats for the monastery and gave it to Franciscan friars.

It is thought that 50–60 Franciscan saints and blesseds spent time at Santa Maria di Val di Sasso. According to information at [www.fabrianostorica.it](http://www.fabrianostorica.it): "There dwelt St. Bernardino of Siena (1433), St. John of Capistrano (1450), and St. James of the Marches (1456). Years ago were still extant cells [of] St. Bernardino and St. James (which) were transformed into chapels in which [were] the inscriptions: 'Here Bernardino, bright star of the



**The hermitage of Santa Maria di Val di Sasso in September 2015. You are facing the church, which was built in the 14th century; friars' cloister is behind it. The 10th century building (right) is being outfitted as lodging for retreatants.**



**Just a few years ago, you would have seen rubble where now stand the structures that comprise the back of the hermitage. The campanile (bell tower) has been rebuilt and the hermitage's bells ring once again.**

observance, lived.' And 'Here, James, ... treasure of poverty, lived.'"

The place was famous as the "Portiuncula of the Marches" because, just as the Portiuncula in Assisi was the friars' first novitiate there, Santa Maria di Val di Sasso filled that role in the Marches.

But, when the Church in Italy was suppressed, monasteries, convents, and hermitages, including, Santa Maria di Val di Sasso, were closed. For 110 years, no one lived there full time,

though there were residents off and on. Farmers grazed their sheep on the lawn and warmed themselves around fires they built in the portico. Smoke from their fires turned the ceiling black and darkened or concealed the handpainted frescoes on the ceiling.

A photo from 1920 shows the cloister and church bell tower still standing, but eventually, they collapsed.

In 1970, the friars from the Order of Friars Minor Province of San Giacomo della Marca (St. James of the March) began to use the hermitage for retreat days.

Friars were there the first time I visited, in 2005, as part of a St. Francis Pilgrimages group. I was fascinated by the place, and it was immediately my favorite hermitage. A few years later several friars began to live there year-round.

In 2009, the Marche Region's governing council approved the hermitage's restoration and provided a 2.3-million-euro grant for the



**The church interior with its golden altarpiece depicting, on the lower panels, St. Jerome (left), St. Francis, coronation of the Blessed Virgin, St. Dominic, and St. Mary Magdalene. The original, stolen when the hermitage was closed in the 1800s, is now in the Pinacoteca di Brera (Brera Art Gallery) in Milan, Italy.**

work. The hermitage will retain its religious presence but will have an expanded community role.

"The Marche Region has the aim at creating a center with many functions: meetings, conventions, and initiatives related to the enhancement of learning about its historical and artistic-architectural aspects and as an important Franciscan reality in the Marche region. A new

way of dialogue between religious and laical people, open and respectful of different identities” (en.visit.marche.it).

Archeologists discovered ancient walls, an old fountain, as well as two rooms under the front lawn. These have been refurbished for use as a library and a conference room. Windows along one wall look out on the valley.

An art restorer cleaned the portico ceiling, thus bringing new life to paintings obscured for centuries.

The church’s apse had collapsed and a wall built to fill the gap. Now the apse has been restored, making the church five feet longer than what we had seen in past years. Construction workers used masonry techniques and materials that perfectly match the original construction.

Four friars are living in the rebuilt cloister. One or two are already professed, but for others, this place is part of their initial formation as OFM friars in the Province of San Giacomo della Marca.

Once vested with the habit, they have a novitiate year at San Damiano in Assisi. After making their first temporary vows, they spend a year at Santa Maria di Val di Sasso or another hermitage. This time includes liturgical, fraternal, and personal prayer, as well as work in the community.

“They have to have the experience of a hermitage,” said Father Ferdinando Campana, OFM, provincial of the province. “They need to have the experience of the poor and the sick. In our province they also have to have a year in the hermitage during temporary profession.

“From our tradition in the Province of the Marches, we have a great spiritual tradition. So, we decided in our province to continue this tradition. We have the hermitage as a temporary experience, not as a stable way of life.”

His vision for Santa Maria di Val di Sasso is that it will be a “place of prayer and peace.”



**One of the refreshed frescoes on the portico ceiling. This one recounts the birth of St. Francis: Francis’s mother (left) receives a man who predicts that she will give birth to an illustrious son; at center, she has just given birth; at right, Francis with a man who carries a cloak he will spread across a puddle so Francis can walk across without getting wet.**

*Joanita M. Nellenbach, OFS, is Communio editor. She is a member of St. Francis of the Hills Fraternity in Hendersonville, N.C., and spiritual assistant to Franciscan Martyrs of Siroki Brijeg Fraternity in Blairsville, Ga.*

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Profession Mass**

**1:30 P.M. CST**

**for our 3 candidates  
making permanent  
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Refreshments provided  
afterward.**

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