

THE PILGRIM'S COMPANION: SHARING THE FRANCISCAN JOURNEY

APRIL 2021

Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases...and who crowns you with love and compassion. Psalm 103: 2-5



Pedro Subercaseaux

I
have
done
what
is mine;
may Christ
teach
you
what
is
Yours.

-St. Francis

Dear pilgrims,

I hope you had a Blessed and happy Easter.

This month our newsletter offers a reflection by one of the Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs leaders, Br. Tom Barton, OSF. Br. Tom takes us to La Maddalena, the place outside the walls of Assisi where early Franciscans cared for the lepers. Like pilgrim snapshots on a walk to La Maddalena, Br. Tom's reflection offers the reader some moments to consider: the isolated location, the poor facilities, a well for water. On pilgrimage, a visit to La Maddalena may have us reflecting on what must it have been like for those who suffered from leprosy, and asking: "Who are the lepers in our lives?" Having lived through a year of pandemic we perhaps have an increased understanding of what it means to live in isolation, untouched, and disconnected.

In our wounded and wounding world, La Maddalena is a physical place that calls us to notice when we have blocked others, lived protected behind walls, judged harshly, or stepped away in fear. It reminds us, too, of the times we have felt outcast. But La Maddalena is not only about loss. It is a place of healing and love. We are healed as we are touched by mercy and God's love. We become healers when we are awakened to mercy (Niemier). Br. Tom Barton reminds us how much healing comes through physical touch and personal encounter with the woundedness in our midst.

While COVID has limited the ability to be physically present for and with each other, it can offer a new appreciation for the power of touch and community. And like the disciples after Jesus' death, and the early Franciscans after Francis, while it may be confusing to find our way, we can each day follow the road of those who have gone before us. We can pause by the well, listen to the stories, and learn what is ours to do.

Wishing you Peace and Good,

-Mary Beth

Mary Beth Wisniewski
Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs, AFCU Outreach



St. Francis Nurses Leper
Bonaventura Berlinghieri 1228-74



Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs

For more information on **Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs**, please call us at 414.427.0570 or visit our [website](#)

Meet this month's writer: (from [The Franciscan Brothers of Brooklyn](#))

Brother Tom Barton, OSF, a Franciscan Brother for 54 years, has lived the Franciscan Life to its fullest! Initially educated as a Special Education Teacher, Br. Tom's ministry has not been limited to the classroom. From working with persons with HIV/AIDS to teaching Franciscans in India to leading Pilgrimages in Assisi to campus ministry at a high school, Br. Tom has had an awesome experience of Franciscan Life. When not leading Franciscan Pilgrimages in Assisi, Br. Tom can be found feeding the homeless and those with food insecurity at CHiPS Soup Kitchen in Brooklyn. Thank you, Br. Tom, for your faithful Franciscan witness to the Gospel Life!



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A Visit to La Maddalena: Embracing the wounded body of Christ.

-Br. Tom Barton, OSF



Arnaldo Fortini, Franciscan historian and former mayor of Assisi, has done remarkable research on Francis and all things Franciscan. The English language translation of his book by Helen Moak is called FRANCIS OF ASSISI.

One of the duties of the newly elected Podesta, mayor, would be to visit the homes of the citizenry, and if a leper was found out, to quickly deal with them according to the law. The default on the leprosy issue then would be from Leviticus 13: 46 which directs the leper to be sent outside the camp in isolation until the condition was cured.

In this book Fortini describes what happens to the leper immediately. She or he would be brought to the local parish church where the priest would perform the ritual, in fact, the funeral, of that leper followed by the expulsion from the city.

If you look at Assisi, you see it is on Mt. Subasio, and if you have walked the streets you will have noticed that all the streets slope downward. Why is that? The purpose is a medieval form of sanitation: the waste from humans as well as other refuse would be washed downward and ultimately out of the city, finally settling on the valley floor.

Who would have lived then in the valley? Those who were the unwanted, "waste" people: thieves, fugitive and run away serfs, lepers, waste land for the wasted, unwanted people.

While within the city walls, there was protection and some form of security, outside the walls one could expect disorder and lawlessness, snakes, scorpions, mosquitoes and perhaps malaria.

The Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs engages three places in the valley which most probably were leprosaria. Here I will mention them: Rivo Torto, San Rufino D'Arce and La Maddalena. But La Maddalena will be the focus since it is the most primitive and underdeveloped.

In our Franciscan studies we were taught the importance of water, and at La Maddalena there is a decent size sink now near the church, which probably was a well once. During Lent, we had the episode of Namaan being washed clean of his leprosy [2 Kings 5: 1-15]. Here at La Maddalena there must certainly been attentive care to the lepers.

Fr. Murray Bodo, OFM has written that the novitiate for new members of the order was the leper house. Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM has written that "downward mobility" is definitely "upward mobility" for Franciscans. Francis himself wrote, "When I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. ²And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. ³And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body." [FAED, v.1, p 124.] Br. Joseph Wood, OFM Conv. has written that La Maddalena in the 14th century became the leper house for friars who themselves had become lepers.

Testimony to the life and ministry of the friars and the sisters in the valley, the wasteland with the wasted people, is offered by Cardinal Jacques De Vitry who wrote, "After I had been at the Curia for a while I found much that was repugnant to me...I did find one source of consolation in those parts...They were called "Lesser Brothers' and "Lesser Sisters'...The women [and men] live in various hospices, accepting nothing, they live by the work of their hands." [FAED, v.1, pp.579-80]

One of the rituals we practice on our pilgrimage begins at the convent of San Rufino d'Arce. Following Fortini we reenact the funeral, the expulsion from the city and walking to the nearby Maddalena often chanting, "Jesus remember me when you come into Your kingdom," we bring the leper to her/ his final place of rest. Inside the church after a brief reflection, touching the walls and often barefooted, we pray with those whose sole place of consolation was this church. We will often take water from the nearby sink, and depending on who is in the group the staff will tenderly wash, if adults, their hands, if students their feet. Wholesome and holy touching of the wounded body of Christ.

La Maddalena was and is a place of encounter with a brother or sister in Christ, with holy and wholesome touching and prayer. Not perhaps a very happy place, but rather a place of consolation, and even protection.

"I have done *what is mine*; may Christ teach you what is yours!" wrote Francis to each of us then and today. [FA:ED, vol. 2, 386]

