Spirituality
Soul Seeing



(Unsplash/Luca Pennacchioni)



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Sometimes the Holy One has to hit me between the eyes with a metaphor to make sure I get the message.

My Airbnb host in Assisi, Italy, had named her place La Chiocciola. It means "the snail" in English. But I wouldn't fully appreciate the significance of that name until days later when I was preparing to leave.

It was my first time visiting Assisi, so I booked a street-level studio in the heart of this medieval village, hoping for as authentic an experience as possible. Just opening my front door onto the stone-laden street immediately dropped me back in time. I'd tacked on three days of solo traveling at the end of a guided Cinque Terre tour so I could experience everything related to Francis and Clare. Part tourist, part self-proclaimed pilgrim, I planned to take in all the sites while taking contemplative time in the places where these well-loved saints had walked, prayed and lived. A tall order, I know, but since I was traveling alone, I figured I could manage it.

On my first day, armed with a tourist map and my trusty traveling water bottle, I headed out the door. To get my bearings, I stopped at an overlook at the far side of town and pulled out my street map. A young blonde approached. "You appear to be lost," she said in English. "May I help?"

"Oh no, I'm not lost," I assured her. "I've just arrived and I'm simply getting an overview of everything."

She introduced herself as Elly, from Luxembourg. This was her fifth visit. An annual pilgrimage, she said, and, being well-acquainted with Assisi, she'd be happy to guide me along. I joked that it seemed impossible to get lost in a city contained within a stone fortress. She assured me that it wasn't.



A medieval street in the town of Assisi, Italy (Unsplash/Gabriella Clare Marino)

Elly joined me on my walk back to the village center, sharing tidbits about "mustn't miss" places. An excellent restaurant, out-of-the-way St. Stephen's chapel and her favorite cheese shop, which she'd be happy to take me to now. Not on my packed to-do list, but I agreed.

Moments later, the aged Pecorino cheese Elly chose for me to sample landed in my mouth like a gift from heaven. I had no idea cheese could be this delectable. While she planned to pack several into her suitcase, I knew the smell alone would be too much for the distance I was traveling. I settled for this fleeting gift.

"Remember," she said as she left me, "pay attention to your surroundings so you don't get lost."

I smiled and waved goodbye.

That evening, I wound up eating humble pie. After dining at Elly's recommended restaurant, I exited in the right direction, but soon I came across options for left or right turns. That's when I realized I hadn't paid close enough attention. Every choice I made was an uncertain one. Darkness set in, but I kept moving forward until my spirit lifted when I spotted the *porte*, or gateway, that led out of the city. My Airbnb was located near such a gateway. Unfortunately, it wasn't this one.

How many gateways could Assisi possibly have, I wondered? I guess I hadn't paid close attention to that either. Now I had to admit, I truly was lost. Flustered, I asked a couple for directions. Using Google Translate, they directed me to the right gate and I was back on track.

For the next two days, I meandered through Assisi and along the hillsides up to Mount Subasio, trying to be more attentive. Without meaning to, I was moving like the snail in my aptly named Airbnb. But maybe that's what it took to follow in Francis' footsteps. Move slowly and release my grasp on control.

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Late on my last afternoon, I wanted to visit one more famous site. The Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli, with its Porziuncola sanctuary, where Francis had allegedly received many graces. As a regular hiker, I figured I'd easily manage walking its 2 miles outside Assisi, until I realized how close to the road the path was. As traffic picked up and I grew uncertain, I decided to turn around. Maybe this wasn't a good idea after all.

That's when I spotted a robust Italian woman, about my age, walking toward me. A perfect opportunity to use the five Italian words I knew. As soon as I mentioned the word "basilica," her face lit up.

"Come," she said, beckoning me in her direction.

She said her name was Rosella, and I gave her mine as I turned and followed. Our conversation soon dropped off since Rosella spoke little English and I'd depleted my Italian. Still, we practiced sign language and the words we thought we knew. We giggled like schoolgirls whenever one of us figured out what the other one was saying.

Rosella charmed me for a while, but she was a slow walker, forcing me to slow my steps. At this pace, I realized I'd have only a tiny opportunity to visit the basilica by the time we arrived. I needed to say goodbye and move on.

"*Dove vas*?" I asked, mixing my Italian with Spanish. Figuring she was headed elsewhere, I motioned to leave.



Porziuncola chapel beneath the cupola of Santa Maria degli Angeli outside of Assisi, Italy (Wikimedia Commons/Alekjds)

"*La Basilica degli Angeli*!" Rosella proclaimed this news with great delight. "This is a happy day!" she suddenly blurted in English. "A happy day for Rosella and a happy day for Pauline!"

Clearly, Rosella was thrilled to walk the entire way with me. How could I leave her? Her joy felt more important than what time I arrived. Following Francis' lead, I acquiesced. I'd do my best to scout out the highlights and spend some silence in the Porziuncola whenever I got there.

But at the basilica, Rosella wasn't ready to release me. She wanted to make sure I returned to Assisi by bus because it would be too dark to walk back. She pointed to the bus ticket office across the street. It will close soon, buy your ticket now, she tried to say in broken English. So off I went, noting that she wasn't coming along to buy a ticket for herself. How would she return, I wondered.

Once inside the basilica, I weaved my way over to the Porziuncola. As I stepped into the small sanctuary, I spotted Rosella up front, on the floor. She'd prostrated herself, pressing her forehead to the cold tile. A hard position for anyone to maintain, much less a woman who didn't appear to be in the greatest physical shape. But Rosella remained surrendered there for a long time as I sat in silence, praying and wondering what Rosella might be carrying in her own heart.

Finally, I wandered off, hoping to say goodbye when I returned. But later, she was gone. Not only gone from the Porziuncola, but nowhere to be found. Rosella had disappeared as mysteriously as she'd appeared on the street.

Not until the next morning did I discover a poem my Airbnb host had written about La Chiocciola, in both Italian and English. She hoped that her guests would travel through her city more like a snail than a tourist. That they'd take time to notice the little things, to get lost on Assisi's streets, to appreciate the people and the sense of this special place.

My host had no idea how I had inadvertently taken her advice, how much I'd surrendered to the snail's pace, how I'd learned firsthand the gifts of the *chiocciola*. Gifts like silly giggling new comrades, scrumptious smelly cheeses and hidden sacred sites that I would not have discovered on my own. The gift of slowing down enough to see the Holy One, unexpected, right in front of me. Just like Francis.