

THE ASSISI EXPERIENCE OF "SPIRITUALITY OF PLACE"

"Does geography have anything to do with spirituality?" Keith Warner recently asked. In Franciscan spirituality, he answers, it does.¹ The late Eric Doyle had also addressed the issue when he wrote that in addition to the writings of St. Francis and the early written sources about him and his message, "there remains still one more source: the city of Assisi itself. It is one of the holy places of the earth."² Additionally, Doyle proposed that if someone wanted to "penetrate the mystery of St. Francis, [they] really ought to visit Assisi."³ For modern Franciscans, the journey to such a holy place means making PILGRIMAGE.

In the fall of 1986 a group of *Assisi Experience* pilgrims made their way through San Damiano; the presence of thirteen Poor Clares among them made this an historic visit. Moving slowly through the monastery, the group eventually came to the large dormitory of St. Clare, where a cross and fresh flowers always mark the place where the Lady Clare met Sister Death. As the pilgrims entered the room, no explanations were given, no comments were made by the Pilgrimage directors. As the Poor Clares found themselves standing in this sacred place, which up to that moment they had envisioned only in their imaginations, the majority of the sisters were in tears. They had connected with SACRED PLACE.

The directors of *The Assisi Experience* programs have for the last twenty-five years always predicated their work on the concept of the **spirituality of place**. In these programs, sacred places experienced in the context of pilgrimage form the foundation of a profound religious experience. What follows is an elucidation of our understanding of spirituality of place, based upon an examination of Franciscan sources and modern interpretive writers.

PILGRIMAGE

1. Keith Warner, Pilgrims and Strangers: The Evangelical Spirituality of the Early Franciscan Friars, unpublished Master's thesis (Berkeley: Graduate Theological School), 1.

2. Eric Doyle, "Select Bibliography on the Life and Message of St. Francis," in Francis of Assisi Today, Concilium Religion in the Eighties, ed. C. Duquoc and Casiano Floristán (New York: The Seabury Press), 74.

3. Ibid.

The concept of **pilgrimage** informs the entire Franciscan story. We know that in Francis' understanding of the Gospel, "Jesus was a traveller, a pilgrim on the way. . . .Francis uses the expression 'follow the footprints of Christ' five times in four writings."⁴ Other writers have likewise commented upon the Scriptural picture of Jesus as pilgrim; Kajetan Esser held that this theme was at the heart of Francis and of Franciscan spirituality.⁵ The Gospels themselves (Lk 2: 41-42; Jn 2:13; 5:1; 7:10) show us Jesus observing Jewish law concerning pilgrimages.⁶ And we know from various sources that Francis made pilgrimages to Rome and to the Holy Land (1 Cel 8; L3S 10; LM 1:6 for Rome; 1 Cel 55; LM 9: 5-9 for the Holy Land). Francis and the early companions visited the tomb of Peter after they received approval of the primitive Rule, and Brothers Bernard and Giles journeyed to the shrine of St. James at Compostela (1 Cel 34; 1 Cel 30). St. Clare's mother Ortolana made pilgrimages to Rome and the Holy Land (Proc. 1:4; LegCl 1); Bishop Guido of Assisi was on pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Michael at Gargano when Francis died (2 Cel 220). Pilgrimage is undeniably embedded deeply in our Franciscan roots.

In tracing the history of the phenomenon of pilgrimage, one learns that the idea of a holy journey precedes both Jewish and Christian traditions of pilgrimage. In classical terms, the Latin peregrinus denoted "a foreigner without citizenship"; later it referred to "one on a journey to a holy place or shrine."⁷ The earliest attestation of a Christian pilgrim identifies Alexander, bishop of Cappadocia, as going to Jerusalem to "pray and know the holy sites." After 313, the year of civil recognition of Christianity, the Holy Land journey became the source for all other devotional journeys.⁸ In the patristic era, becoming a pilgrim was considered on a par with the monastic state; in the following centuries peregrinatio acquired heavy connotations of an "ascetic wandering of the earth in exile, seeking a heavenly homeland."⁹ By the time of Gregory the Great (d. 1085) it had been deepened to include an **inner desire and subjective experience**, according to Warner.

4. Warner, 53-54, citing Kajetan Esser, "Studium und Wissenschaft im Geiste des hl. Franziskus von Assisi," in Wissenschaft und Weisheit 39 (1976): 28.

5. Warner, 54.

6. Thomas M. Rossica, CSB, "Towards a Biblical Spirituality of Pilgrimage," Catholic International (December, 1994), 569.

7. Warner, 13, citing F. Raphael, "Le Pèlerinage, approche sociologique," Les Pèlerenages de l'antiquité biblique et classique à l'occident médiéval (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geunther, 1973), 11-12.

8. Rossica, 569-70.

9. Warner, 73.

Benedictinism and Bernard of Clairvaux moved the idea of pilgrimage to **a journey one undertook in the heart** and a need to **keep oneself unentangled from the snares of the world**. Irish monks proposed pilgrimage as a **penance for sins**.¹⁰ By the eleventh century, the notion of **pardon** had been attached to visiting a specific shrine. "When Francis exhorted his brothers to live as pilgrims and strangers in this world, he summoned images of Abraham, Jesus, and the holy men and women of the early Christian tradition."¹¹ Indeed, the idea of pilgrimage to Assisi for the feast of the Porziuncola as the feast of **The Pardon (Il Perdono)** each August 2nd is built upon the larger Christian context of pardon for one's sins.

Francis did not conceive of pilgrimage as exclusively an inner journey, but as **"an inner journey which corresponded to an outer one"**.¹² In the understanding of the late Joseph Doino, OFM, pilgrimage is "extroverted mysticism" and mysticism is "introverted pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is prayer of the feet while mysticism is interior footwork."¹³ Doris Donnelly, a contemporary Catholic writer, further expands our notion of pilgrimage when she writes:

Most pilgrims who undertake physical pilgrimages understand that it is their own interior incompleteness that leads them to seek contact with holy places and persons to do for them what they cannot do by themselves: to deliver them from fragmentation and effect a glimmer of wholeness which invariably opens unto God.¹⁴

There are five ways in which pilgrims and tourists differ, and staff members of *The Assisi Experience* always emphasize to participants that they are on pilgrimage, not on a tourist trip. The distinctions between tourist and pilgrim are worthy of consideration here.

1. Pilgrims perceive an internal dimension to pilgrimage, while tourists are concerned with the external journey alone.
2. Pilgrims invest themselves; tourists avoid personal commitment.
3. The focus for the pilgrim will be affected by the pilgrimage. Tourists seek to remain untouched on a deep level by their experiences.

10. Ibid., 76-77.

11. Ibid., 78. Emphasis added.

12. Ibid.

13. Joseph Doino, OFM, "Pilgrimage: Reality and Illusion," lecture delivered at the annual Assisi Pilgrimage Staff Meeting, San Antonio, Texas, 2 January 1991.

14. Doris Donnelly, "Pilgrims and Tourists: Conflicting Metaphors for the Christian Journey to God," *Spirituality Today* 44 (1992): 23.

4. Both the journey and the arrival are important to the pilgrim, while only the arrival matters for the tourist.
5. Community is formed for pilgrims; community is not a desideratum for tourists.¹⁵

It seems that a deeper understanding of PILGRIMAGE would serve well the People of God of the post-Vatican II era: our life is a Christian spiritual journey, **we are a pilgrim church** (Lumen Gentium 48).

SACRED PLACE

Beyond the notion of pilgrimage, a second concept holds our attention in *The Assisi Experience*. Recalling the 1986 visit of the Poor Clares to the dormitory at San Damiano, we see an instance of immediate apprehension of and encounter with the sacred place they had entered--the place where St. Clare slept, where she had spent many days and nights in convalescence from illness, and where she was embraced by Sister Death on 11 August 1253. These events and the place coalesced into a most powerful moment for the Clares; their tears gave witness to the depth of their experience with the spirituality of **sacred place**.

James Postell, teacher and architect, provides a rich explanation of **sacred place**: "**Sacred** has to do with both an inner and an outer presence--a spiritual power, an intersection of Heaven and Earth. . . . **Place** implies human significance, human action derived from history, belief, ritual, and everyday . . . activity."¹⁶ According to Postell, sacred places are perceived as sacred and serve to mark "important geographic, cultural, political, and religious transitions involving spiritual power. As such, their presence requires an attentive eye and open mind and heart."¹⁷

One of the first lectures presented to pilgrims in *The Assisi Experience* explains the focus of the pilgrimage--the **spirituality of place**. In bringing the pilgrims to so many places associated with the lives of St. Francis and St. Clare, the directors invite the pilgrims into an experience of the spirituality of these sacred places. Each pilgrim has a copy of The Pilgrim's Companion, a book containing excerpts of Franciscan sources as well as prayers, rituals, Eucharists, and historical background on each Franciscan site in Rome, Rieti, Assisi, and LaVerna. Equipped with The Pilgrim's Companion and the guidance of the staff, pilgrims are invited to participate in an

15. Ibid., 21.

16. James Postell, "Making Sacred Places," letter to Margaret Carney, OSF, 28 July 1995. Emphasis added. The point of reference for the letter was the renovation of the motherhouse chapel of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God, Whitehall, Pennsylvania.

17. Ibid. Postell also cited the view of Mircea Eliade that sacred sites have a single origin and function: they were the meeting places of heaven and earth, the sacred center through which heaven and the underworld are joined.

unfolding process at each of the sanctuaries. First, there is the **Historical Visit**: upon arrival at one of the sanctuaries, a staff member guides the pilgrims on an extensive historical visit of the sacred place. This is followed by the **Prayer Experience**: in each sanctuary the pilgrims are called to participate in prayer through celebration of the Eucharist or another ritual, or through a morning or evening prayer service. Thirdly, there is always **Reflection Time**: personal time for reflection on the meaning of the particular sacred place is provided for the pilgrims. (Sometimes the order of historical visit and prayer are reversed so as to accommodate the schedule of the sanctuary.) Always, the pilgrims are advised that the staff will be able to do the first two parts of the process with them, but the third part--the reflection--can only be done by the pilgrims themselves. While this may seem obvious, it is precisely in the reflection of the pilgrim that the spirituality of the sacred place unfolds and is experienced.

Dr. Ewert Cousins writes of what he calls the "mysticism of historical event." During the Middle Ages there was in Western Europe an immense transformation in popular devotion, with a new focus on devotion to the humanity of Christ and the historical events of Christ's life. "Religious sensibility" of the era desired to "imagine and re-enact these events and to imitate Christ in the concrete details of his earthly life." According to Cousins, it was Francis of Assisi "more than any other saint or spiritual writer" who helped transform religious sensibility this way.¹⁸ This use of imagination has consequences for a **spirituality of place**. For each pilgrim, the meaning of a given place is colored and shaped by her/his own personality type, just as it was for Francis. When one looks at the types identified in the Myers-Briggs Inventory and attempts to apply them to St. Francis, it may be conjectured that he was probably an ESFP [extrovert, sensate, feeler, perceiver] who "exhibited all the marks of the SP temperament, which is characterized by an attitude of openness and willingness to go in any direction the Spirit calls."¹⁹ As an SP, Francis was interested in the **events**, and therefore places, of Jesus' life more than in his teachings. "The events surrounding [Jesus'] birth, his hidden life, his baptism, his miracles, his passion, death, and resurrection will hold special interest for the SP."²⁰ When a modern pilgrim moves into the reflective stage of the process described above, she/he is already situated in a sacred place and is prayerfully pondering historical events that happened there. Cousins considers this type of meditation a form of mysticism, the **mysticism of historical event**--that is, "a distinct form of contemplative mystical consciousness whereby one attempts to enter into a significant event of the past in order to tap into its spiritual energies."²¹ Given the premise of *The Assisi Experience*, then, the events of Francis' or Clare's lives offer an opportunity for each pilgrim to enter into a mystical experience. According to Cousins,

18. Ewert C. Cousins, "Franciscan Roots of Ignatian Meditation," in *Ignatian Spirituality in a Secular Age*, ed. George P. Schner (Toronto: Willrid Laurier University Press, 1984), 56.

19. Chester P. Michael and Marie C. Norrisey, *Prayer and Temperament* (Richmond: William Bird Press, 1984), 69.

20. *Ibid.*, 72.

21. Cousins, 60.

How should one assess this form of meditation? Is it a mere exercise of imagination . . . or is it rooted in deeper levels of the psyche and in the very structure of human existence? I believe that it is rooted in the very historicity of human existence and that it activates that level of the psyche whereby **we draw out the spiritual energy from a past event.**²²

There are others whose work supports such a comprehension of reality. Historical events do not occur in a vacuum, they happen in **places**. Therefore, **both event and place are conduits of spiritual energy**--even in the post-modern world. A fine example of someone who experienced spirituality of place is Thomas Merton. In an insightful analysis of Merton's spirituality of place, Wayne Simsic maintains that Merton did not want to simply occupy a place, he wanted to be at home in it, dwell in it. "Through a solitude grounded in Christ, he discovered **power and energy in the place itself. He found himself pulled toward places** not so much out of emotional need or because he knew the place, but **because the place knew him.**"²³ According to Simsic, Merton also remained "open to the energy of the earth."²⁴ This resonates with Franciscan spirituality, especially when one thinks of our Sister, Mother Earth (CantSol).

Simsic identified two interesting elements in Merton's spirituality of place: the telling of stories and the enactment of rituals. Stories seem to trigger the release of the spiritual energies of a place. According to Simsic, Merton found that "people who live close to the land embody their wisdom in stories. Stories preserve their relationship with the land and with the natural order."²⁵ In fact, Merton's own stories connected with Gethsemani Abbey "reveal the sacredness of the place to him and act as a reminder of the spiritual landscape hidden within the physical landscape. . . .Stories knit his soul to the landscape, deepening his appreciation of and familiarity with it."²⁶ In a similar vein, *The Assisi Experience* makes constant use of stories from the rich storehouse of Franciscan sources. As each pilgrim moves from place to place, she/he is encouraged to read these stories which recall the events of our larger Franciscan story.

Merton's use of simple ritual also parallels the use of ritual in *The Assisi Experience*. Merton's rituals, according to Simsic, "anchored him in landscape" and "rooted him in the ground of Mystery" so that earth and sky stood within a deep primordial relationship with him. "Each gesture

22. Ibid., 59-60. Emphasis added.

23. Wayne Simsic, "Merton's Spirituality of Place," *Review for Religious* (July-August, 1994), 572. Emphasis added.

24. Ibid., 575.

25. Ibid., 573.

26. Ibid., 574, 576.

and action [of ritual] filled space with meaning . . . and became signs of his relationship with sacred space."²⁷ *The Assisi Experience* incorporates ritual in many visits to Franciscan sanctuaries. Many times, the ritual itself facilitates the release of spiritual energy of the place in a way that lectures, homilies, or historical input are unable to accomplish.

A word about the most significant Christian ritual of Eucharist. One of the strongest elements of Christian pilgrimage is "the centrality of the Eucharist as the ritual that commemorates the roots of the community and reestablishes the identity of pilgrims and com-panions--as breakers of bread."²⁸ Over the years in which *The Assisi Experience* has matured, rituals--especially the ritual of Eucharist--has played an increasingly important role in the experience of the **spirituality of place**. Celebration of the Eucharist at the various holy sites helps sustain a focus on the heart of the pilgrimage: Jesus Christ. During the course of an *Assisi Experience*, staff members consciously allude to how the lives of Francis and Clare constantly and unwaveringly point toward and conform to the life of Jesus Christ. Among the sources cited, two stand out: Thomas of Celano describes Francis as "always occupied with Jesus, Jesus he bore in his heart, Jesus in his mouth, Jesus in his ears, Jesus in his eyes, Jesus in his hands, Jesus in the rest of his members" (1 Cel 115); Bartholomew of Pisa, near the end of the fourteenth century, wrote the Book of Conformities in which he delineated 1,136 pages of material describing how Francis was conformed to Christ. When Assisi pilgrims hear of this, they come to understand that the deepest reason for their journey to Franciscan Italy lies in their ability to see how the lives of Clare and Francis point consistently to the Christ. Every pilgrim is on the way to meet Christ and to discover the glory of God in the face of Christ, even the crucified Christ. John Duns Scotus perceived that we are on earth not only to love God, but to love with God: "God wills love and God wills others to be co-lovers with God."²⁹

CONCLUSION

In light of all that has been said, if we return once more to the experience of the Poor Clares at San Damiano in 1986, it is clear that the events which occurred in that sacred place, especially the death of St. Clare, were already part of the meditation of these women before they entered the dormitory. The historical events that had happened in that room centuries before effected a release of spiritual energy in each of them, bringing them to a mystical experience. When they found themselves in the sacred room, the place itself released its own energy, which brought them to tears--the external expression of a powerful interior movement. I recognized this movement because at one time I was privileged to accompany the late Carroll Stuhlmuller, CP, on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. At the church called "Dominus Fleuit" (The Lord Wept--Lk 19:41) Stuhlmuller gave a lecture on the

27. Ibid., 576.

28. Donnelly, 33.

29. John Duns Scotus, Reportata Parisiensia I, 3, d. 7, q. 4, n. 4.

"Theology of Tears." In that lecture he proposed that in the experience of tears there is a movement of God. The Poor Clares at San Damiano profoundly underwent a spirituality of place experience, encountered a release of San Damiano's own spiritual energy, and entered into a mystical experience, discerned by their tears.

Each *Assisi Experience* eventually comes to an end. The pilgrims pack their luggage (usually a bit heavier than at arrival), for the return home. The biggest item taken home, however, is the collage of memories, which, in the words of Thomas Rossica, weigh nothing, go easily through customs, and can be enjoyed for a long time.³⁰ It is the memories of sacred events, sacred places, and sacred experiences that will enliven the continuing pilgrimage through life toward the final "homeland."

30. Rossica, 573.