

**We are pilgrims and strangers...** Just a month ago, I had the privilege and blessing of accompanying 28 Secular Franciscans of Western Canada for a pilgrimage to Italy (La Verna, Assisi, Greccio, San Giovanni Rotondo and Rome). We started this pilgrimage from Laverna-the place of Stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi and ended with visiting four major Basilicas in Rome.

Ten minutes before the vesper, a religious nun who serves with the friars in La Verna sanctuary, informed me in case I knew of any Indian friars here... to that I said, 'I am familiar with brothers of Indian province because I belong to that brotherhood...so let me know who is here?' I had never expected and was not aware that three Indian brothers would be at Laverna during my visit. Brothers invited me to join the community for dinner. I experienced a brotherhood filled with joy. A warm hospitality from brothers even though a short notice was given to the guardian of La Verna of my presence. Indeed, La Verna, a mountain of natural beauty, is a place for prayer and solitude.

I had another unexpected meeting with four brothers from an Indian province and my cousin who is in his final year of theology to be a priest in Rome. It was a blessing to connect to familiar faces in a foreign land and share a dinner with them. I was a bit overwhelmed with the grandeur of the Basilicas in Rome and felt sad to see such places also have a lot of poor and homeless, especially sleeping under the arches (a quadruple row of Doric columns) of St. Peter's square. So, the real pilgrimage has just begun...how do I embrace the Poor Christ in those visible poor and homeless around me.

For me this pilgrimage was rather exhausting with far distances to travel on the road but nevertheless travelling as a group on a bus through the beauty of Italian valleys, visiting the spiritual power houses (Basilicas) in Rome and meeting Indian brothers was outstanding. I was delighted to be in such places of high importance for us Franciscans. It gave me a good impression of walking in the footsteps of St. Francis of Assisi and a little better understanding of how his world would have been 800 years ago. I also came to know a little more about my Secular Franciscans brothers and sisters. I might have begun as a stranger for some but I am sure at the end of it, we have grown in our friendship.

Pilgrimage was a God given opportunity to see beautiful places, meet strangers and nourish spiritual life through prayers and Eucharist. As I said, the real pilgrimage begins right where we live. Soon, we are going to enter the holy season of Advent, preparing ourselves to welcome the incarnate Jesus on Christmas.

How are we going to prepare ourselves for Christmas? I am sure many have already scheduled their Christmas parties, starting the very first week of Advent. I encourage you to pay attention to what is essential in our pilgrimage to heaven. I invite you to get serious about the season of Advent. Check for yourselves what you need to clean from your heart to make a manger for Jesus to be born. Sometimes, we get caught up in doing what is not essential to the point that the real purpose of Christmas is lost. Some of us have seen Greccio, the cave where the first live nativity scene was created by St. Francis of Assisi. This Christmas it should put us into vigor to truly embrace that poor Christ in our poor brothers and sisters.

Brother Manoj Xalxo