

Reflection for Memorial Service for Sisters Who Died During COVID: 2020-2022

August 2, 2022

Jeanne Bessette, OSF

We have so much to celebrate together today:

The feast of Our Lady of the Angels celebrated worldwide by the Franciscan family, especially commemorating the little chapel – the Portiuncula – that became the center of St. Francis of Assisi’s unique mission in the Church.

We celebrate the founding of our own congregation here in Joliet on this date in 1865 –158 years ago.

And of course we celebrate the lives that 12 of our sisters shared among us for so many years.

First – Our Lady of Angels – the Portiuncula. So many of us have had the gift of visiting that holy place in the valley below Assisi. This spring I was there for the third time, this time staying right on the grounds of the basilica. For those who haven’t seen it, the little chapel known as the Portiuncula – or little portion – is housed in a giant basilica. I often think that Francis would be aghast at his “little portion” being surrounded by that giant basilica. Francis didn’t need a basilica to feel close to God. He was happy with his little portion. It was here that he and the brothers lived in little huts. Here where he received Clare as a sister and where they shared a meal and prayer. Here where the early Franciscans gathered to pray and make decisions. They were sent from the Portiuncula two by two to their preaching mission. And here where Francis asked to be taken in his dying hours. Not unlike so many of our sisters here at **our** portiuncula, Our Lady of Angels.

And down through the next 800 years, so many others have heard and answered the call to join the Franciscan way of life, the Franciscan movement. Sister Alfred Moes and her small band of companions found their mission / their little portion here in Joliet after a long search for direction. At each funeral we recount how many sisters have gone before us after living generous, fruitful, spiritual and spirited lives as Joliet Franciscan. We have laid 990 sisters to rest since 1865. Soon we will number 1,000 souls plus the remnant that is us. But good heavens, look at who these women have been and what they have accomplished.

How many millions of prayers prayed?

How many thousands of children taught?

How much beautiful music sung and played?

How many institutions, missions and ministries built and sustained?

How many meals prepared and shared?

How many people touched by them, nurtured, nourished, healed, supported, embraced, guided, led, treasured, cherished, buried, humored, loved by them?

We simply cannot imagine the influence that has been the result of the lives of Elizabeth Marie, Clare, Lauren, Mary, Felicity, Anna, Margaret Rose, Elaine, Nadine, Dorothy Clare, Mary and Margaret Ann.

And even as we celebrate the wonder and vastness of each of their lives, we do not build basilicas around them.

In the vastness of this grand universe, our bodies house our souls, our spirits, our talents, our dreams, our memories. They show wear and tear over time. Our lives serve a purpose for a while, but they are not great monuments or basilicas. Each of our lives is perhaps just a little portion, a portiuncula, not a basilica.

As I prayed this spring for each of us at the portiuncula, I noticed each person I was with gently touching the stone walls. Each of us was touched to be at and in that holy place. Each of us was touched by being so close to the spirit of St. Francis. Each person experiencing anew her or his call to also “rebuild God’s church.” Each person feeling missioned to carry out the spirit of Francis and Clare as our own mission, in our own small ways. In our own little portions.

So here today, let us celebrate all of the portiunculas in our lives:

The holy place in Assisi.

The holy women in our own Franciscan community.

The little portion that each of us is in the vastness of God’s creation – missioned like these women to find God, to love others, to preach peace, to live joyful, creative lives rooted in the Gospel.

May we aspire to nothing less in our own little portions.