

Friar follows in footsteps of St. Francis

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Franciscan Friar of the Immaculate the Rev. Angelo Michael Guarin recently retraced the steps of St. Francis along the Italian hillside of Assisi and LaVerna.

“It was a blessing from God” said the Rev. Guarin who ministers at Our Lady’s Chapel in New Bedford. “I was able to experience the life of St. Francis and actually felt that he is still present there.”

Born in Assisi in Umbria in the late 12th century Francesco Bernadone was the son of a wealthy merchant.

The Rev. Guarin visited the remains of the house where the saint was born. He also stayed at a residence next to the bishop’s palace in Assisi the site where the young Francesco gave all his earthly possessions back to his father including stripping himself of all his clothes.

The following morning the Rev. Guarin led a contingent of 30 pilgrims to the Basilica of St. Francis one of the oldest Gothic churches on Italian soil. Taking a staircase from the middle of the main aisle of the Lower Basilica they descended into the crypt.

He was principal celebrant at the Mass at the tomb of St. Francis. “I was very honored” he said. “St. Francis had great love for the Holy Eucharist.”

In 1230 Brother Elias hid the body of the saint in a wall near one of the pillars of the church on the exact spot where the rough stone sarcophagus lies today. The whereabouts of the mortal remains were kept secret in order to protect the relics from being stolen. They were discovered in 1818 during excavation of the lower altar.

“When I was celebrating Mass the tomb was behind me” the Rev. Guarin said. “I knew he joined me in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.”

St. Francis remained a deacon all his life never daring to proceed to the priesthood.

“He felt he was unworthy of the supreme dignity of priests.”

After Mass the friar visited the Church of San Damiano where St. Francis heard a voice coming from a crucifix which said to him three times “Francis go and build my church which you see is falling down.” The saint misunderstood the heavenly command and rebuilt the old church. He and his followers would ultimately rebuild the spiritual structure of the church.

“The huge cross is still there. Everyone who visits gets indulgences.”

Next the Rev. Guarin headed to the mountains of LaVerna an hour and a half drive from Assisi. It was here in 1224 that St. Francis received the stigmata the marks that corresponded to the wounds of Jesus on the cross.

“He was praying to Jesus to show him a sign to share in his suffering. According to Brother Elias there was literally a head of a nail in his hand before he collapsed.”

Throughout the remaining years of his life the saint bore great physical pain and weakness due to the stigmata. After blessing his disciples and listening to the Passion in the Gospel of St. John St. Francis died on Oct. — 1226.

The Rev. Guarin said that the pilgrimage inspired and revitalized him as well as deepened his faith.

“I cannot describe how I felt being there. There was such sacredness a holiness. The saint led me to God.”

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