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Photo Fr. Max Mizzi OFM Conv.©

Group of Japanese Buddhists at dinner at the Sacro Convento during an inter-religious meeting in October 2002

With God in Assisi

by Bente Wolf

This article is an attempt to describe a path of development leading to the main task in my life. Having given many lectures about my story, I have experienced that it evokes a response and intensifies the longing to work for God for many spiritual people.

After many years' spiritual search and training in different spiritual movements and since 1996 in Den Gyldne Cirkel (The Golden Circle) I still had an indefinable longing for my "vocation", as if I knew by intuition that I had not yet found my niche in a mission in which I could make a bigger difference. In October 1999 I was on my first stay in Assisi. If beforehand I had known what large and relatively quick changes of both my outer and inner life this stay would imply, my personality – in spite of the longing – would perhaps have hesitated a bit to go to Assisi!

Already shortly after my arrival at the convent, where I was staying as a guest, I received an inner experience, which it was impossible for me to ignore. Sitting in the garden of the convent with a view over the large, beautiful valley, I became absorbed in a peace beyond words and an inner voice sounded: "*Now you have come home*". It was both an

indescribably wonderful but for the personality also quite shocking experience, and my body reacted with a strong cleansing. I got high fever, and physically I felt quite ill for about a month. At my first visit a few days later to “Porziuncola” – the beautiful chapel which was one of St. Francis’ favourite places, and over which a special mercy and blessing rests: The forgiveness and healing of Assisi – the clear inner voice sounded again followed by a deep blessing and peace: *“Let go. We are helping you to a deeper cleansing, which comprises also the physical body”*. The rest of the 7 days’ stay in Assisi continued with this strong cleansing of the body with fever, pains and coughing.

Together with the group I visited the many, deeply holy sites in and around Assisi, and at every visit I cried because of the experience of my deep inner longing being met with such a beautiful divine response and blessing that my heart seemed to overflow with joy and gratitude. I sensed the presence of St. Francis and St. Clare everywhere, and different aspects of their being seemed to unfold, to teach and to embrace me. At one of the holy sites I felt a strong inner urge to transmit God’s love to the collective suffering of man, to which this holy site seemed to offer a special opening, and with a lighted candle I opened to my first conscious meditative service in Assisi.

A week after my return to Denmark I received the next spontaneous inspiration: *“You have promised to take a responsibility for the inner work in Assisi. You have a mission of intensifying the divine inflow in Assisi”*. My doubt and lack of confidence was big: *“How do you do that? How on earth can I contribute and with what?”* My lack of self-confidence and faith in the difference I could make grew strong, and I had to deal with it through continued spiritual training and guidance. Three months later the next step of the inner guidance was given: *“Before your incarnation you promised to come to stay in Assisi more permanently to work for God as a transmitter. We have been waiting for you.”*

Now the inner process of being able to stand as a “pillar” and always to work for God accelerated through training and tests in many outer difficulties and challenges. Gradually, the seriousness and a deep inner commitment towards God, the earth and humanity became stronger than the many “buts” about physical and emotional security, my son, my family and friends and a well-known, spiritual life of service in Denmark. The voice of the personality became gradually weaker concurrently with the soul permeating more and more and the mission becoming clearer.

The next two years I went to Assisi four times a year, sometimes with a small group, sometimes alone. In Denmark I did meditative services every day, in which I visualized that I was in Assisi, and when I was again staying in my beloved “home town”, I continued the meditative services, and every morning I participated in a Franciscan mass and vespers in the evening. I went on 8 holidays to Assisi and participated in about 200 masses and vespers, before the next step in the mission started to unfold.

Father Max Mizzi and dialogue

Already during my first stay in Assisi I had got to know about the Franciscan Friar and Priest Father Max Mizzi OFM Conv. For 46 years Father Mizzi has worked indefatigably in a pioneering mission in Assisi promoting both dialogue between the Christian Churches and the world’s other religions. In the group we visited the centre for

interreligious dialogue, which he founded and at that time was the leader of. During all subsequent stays in Assisi I again visited Father Mizzi, and during spring/summer 2001 the inspirations – now also as powerful dreams – started to indicate that I had a task for Father Mizzi both with inner support but also concretely. It lasted about 5 months before the personality was so “softened” and strengthened by the soul infusion that I went to Father Mizzi and in a monologue of about 15 minutes told him that I was volunteering as a support (secretary) of his mission, and why I was doing so. He promised me to consider it. After having waited for a couple of months – actually with some relief that I did not hear anything from Father Mizzi about his considerations, because then the personality was able to “hide in a more secure life” for yet some time – I had to follow a new inner inspiration about “*knocking on the door again and trying to open it*”. I wrote to Father Mizzi and repeated my offer, and immediately I received an answer that I was welcome at the centre in December 2001, when I had planned a new stay in Assisi.

During this first stay at the centre a very harmonious and joyful collaboration unfolded, and we agreed that I was to come back as soon as possible. I went back with great enthusiasm and a feeling of deep meaning, and we worked together for about 3 months, when I got more acquainted with the many tasks at the centre, read about the mission and participated in many meetings with groups, in which I listened to Father Mizzi’s lectures. This proved to be decisive for the next step of the task.

The Connection with the Franciscan Order

After these 3 months’ intensive training Father Mizzi suddenly got ill. He had to be hospitalized with a subsequent operation and a long time in bed. For some years Father Mizzi had been living alone at the centre, he had no permanent assistant, and no one in the Order knew much about the work and the routines of the centre. Now I was alone in a busy period, in which many activities were planned, and I had to step forward as much as I could. I wrote and made phone calls about the meetings which had to be cancelled, but we tried to keep the centre as active and open as possible. Among other things I brought some Japanese contacts to a meeting with Father Mizzi at the hospital, and I received all the groups which had made an appointment with the centre. I still remember my first meeting with a group during this time of Father Mizzi’s absence. An old friend of Father Mizzi, the Anglican bishop in Rome, came with a group of about 40 English pilgrims only about one week after Father Mizzi’s hospitalization. I received the group and gave my first lecture in English about the interreligious dialogue mission. Because I was so busy I had no time to get nervous, not even nervous about not having had time to make preparations, and thus I had learned enough in the many lectures I had been listening to. That this first lecture went well, and that the group applauded me, is, however, mainly to be attributed to the vibrations, which I was used to transmit and the outer and inner help, which I have experienced as a permanent and faithful “follower” concurrently with my accepting the task in Assisi at a deeper and deeper level.

Our wish and readiness for service, and when we really start to demonstrate this readiness – at first just by choosing an area of service, even though we perhaps do not yet feel deeply called to it – starts a kind of “divine circulation” and permits us to receive more and more divine help to release and unfold abilities, until then perhaps “hidden”, which – if they are used to benefit the world – makes us able to benefit even more than before. I can still be surprised and very joyful at the work of planning being performed at “the

higher level". Also in this crisis so much both inner and outer help was stimulated, and thus many of the activities of the centre could continue.



Dinner with the friars at the Franciscanum (the priest seminary)

Until Father Mizzi's illness I had been staying and working at the centre, but apart from this I had practically no contact with the many friars of the Order of which Father Mizzi is a member, and which has its mother house, called the Sacro Convento (the holy convent), at the tomb of St. Francis, and a priest seminary in the floors below the centre. After Father Mizzi's hospitalization I became "visible" in the Order almost overnight, as the Order invited me to the normally closed areas (because of the enclosure) at both the Sacro Convento and at the Franciscanum. I now had my lunch and supper with the friars either in the mother house or among the young students in the priest seminary.

This opening started a new process of more "visibility" and thus also deeper connection into the mission. I got to know many friars, and my enthusiasm and joy at the mission grew every day, when I gradually had an easy, joyful and harmonious relationship with almost all of them. I experienced how we "vibrated in unison" as members of the same spiritual family, and my joy became even bigger when some of the friars started to call me "their sister of the heart". It was also deeply inspiring for me to talk with friars from all corners of the world about the mission, problems and difficulties in their home countries, and the young students' enthusiasm and overflowing joy was uplifting in a time which because of Father Mizzi's illness was difficult and uncertain – filled with much grief.

The Reception into the Catholic Church and the Association to a Franciscan Order as a Lay Sister.

Along with my tasks in Assisi for Father Mizzi I started to consider a conversion to the Catholic Church. I had many reflections and doubts, but my inner understanding that such a conversion would make the mission much easier and would allow a deeper inner work in Assisi lead to an introduction course of one year with the Franciscans in Denmark supplemented by spiritual guidance by Father Mizzi. As in this process I began to have a wider understanding of the Catholic Church and more barriers, which proved to be also my prejudices and ignorance, seemed to disappear, I decided to be received into the Church during a very beautiful and expansive midnight mass on Holy Saturday in 2002. In my heart I carry this reception into the Church as a very dear memory.



*One of the many preparatory steps
in connection with a reception into the Catholic Church
Lent, March 2002 in Assisi*

Immediately after my reception I made an application to a branch of the Franciscan Order here in Assisi – ***the Franciscan Friars and Sisters of the Atonement*** – to which I feel especially attached because of the focus of the Order on the unity of the human family. I got to know these dear spiritual sisters and brothers through my many stays in Assisi before I started working for Father Mizzi. My reception as a Franciscan lay sister one year after the application during a very beautiful and blessed celebration presided over by Father Mizzi and the nuns became a sort of interim “crown” after a long process. To be a lay sister implies a promise to strive to live according to the Franciscan ideals, among them to live a life of surrender to prayer, charity, service to God by “doing good” to the world and humanity and material simplicity. Usually, I see my life as a sort of “free” nun, because I do not live under the three principal vows of obedience, poverty and celibacy

made to God through a superior of an order, but merely as vows made between me and God.

Giving up "Plan A" – deeper Surrender to the Will of God

After all these beautiful transitional processes and dedication ceremonies the life in Assisi went on. I continued to work as much as possible for Father Mizzi during frequent stays at the centre, and also from Denmark I tried to help as much as possible. Because of Father Mizzi's continuing illness we entered different deep and painful processes of surrender, and a process of a continuation of the centre by a new leader was started in the Order. In the summer of 2003 I moved more permanently to Assisi with residence at the centre as an assistant to the new leader. This cooperation proved to be very difficult and despite the original agreement of a minimum of 1 year's employment very short. Already after three months with a very short notice I was asked to leave the centre, which I had come to love so dearly because of its meaningful mission, for which I "burn", and because of its both outer and inner beauty.

The shock at this sudden change of the plan was overcome with the help of spiritual friends from the Golden Circle who were staying in Assisi at that moment – again a caring planning from the divine level, and it was also a help that "from within" I experienced that my real "employer" now wished me to leave the centre.

One month later Father Mizzi also chose to leave the centre, because he also found the new situation very difficult. Our grief was so painful that a process of more months calling for God's help to a deeper surrender started. I do not remember previously having so constantly deep pain in the heart, which also felt very heavy, but the awareness that this very pain and heaviness would result in a deeper opening to the compassionate love of Christ and the Sacrificial Fire, which would be an even deeper help for God in His work in Assisi, gave me the necessary strength and courage. Experiencing this great pain and heaviness for about three months I was helped through a process of being able to transmit a deeper frequency of these deeply transforming vibrations which God wished to transmit in exactly this phase of difficulties in the original plan of God in Assisi.

Also at the physical level many difficulties had to be solved. Leaving the centre at very short notice I had nowhere to live, no work and income, and no permission to stay in Italy apart from the 3 months' tourist visa – all the physical security disappeared at a single blow. An inspiration, however, showed that there would be so much divine help that I should just surrender and keep myself "tuned in", if I chose to remain in Assisi. For the first time I received the impression that the choice was more "free" – to be understood in the way that both my decision to go back to Denmark for some time or the decision to remain in Assisi would be supported. I chose to remain in Assisi, and the inspiration started to unfold. First I was guided to a very beautiful, small apartment already shown to me in the inspiration, and all difficulties of being approved as a tenant were overcome because of my relationship to the nuns and Father Mizzi. Then gifts such as help with computer, furniture, kitchen utensils and loan of the most necessary things started to flow in. Later in the spring a very simple living began to unfold when I started to help groups of Scandinavian pilgrims visiting Assisi. I also invited people to the first spiritual retreat I was to lead. As a last step I had to give notice to terminate my tenancy of a very good house in Denmark, for which you have to be on a waiting list for 20 years, without

having been granted my permission to stay in Italy. Again I had to give over my insecurity and fear to God, and two weeks after having terminated my tenancy I was given permission to stay and my admission to the Italian National Health Service was also given. Now I had been officially invited to stay in Italy!

Shortly after I gave up all my belongings in Denmark by giving most of them to my son and the scouts. Of course it was with great sadness that I gave up living near my son, my mother and spiritual friends, but it was with great relief that I gave up most of my physical belongings which had previously meant so much and given so much security. It also proved much easier than I had expected to give up the good social security which we are so privileged to have in Denmark. All the time I tried to bear in mind St. Francis' and St. Clare's sacrifices, and could see how small mine was comparatively. Under all circumstances I knew that I would not die from starvation or be without help from the hospital services, if I got ill.

The most difficult part of the process was the deeper opening of the heart and more understanding of how God works. I had a naïve trust that the original optimal plan which had unfolded during more years with almost no adjustments would continue to unfold. When the plan was so suddenly and dramatically changed, my confidence and willingness to surrender were put to the test. By way of conversations with my spiritual guide, studies, inspirations and reflections I have had to try to understand more about how God works, and how man's collective and individual free will and karma result in many original plans having been adjusted and changed in the course of time. Maybe such a change at first means a step backward in connection with the plan on which the Kingdom of God has spent many "resources" to stimulate and support. I was absorbed in that question for quite some time. But in the long term the individual and collective suffering and subsequent deeper experience and maturity in humanity will often mean that the next step forward is taken at a deeper level with more collective transformation, so that the delay is made up for – more or less. This "minor" change of the plan in Assisi is indeed relatively small compared to much more comprehensive changes and adjustments on the part of the Kingdom of God which have taken place during the history of man.

At a deeper level I have also learnt that working for God means a willingness to sacrifice yourself at deeper levels all the time and to hand over your own wishes, dreams, and longings to God to be transformed in the Sacrificial Fire, making us deeper instruments of God's work on earth. At deeper levels I had to accept "Thy will be done", and at the same time I grieved at the wasted possibilities at the centre and at the fact that the plan of a deeper step towards the unity of the human family via inter-religious dialogue in Assisi had to be suspended for some time. But as this grief also forms part of the sacrifice and suffering of Christ because of humanity's hardness and egoism, at the same time it was a deep help to the continued inner work in Assisi. Partly my deep love of my son and not being able to live near him and partly the centre and its mission was my most difficult personal sacrifice. It was also with great sorrow and compassion I followed Father Mizzi's surrender of an even deeper suffering seeing his life's work and 45 years' mission fall apart at a time when he continued to struggle with serious illness.

The New Task in Assisi

After this painful process the light and a deeper level of joy, peace, trust, surrender and gratitude started to return in the spring of 2004. The new tasks – not least the spiritual retreats in Assisi to which I invite people – seem to unfold and blossom. We are very joyful at reaching so many spiritual people with the “Spirit of Assisi” and to experience them leaving Assisi very much enriched.



*Capella della Pace in the Sacro Convento
Retreat with Danish group in December 2005*

I have had to study new topics for which I am also “burning” and work intensively to acquire more knowledge and understandings. This is of course a process for all of us which never ends. It has been possible to start new activities for which there was previously less time considering the fact that a large centre was to be kept open and taken care of. We now have more time to travel with “the Spirit of Assisi”, for example during the trip to Denmark in February 2005 where the recording of a CD with Assisi mediations and prayers became another innovation. For some time I have been recording Father Mizzi’s lectures on different topics, which I then transcribe, and we are working on a coming publishing of a series of articles and later hopefully a book, which is to be written by an English author.

Father Mizzi’s ecumenical and interreligious activities in which God has so much attention are still blossoming in Assisi – now at the Sacro Convento where so many groups from all corners of the world seek Father Mizzi and the understandings and beautiful vibrations of which he is such a deep instrument. Also today we receive many groups from different Christian Churches, other religions, traditions and cultures, and

Father Mizzi's presence at national and international meetings is still in demand. However, he is still taking care of his health and does not go on long trips for the time being. He has reduced his working day considerably but as it was 12-14 hours a day just 3 years ago, he is still doing very much.

And most important of everything and the task to be given the highest priority: The inner work in Assisi continues and today at an even deeper level which will hopefully mean a deeper step forward in the long view through transformation of a larger "trauma layer" in humanity and on earth.

If during my first stay in Assisi I had known about the difficulties to come – and especially four years later – I don't think I would have had enough confidence to be able to cope with the difficulties. At the same time I am more mature in my consciousness of the probability of new adjustments of the plan and difficulties and challenges which I have to deal with as well as possible – with the help of God. The process has shown me that often we have more resources than we think! Finally it is with heartfelt joy that I have experienced how God always finds new ways to use human instruments who dedicate themselves to a gradual more unselfish service, and how God's work on sanctifying humanity and the earth can thus continue in spite of the fact that free will, karma and counter forces sometimes seem to curb or stop a divine impulse.



Photo Fr. Max Mizzi OFM Conv.©

*Islam (the imam of Perugia), Christianity and Brahma Kumaris (Hindu movement)
during inter-religious meeting at the Sacro Convento, October 2002*

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