

From Fr. Christopher Ankley

Dear Friends,

A few years ago I went on a pilgrimage to Rome. I went with a group of priests from my seminary and we went for the canonizations of Popes John XXIII and John Paul II. My seminary was named for Pope John XXIII. I was able to celebrate Mass in some very beautiful Churches including St. Peter's Basilica. As for the canonizations I didn't get as close as I wanted. The crowds of mostly young people were in the way, and we were edged out. Only Bishop Uglietto who travelled with us and two of the priest faculty at my seminary were able to concelebrate mass. We had to watch the Mass from a screen, still an awesome experience.

Now we began our Pilgrimage in Assisi and we started by visiting St. Clare's Monastery of the Poor Clares, founded way back in the 13th century. St. Clare was the first woman to write a rule of life for a religious community. She was very adamant about being the one to write the rule, and the pope of the time eventually gave in and accepted her written rule. This monastery was at the top of a hill that overlooked a valley of fields. It was about a 90 degree angle walk, going up the hill to see the monastery.

In this monastery we were shown where St. Clare ate, and slept, and prayed. Our tour guide also showed us a statue of Clare positioned on the edge of the hill. It overlooked the valley below. This statue showed St. Clare holding a monstrance. As we know a monstrance is used to display the Eucharist during adoration. Our tour guide went on to tell us why the citizens of Assisi had commissioned this statue.

In her 80's towards the end of her life Clare was very sick and was confined to her cell, which she rarely left. This time of the 13th century was also a very dangerous time. That region of Italy was at war with the Saracens. The Saracens were looking for territory to conquer and to plunder. The men of Assisi had left the town to fight. Only women and children were left behind. One of the Poor Clare Sisters who was keeping watch at the wall surrounding the monastery saw down in the valley a group of Saracens making their way up the hill. The wall at that point was very low and easily scaled, it was an easy access into Assisi. This sister was worried and scared about what would happen to them if the Saracens made it over their wall and entered the monastery. She'd heard the rumors of what had happened to the other woman who had met the Saracens. And so to Mother Clare she ran.

She found Clare sleeping on her mat of straw so she woke her up to tell her that they were about to be overrun by an army. "Tell us what to do Mother Clare!" the nun yelled. So St. Clare told her, "Go to the chapel and get the Eucharist, get the Blessed Sacrament. Put Him in the monstrance and bring Him to me." And so the sister did as she was told, and brought the monstrance back containing our Lord, the Blessed Sacrament.

So Clare held the monstrance and asked for two sisters to help her up and to take her to the top of the wall overlooking the valley. So there, on top of the wall she stood praying, praying full of confidence. Here was an 80 year old woman standing on top of a wall praying. And as she prayed she held the monstrance as high as she could, pointing it towards the advancing army. And what happened next has been noted in history books. The advancing army stopped, turned away, and retreated. We might ask ourselves, "What did they see when looking at an aged nun holding aloft the Blessed Sacrament. What Divine power and strength did they recognize? Did they see the power of Heaven? The prayers of a Saint are a powerful thing, but even more powerful is the Eucharist. When the priest elevates the Sacred Host that is our window into Heaven. As we know the Mass joins Heaven and Earth, we all worship together. We all look upon the same Sacred Host. We see what looks to be bread, but in faith, we know that it is Jesus. Those in Heaven look upon the same Host, but instead of what looks to be bread they see Jesus, they see Jesus offering Himself to the Father on our behalf. The Mass makes present to us the one saving sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

From the gospel today the two disciples on the way to Emmaus at first didn't recognize our Lord. It was only in the breaking of the Bread that they really saw Him. And after receiving the Eucharist they knew Him, their eyes were opened. Thirteen centuries later on the plains of Assisi the Saracens saw something they didn't fully understand, they experienced a power they didn't understand and they retreated, running in the opposite direction. They ran from the Eucharist.

My prayer for us today is that we are always doing the exact opposite of what the Saracens did, they ran from the Eucharist, let us, instead, run to the Eucharist, always running to that Divine power and strength, in moments of sorrow and anxiety but also in moments of joy and thanksgiving, always running with our eyes wide open always praying for the grace to recognize our Lord in every Holy Eucharist we receive.

Peace and all good,

Fr. Christopher J. Ankley