



*Assisi seen from the valley
with the Sacro Convento and the Basilica of Saint Francis in the foreground*

ASSISI – the Town of Peace

By Bente Wolf

”Blessed be you by God, my town! Because thanks to you many souls shall be saved, in you many servants of the most High shall live, and by you many shall be called to Heaven. Peace be with you!”

The words above are St. Francis’ famous last greeting and blessing of Assisi, when dying he was carried to his deathbed in the small simple stone cottage at the tiny chapel dedicated to Mary, Porziuncola, in the valley below Assisi. From the autumn of 1999 to the autumn of 2001 I stayed in Assisi 7 times, in total 75 days, and I must say that I understand his greeting of and vision for the future of Assisi. Gradually, I have reached a deeper and deeper understanding of the amazing beauty of this small town in the green, flourishing mountains of Italy – both seen in relation to the world-wide Catholic Church and other Christian Churches, in relation to all other religions in the world and in relation to the inner work, to which I and many others have dedicated themselves in our time, when humanity seems to be more ready for the Second Coming of Christ and thus an amalgamation with the Kingdom of God.

Assisi is the radiant, white-pink medieval town with well-preserved roots and buildings going back to the time of Antiquity. The town is built on the green mountain, Monte Subasio, in the Italian re-

gion, Umbria, which in my experience constitutes the heart center of Italy. Today about 5 million people from all parts of the world flock to Assisi each year, and they come from all religious communities and numerous new spiritual movements. Many of these people come as pilgrims in an attempt to walk in the footsteps of Saint Francis.

Especially from the 13th century Assisi started to become well-known as the town, to which God sent Francis and his female counterpart and inner support Clare, in an attempt to reform the Christian Church, which was then characterized by strong desires such as abuse of power, outer wealth, exploitation of the parishioners, wars, conflicts, etc. In this little town Francis and Clare were born, here they lived and did their work, which for both of them resulted in canonization by the Catholic Church 2 years after their deaths in 1226 and 1253 respectively. Unlike most other Catholic saints Francis is also loved and known by the followers of all other religions as a representative of some values and a relationship to God, which all people can have as an ideal, can love and appreciate in spite of cultural, social and religious barriers. Clare is just as much loved by members of the Catholic Church, but not until the end of the 20th century did the knowledge of her really start to spread along with the gradual return of the feminine aspect and values in our western culture.

Francis and Clare became founders of the movement today called "The Franciscan Family" as an overall expression. The family consists of a regular religious order and an order of lay people, i.e. a movement of people who do not live in a monastery and who do not make the 3 principal vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience, but who seek to live and work for the Franciscan ideals. The religious movement is today organized in 3 main orders, viz. the Franciscan 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Order. The Franciscan 1st Order comprises the three branches originating from the Order, which Francis founded, viz. the Friars Minor (OFM), the Friars Minor Conventual or the Grey Brothers, as they are called in many parts of the world (OFM Conv.) and the Friars Minor Capuchin (OFM Cap). The 2nd Order consists of the Poor Clares, i.e. those nuns who live according to the rule which Francis wrote, and of which Clare had the Pope's approval just before her death. The regular 3rd Order consists of all the religious orders, primarily orders of nuns, which were founded in the centuries after St. Francis and St. Clare by founders who connected to the basic values and ideals of St. Francis and St. Clare. The 3rd Order also comprises a branch of lay people – the so-called secular 3rd order, which was founded by St. Francis. On a world-wide scale the number of friars and sisters (this is how the Franciscans call themselves) totals the following: The 1st Order around 30,000 friars, the 2nd Order more than 20,000 sisters and the regular 3rd Order more than 200,000 friars and sisters. In total it is the undisputed biggest religious movement on earth, and when we add the more than 800,000 lay brothers and sisters, the Franciscan Family must be said to be quite a comprehensive movement.

By the 13th century the Franciscan Family had already spread to many parts of the world. As an example already in 1263 there were no less than 22 convents of Franciscan friars and 6 of Poor Clares in the Holy Land, and today the movement is represented in all continents. Following the Reformation the Franciscans were driven away from the Protestant areas in Europe, but by then they had left an indelible stamp not only on streets and places (eg. Gray Brothers' Square), but also on the popular mind, and they have returned especially in the 19th and 20th century. As an illustration of this the Franciscan Lay Order in Denmark has more than 50 members. The Friars Minor Conventual (OFM Conv.) now have two communities in Denmark (in Roskilde and Maribo), and the 1st Order in total 6 convents in Scandinavia. In Denmark there is also an ecumenical community called Assisi-Kredsen, which – during the last 25 years - has worked to spread the knowledge of Francis of Assisi through a magazine and articles, member events and 2-3 yearly pilgrimages to Assisi. Assisi-Kredsen comprises about 350 members.



*Franciscan friars and priests in procession at the All Souls' mass
Basilica di San Francesco, November 2005*

The Mission of the Franciscan Family today

What is it which makes the Franciscan movement have such a relatively big impact and attraction also in our time which is characterized by the fact that the Christian Churches are undergoing a deep crisis, that the monastic movements are languishing in the western world, and that many of the spiritually seeking people in the western world, who have reached a certain degree of satiety with our materialistic society, instead seek the fulfillment of their spiritual needs in movements, which could be called the New Age wave as an overall expression? Even though the Franciscan Order has gone through some modernization in the past centuries, the Order (and the other orders of the Catholic Church) is still based on the quite radical – and many would say – antiquated personal vows of celibacy, obedience and poverty. Unlike some other orders the Franciscan Order today still interpret St. Francis' beautiful and radical ideal of poverty by the way that the Order only wants to possess the most necessary belongings for life and the continued existence of the Order. If for example the Order or a brother/sister receives a big donation or inheritance, the Order evaluates whether it needs it, and if not the gift is given to charity outside the Order. It is clear to me that the Franciscan Order has maintained a very balanced relationship to our time's materialism and overconsumption, and it does seem as if the Order is not affected by the same dilemma which could arise, and which has arisen in other parts of the Catholic Church, i.e. the Church and some Orders have profitable investment and business activities. The materially very simple Franciscan life is mainly maintained by work for others supplemented with donations.

What could be missing of "outer" boons is, however, so exuberantly represented in the Franciscan Order on an "inner" level. Through my stays in Assisi and my early knowledge of the Franciscans in Denmark I have reached the understanding that the main reason that the Franciscan movement is still able to attract young people in our time, who thus accept the radical and simple life in a Franciscan Order, must be that the movement has been capable of maintaining *a living contact with the ideals and spirituality of St. Francis and St. Clare. This is both valid in relation to God as an inner, living connection in the heart, and in relation to the universal, ethical ideals which people with a living connection to God work for:* Mediation for peace, reconciliation between enemies, building of tolerance and mutual understanding, work for justice and human rights, reconstruction and pres-

ervation of the eco-systems on earth and help to relieve the sufferings of the poor, the sick and refugees.



*San Damiano, in which the crucifix spoke to Francis,
and where Clare lived enclosed with her sisters, until she died*

The living connection to God

Here in the autumn of 2002 I participated in more than 150 masses and other church celebrations in Assisi, especially in the small chapel of San Damiano, where Francis received his vocation by hearing the crucified Christ speak about rebuilding the church which was in ruins (the Christian Church). It was here Francis at first interpreted the call in concrete terms and by own hands rebuilt the chapel, it was here he wrote the famous Canticum of Creatures at the end of his life, and it was here the previously noble and privileged Clare lived a poor and enclosed life with her spiritual sisters in an everlasting prayer for humanity and in deep surrender to God. When Clare died the sisters were moved inside the walls of Assisi, and thus to a more secure place in the turbulent and violent Middle Ages. Since then San Damiano has been kept alive by the Friars Minor (OFM), and also here the living and rich liturgy of the Catholic Church is blossoming *because of the friars' obvious living inner connection to God.*

Participating in masses and other prayers in Assisi and connecting to the Franciscan movement has helped and is still helping me in more ways. It both helps me to a deeper surrender to God, and also the transparency of the ego, inner joy and gratitude characterizing the members of the Order is helping me not only to more humility but also to a greater sense of gratitude and joy at God's Creation. Along with the meditative work to which I have dedicated myself in Assisi it is deeply meaningful to me to participate in the masses and other church celebrations as an inner support for the transmission of the vibrations from the Kingdom of God in which most of the Franciscans live. In Assisi more possibilities thus exist to be instrumental in intensifying "*the Spirit of Assisi*" and thus to the Second Coming of Christ in the hearts of humanity.

Apart from the inner work of the Franciscans in Assisi they perform a comprehensive outer work – naturally characterized by the inner connection to God – for the values described above. In Assisi numerous initiatives for raising the collective consciousness and the human conditions of life are taken. An example is that innumerable international congresses, meetings, arrangements and con-

certs are held to help the kingdoms of the earth into the New Era. Father Max Mizzi's many years' pioneering work for dialogue between the religions is naturally to be numbered among these uplifting examples of the work of the Franciscans in Assisi. This mission is described in the article "Dialogue between the Religions", which can also be found in this homepage.

A living Centre for the Work of Christ on Earth

It is well-known in Italy that "the Franciscan spirit" is something very special, and Italians are generally very proud of and happy for their holy town of Assisi. When an Italian citizen has tried to explain the difference between the mentality in Umbria and other parts of Italy, I have often heard them saying: "Well, they are also Franciscans in Umbria". Thus the Franciscan spirit has succeeded in permeating the collective consciousness, and I have had many joyful experiences of the understanding of brother/sisterhood, openness, warm-heartedness, joy and tolerance of this spirit. It is without doubt that in Assisi – as prophesied by St. Francis – the divine co-operation and vibrations are alive resulting in Assisi being a living centre for the work of Christ on earth playing an increasingly more important part in connection with the transition of the earth to the New Era.

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*The Basilica of St. Francis and the Sacro Convento in Assisi -
the place for innumerable inter-religious celebrations, meetings and congresses*

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