



*Painting by Sarah Duque ©
St. Francis walking and working in the fields*

PILGRIMAGES – PEACE MARCHES *in “the Spirit of Assisi”*

*by Fr. Maximilian Mizzi, OFM Conv.
Sacro Convento, Assisi, in March 2007
with an introduction and postscript by Bente Wolf*

Introduction

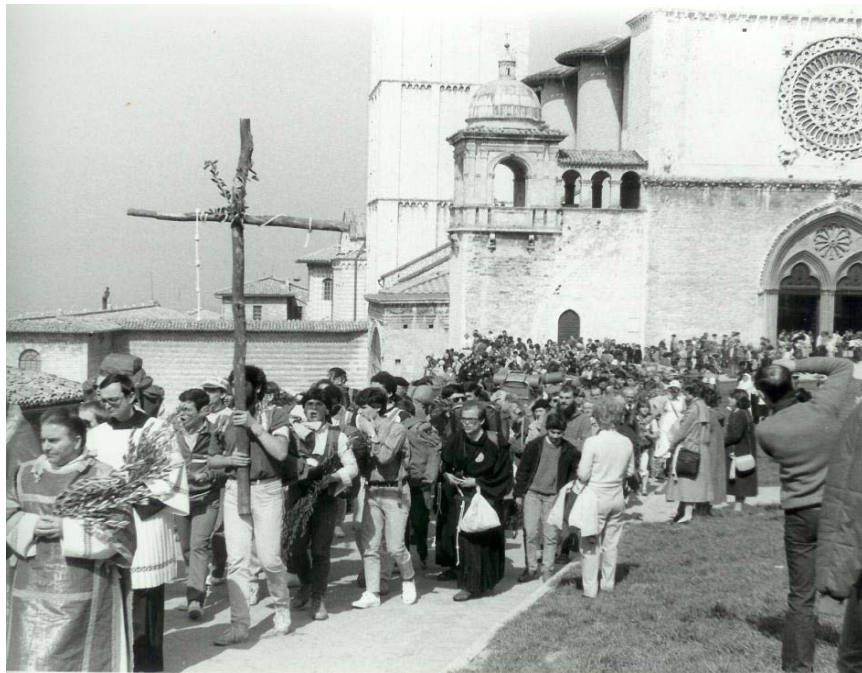
Pilgrimage is an ancient tradition and practice in all the world religions. The patriarchs of the Bible, as Abraham, David, Moses, walked in the Holy Land – Moses walked in the desert with the Chosen People during not less than 40 years. In his 3 years’ of public mission Jesus walked with his disciples, and everywhere he went, he unveiled aspects of the Kingdom of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit to the disciples and the people who went to listen to him. St. Francis of Assisi was the follower of Christ who took up this part of the mission of Jesus. It was quite unusual for monks at that time to go around walking, as the monks of the largest Order – the Benedictines – lived in monasteries, from which they never moved. But St. Francis walked around in his 17 years of public mission. He walked all over Italy and other parts of Europe and also in the Holy Land. To bring the message of God to the people was one of St. Francis’ most important missions, and always he wanted to bring this message with him by walking around. When he received the stigmata at La Verna two years before his death, he had, however, to give up walking himself, and had to let his brothers carry him. In the centuries after St. Francis walking on foot was still one of the only ways to travel – whether it was as a pilgrim or whether the travel had another purpose, but after the appearance of the many quick means of transportation, especially in the last century, the spiritual practice of walking on foot ceased. It was now less time-consuming and much more comfortable to go to a holy site and from one holy site to another by train, car, bus and plane.

Also in and around Assisi long walks on foot as pilgrims had become part of history, but as in other areas Assisi played a pioneer role re-introducing this ancient spiritual practice of pilgrimages. In 1975 Fr. Max Mizzi was promoter of the pilgrimages which became known as peace marches in the years to come. In March 2007 Fr. Mizzi told me his personal story from these years with pilgrimages, and having worked with the text it can now be published:

PILGRIMAGES – PEACE MARCHES

In *“the Spirit of Assisi”* by fr. Max Mizzi

Previously pilgrims used to walk on foot to Assisi, which since the time of St. Francis was a very important place of pilgrimage. In the Lower Square in front of the Basilica there are the beautiful arcades, which were built by the friars in the 14th century for the many pilgrims to have a place to sleep. The pilgrims used to come on foot and sometimes on donkeys and horses. Today pilgrims primarily come to Assisi by busses, and some of them walk to the different shrines of Assisi. But many pilgrims today also go from one shrine of the world to another, to Assisi, Loreto, Lourdes, Fatima, and Rome by bus. There is still today the shrine of Santiago di Compostella, in Spain, to which many pilgrims walk on foot. But in Italy and in many other parts of the world these long pilgrimages on foot had ceased. Today though there is a certain revival of such long distance pilgrimages on foot. I was one of those who gave a new start to these pilgrimages.



First pilgrimage from Assisi to Rome in Easter 1975 – leaving the Basilica

The first Pilgrimage from Assisi to Rome – Holy Week Jubilee Year 1975

The first long pilgrimage was from Assisi to Rome during Holy Week of the Jubilee Year of 1975. One can say that it started in a very providential way. In those years the Ecumenical Commission in Assisi, of which I was the secretary, used to send olive twigs to many parts of the world – to Christian Churches, to heads of States and to spiritual leaders – with a message of peace from the bishop and the mayor of Assisi. Sometimes

we sent more than 100,000 of such olive twigs. Of course we also sent one to the Pope. When the Vatican Commission of the Jubilee was organizing the Jubilee celebrations of 1975 the members of the Commission knew of this initiative of Assisi, and somebody said: *"We know that in Assisi for Easter they send olive twigs with a peace message from St. Francis. Rather than sending the message to the Pope by mail, can't they bring it to Rome with some people walking on a pilgrimage from Assisi to Rome?"* The idea was good but it soon appeared to be very difficult to achieve, because it was not easy to organize something like that. What happened was that a dispatch was released by mistake on the Vatican Radio saying that among the initiatives of the Holy Year there is going to be a pilgrimage on foot from Assisi to Rome. Some young people heard about it, and they started to press for it by calling Assisi, the Vatican etc. Seeing that we said to them: *"OK, you want it, you will get it"*. But it was not easy for us to do. Mons. Patrick Carroll Abbing, an Irish priest, founder of "the Boys' Town" in Rome and a member of the Jubilee Commission, and I got in contact and started to make plans. ("The Boys' Town" was an initiative of the Church started after the war, where young boys and girls without parents or in great moral and financial difficulties were given a home, i.e. shelter, food and school. The place was like a very tiny village organized as a small municipality with one of the boys as the mayor and others acted as councilors). Father Carroll Abbing called me to tell me that he decided to come to Assisi. *"What shall we do?"* he asked. We discussed the whole thing and made plans. One of the plans was that we would invite the bishops of Europe to send young people from every country in Europe (France, Germany, Spain, etc.) I suggested that we should invite also non-Catholic young people because, as I said, this is a pilgrimage of reconciliation, of peace, of brotherhood and those, who are not Catholic, the Lutherans, the Protestants, the Anglicans, etc. should be included. The idea was accepted warmly by the Vatican, and soon I got in touch with Sweden, with Denmark, and with other non-Catholic circles, with which I had been familiar for some years. Their reaction was very positive.

A group of about 25 young people came from Denmark, and a similar group from Sweden, others came from Norway. A very nice group came from America among them a Franciscan friar and a Franciscan sister who had served as a nurse for the USA army during the war in Vietnam and a few young people from the Pentecostal Church. Little by little the group of those who wanted to join the pilgrimage became bigger and bigger. Father Carroll Abbing and I had agreed that we could not manage more than 150 pilgrims, because we had to find shelter and food for them. We also had to establish the route. We could manage between 25-30 km walk in one day. We could not walk fewer kilometers if we were to be in Rome in a week. We had to work out on all these details. We asked school authorities to let us have the use of some schools where to sleep and where we could use some showers and toilet facilities. We organized for the participants a good dinner every evening, breakfast in the morning and picnic lunch for noon. Instead of a group of 150 we had 170 who came on the pilgrimage. So many young people were enthusiastic about it.



*Pilgrimage Assisi-Rome in Easter 1975 –
Father Mizzi with the olive twig to be offered to the Pope*

The plan was to leave Assisi on Palm Sunday and arrive in Rome on Easter Sunday for the Pope's mass in St. Peter's Square. First we participated in a mass at the tomb of St. Francis celebrated by the bishop of Assisi followed by breakfast. After breakfast we went to the Upper Basilica of St. Francis for the opening liturgy of Palm Sunday celebrated by Cardinal Silvio Oddi, Papal Legate for the Basilica. All the pilgrims were there, one of them holding a big cross made from two branches cut from a tree by some of the pilgrims. When the very solemn procession unfolded from the Upper Basilica to the Lower Basilica, the pilgrims who were at the head of the procession, separated from the procession and started their walk through Via San Francesco. At the main square, Piazza del Comune (Town Hall), the mayor, Dr Gianfranco Costa, delivered a short speech and walked with us to Porta Nuova. The pilgrims proceeded towards San Damiano and then towards Rivotorto. I had asked the people of Assisi to walk with us part of the pilgrimage. There was so much enthusiasm, and many people walked with us through Piazza Comune, to San Damiano and to Rivotorto. We stopped at all the holy sites connected with St. Francis. There was a great joy everywhere. The People along the streets were waving to us and saying: "*Buon Pellegrinaggio. Pray for us.*" At Rivotorto many of these people – young, old, men, and women – left us and returned to Assisi, while the pilgrims proceeded on their way to Rome.

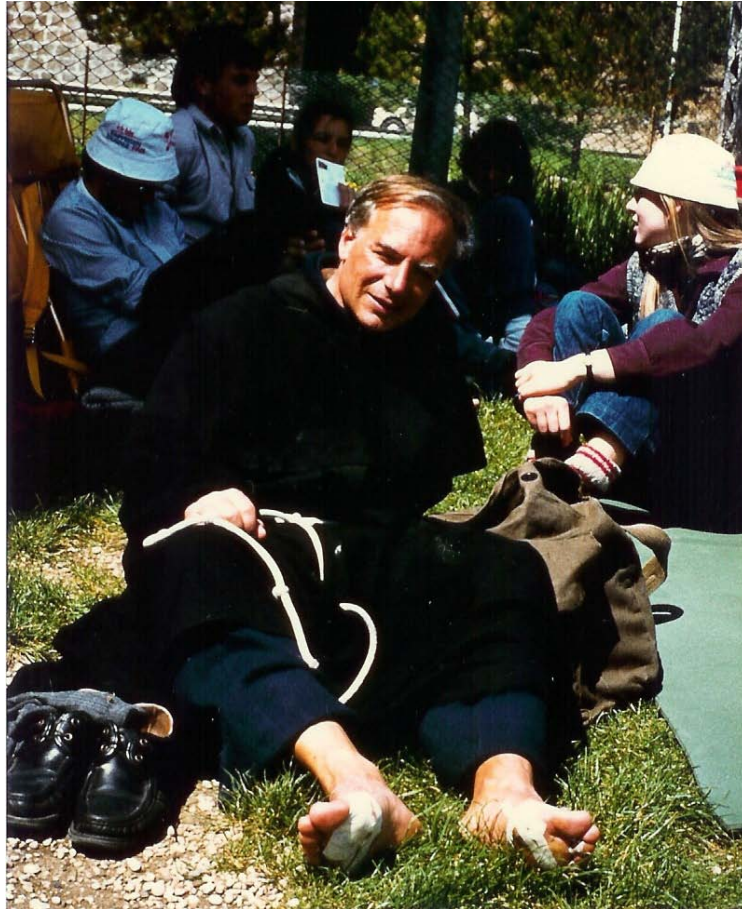


Pilgrimage Assisi-Rome in Easter 1975 – stop for prayers at San Damiano

It was the first such pilgrimage of the last many decades that a large number of pilgrims were walking from Assisi to Rome. Many were anxious about the outcome of the pilgrimage and were worried about us. I remember that some people of Assisi, including some Poor Clares, said to me: *“Oh, please don’t walk so long. You will die on the way!”* I replied that it is not a good thing that I organized something hard for people to undertake without participating myself. I had to set an example. I learned later that some of the monasteries in Assisi organized night prayers for us.

The pilgrimage was given much attention in national and international papers, and one of the Italian papers wrote: *“The globetrotters of Christ are walking from Assisi to Rome”*. The RAI, the Italian television, followed us every day, and every evening the day’s walk was included in the top news of the Italian television.

For us who were not used to walking long distances it was not an easy task. Great enthusiasm was not enough and after the first day’s walk when we arrived in Foligno about 25 km from Assisi, many started to have feet problems, and the first blisters appeared. I remember that when I woke up in Foligno after a few hours’ sleep on a blanket on the hard floor and started to start walking, I had problems making the first steps, because my rigid muscles hurt terribly. I thought: *“Oh, I am afraid I cannot make it. I will have to go back to Assisi”*, but I did my best, and after walking for some time, I felt that it became easier. But then the first blisters came out – many had big blisters on their feet. When we had the next stop for lunch somewhere in the countryside or in a small village, the first thing we did was to sit down on the ground and take care of the blisters. Luckily, we had a Maltese doctor with us, who used to help us until we had learned ourselves how to cope with all the bodily problems.



*Pilgrimage Assisi-Rome in Easter 1975 –
in some way sharing the stigmata of St. Francis*

When we were organizing the pilgrimage we had asked the people of the towns and villages to meet us some kilometers before we entered into the town or village and walk with us into the town. I will never forget our entry into Spoleto. So many people came out – young, old, men, women, children – walking with us, clapping their hands, waving, singing Franciscan songs. What a welcome! Walking through the main steep streets of the old town we went into the cathedral of Spoleto where a beautiful celebration, a mass, was celebrated. Every day we had a mass celebration which was the highlight of the day. Surprisingly all the pilgrims, Catholic and non Catholic, attended. Apart from that along the walk we shared our spiritual experiences with each other and with the people of the town or village. Our spiritual practices during the walk were free. But we also shared community prayers and meditation. Many prayed as they walked. I used to say the rosary and other prayers and I found it very helpful. I also said my breviary every day. Everybody did it as they felt to do. We did not want to put any rules on anyone.



Pilgrimage Assisi-Rome in Easter 1975 – leaving behind us Spoleto

Sometimes walking was very difficult and we had to help each other and encourage each other. We had a van with us, so that in case someone could not walk, he could for some time go on the van, where we also kept some food and drinks. I remember some people were walking with great difficulties because of the long distance. When the van stopped by their side and they were asked to step inside, they refused saying: *“I want to walk”*. It was very impressive. We also had a blind man from Rome walking with us. He was married, and had lost a very young son. This man, whose name was Orlando, was helped to walk by two young people, who always walked with him, holding hands with him to help him and tell him where we were and what we were doing. Sometimes he walked very badly because his feet hurt, so we asked him repeatedly: *“Please, go in the van for a little while”*. His answer was always the same: *“No, I will not. I want to walk with you all the way”*. When we approached Rome we went into the cemetery, where his son was buried. We experienced a very moving scene. We were singing and praying and he started to cry. Then we stopped singing and instead prayed in silence at the tomb of his son. It was very touching.

Every evening after supper we organized meetings with the people of the town. These gatherings took place in the main square of the town. The pilgrims sat down in the center of the square and soon we were surrounded by the people of the town. We sang and shared our experiences with the people. Some of these experiences, which we had along the road, were so deep and so touching that people cried.

The weather was very fine, except for one or two days with very much rain, and we got soaked like chickens, as we say. But it was OK, no problem, we kept on walking and singing happily *“Laudato sie, mi Signore, per sorella acqua”* (Blessed be, my Lord, for sister water). We did not have umbrellas. Only very few had a raincoat. We were just soaked. But it was nice to walk and sing in the rain in friendship, fellowship and joy.

Something which was very strange is that in this march – and in all other marches I have been leading – some stray dog joined us. It happened in every pilgrimage that a dog came and started to walk with us and remained with us until the end of the pilgrimage. When we stopped for lunch or for the evening meal, the dog stopped and we gave him food. He slept with us by our side. The dog walked ahead of the group happily. He took great care of us and when he saw a car coming, he stopped and barked at the car so as to say: “*Keep away, keep away*”.



*Pilgrimage Assisi-Rome in Easter 1975 –
the stray dog “Romeo” who followed us all the way to Rome*

It was so wonderful to see this creature behaving like that. When we arrived in Rome, the dog - “Romeo” we called him - was adopted by “the Boys’ Town”. The big wooden cross we had been carrying was put in the middle of “the Boys’ Town’s” garden as a reminder of this first and great pilgrimage.

On the highway we also had a traffic police escort most of the way – to keep the traffic at a distance. Most of the way we walked at the side of the road nearly all the way from Assisi to Rome. It was the shortest and easiest way in the mountainous area of Umbria and Lazio.

Our entrance into Rome was so great and solemn. You can say that everyone in Italy and probably quite many abroad had heard about the pilgrimage by watching the television news and reading the papers. On Easter Sunday, when the Pope celebrates the Easter Mass in St. Peter’s square, the square is usually totally packed with people. When our group of pilgrims started to enter into the square - with the wooden cross lifted high into the air for everyone to see it - the 300.000 or more people stood up and started to clap their hands, wave handkerchiefs and to shout: “*Peace, peace*”. Then our group of pilgrims was accommodated in front of the altar. At the time of the offertory – the part of

the mass where gifts are offered – about 8-9 girls and boys were chosen to go the Pope and offer the gifts we had brought with us. The first gift we offered the Pope was a big olive branch from Assisi as a symbol of peace. Then we offered other gifts that we had picked on the way – vegetables and fruit. There was a young man – a worker from Milan - who during the walk had noticed a beautiful little lamb gazing in one of the fields with the other sheep. This lamb was still living on milk. The boy then bought the lamb for ten thousand lire (€5.00) and wanted to bring him to Rome. The lamb could not walk any long distance, so we had to carry him in our arms like a baby, and also to feed him with milk from a milk bottle. The little lamb seemed so happy to be with us, in a way he was spoiled. The lamb was of course dirty and so when we arrived in Rome in the evening before Easter Sunday, we washed him, put a blue ribbon around his neck and he looked so beautiful, clean and white. Then, as I said, at the offertory this young man from Milan went up with the lamb and offered it to the Pope. Pope Paul VI was a very serious pope. During his pontificate he was never seen smiling or laughing. Because of this he was called: “*Paulo Sesto – Paulo Mesto*”, which means: “*Paul the Sixth, Paul the Sad*”. But when Pope Paul VI saw this young man coming to him looking like a peasant – he was not very clean, because during the march we had had little possibility to take a shower – the Pope received the lamb in his arms with a big smile. A beautiful photo of the smiling Pope with the lamb in his arms went around the whole world. It was so beautiful. Now we have done something in the footsteps of St. Francis, who on more occasions carried a lamb with him. The lamb was so dearly loved by St. Francis because of all the animals the lamb is the perfect symbol of Christ, called the Lamb of God, who died on the cross in order to take away the sins of the world.



Pilgrimage Assisi-Rome in 1975 – feeding the lamb



Pilgrimage Assisi-Rome in 1975 - the lamb was carried all the way

To give you an idea of how wonderful the pilgrimage was, I can tell you that when the pilgrimage was over and we said goodbye to each other the atmosphere was one of both joy and sadness. As we said *"We see you again"* – tears went streaming down from the eyes, as boys and girls hugged each other in St. Peter's square. It was a very emotional scene. After our parting I decided to go back to Assisi right away without caring about having any lunch. So I took the first train to Assisi. I was wearing the same Franciscan habit with my rucksack on my back, as I did during the walk. Certainly I did not look very clean. I went into the first carriage of the train and I sat down opposite two nuns – Coletine Poor Clares. They showed a strange attitude and I could see that they were a little bit scared. One of them said to the other in Maltese: *"Oh, my Good, who is this man? Is he a bandit?"* They did not know that I am Maltese, and that I understood what she said. So I said to them in Maltese: *"Do I look like a bandit?"* They were surprised and shocked that I understood Maltese. *"Oh, do you understand Maltese!"* they said. I then told them that I was one of the pilgrims who had been walking from Assisi to Rome. They were so sorry and embarrassed that they had mistaken me for a bandit! I assured them that it was OK, but they kept apologizing all the way to Assisi saying that they were so sorry. When we arrived at the railway station, they were met by another Coletine Poor Clare, who was their sister and whom I knew very well, and they told her the story in front of me. She said to them: *"Oh, did you tell father Mizzi that he is a bandit. What have you done? He is such a good man, and he has been working very hard for this pilgrimage. And you call him a bandit! Shame on you"*. Poor good sisters this increased their embarrassment.



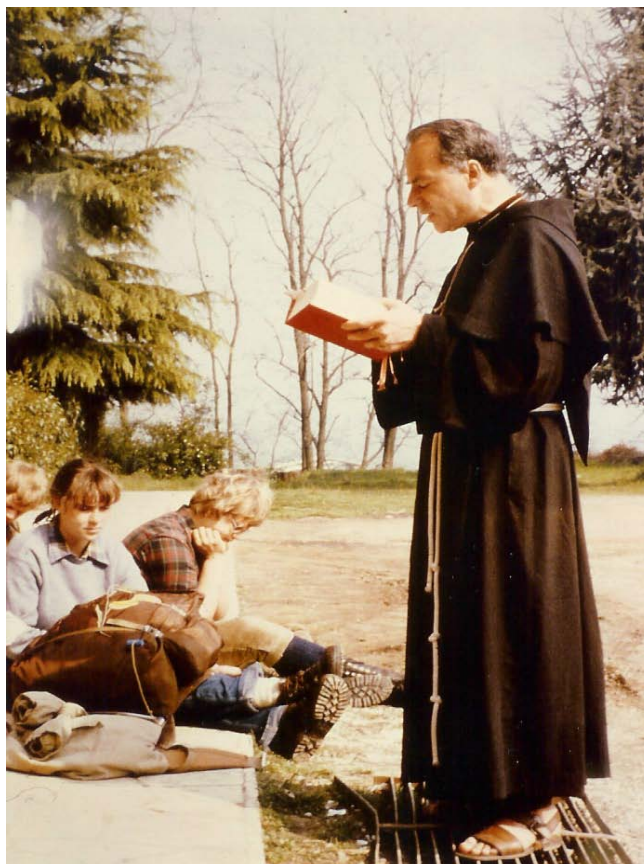
Pilgrimage Assisi-Rome in Easter 1975 – Pope Paul VI is offered the lamb

The Second Pilgrimage from Siena to Assisi in 1976

Seeing that this first pilgrimage from Assisi to Rome was a success, I felt very encouraged to organize another one. The following year in 1976 we were going to celebrate the 750th anniversary of the death of St Francis and this time I thought of having a pilgrimage from Siena to Assisi. Why Siena? During the last part of his life St. Francis was spending some time in Siena. The brothers took him to Siena due to his serious eye sickness. Earlier St. Francis had been taken to Rieti to be operated on his eyes by cauterization - burning the nerves near his eyes with a hot iron - for the same reason. It was very painful, and it did not improve his situation. So the friars, who were very keen to help Francis, decided to take him to Siena, as Siena was known for excellent opticians. Even today Siena is still known for that. I remember that the wife of Sakarov, the Soviet Nobel Prize winner and dissident, who suffered from her eyes used to go to Siena to be taken care of by a specialist there. For the same reason the brothers took St. Francis to Siena. After some time in Siena his health declined rapidly, and he knew that he was soon going to die. So he asked the brothers to take him back to Assisi, because he wanted to die in his beloved and holy town chosen by God for the salvation of souls. Before the brothers started the trip towards Assisi they put Francis on a cart driven by two bullocks and little by little they started their long journey to Assisi. They decided, however, to take a longer way than the usual shorter one, because if they had taken the shorter one, they would have passed by Perugia. The friars wanted to avoid passing by Perugia, because the people of Perugia had in mind to kidnap St. Francis and keep him in their town after he died, so that they would have the honor of having the body of this great saint. So the friars took a longer route and passed by Gubbio, which meant that also we had to take this longer way prolonging the pilgrimage by one day than if we passed by Perugia.

I was very enthusiastic about this pilgrimage, and discussed it with some of the friars at the Sacro Convento, who also found it a good idea because of the celebrations of the anniversary of the death of St. Francis. It is of course easy to dream but it is more difficult when it comes to put the dream into reality. I had promises from some others friar telling me that they would help me. At the end the only help I was given, was, however, that they came with me to Siena for the first meeting, and then I was left alone with my project. When things started to get in shape, they told me clearly: *“We have no money and you cannot expect any money from us – we have none”*. This put me in a difficult situation, because I had already started to move on this big, new adventure, and I became very worried. This was something different from the pilgrimage to Rome. On that occasion we had the Committee of the Holy Year on which to rely for financial help. Now the friars told me that I could not rely on them for financial problems. *“What shall I do”*, I thought, *“now that I have already sent the invitations?”* I had planned to have 150 young people, and that meant that I had to find a place for them where to sleep, food, and everything. The participants were charged a very little sum of money (young people do not have much money), but this charge would not cover even 1/3 of the expenses of the march. And I also knew for certain that some young people would come to me and say: *“I want to take part in the march, but I have no money”*. I was determined that even if they had no money, I would accept them. I will never turn away anybody because of money.

I started to get worried and to wake up in the night, and say to myself: *“What shall I do? What about if I am left with a big sum of money as a debt to pay? I cannot pay”*. One night I heard a clear voice – not in my ear, but in my mind – I heard God say to me: ***“You man of little faith! Why are you relying only on yourself?”*** I understood the message, and I said: *“Ok, Lord, I leave up everything in your hands. If it is a success, the honor will be yours. If it comes to be a fiasco, it will be my fiasco”*. So that was my agreement with God, but of course I had to keep working hard. I started to go to Siena and to the other villages and towns where we were to pass and “taste the water”, as we say. In Siena I went to the parish priest of *“San Francesco all’Alberino”* who was very welcoming and said: *“I will help you with all that is needed in Siena. We will give you hospitality and we will also prepare food for all of you.”* Then I asked him to help me to make a plan for the rest of the route – because I wanted to take the same route as St. Francis did. And he gave me some good suggestions, and showed the way and the places where to pass. By the way this place in Siena is called *“San Francesco all’Alberino”* because here there is the room where St. Francis stayed during his illness. The room was later turned into a small church and outside the church there is a little tree, which St. Francis planted.



“You man of little faith” - in a moment of prayer with the walkers

I took the car and started to go to all the other places and contacted the local parish priests asking them for help. *“I need shelter and food for these young people. We will pay you – not in money. When we arrive we will organize a beautiful mass with Franciscan songs for the people, and we will have a meeting with the people in the square of the village, where we will share our experiences with them”*. Little by little all the doors started to open, but, as one can imagine, I was getting exhausted with the planning. The march was going to take place in September, and I started the preparation work in July and August. I traveled by car alone in the heat of the day especially in the afternoon, and a couple of times I nearly fell asleep at the steering wheel. Once I was rescued from a mortal accident right in the last moment. I just opened my eyes when I was going to crash into something, and managed in a split of a second to avoid the accident. Sometimes I had to stop the car and relax a little, because I was too exhausted. The same thing happened to me when I was working on the first march to Rome. I used to go to Rome by car. Once on my way back to Assisi, at one o’clock in the night, I just started to dose when I heard the car touching the guardrail along the road. I woke up and managed to turn the car into the opposite direction and it went too far to the other side. Thank God no one was coming from the opposite direction at one o’clock in the morning, so nothing serious happened, except that I got shocked. Then before continuing on my way home I took a short rest in the car.

The planning of the pilgrimage went on well and little by little everything was ready for the march from Siena to Assisi. I had made all the preparations including sending invitations to the young people from Italy and other parts of Europe, to Catholics and

Non-Catholics. Actually in this pilgrimage we had with us also a young Buddhist member of the Japanese Buddhist lay organization called *Rissho Kosei-kai*. He was a very good Buddhist, and carried with him a copy of the Bible. On our way we always stopped for a break to pray and sing. When we prayed he sat down and read the Bible. I could see that many passages of the Bible were underlined with his pen. I was amazed. This young Buddhist was so kind to me. When we arrived in some place for a break or for lunch he sat next to me, took my feet on his lap, took off my shoes and stockings, and bandaged my feet. He was a real “Good Samaritan”.



Pilgrimage Siena-Assisi in 1976 – a moment of prayer

This pilgrimage, in which participated about 140 youngsters, I must say, was such a success. Very often when we approached a village, the people came to greet us happily and followed us into the village. Some of them were moved to tears and even cried at seeing these young people walking joyously with hurting feet. Everywhere the people were very generous. In the evening they gave us a very good Italian meal, a first dish with delicious Italian spaghetti, and a second dish with meat, vegetables, potatoes, bread, fruit, wine and everything. Before we left in the morning, they offered us breakfast and also gave us food for lunch. We had a van with us, and it was always full with bread, salami, ham, cheese, fruit, wine, water – everything. The pilgrims were much moved. This march was the one I had been most worried about in the planning phase, and yet God showed me his kindness through the kindness and generosity of the people. It was the march with most abundant generosity of the people! I remember that some young people from Denmark and Sweden could not believe their own eyes. They ate Italian food with great joy and appetite. I also remember that on one occasion a priest from a village came to me while walking, and said: “*Will you please come with the boys and the girls into our little village, because we have prepared things for you to eat?*” I asked: “*How far is your village from the main route, on which we are walking?*”. He replied: “*Five kilometers*”. I said: “*No, I am sorry, because that means that we have to walk an extra 10 kilometers,*

and that will be too long for us". He just said nothing and left. When we arrived near the road that leads to his village, we found a big table by the road covered with a large, beautiful white cloth on which there were all sorts of food: Pizza, bread, sandwiches, meat, vegetables, fruit, coffee, water, wine – everything. On the table there was a cardboard: *"Please help yourselves. Pax e Bonum. Pray for us"*. Oh, it was so moving for all of us to experience all this love, generosity and kindness of these people.

The morning we were starting for Gubbio it was raining very hard. The sky was heavy with black clouds. I asked the pilgrims what we should do: *"Shall we go on – we have no umbrellas or raincoats – or shall we wait for some better weather?"* *"Oh, no,"* they replied, *"we go ahead"*. We were walking in the rain – totally soaked – singing happily the whole day: *"Laudato sie, mi Signore, per sorella poggia – per sorella acqua."* (Praise the Lord for sister rain – sister water). That day was one of the most difficult days. Due to the bad weather no people came to greet us before we reached the town, as they did in all other places. Our entrance into Gubbio was therefore a little sad, but we kept walking in the rain and singing. We arrived at the Franciscan church of Gubbio, and again there were no people, the church was empty. A Franciscan brother came to us and said: *"What do you need? What can I give you?"*. *"Please go and fetch some trousers and shirts – some dry clothes for us, to put on"*, I replied. He went and fetched some old clothes, so that some of us could at least change a little bit.

Mass was started, and still no one was in the church. But once more an astray dog came. He went around the altar once or twice and then he lay down in front of the altar. He stayed with us until the mass was over and followed us for dinner. We gave him food. He slept with us and stayed with us the rest of the march to Assisi. It was so moving. When we celebrated mass and I gave Holy Communion, the dog raised himself on his hind legs and with his forelegs he rested on my breast. He too wanted Holy Communion! One day he was a little naughty, he was apparently hungry or he wanted to play, and when we walked past a farm house, he saw some chickens. He suddenly ran into the field, took a chicken and killed the poor creature. The farmer came out shouting angrily: *"What is that dog doing?"* *"Well"*, I said, *"I am sorry but we can do nothing. He is a dog. He is an animal"*. Then I said to the dog: *"Leave that chicken there. Don't take it and don't be naughty again"*. He listened to me and for the rest of the way he was very good. One of the boys in the march became very affectionate to the dog, and they became great friends. When we arrived in Assisi, he asked me whether he could take it, and keep it with him in his home. Naturally I agreed and so the dog got a very good home.



Pilgrimage Siena-Assisi 1976- the faithful pilgrim dog

Apart from these two marches I organized other pilgrimages including others from Assisi to Rome and from Siena to Assisi. In the last one from Assisi to Rome 200 pilgrims participated, many from Austria. One of the walkers was a man over 80 years old. I also helped organize and took part in other pilgrimages. They were all very good and proved to be a deep experience to the participants. As a fruit a number of youngsters - both girls and boys - joined a religious order, some of them became Franciscans. One of the most important experiences I noticed during such pilgrimages was the deep community life we shared with each other, the sense of responsibility showed by everyone and the meetings with the people in the towns and villages who gave us hospitality.



Pilgrimage Assisi-Rome in Easter 1984 – leaving the Basilica

WWF pilgrimages and celebrations in Assisi

The last pilgrimage, I helped organize, was in 1986. In that year the World Wildlife Fund – the WWF – was going to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of its foundation. As you know St. Francis is the patron saint of ecologists, and for this reason Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, who was the International President of WWF, decided to have the celebrations in Assisi. The organizers came in contact with me and told me about their intentions. When they illustrated to me the program, they asked me if I had any suggestions. I made a number of suggestions, and I said: *“There is one thing which is very appropriate in this important event and that is to have one or more pilgrimages or marches starting from different places to arrive in Assisi simultaneously. They could be more than one pilgrimage, because probably we will have many people, who would like to join one of the pilgrimages. The WWF is a well-known international association, and therefore many people from abroad would like to join one of the pilgrimages”*. They agreed, and I proposed to have four pilgrimages: One from Gubbio to Assisi, a second one from Cortona, a third one from Spoleto and the fourth one from Nocera Umbra. I chose to lead the pilgrimage from Gubbio to Assisi which was the longest one. In this pilgrimage we had a man from New Zealand who was the head of a Maori tribe, which is a natural religion. He and I spent much time together during the walk talking and sharing religious beliefs, and I was very much impressed by his religion. Among other things he had a stick, in which he had sculptured the main teachings of his religion. I asked him to explain some of the principal commandments of the religion, and I realized that many were more or less as the Christian teaching and also similar to the teaching of other religions especially with regards ethics, justice, peace, respect and love of others etc. It was of course very nice to learn something spiritual from this man, to whom I had a great esteem, because he was very serious and very religious and spiritual. He set a very good example to the marchers and to the people we met on the road and gave a very good energy to the pilgrimage.



*WWF Celebrations in Assisi in 1986 -
the Maori Spiritual Leader from New Zealand with his “Stick of Life”*

Another very particular thing about this pilgrimage was its finale. We entered into Assisi through “Porta Perlici” – the same old gate through which the dying St. Francis was brought into the town of Assisi. Many people, who came to Assisi for the celebrations, joined us for the last few kilometers before we reached the old gate, so that we would walk into Assisi in a very solemn way, which we did. It was also very meaningful that some of the most prominent personalities who took part in the celebrations, and who were known international personalities, joined us in this solemn procession. Just to mention a few there was Sir Edmund Hillary, who climbed Mount Everest for the first time, and also the Norwegian, Thor Heyerdahl, who went around the world in his yacht. We had many other great people who joined us in this last part of the march. It was a great entrance into to town of Assisi. The warm and joyous welcome reserved to the pilgrims was extraordinary: The bells rang, a group of Tibetan monks played their huge trumpets, another group of young people from the Upper Part of Assisi (called *Assisi Sopra*), wearing their medieval costumes, hammered their drums with great strength, and a choir from Zambia sang with great joy.

All four pilgrimages arrived at the Piazza del Comune – the main square of Assisi - more or less at the same time. We gathered together in one big group with all the people who had joined the last part of the pilgrimage, and we all went down Via San Francesco to the Basilica of St. Francis, joyfully singing the Canticle of Creation by St. Francis: “*Laudato*

sie, mi Signore cum tucte le tue creature”, and “*We shall overcome*” and other beautiful songs. When we arrived in front of the Upper Basilica of Saint Francis, we were welcomed by Prince Philip of England, International President of WWF, and Father Lanfranco Serrini, Minister General of the Franciscan Order, and other prominent people who participated in the celebrations. They not only greeted the marchers but also thanked them for their generosity for having done the long walks.



WWF Celebrations in Assisi in 1986 – one of the pilgrim groups arriving in Assisi

The following day was the conclusion of the celebrations of the anniversary of the WWF, which took place in the Upper Church. A very solemn procession started from the Sacro Convento and we walked up the street leading to the Upper Basilica. The Maori spiritual leader waited in front of the Basilica to greet the procession which was led by Prince Philip and the other representatives. This man greeted us in a very special way. He made a sign with his stick to Prince Philip and the rest bidding them to stop: “*Stop*”, he said to Prince Philip in a very serious voice: “*Did you come here for peace or for war?*” Prince Philip answered: “*I came for peace*”. “*Ok, if you came for peace and not for war, then you have to pick up this branch of a tree from the ground where I am going to throw it. If you pick it up, it means that you come for peace. If you don’t pick it, that means that you come for war, and we will have to fight*”. He was very serious! Prince Philip bowed down very humbly and simply he picked up the branch from the floor where the Maori spiritual leader threw it. The spiritual leader was very pleased and satisfied, and as a sign of a greeting he moved towards Prince Philip’s face and with his nose he rubbed Prince Philip’s nose a few times. It was a very touching ceremony, and we all smiled happily. Then we all went into the Basilica while an English choir started to sing “*Altissimo, Onnipotente, buon Signore*” the Cantic of Brother Sun written by St Francis before he died.

Before the procession started a Muslim, an imam from Saudi Arabia, went to the tower next to the Basilica, and started to invite all the people to prayer by singing and shouting

as they do in Islam. Also this was something new and moving. When he finished the Jewish rabbi Hertzberg from America came out in front of the door of the Basilica with the Shofar (the special horn used in Judaism to call for prayer). Like the Muslim imam he too invited all for prayer blowing his Shofar. When the Muslim spiritual leader and the Jewish leader had finished their special invitation for prayer, the official solemn ceremony started inside the Basilica. A group of Buddhist monks from Tibet blew their special long horns and chanted Buddhist prayers with their low voices. After an introduction in the form of a short sermon the five spiritual leaders representing the five main religions, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism, read a special prayer for peace and for the conservation of creation based on their own Holy Scriptures. These prayers were published in a book for future generations. One of the features of the celebration was something very special indeed. A Hindu woman from India, dressed in her Hindu costumes, performed a spiritual dance on an elevated platform set up for the occasion in the middle of the Basilica. When the celebration in the Basilica was over we all went out and joined the many people who had improvised a joyful dance on the beautiful meadow in front of the church.



WWF Celebrations in Assisi in 1986 – the procession before the final ceremony

The four pilgrimages to Assisi and the inter-religious celebration in the Basilica gave a unique highlight to the celebration of the Silver Jubilee of the WWF. These celebrations took place on September 23-28, 1986 – exactly a month before the famous meeting of the world religions in Assisi on October 27, 1986, to which Pope John Paul II had invited the spiritual leaders of all the world religions to come to Assisi to pray for peace. This was the first time in history that the world religions came together to pray for peace. The participants in the WWF celebrations and in the subsequent peace meeting in Assisi were blessed to be part of this special atmosphere which marked the beginning of a new era. We were also very blessed that the Vatican gave us all the permissions to have these special features of two very unique celebrations. We were very lucky as to live in a time

where there was much openness and enthusiasm due to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The world mass media (radio, papers and TV) gave much space to these events and Assisi became once more the centre of international attention. In this way St Francis of Assisi became even more venerated because of his love and respect for God's creation. After 1986 I became more involved in such events and also I became very busy with inter-religious meetings both in Assisi and in many parts of the world, so I had too little time to arrange more pilgrimages.

A pilgrimage is a spiritual journey

Among the other pilgrimages and marches which I have helped organize, and in which I also took part, I mention that from Terni to Assisi. This was organized by a French branch of the so called "*The Companions of St Francis*". This is a Franciscan International Institution with some hundreds of members.



*End of pilgrimage Terni-Assisi –
Followers of St. Francis from different churches and different European countries*

As one can imagine a pilgrimage can be very hard especially for those who are not used to walking. Walking on foot for long distances and sometimes in all kinds of weather can be unpleasant and painful – you can have bad weather, rain, or on the contrary very hot weather. Often you have to sleep in a very primitive way, on a hard floor and in a very cold place. It may happen that you have to sleep under the blue and starlit sky or under a cloudy sky. If you are a real pilgrim you do not expect to sleep in a comfortable bed in a nice hotel.

On this particular pilgrimage from Terni to Assisi I did not have all those equipments, which some of the others had. All I had was a rather small blanket to sleep on. One day we arrived late at our destination which happened to be an old Franciscan friary in the

middle of nowhere, in the countryside. It was very late at night and we were walking along some country roads in pitch darkness. We were quite exhausted and were unable to find this abandoned Capuchin convent where we were to spend the night. At long last we found it. But what did we find? We found a closed friary with nobody in it. It was nearly midnight, and we had no other place where to sleep than in the adjoining field. It was rather cold. So we laid down the haversacks and got ready to sleep. I had only a small blanket. The field had just been reaped. All the stubbles left from the grain were piercing my body. You can imagine my situation. Apart from that I had a cold. I unfolded the blanket and put half of it under me and with the other half I tried to cover myself. Little by little I adjusted myself on the ground and tried to sleep. But as it was a small blanket, I could not cover all of my body. When I covered my feet, my face could not be covered and vice versa and I had to spend the whole night trying to cope with the cold air. In the morning having said our prayers we prepared breakfast. We had some bread and made some tea and some coffee with the water we had. There was no better place where to have our breakfast than the nearby cemetery. So we sat down at the entrance of the cemetery and had our breakfast in “*perfect joy*” as St Francis would have done. This is just to give you an idea that some of the pilgrimages were not very comfortable.

In these pilgrimages we learned to offer our physical suffering to God. When you suffer physically or mentally, and you bear your suffering for the love of God, i.e. for a spiritual cause, you can say that in some way you share the suffering of Christ and thus you share the work of the redemption. Moments of prayers were very important. In every march we always had moments of prayers and meditation. We also shared our experiences with the people in the squares of the villages and towns. I can say that these experiences (we sat down in the squares, and sang and shared our experiences with them, the joys and the prayers) were very deep spiritual moments. Many people were moved. How did St. Francis become a great saint? Because he offered all his sufferings – and his joys, everything – for the love of Christ. I must say that doing such things, and to offer yourself and what you do to God is a very strong means of sanctification.

Such pilgrimages must not be taken just as an adventure like climbing a mountain or skiing or just like taking a walk. They are to be taken in the footsteps of the old pilgrims who walked from one shrine to the other in prayer and doing some penance. Pilgrimages can really be a way of doing penance for your sins – together with asking forgiveness. In this way they are a means of purification. In all our marches there was always a spiritual leader to help people in their spiritual process by giving instructions, leading meditations and prayers. They are not to be undertaken as an adventure unless to look at it as a *spiritual adventure*.

Our common prayers and meditations were not the same as they are in a friary or in a monastery, where the prayers are said according to a schedule and at particular times of the day. We took into consideration that the pilgrims were both Catholics and non-Catholics and on two occasions there was also a Buddhist walking with us and representatives from other religions. Anyhow we did not want to put any strict rules on the pilgrims. Everyone was free to participate or not in our common prayers and actually they did. I was happily surprised to see that they all came to mass. Amazing!

Henceforth, among the Franciscans of Assisi who continued the spirit of the marches, the Friars Minor started to organize long distance pilgrimages after me. They make these pilgrimages coincide with the feast of the Portiuncula in Santa Maria degli Angeli on August 2nd. Many years ago some of the Friars Minor had asked me to lead a pilgrimage from La Verna (where St. Francis received the stigmata), to Assisi. “*I will think about it,*” I answered. When some time later they asked me again if I would do something, I answered that I could not keep organizing pilgrimages but that I was ready to help them if they wanted to do something in that direction. “*I will help you willingly and fraternally*”, I said. So one day they came to the Sacro Convento, we sat around a table, and I gave them advice and instructions about how to organize a march. They were very satisfied and organized their first Franciscan march from La Verna to Assisi. It was a good success and after that they decided to go on with these pilgrimages.

It would be a good and holy idea to revive such pilgrimages to which Christians in the Middle Ages and even in earlier centuries gave a great spiritual importance!



*Pilgrimage from Assisi to Rivotorto with a Danish group an early morning during Easter 2007.
At San Damiano Fr. Mizzi introduced the rosary to Mary,
which we were praying during the first part of our walk and then we continued in silence*

Postscript - Revival of Pilgrimages in Our Time

As mentioned by Fr. Mizzi the Franciscans are continuing this mission of pilgrimages. In this area of Italy it is especially the Friars Minor (OFM with their mother convent at Porziuncola), who arrange these spiritual walks. Every year they arrange a special walk lasting about 5-10 days. One group walks from La Verna to Assisi, and other groups walk

from other parts of Italy towards Assisi. During the walk, which ends on the 2nd of August at the Porziuncola, the walkers prepare themselves to receive the special gift of Assisi, “the Forgiveness of Assisi”, also called “the Porziuncola Indulgence”, which was given by Christ and Mary through Francis on the 2nd of August 1216. These “forgiveness marches” start in the last week of July and during the walk the pilgrims participate in spiritual practices to help them to a deeper opening to the divine grace and the blessing being granted at the Porziuncola as the culmination of the process. Together with Fr. Mizzi I have for more years been a witness to the arrival of these groups at the Porziuncola. It has always been very touching to see the pilgrims – sensitive, silent and open, many crying – entering the large, sumptuous Basilica dedicated to Mary and falling on their knees in St. Francis’ tiny, humble chapel, the Porziuncola.

Not only in Italy, but also in many other places all over the world, walking on foot as pilgrims are being revived as a spiritual practice which seem to have much to offer to modern seeking people. The life of our time is characterized by many activities, demanding tasks, long working days, stress and hurry and thus more and more people look for breathing-spaces with silence and absorption. Many seem to find such precious moments during this old spiritual practice which is being offered in a steadily increasing number.



End of pilgrimage in Easter 2007 – rest and lecture in the old convent of Rivortorto

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