

March 19, 2023

Coming Down the Home Stretch

Yesterday morning (Saturday), my thoughts turned to final few days in Rome...and thinking about the time I've spend here. It took me a full week to settle down and realize I didn't need to be doing something every minute of the day. I pushed myself out the door every morning feeling I HAD to walk, HAD to visit as many churches as I could. Rome is a culture shock for anyone coming from any city in America. But coming from a life in Haiti, the shock is super-charged.

I saw abundance everywhere. My heart felt the pain of overwhelming need and the desperation so many poor Haitians deal with every day. The endless hardships. The dearth of hope. The struggle to haul water. Persistent hunger. Unthinkable indignities. People dressed in rags.

The ultra keen sense of fashion on full display with both the Italian women and the men stunned me. They embraced *la dolce vita*, the sweet life, and lived it to the fullest. I was drawn to the art in the churches, even the overly pious art. The architecture of the churches reached back to a time when faith inspired higher and higher expressions of awe and worship...all for the glory of God. Today, God has vanished from the public square. Creativity serves commerce. Rome is dotted with luxury hotels and expensive shops. People visit the stunning new Apple Store which cost millions to create. Google "apple store in Rome" to see dozens of images.



During my second week in Rome, I struggled with WHY I was here. I missed Haiti. I wrestled long and hard with the decision not to go to Assisi. Then I wanted to leave Italy a week earlier than planned. More angst over that choice. Then there was the possible grant from agency of the United Nations. Excitement. Followed by lots of work. Then disappointment in the paltry amount they could give. I felt I was wasting my time in Italy. God knows time is the one thing I have a shortage of. That and the real money I need to run the orphanage the proper way. But just on the cusp of leaving I realized that my personal true reason for coming was to have a spiritual renewal. That, despite my best effort to thwart reaching the objective, something was happening within me. Call it the S. Isidoro effect. My consciousness of God seemed omnipresent. Every step became a prayer.

When I entered the hotel coffee bar, Carolina said, "Oh, you come. We wondered where you were." (Yes, I finally learner the correct spelling and pronunciation of her name. My diminished hearing and her thick Polish/Italian accent were the problem.) I said I slept late. No true. I was up

at 5:30am, but on Saturday morning prayer and the Mass is at 8:00am instead of 7:00am. When she brought me my coffee, she asked, "How is your wife and all the kids?"

I told her one day I would return to Italy with my wife. "When," she wanted to know. She seemed puzzled when I said Steph couldn't travel because she needed to get a temporary humanitarian Visa to the United States, and then hopefully within a year earn "permanent resident" status which would allow her to travel abroad. "But she is your wife. Why can't she come with you now?" Too difficult to explain to a 19-year-old Polish immigrant living, studying, and working in Italy.

Carolina said she was tested for the flu on her day off. Maybe she meant she received a flu vaccine. She said she wasn't feeling so well that morning, but she knew "Gerry would be there for his coffee" so she came to work. I brought her a copy of my book *The Loneliness and Longing of St. Francis*. She wanted to pay for it. I said it was a gift. She insisted on paying for it. I insisted it was a gift. The place got busy and so she put the book in a counter drawer. (Later Carolina showed it to the supervisor, Belinda, who looked at it for a few moments.)

A couple walked into the shop. They seemed surprised it wasn't a normal coffee bar. The guy struggled to say a few words in Italian...ending with "that's all the Italian I know." I said Carolina speaks English very well. Later he said to me, "You speak English very well also." I said I was an American and asked him where he was from. When he said California, I perked up as I love and miss California. I told him I lived in Los Angeles for twenty years. He said they were from the "Bay area," meaning San Francisco. I mentioned I lived in Carmel-by-the Sea for a year. He smiled, knowing the charm of that little idyllic town by the sea south of San Francisco.

The conversation should have ended there. But he seemed interested in talking. It did not take long for Haiti to enter the chat. He seemed very much aware of the troubles Haiti is enduring at this time. I shared just how bad it is. The mention of decapitations always shocks people. The wife asked, "Why can't other nations help put down the gangs?" The husband nailed the answer: "They have no strategic importance to other nations. They have no natural resources anyone needs." Plus it is a nation of poor uneducated black people...who taught me how to be more human.

The couple wanted to know more about Santa Chiara. Before long, I sensed their genuine interest in what my life there was like...and so I moved closer to them I showed them a photo of Steph and Moïse that is on the lock screen of my phone. I briefly shared the stories of the dreadful circumstances surrounding the births of Peter and Moïse. They found that shocking. It is common in Haiti.

I mentioned in passing my 20 years in Hollywood, many of which were spent producing soap operas, most notably *General Hospital*. A little later the woman as if I worked on GH during the Luke & Laura on the run years. I said yes, adding I had very small acting role in the wedding show with Elizabeth Taylor. The woman said no student at her university wanted to sign up for a class that started at 3:00pm because students wanted to watch *General Hospital*. The guy said he remembered visiting the woman at her school before they were married and she spoke of the big wedding...but he was clueless about the show's enormous popularity.

The guy asked if SCCC was a 501(c)3. Then he asked if we had a website. This was harder to answer. Of course, I knew we had a website...but I wasn't sure of the address. "I think it is SantaChiara...then two c's dot org." He typed it in his home. "Yup...there it is." Astonished, I said, "Really!?" He showed me the phone. Then he said, "I'll make a donation." I tried to tell him that wasn't necessary...we were just talking." He said he wanted to help.

Then he said they were heading for the Vatican. I asked Carolina to show him the book I gave her. He seemed impressed. He took a photo of the cover and said he would get a copy. I didn't say that it was out-of-print. As I walked back to the friary, I had an idea of cutting some of *Sun & Moon*, adding bits from *Loneliness and Longing*, and adding something about Santa Chiara and publishing a new Francis book that would explore Franciscan spirituality and the need to be one with the poor. Twenty-three years after the book was published, I could bring much more to the table of understanding of a transformative way of life.

Later that night after adoration and night prayer, a friar from Germany interviewed me from 8:15pm to 9:45pm for a profile he will write about my work for his Province's newsletter. He really asked some probing, deep questions. I really like it when I can talk about really important things, not the triviality that comprises of 93.5% of all conversations. He said he wanted to title the article "No Border" because he felt my life and work had no borders...which he meant in a positive manner. He essentially said I erased the border between wealth and poverty, between prayer and action, between different religions, between self and selflessness.

After I returned to my room his "no border" commentary occupied my mind. How did he see what I had not seen. My life since my fleeting conversion experience still baffles me. While in Rome I am struggling to understand my past in order to move into what's left of my future.

On Sunday morning, I went to the elite coffee shop in the exclusive 5-star hotel where rooms go for \$400. When Carolina told me the cost of a room, I told her I could afford to stay at the hotel for one hour, which would cost \$16. She did not grasp what I was saying. I brought a small piece of paper with me and I asked her to write her first name down because I was having a hard time understanding it. After she delivered me my first coffee she asked if she could toast some nut bread with butter for me. I said no, a croissant is fine. She asked me to please try the bread. I said OK. After I ate the bread, she handed me an envelope. She said it contained a letter for me. I asked if I could read it while sipping my second coffee. She said, "No. You need to read it alone later."

Carolina asked about the kids. I showed her a photo of a group of younger kids that a staffer had sent me. She melted at the sight of the kids and told me how much she loves kids. She said that she once helped a refugee boy to learn to read and swim. She said, "Gerry, would it be possible to come to Santa Chiara to help with your kids." I said sure. "Would it be a long trip?" I told her Air France flies direct from Paris to Port-au-Prince. She told me about her father driving her and her mom from Poland and it took 24 hours. I said that if she wants to come next year, I would pay the airfare. I meant it. It would be a life transforming trip for her.

When I got back to my room, I immediately opened the letter from Carolina. It was hard to believe a 19-year-old immigrant from Poland wrote the letter. The writing was beautiful; the penmanship

was excellent. Her thoughts and manner of expression touched me. Here it is in its fullness and unedited.

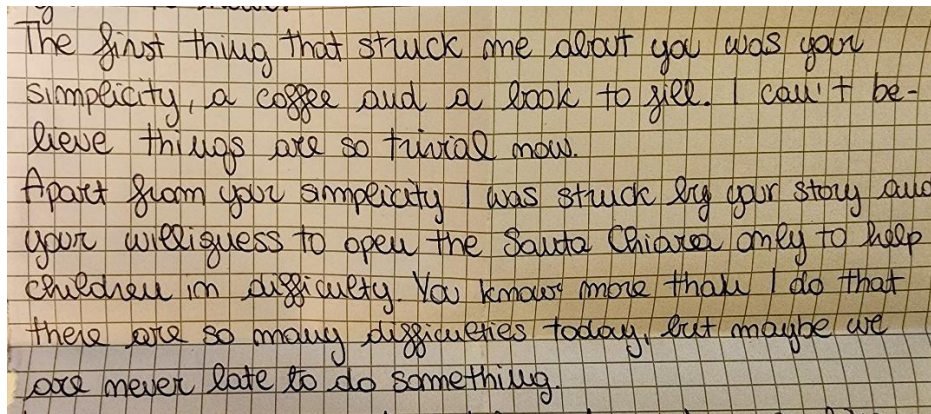
Dear Gerry...

The first day you walked into the hotel I didn't want to talk with anyone, in fact you thought I didn't speak English, instead here I am writing a letter.

Meanwhile, I want to thank you for the autobiography [the ND Magazine article written by Joe Heil] and the book [*The Loneliness and Longing of St. Francis*], for the only reason you never forgot, and for the company, that although silent, I was glad to have.

The first thing that struck me about you was your simplicity, a coffee and a book to fill [she is referring to my notebook that I wrote in while having coffee]. I can't believe things are so trivial now.

Apart from your simplicity I was struck by your story and your willingness to open Santa Chiara only to help children in difficulty. You know more than I do that there are so many difficulties today, but maybe we are never late to do something.



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I just wanted to say that I hope to meet people like you, with a deep and kind soul, and that the world needs more people like you.

I hope to go visit countries in difficulty and in some way help them.

I wish you many beautiful things, to walk on the bridge and breath the freedom, to continue to see churches and to help.

Take care of yourself, do not drink too much coffee and do not eat so many croissants!

Say hello to your wife and all the children.

It was a great pleasure to meet you, have a nice trip.

With affection, Carolina.

I will never forget you.

I was blown away by the letter. I showed it to Fr. Hugh. He said it was a miracle, adding, "You may have changed her life."

For me the letter was sign. John's gospel often calls the miracles of Jesus a "sign." Through a sign, we see things differently, not simply the way humans see things, but the way God sees things. In other words, we see beyond appearances to what is most real. We see the heart. Sunday's gospel reading was the story of the man born blind. Even though he was an uneducated beggar, a nobody, he was able to see what the educated Pharisees, the theologians of their time and faith, could not see. As Hugh McKenna, OFM, said in his homily on this the Fourth Sunday of Lent, "Today's gospel suggests that when it comes to the ways of God, there is always more to see. Whenever we say about God, 'We know', we have to say in the next breath, 'We don't know.'" I was blind for most of my life. I see a little better now, but I still fumble around in the dark. Fortunately, God sees the heart. It will take a life-long journey to have a heart open enough to partially see as God sees...and see the uniqueness of others and love them instead of judging them. In time, perhaps a lifetime, we stop choosing sides or using people for our own advantage. We stop hoarding and start sharing. Gradually, we understand we are not alone. We are with God and God is in us. We are loved and are called to love without counting the cost. And everything changes. Suffering still exists, but we want for nothing. Pray that God lifts all of us beyond our smallness of vision to what is vast. We need to treasure each other to open our hearts to true and lasting Wisdom.

Here is a photo I took of Carolina last week to show my wife.



I just have two more full days in Rome. I will spend part of tomorrow in the upper library of S. Isidoro where much of my first book of St. Francis was written. I pray to better live the example of the poor man from Assisi, to continue to empty myself of all traces of ungodliness and to deepen my sense of mercy and compassion.

Rome is where I needed to be for 21 days. I am thankful for Fr. Hugh and all the friars from around the world living at S. Isidoro for their kindness and hospitality.

While I was writing this Journal, which took until 3:00pm in Rome to write, I learned the Help fund would grant us \$3,000 toward the solar power system upgrade, which will cost \$32,000. Someone in Rome matched that grant, and someone in America also matched the grant. So, we have \$9,000 toward the \$32,000. A few days ago, someone in the States said they mailed me a check for \$10,000. So, we are just short \$13,000 to freedom from fossil fuel. If needed I will take it out of the operating funds.