

ASSISI-NEWS – JANUARY 2006



Basilica di Santa Chiara in Assisi

*with the large mother convent of the Poor Clares on the right of the church building
and the magnificent view across the valley towards Spello and Foligno.*

Dearest friends of Assisi.

This winter covering a large part of Europe is unusually perceptible in Assisi too, where we have again had a long period of high pressure and sun, but the temperature has seldom been above 10 degrees during day time, and during the night it has been as low as 6 degrees below zero. Today we have even had frosty weather with snow. Being a Scandinavian this is a rather comfortable winter weather for me, and I dearly value the view of the snow-covered mountains surrounding the beautiful and in winter also lush valley of Spoleto.

Christian unity

Christmas time in Assisi concluded with the great celebrations in connection with the adoration of the Magi on the 6th of January. No less than 25 masses were celebrated in the crowded churches of Assisi on this important holiday in Italy. Up to and between Christmas time and Epiphany pilgrims have crowded Assisi, and walking the streets of Assisi after the 8th of January is a big contrast. Now entering the week of prayers for Christian unity (from the 18th of January to the 25th of January) it is immensely quiet and peaceful in Assisi with beautiful prayers and other services daily, in which we of course participated. One evening a video called: "Ut Unum Sint" (that they all may be one, John 17, 21) made by the Vatican focusing on the ecumenical dialogue during the last 40 years was shown. The first part of the video portrayed Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), and the second part showed the 40 years of energetic efforts and progress made during

the leadership of the following Popes not least during the papacy of Pope John Paul II. Obviously a tie of friendship and respect has been created between the religious leaders of the Catholic Church and the leaders of other Christian churches, especially documentaries and reports about meetings with leaders from the Orthodox, the Anglican and the Coptic Church were shown, together with recordings from the two inter-religious meetings during the papacy of John Paul II on the 27th of October 1986 and on the 24th of January 2002 in Assisi. It was uplifting to get this inside information about the great progress made since the Second Vatican Council. Watching the video I wondered if since the Christian leaders have now obviously become friends it might be the right moment for the next step towards a more profound dialogue in the spirit of openness for Christ as the Unifier. Father Mizzi was the main celebrant during the service for which the friars of the Sacro Convento and the students of theology of Franciscanum were responsible. It was a very beautiful service including antiphonal singing by the friars together with the rest of us in the crowded church of “Santa Maria sopra Minerva”. In his sermon Father Mizzi commented very universally on how Christian Unity can be achieved only through surrendering of the heart to God. *“Unity has emerged between us through our deep unity with God. As a Christian it is not about converting from one church to another but about converting to Christ being the head of the mystical body. We are all called upon to live in unity with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and through our deeds, through our examples to live the message of the Gospel,”* Father Mizzi stated in his sermon among other issues.



Father Mizzi delivers his sermon in “Santa Maria sopra Minerva” during the week of prayers for Christian Unity in January 2006

In the “ASSISI-NYT” from January 2005 you can read much more about the background for this work for Christian unity, and especially about what happened in Assisi where Father Mizzi was the pioneer of the approaches between the churches. The newsletter can be found on the website.

Besides the activities of this special week in January, for a couple of days we welcomed a large group of Anglican pilgrims from Japan led by their very warm-hearted bishop. It was his 12th visit to Assisi with groups of Japanese pilgrims. We were also able to spend quite some time on editing the lectures and the articles of Father Mizzi mentioned in the last newsletter.



Fr. Paulo and Fr. Mizzi in front of Christmas crib carved by Fr. Paulo

Spello

Moreover January has offered us the unique possibility of a little leisure time, which we have spent on pilgrimages in Umbria. In the very beautiful medieval town of Spello situated on the eastern mountainside of Monte Subasio approximately 10 kilometres from Assisi, Father Mizzi and I visited his former novice Fr. Paulo. Fr. Paulo is living as a hermit - alone in the convent of Spello. He leads a very simple life closely dedicated to the ideal of poverty given by St. Francis. It is always very joyful to meet him. In spite of his materialistically very simple life with many deprivations including no heating in the cold convent in winter, his joy is always overwhelming. Filled with cheerfulness and an almost burning intensity and enthusiasm he tells about his mission – to meet pilgrims in Spello and to show them the Franciscan church, the great Christmas crib and the very beautiful wooden religious reliefs and sculptures carved by himself from different kinds of natural materials. By the way Fr. Paulo was the person creating the rosary which saved the life of a Swedish protestant priest as described in the newsletter for Christmas 2005. At our meeting with Fr. Paulo in January I was happy to receive one of those beautiful rosaries made by him while praying. It was interesting too to experience the warm affection of Fr. Paulo towards his former master, Father Mizzi, whom 40 years later he still called “Maestro”.

After the visit to Fr. Paulo in the warm winter sun we walked the streets of Spello, a town offering several fantastic views over the magnificent, lush area of mountains and valleys to the North, which we cannot see from Assisi. During the walk we went into the convent of the Poor Clares, and as in a very lively way Father Mizzi told me some of the anecdotes from his life with these contemplative enclosed nuns in Assisi, I decided to dedicate this newsletter to:

The Order of the Poor Clares and other contemplative sisters in Assisi

A historical retrospect

Ever since the first centuries A.D., when the Desert Fathers lived their lives as hermits in the desert surrendering to God in asceticism, prayers, meditation and contemplation, it is an unbroken tradition within Christianity – especially after the Reformation within the Catholic and the Orthodox Church – for some individuals to withdraw from the glamour and the noise of the world to dedicate their lives to the mission as an inner “bridge” between God, humanity and earth. St. Anthony of Egypt (see the newsletter from February 2005), who lived about 251-356, is especially regarded as a forerunner of the monastic movement, and before he withdraw to a life as a hermit in the desert, he put his sister in a special home for virgins regarded as the forerunner of later convents. St. Benedict of Nursia, born in 480 in the small village of Norcia in Umbria close to Spoleto and only about 40 kilometers from Assisi, is regarded as the founder of the Christian monastic movement of the Western World, and his twin sister St. Scolastica was the first woman living enclosed according to the rule given by St. Benedict. She is regarded as the founder or the mother of the female Benedictines. Through the mission of St. Benedict and St. Scolastica the Christian monastic movements were born - significantly influencing the development of Europe and with its many reformations and new movements during the following centuries they tend even today to be the most important spiritual source within the Catholic Church.

From the 5th century and for quite some centuries the female nuns, “the Brides of Christ”, still lived enclosed – i.e. in a closed area of the convent. Also because that was the only possibility for women, i.e. to live without men during those painful and turbulent ages of poverty, sickness, conflicts, wars, crusades, etc. In the Middle Ages in Europe many new monastic movements emerged emphasizing different aspects of the rule of St. Benedict. In the 13th century St. Francis together with St. Clare became the founders of an order of nuns called the Poor Clares who are still – almost 800 years later – among the most strictly enclosed nuns living in Assisi – anonymous, faceless and totally secluded from the world in a life dedicated to inner work. In Assisi there is no access to the mother convent, they have no web site or any other publications and as a major rule they do not answer any questions concerning their lifestyle and practice. Neither have they allowed a recording of their immensely beautiful singing in the Basilica di Santa Chiara (the burial church of St. Clare), which sounds as if it is directly channeled from the Angelic Kingdom, and every day affects and heals the pilgrims. Numerous participants in my courses have asked me for such a recording of the singing by the Poor Clares, but regrettably the only chance is still to attend their prayers and masses in the church, to be healed and revitalized through the beautiful vibrations channeled during their singing.

Within the Catholic Church it is a common understanding that the Poor Clares - and other nuns and monks living enclosed - have in an especially deep way sacrificed their lives, i.e. a normal, active and free life, for the work of God in the redemption of humanity. Through their sacrificed lives and through their intense and contemplative prayers they form a link or an open door between God and humanity and the whole of Creation. Within the church it is well known that if you really want someone especially close to God to pray for you or for someone or something else, the Poor Clares are the right people to ask. In the Basilica di Santa Chiara in Assisi you find a letter box with a shelf next to it offering paper and pencils. Pilgrims are thus invited to write what they wish to be prayed for. During my visits to the church I have seen an innumerable number of individuals writing a wish

on a piece of paper and dropping it into the letter box of the Poor Clares, and I have often heard a Catholic saying: “*Let the Poor Clares pray for it.*”



*A rare picture of the Poor Clares of St. Quirico in Assisi. –
after a vesper they allowed me to take a picture*

Not of this world but in this world

In spite of the fact that the Poor Clares in Assisi are still living a life characterized by prayers, meditation and contemplation totally secluded from the world – you might say that they are not “of this world” – yet they are still absolutely “in this world”. Following the media they keep informed about what is happening in the world, and during times of crises in humanity they intensify their prayers. The Poor Clares have also closely followed Father Mizzi’s pioneering mission for ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue in Assisi throughout the years. They have followed it primarily through the magazine called “San Francesco” which is published by the Sacro Convento, and in which Father Mizzi every month wrote an article every year from 1963 to 2003. Some of the Poor Clares have told Father Mizzi that as the first thing they always read his articles in the magazine in order to be informed about what had happened in the inter-religious area since the last issue. Equally, the leader of the Poor Clares in Assisi – the Mother Superior of the Basilica di Santa Chiara – has told him that during lunch she read out the articles to the sisters eating in silence.

Father Mizzi has had the privilege of inviting groups to the parlour of the Poor Clares in their convent in Assisi. The Poor Clares always received the groups with much warmth and cordiality – often it was the Mother Superior herself who received them. The sisters always encouraged Father Mizzi to continue his work of dialogue saying: “*Go ahead with your good work. We are praying for you and for the mission.*” The Poor Clares were always happy to meet people from the different Christian traditions and also from other religions, for example Hindus and Buddhists, with whom Father Mizzi visited the Poor Clares. During these visits – also in the first years of the mission -

they showed an exceptional open-mindedness towards all the children of God. Of course the groups were also very grateful to experience such a rare contact with nuns who had chosen a radically different life. Even though the segregation of the Poor Clares from the world was often shown symbolically - for instance by a veil completely covering the face of the Poor Clare or she sat behind a fence in the parlour - they showed much cordiality towards the people of such different nationalities, cultures and religions. When some years ago Father Mizzi brought groups of young Protestants from Sweden especially to the convent of the Poor Clares in Spello, the sisters often sang and played the guitar for them.

Father Mizzi finishes with these words: *“This illustrates how these sisters who are completely cut out off the world, are very open and interested in what is going on in this world. They follow the events of the world closely. They follow the crises and pray for people suffering. They offer themselves and their sacrificed life for the world and the suffering of the world.*

Almost every year from 1975 to 1986 Father Mizzi arranged peace marches from Assisi to Rome which were each time joined by approximately 200 youngsters from different parts of the world. These young people represented all traditions and while walking to Rome on a march typically lasting for 8 days they were singing, praying and meditating. The Poor Clares also became aware of this activity and followed it closely with their prayers. The Mother Superior, however, was worried whether the long march might be too exhausting for Father Mizzi and the participants, and she advised him not to walk saying: *“You’d better not go, because it is a very hard walk from Assisi to Rome. Maybe you or someone else might die!”* Of course Father Mizzi carried out the marches and then the Poor Clares often dedicated their prayers on the night before the start of the pilgrimage to the march and to the participants.

No rule without an exception

On an exceptional occasion the Poor Clares in Assisi broke their rule about living totally enclosed in their convent. Father Mizzi explains: *“In 1978 for only the second time in history the Pope gave permission for the tomb of St. Francis in the crypt of the Basilica di San Francesco to be opened. The bones of St. Francis were moved to a conference room of the Sacro Convento to rest in a glass coffin. A large crowd of people made a pilgrimage to venerate St. Francis, and the Pope gave permission to all the enclosed sisters in Assisi to leave their convents to venerate St. Francis as well. A number of the Poor Clares – not all of them – accepted the invitation and entered the conference room kneeling in front of the glass coffin in devotion to St. Francis. The picture of these poor Clares throwing themselves to venerate the bones of St. Francis reminded me of the famous fresco by Giotto in the Upper Church showing St. Clare and her sisters venerating St. Francis after his death, when he was carried from the Porziuncola to San Damiano and after that to Assisi to be buried. When in 1978 I saw these Poor Clares doing the same, I had the vision of this beautiful last meeting between St. Francis and St. Clare and her sisters outside San Damiano depicted in the fresco. I hurried to my room to get my camera and hurried back to take photos of this beautiful scene. After the pictures were developed, I realized that they were much like the farewell between St. Clare and St. Francis. I chose to publish one of the photos in our magazine called “San Francesco”. Immediately after the release I received a telephone call from the Mother Superior of the Poor Clares: “Oh, Father Mizzi, what have you done? You have published a photo of us!” I said: “Well, I have published a photo of some Poor Clares venerating St. Francis like St. Clare did herself. I didn’t publish a photo of the Poor Clares dancing in a discotheque or something like that. Why aren’t you happy about this beautiful photo?” “No, no”, she answered, “you should not have done that”. I said: “Okay, next time we open the tomb of St. Francis, I will not do anything like that. Naturally we continued to be close friends even after this blunder.”* When Father Mizzi and I edited the present newsletter we discussed using one of those unique photos of the Poor Clares

praying at the glass coffin of St. Francis as the welcoming photo. But we agreed it would be better not to – even after so many years to “put our foot in it” once more.

Convents with contemplative sisters in Assisi today

Assisi is blessed with quite a number of sisters sacrificing themselves to live enclosed in prayer, contemplation and meditation. In the mother house of the Poor Clares next to the Basilica di Santa Chiara we have about 50 such sisters, only 3-4 of them having a task which allows some contact with the surrounding world. We have the “San Quirico” too, another convent of the Poor Clares, in which they live in the same way. Together with Father Mizzi I paid an unusual visit to the chapel of this convent and it was a joyful experience to see a number of young novices applying for such a unique and contemplative life.



Part of the San Quirico convent in Assisi - the door to the chapel

San Quirico

“San Quirico” is a convent known for a very unique and beautiful mission. Thanks to the bishop of Assisi at that time, the Benedictine monk Giuseppe Placido Nicolini, OSB, as well as to the Father General of the branch of the Franciscan Order, to which Father Mizzi belongs too, Fr. Bede Hess OFM Conv. Assisi attained a special status during the Second World War. Fr. Bede Hess was an American with German roots. He persuaded both towards the Americans not to bomb Assisi as well as negotiating with the Germans not to make Assisi a fortress. After prolonged negotiations the bishop and Fr. Bede Hess managed to make the Germans declare Assisi a hospital area for wounded soldiers, and afterwards the allied troops preserved Assisi too. In this way Assisi avoided the same destiny as the large and beautiful mother house of the Benedictines, Montecasino, situated between Rome and Naples, which was totally bombed during the war, because the German troops had annexed the convent as headquarters.

It is a matter of common knowledge that because of the Nazis many Jews were put to flight all over Europe and in Italy too. Some of the Jews found refuge in Assisi, where the bishop, a Catholic priest called Don Aldo Brunacci and the Franciscans persistently worked to hide and help these

threatened people. The bishop asked the Poor Clares in the “San Quirico” to hide the Jewish refugees in their convent until another safe hiding place was found and until the refugees were equipped with new false identity papers which the Catholic priest was very busy in procuring. And then the Poor Clares could receive new refugees. At the beginning it was naturally not easy for the Poor Clares to open up their totally closed home to strangers, but the bishop convinced them and promised he would protect them from excommunication (expelled from the church) for breaking their rule. Due to this risky co-operation between the bishop, the Catholic priest, the Franciscans and the Poor Clares about 300 Jews were saved from being deported and killed by the Nazis. Moreover it was a great help that the German supreme commander in the Assisi area, General Robert Müller, closed his eyes out of charity. The Catholic priest, Don Aldo Brunacci who was so much engaged in helping the Jewish refugees is still living here in Assisi. Among other distinctions some years ago he was called to the US to be honoured by the Jewish community for his services to them during the war. Those of you who know the Casa Papa Giovanni here in Assisi have probably met Don Aldo Brunacci. He is the old, charismatic priest living and celebrating masses there.

Other contemplative nuns in Assisi

In Assisi we have a third convent of Poor Clares living enclosed. We call them “The German Sisters” since they all come from Germany and because only German sisters can join their convent in Assisi. The German Sisters have received permission to run a little farm outside Assisi, so that in this way they make a living. They work very hard on their farm and they also have a small guesthouse built in connexion to their convent. Everything they serve their guests – cheese, milk, meat, vegetables and so on – is produced by the sisters themselves, but only a few of the sisters do this outside work. The other sisters live enclosed and we never see them in Assisi.

The fourth convent of Poor Clares here in Assisi is an order of French sisters called the “Colettine-Sisters”. Saint Colette Boylet, a French woman living in the 15th century, was a great reformer of the Order of the Poor Clares, which after a vision of St. Francis she brought back to the strict observance of the rule. In this work she founded 17 new convents of Poor Clares of the strict observance, and she reformed quite a number of other convents, including convents of Franciscan brothers. Still today these sisters are known as the French Colettine-Sisters, even though there are sisters from many other countries within the order, among these Italian sisters too. In Assisi the sisters run a small guesthouse, but they live totally secluded from the surrounding world.

The fifth convent of contemplative nuns in Assisi is a convent of Benedictine nuns. According to their rule they are not totally enclosed, but they live as if they were, because we never see them outside their convent. Previously they were running a girls' school known for its very high standards of teaching, but today they make their simple living running a guesthouse.

Father Mizzi finishes with the following words: *“In this little town of Assisi we have 5 convents with more than 100 contemplative nuns whose main mission it is to pray and meditate night and day. It is a great privilege, because nowadays it is of course not easy to have so many contemplative nuns close to you. Through their prayers these sisters offer an invaluable help to the mission of Assisi and to keep the spirit of St. Francis and St. Clare alive.”*

Besides the contemplative nuns in Assisi we have probably about 20 nun congregations of Franciscan sisters also having an outer mission in Assisi and in the world as well for instance hospital work, educational work, helping in the parishes and in the churches, in guesthouses and so on. The number of sisters in Assisi is about 250, and 200 Franciscan friars can be added to the number of consecrated people living under the religious vows. Internationally the Poor Clares make a total of more than 20,000 sisters. It is mainly in Assisi that they observe the strict rule of being fully enclosed from the world.

I must admit that I have a special deep affection and love for the Poor Clares. I know the three Poor Clares of the Basilica di Santa Chiara who have some contact with the surrounding world as very warm, good-humoured and lovely sisters. From the beautiful response I receive from all the participants on my courses I am aware how much the Poor Clares through their singing and inner work are contributing to the experience of a deep meeting with God by which the pilgrims in Assisi are enriched. It is also my understanding that their mission in the footsteps of St. Clare today also inspires many of us women who seek a deeper surrender to live a life which in a continuously deeper way is sacrificed in service, through being instruments of the work of God with the Second Coming of Christ in our time – even though we “modern nuns” try to live contemplatively in the midst of the noise of the world.

A prayer for unity

Because of the week of prayers for Christian unity I would like to end this newsletter with an extract from the beautiful and deep Gospel of St. John with the last prayer of Jesus which is probably the most important source of inspiration to the work for Christian unity:

*“I am not praying only on their behalf (the disciples),
but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their testimony,
that they will all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I am in you.
I pray that they will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me.
The glory you gave to me I have given to them, that they may be one
just as we are one – I in them and you in me –
that they may be completely one,
so that the world will know that you sent me,
and you have loved them just as you have loved me.”* (John 17, 20-23)

With love – peace and all good from Assisi.

Bente

ASSISI MISSION ♦ c/o Bente Wolf
Via Fortini 7 ♦ I-06081 Assisi (PG) ♦ Italy
tel: +39 075 8155 278 ♦ e-mail: bente@assisimission.net
web: www.assisimission.net