

John Towler writes.....

By the time you read this Christine and I will (Boris willing) be travelling to Italy in order to have a few weeks rest, but also complete on the sale of the house which we have enjoyed for 20 years. It will be a sad occasion but one in which has enabled us to explore different parts of Italy.

One of my happy remembrances is a visit to the Umbrian town of Assisi. Here, we were able to savour the delights of Italian cuisine and be introduced to Crostini, a bread which one dips in a viscous sweet dessert wine and sucks hard! I well remember the upstairs restaurant which butted against a Roman Temple now used as a Church! What legacies the Holy Roman Empire left us to enjoy!

As many of you will know, Assisi is the home of two remarkable saints St. Francis and St. Clare. It's as though they were brother and sister in love, such was the bond between them. At one end of the town is the glorious Basilica of St. Francis which I remember visiting whilst Mass was being celebrated, and was stunned by the architecture of the Basilica bathed in dazzling light. As we walked through the town, past the restaurant and Temple, we encountered a very modest building dedicated to St. Clare. Inside hangs the crucifix which was instrumental in the conversion of Francis to Christianity.

Francis started life as a bit of a playboy spending his father's money and living it up. Whilst in prison he received dreams and visions nudging him to a deeper understanding of his purpose in life. We are told that after much thought, mystic visions and vivid dreams he gave up the pursuit of pleasure and devoted his life in caring for society's castoffs.

The defining moment seems to have been an experience at St Damiano's Church where he was touched by the suffering of Christ on a crucifix currently hanging in the Church of St Care. Clare became a close friend and companion of Francis. From this vision he received a commission

from God to rebuild what he felt had become a rich decadent church and to live a life of simplicity. He spent much time alone in prayer and contemplation and became an itinerant preacher in the villages. His reputation grew as a lover of all creatures great and small. Legend has it that he preached to the birds and was known as 'God's fool'. The Franciscan Movement and order is his legacy.

Richard Rhor, a contemplative Catholic Franciscan suggests that Francis lived his life along with Clare 'Living on the edge of the inside of both church and society'. A former spiritual director of mine always advocated 'live with one foot in the church and one foot outside of it' - a similar notion! Francis was the exemplar of living 'the simple life'. Again, Richard Rhor summarises this beautifully in a book about Francis entitled: 'Eager to love'. He writes that the simple life is lived when;

- you put yourself outside of others' ability to buy you off
- you have little to protect and no desire for acquisition
- you do not consider the immigrant, the refugee, the homeless person, or the foreigner as a threat to you or see them in competition with you
- you do not need to get into the frenzy of work for the sake of salary or the ability to buy non-essentials or raise your social standing
- you have time for spiritual and corporal works of mercy
- all the ideological 'isms' lose their pull and attraction: consumerism, classism, sexism, capitalism, ageism, lookism, communism, patriotism, fascism, even addiction
- the ethics and economics of war reveal themselves in all their evil and stupidity
- people cease to be possessions and objects for your consumption and use
- there is no long-standing basis for any kind of addiction

Francis set the bar very high. However, I think that there is an agenda here on which we can all usefully reflect how we might emulate what in

the end is the simplicity of the life of Christ, and shines forth in the pages of the gospel.

Thinking of the coming UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow (31 October-12 November) is useful to think of Francis as a great ecologist. He opens our eyes to whole created order. He is totally inclusive of all creatures as worthy of our care and respect. We have a wonderful heritage in this part of the world to savour and care for. He alerts us to the power of nature as the dwelling place of the divine presence. All is sacred. His wonderful canticle is a beautiful poem of praise for the whole of creation. We would do well to heed the voice of those who encourage us to be careful about fuel, food wastage, exploitation of rain forests, the unnecessary and sometimes cruel slaughter of animals. For all is sacred, and we are but the stewards of God's world. We don't in one sense own it! From the terrace of my house in Italy I look with dismay at the amount marble being mined out of the Apennine Mountains-quite a sad sight.

Let Francis have the last word: 'You must preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words'. WOW!!!