

*Dear Friends,*

As usual, our stores have been displaying Christmas goodies for weeks now - commercialism deflects our attention from the God who came among us!

During these weeks that we call ADVENT, how many think about Jesus - Jesus, who was born among an oppressed and dominated people. Those who heralded His birth, were for the most part, those even we would probably hesitate to welcome at our own Christmas celebrations. Would we have been comfortable at a birth in a stable, surrounded by the noise and smell of animals in a confined space?



Gustavo Gutierrez reminds us that for Christians, "the Word was made history in the flesh of the poor." He asks us to reflect on the fact that Christmas is the birth of smallness and service in the face of the power and arrogance of the great of this world. To prepare for the coming of "the God made history in the flesh of the poor" means learning to see reality from the perspective of those who are poor and powerless, and committing ourselves to work for the kinds of policies and structures that create conditions for all people to have fullness of life here and now. A spiritual discipline for Advent might be that we reject the commercialism of Christmas by inviting our friends, neighbours, loved ones, to share a meal with us instead of buying the usual presents.

We could also reflect on the following story, whose source is unknown:

Fr Robert was invited to preach the Novena for Christmas in a parish in Brazil. In every sermon, he promised that for Christmas they would have a great "living crib." How anxious people were to see it!

Christmas Day was approaching, but nothing new could be seen in the church. The usual crib was prepared in the usual way, in the same usual place. Two days before Christmas, Father called three students and told them, "In these two days before Christmas, you are exempt from coming to church. You will go to the poorest areas of the parish and look for the poorest families. Write down the names of the parents, the number of children and their ages, and their exact address. You will bring the results of this census on Christmas Eve."

The students came back with about 100 addresses,

which were written on sheets of paper and placed in a tray. The tray was placed on a small table beside the altar at Midnight Mass. When the celebration of the Mass started, Fr Robert went towards the altar carrying two posters. He brought one to the usual crib and left it there. It read DEAD CRIB. Then he laid the other poster beside the tray, and the people read LIVING CRIB.

There was dead silence. People were wondering what was the meaning of the gesture, and waiting for an explanation. Fr Robert talked briefly: "Social injustice, unemployment, lack of housing, poverty, lack of respect for the human person and their rights, have forced Jesus to change His address. Today, Christmas Day, He is waiting for your visit at His new address which you will find on this tray."

After Mass, the church remained empty, and so did the tray. The baker that day sold more bread, the butcher more meat, the shops more rice and beans, and the milk disappeared. Clothes, shoes, exercise books and pens, toys - all found their way to Jesus at His new address.

This Advent, what does this story say to me as I prepare for Christmas?

- Sr Liz

A PSALM - Joan Chittister

To pollute the soul with so much noise and busyness that we fail to notice the beauty around us, deafens the heart and dulls the senses. Take fifteen minutes this week, and sit someplace alone in perfect silence.

Do nothing - read nothing - plan nothing - JUST SIT.

Pick out the most beautiful thing you see - look at it, and let the sheer existence of it drive out all the clutter in your soul. A garden would be a good place, or a park, or your favourite room, or the back patio or . . .

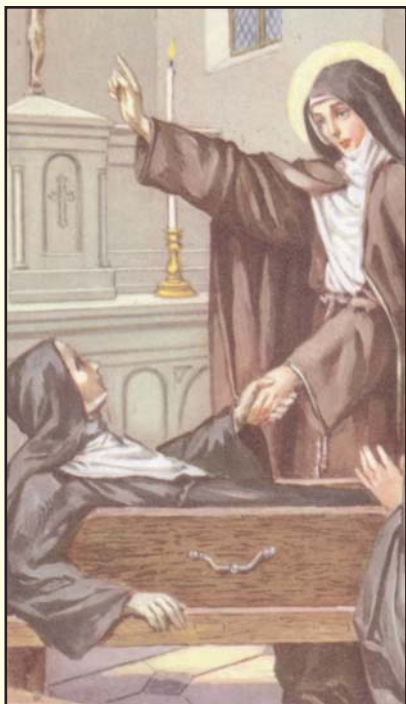
Stop the world for those few minutes. See how beautiful it is to simply learn to be in the presence of beauty.



SAINT COLETTE

Reformer of the Poor Clares (1380 - 1447)

Another great Franciscan woman was St Colette, foundress of the Poor Clares, known as Clarisses. She was born on January 13, 1380, at Corbie in Picardy, France.



After a holy childhood, Colette joined a society of devout women called the Beguines. Not finding their state sufficiently austere, she entered the Third Order of Saint Francis. Here she passed four years of extraordinary penance before St Francis, in a vision, bade her undertake the reform of the Poor Clares, where communities had become very relaxed.

Fortified by ecclesiastical authority, she established the reform throughout a large part of Europe, founding seventeen convents of the strict observance.

With wonderful prudence, she helped to heal the great schism which then afflicted the church. The Fathers in council at Constance were in doubt as to how to deal with the three claimants to the papacy - John XXII, Benedict XIII and Gregory XII. At this crisis, Colette, together with St. Vincent Ferrer, wrote to the Fathers to depose Benedict, who alone refused his consent to a new election. This was done, and Martin V was elected - to the great good of the church.

Dying on March 6, 1447, Colette was beatified on January 23, 1740 and canonized on the May 24, 1807. She was not only a woman of great holiness, but was also intelligent and energetic, and exercised a remarkable moral power over all her associates. She was very austere and mortified in her life, and worked many miracles.

For the convents she reformed, she prescribed extreme poverty - the sisters were to go barefooted and observe perpetual fast and abstinence! The Colettine sisters are found today (outside of France) in Belgium, Italy, Germany, Spain, England and the United States of America. Her Feast Day is March 6.

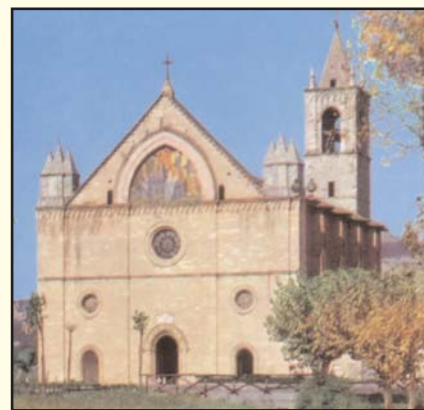
RIVORTORTO

RIVORTORTO, situated about 3 kilometres from the Porziuncola, is considered one of the most well-known sites of early Franciscanism. The present-day church was rebuilt in the 19th Century, after the earthquake of 1854.

The saint was waiting to obtain the Porziuncola from the Benedictine Abbot of Subasio after Pope Innocent III had given his verbal approval to the Rule, and needed somewhere to house his little band of followers. As Pietro Bernadone owned the land, it stands to reason that

Francis chose this site.

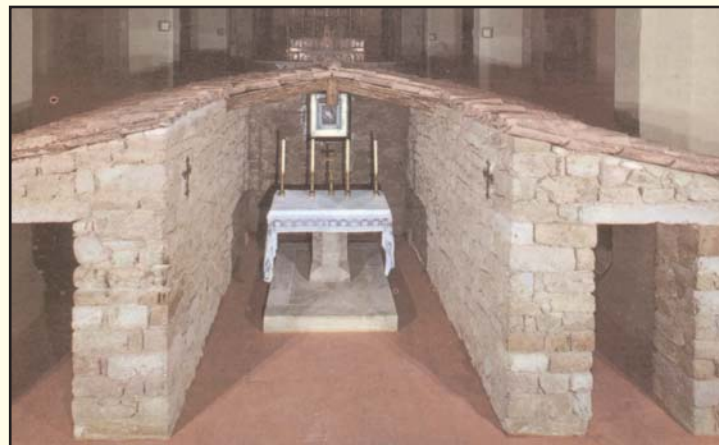
The interior recalls the primitive dwellings where St Francis lived in extreme, though happy poverty, together with his twelve Franciscan brothers. Because of the restricted space, Francis assigned to each of his companions a small space, writing their names on the wall and on the beams. It is composed of two tiny houses, separated by a small chapel, and is a symbol of Franciscan poverty.



St Thomas of Celano wrote that it was so poor that "it is uncomfortable to sit or lie down here. The first family of Rivortorto were living in absolute destitution, very often without even a piece of bread, contenting themselves with turnips given as alms. They accepted it all in tranquility of heart and lightness of spirit, following the example given by their father, Francis, and regarding their life together as the ideal community."

Near Rivortorto, one can find the chapel of St Mary Magdalene (perhaps previously called San Lazzaro) and San Rufinuccio, where there was a leper colony at the time of the saint. A short distance away lies San Pietro della Spina, the second church restored by Francis.

The three years spent at Rivortorto are fundamental in the history of the Franciscan movement - all his life, Francis remembered his time there with nostalgia, for it was here he dictated the first Rule in 1209.



THE first dwelling place of St Francis at Rivortorto.

ST FRANCIS ON CRUSADE

IN the year 1219, Francis with three companions, set off to go to the Crusaders' Army in Egypt. His brethren were hastening to many regions of the Christian world, as well as to countries occupied by Moslems, and he consciously sought to lead and inspire them.

Thus he came to Damietta, Egypt, and met the crusaders. He won many of the soldiers to his brotherhood, but he was appalled at the cruelty of some of the dedicated soldiery. When the crusaders were mauled in battle by the forces of Sultan El-Kamil, Francis desired to meet the Sultan and to preach to him about Christ.

There is no doubt that David met Goliath when Francis came unarmed before the powerful Sultan.

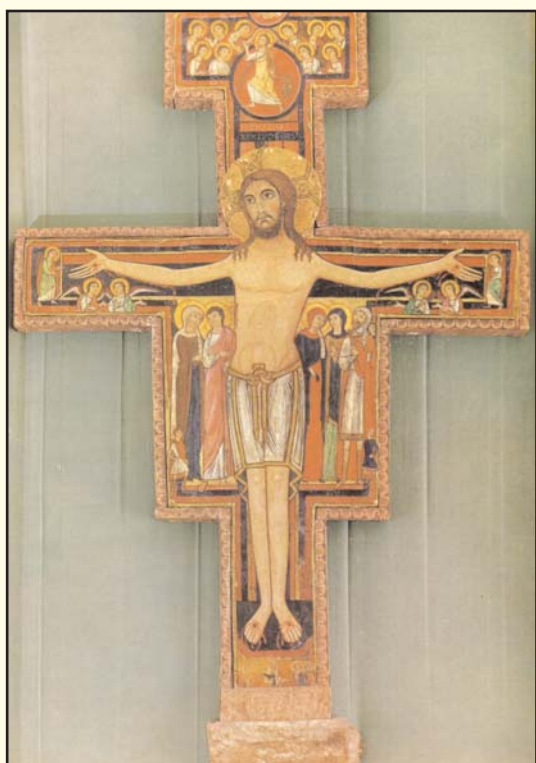
In 1220, the Bishop of Acre in Palestine wrote these words: "When Francis came to our army, fired by the zeal of faith, he crossed over to the army of the Saracens, and they brought him before the Sultan, who for several days listened attentively to his preaching.



However, fearing that his army should be won over to the faith of Christ, he sent him back to us in all honour, saying, 'pray for me, that God may deign to reveal to me that faith which is most pleasing to Him.'

It is a famous encounter. One of its fruits was the peaceful entrance of the Friars into the Sultan's realm as Guardians of the holy places of Palestine - a task that the Friars Minor still fulfil after 750 years.

THE CRUCIFIX OF SAN DAMIANO



THE large crucifix of San Damiano is one of the most reproduced crucifixes in the world. It portrays a living Christ triumphant over death. It is painted in Byzantine style, with figures surrounding Christ. Today, the crucifix hangs in a side Chapel in the Basilica of St. Clare in Assisi.

No-one knows how the crucifix spoke to Francis, but it does not really matter: what matters is that it moved him

to repair God's house, which was falling into ruin. The crucifix has such life - it seems as if it really could speak. From the moment you step inside the Chapel, its eyes are upon you - you can feel them follow you everywhere.

It leaves you wordless - for mere words could never capture what it communicates so loudly through its silence. The body is frail. Hand painted figures extend open hands to catch the flowing blood from Christ's hands and feet and side. But his face is serene, almost totally indifferent to his state. He seems oblivious to all things, except the person who is standing before him. His eyes do not look down in defeat, nor are they raised pleadingly to God. They look straight ahead, penetrating every other eye that meets his. He looks as if he is ready to speak some profound secret, but he waits for you to speak first.

The artist has captured the moment - to Francis, the lips parted and the moment spoke. And to all others who come here to pray and sit in the presence of this crucifix, another moment speaks.

CANTICLE

*Be praised, my Lord,
for Sister Moon and
the stars.
Formed by You so
bright,
Precious and beautiful.*



*Be praised, my Lord,
for Brother Wind
And the airy skies,
so cloudy and
serene;
For every weather be
praised, for it is life-
giving.*



*Be praised, my
Lord, for Sister
Water,
So necessary, yet so
humble,
Precious and
chaste.*



*Be praised, my Lord.
For Brother Fire,
Who lights up the
night.
He is splendid and
carefree, robust and
fierce.*



PRAYER TO SAINT CLARE



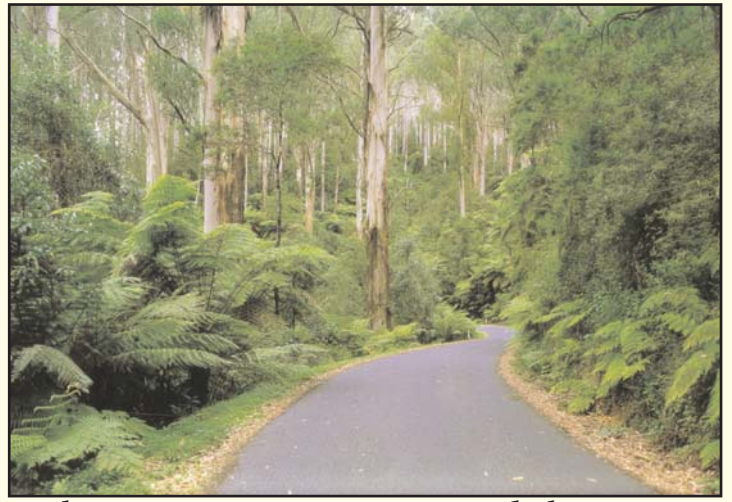
*Woman of the Beatitudes, truly poor in spirit,
Help us to use the things of this world
With detachment and quiet trust,
Always aware of the loving face of God
Turned towards us.*

*Woman of silence, model of contemplation,
Show us the way to our heavenly home,
Teach us to listen to Christ as our dearest friend.
Help us, like you, to contemplate
Our poor and crucified Lord
With the eyes of the heart.*

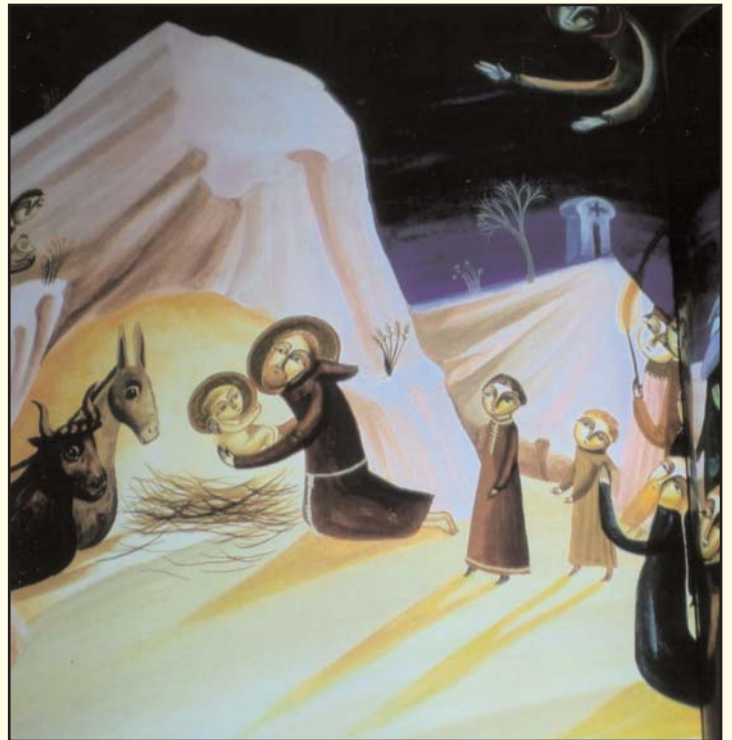
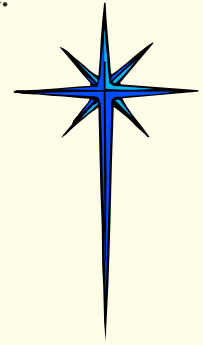
*Disciple of Christ, companion of Francis,
Give us your zeal for the Gospel.
Obtain for us the courage to live completely
By the word of Jesus,
So that, like you and Francis, we may be
Credible witnesses to fraternity and love.*

*O dear Saint Clare, woman so closely resembling
Mary of Nazareth,
Pray for us to the Most Holy Trinity,
To whom be glory for ever and ever.*

Amen



*Whatever awaits you around the corner,
God is already there.*



So, my dear friends, take care, and may this Christmas find us watching for Christ, who WILL visit us, and may we all find joy in giving more than receiving, in loving more than being loved and in selflessness rather than selfishness.

Be still, and let the true meaning of Christmas steal gently and peacefully into your hearts.

Love,
Sr Liz