

My Town

Sister, good morning!
Brother Francis speaks to you!

Welcome to my town! I greet you also in the name of sister Clare. She wanted to come and see you and welcome you with embrace, but she chose to remain at San Damiano; for a reason that you already know! However, I can assure you that, for some time now, she has been prolonging her night prayers before the tabernacle, just for you. At this moment, another day is beginning, though bedridden, she is always available to her sisters.

We are very happy, that today you are visiting our town for the first time. Just remember that during our time the town was much smaller as to what you'll see now. It begins at the square in the center, the Town Square, dominated by its tower and temple which, in the past, were dedicated to the god Minerva. And now, they told me, it is consecrated to Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

In case you have some time, allow yourself to get lost in its steep and narrow winding streets. They are enchanting! They were witnesses to the many festive nights, many love serenades, many frustrations and youthful dreams ...

Visit the San Rufino Cathedral; they have changed it so much, that now I recognize only the external façade. I remember that, as a child, I had observed it many times as I used to go to there for Mass clutching my mother's hand. To be honest, I was unable to understand all its forms, but I stayed admiring it for a long time, in silence.

Entering the Church, you will notice the baptismal font on the right side. That one, yes, it is authentic. I love it very much because it was where I was baptized immediately after birth. So it was also for sister Clare. It pleases me to know that you will go visit it, this way you will understand better what Baptism means to me. To tell you frankly, I exerted a lot of effort understanding it myself.

In the beginning I thought being baptized meant going to Mass sometimes, attending catechetical lessons, and giving alms when you can. Later, all these were forgotten and I started dressing up extravagantly, enjoying life like a fool ... being the 'party king'. Let me tell you honestly that I lived in vanity, worst than anyone could. And my father granted all my wishes.

Thus, this was how I contributed to the destruction of the fortress that crowns the hill where my town lies. The same town that kept coming back in my dreams, with its people covered with shields and all types of armors. A few years later, I was led to the game of war thinking that in crashing the noble people of my town, to whom belongs the family of Clare, I would have contributed to its development. What a fool I was! My father supported me in all these while my mother watched, torn between delight and worry.

It took me a long time to understand what it means to be baptized! What a long way to go ... how many doors had to be opened, how much foolishness I did! For, to be honest, in my time, as it is at present, it is very difficult to know one's self and build one's own identity.

It was only after I understood the poor by serving the lepers and after much prayer before the San Damiano Cross and listening to the Gospel ... that I began to discover the way for me. I began to reconstruct my life and understand what it means to be a citizen of the Kingdom.

I remember that one day, during the first steps to my new life, I went shamefully begging for stones at San Rufino square. I wanted to rebuild the small church of San Damiano. I felt so ashamed that I spoke French in begging so that they would take me for a minstrel. Unknowingly, Clare, the young niece of Offreduccio, was spying on me behind the Persian blinds of her window. Ahhhh ... women, they're all the same.

I think this was the start of the long journey in search of my identity. And so it was for her too. I remember that many years later, while I was preaching on Lent at San Rufino, she came secretly to tell me that she wanted to follow my way.

For her it was a long process too, and a painful one, because besides being beautiful, fragile and rich, she was the daughter of one of the most influential family in Assisi. Yet she never drew back. I always admired her serene courage, her audacity and firmness. Truly, she taught me many things...!

Sister, I cannot talk with you much longer. I must leave you now, but before I go, I'd like to ask you never to forget this day. I don't expect that you, or any other, would consider me a model, but I would ask you not to give up searching: trying, falling, rising again, persevering and putting one effort after another, and another!

I am sure that, finally, almost being unaware of it, you will succeed in imprinting the face of God in your soul. Then, being able to let go of yourself, out of your egoism, giving-up everything that binds you to this world, a song of freedom will resound spontaneously in your heart. Then and only then, will you truly begin to be yourself, discover your identity and be able to assume your task as a citizen of the Kingdom.

Sister, receive my embrace of peace.

Your brother
Francis

ARMIDA

Assisi: The homeland of our soul

Dearest Sisters,

It's always wonderful to listen to Francis!

And to know that with me today, he smiles on each one of you who, from distant lands have come this far through different ways.¹

He who experienced the fatigue of faith and searching, who was and remained fully human, is truly our brother and friend.

Assisi is his city, but also ours.

I felt that this is the homeland of my soul² and I discovered 'one has to be born Franciscan'.

Perhaps we are not aware of it right away, but when we meet Francis and Clare, we feel in our hearts that this is our path and we find joy. Every place in this blessed land hides its own secret and speaks to our hearts.

For me too, like Francis, it took a long time before I understood, before I discovered a living faith and above all I intuited my vocation.

My family is not a practicing Catholic, and I lived my early youth away from the faith. I have been baptized but nothing more. And I didn't understand at all what baptism meant.

I was a lively, curious, restless, carefree girl.

Then one day something happened in my life. At the age of fourteen, I was sent to study at a Swiss boarding school that was supposed to prepare rich young women for their lives as wives and mothers.

I didn't know it, but God was waiting for me in this school!

Like all young women, I dreamed of finding my love, of spending life between dances, parties, meetings.

Yet I was restless. It was a student like me who spoke to me of a love that does not pass away, that does not fail, that is eternal and beautiful: the love of Jesus, of the Sacred Heart. A new horizon opened before me. I understood then that I was loved and as a beloved woman, I could live my life following my dreams.

And I was full of dreams!

When I finished my studies at the age of eighteen, I returned home; I realized that life, full of luxurious clothes, dances, parties, was no longer enough for me. It didn't make me happy. I searched and found; a small rift opened in my bourgeois life.

With a friend, Rita Tonoli, I began to take care of the poor children of my city, Milan.

As in Assisi at the time of Francis, so in Milan there were neighborhoods of the rich (where I lived) and those of the poor (which I did not know existed).

A bit like Francis, I went among them. And in my heart, I felt happiness and sensed the meaning of a life given fully and joyfully.

But my search was certainly not over. It would be years before I understood my calling.

In my heart I felt that it was not enough to take care of these little ones, but it was important to change some social structures. How can it be done?

¹ A. BARELLI, *La nostra storia*, 43

² *Testament* of Armida Barelli, 11-02-1950

I was just a young woman, who hadn't yet been involved with real life and pain.
I worked with those who suffered, but just a little from the outside, without really feeling poverty, hunger, injustice in my own life.

Injustice?

Come to think of it, I also experienced injustice as a woman. It was a subtle form, discreet perhaps, but it was real injustice, real discrimination.

For example, my two male brothers had graduated (one was a doctor and the other an engineer), but we girls did not proceed our schooling.

Not only that: men could leave the house freely, while we were not used to going out alone or to speaking in public. Our clothes prevented us from moving freely, we had to look beautiful no matter what sacrifices it cost.

Above all, we were excluded from social and political life.

We didn't have the right to vote! Even in the Church, we were completely passive.

I am well aware that there is still a lot of discrimination and prejudice against women.

I tell you: don't give up! Be strong and dare the future!

Dare to follow the example of Clare, the first woman to write a Rule of Life for other women; dare to break the rules to follow your heart and the Lord Jesus to the end.

Take courage, dearest sisters!

Your sister Armida

The Basilica and the Tomb

Sister, good morning!
Brother Francis speaks to you.

Thank you for allowing yourself to share in the great miracle of love that was born in this holy places.

Today in Assisi you will visit the places where my body and sister Clare's are laid.

This visit to my town is like a sign of what your town must mean to you. This is so because we are called not to abandon our town. In the end it is to our town that we must always be committed to. Thus, we cannot turn our back to it. However, I repeat, when you go back to your town, you won't go back as a child of Favarone or a first born of Pietro di Bernardone, but like sister Clare and brother Francis, a simple and minor sister.

So, when you back today to Assisi, I ask you warmly, and sister Clare asks of you too, to avoid distractions by admiring the great basilicas built upon our humble bodies of which they spoke a lot. Give more attention, rather, from the point of view of our littleness, to the many artists and poets who find inspiration for their majestic work, several handicraft men of today fill up the market with the fruit of their creativity and a lot of families find a way of sustenance in the hotels and restaurant that are there.

When you go back to Assisi today, and you find it frenetic, also because of its small size, I invite you to think of your own city or town, which is the privileged place of your life as a Missionary and look at the value of work.

Remember that work is a grace and is the universal vocation of humankind and that, for you, as Missionary, it is the most excellent place to accomplish your mission.

Do not ever forget that work is a means by which you attain your growth and your personal perfection.

Yes, sister, I know what you are thinking now: it is not always easy to find the job that we want and many times it is not even easy to find even that which we do not want.

It is then that, like a minor sister, you adjust to what you find in order to survive. I know that this means a lot of suffering, I myself experienced it after I left the business of my father, but I recall it was then that I learned to be one with the poor and emarginated. It was after this that I understood that the problems linked to work is also a way to be united to the redemptive work of Christ.

Sister, I know very well that it is difficult to talk of these things just as it was also during my time, it is much more difficult now during your time, when all human problems acquire a worldly dimension.

One thing though is necessary; it should be clear to you and with it I want to end my conversation with you, and my talk about work: aware that work is very important and that it is a grace of God, it must be put in a wider context which is God's life in us.

This means that we must work to live and not live to work, in this way it must not put off the spirit of prayer and devotion in you, which serve for others and for temporal goods.

Sister, peace be with you.

This is a wish for you from your brother

Francis

ARMIDA

To live in fullness

My sisters,

I confess that for a long time I thought about leaving my city, my native land and retire to live in a cloister.

It seemed like the best choice, but it wasn't. I understood it little by little and when Pope Benedict XV told me that my mission was Italy, then I understood. I was still searching for my vocation, even though I was already thirty-five years old. The pope confirmed to me the intention of my heart: to live in the world without granting anything to the world, because everything about me was given to God.

I was helped by our St. Francis, who, in love with God, decided to stay in his city and proclaim the Gospel in his land, remaining in the world.

And Fr. Gemelli invited me to look at the women of the first centuries of Christianity: Mary the Magdalene, Priscilla, Phoebe, Perpetua and Felicità ...

True, over the centuries women had suffered so much injustice, some discrimination. I myself had suffered from being a woman (for example, I had not been able to graduate, I did not have the freedom of my two brothers, I could not vote, ...). Women often did not have the opportunity to speak out in society and in the church.

Yet this was not always the case and will never always be the case.

Review and ponder, too, the story of so many women throughout the centuries who have found the strength to be themselves in the light of the Gospel.

Be present and participate in the Church's synodal journey, believe in God's gift to you as women, dare to take a few steps of newness!

You too, my sisters, have discovered the grace and passion to be witnesses and proclaimers of the Gospel on the streets of the world.

Made peaceful by the choice to live in poverty, made free and authentic in the relationships of chastity, made joyful in the awareness of a mature and responsible obedience ... go and witness to the Gospel because the whole world belongs to you.

Your lives, like mine, are in the hands of the Lord.

Living in the world we have chosen to be like everyone and to support ourselves with the work of our hands.

In the time in which I lived, so many women did not work, could not work outside their home, work was a conquest. And if work is toil, nevertheless it is also an expression of our creativity and our participation in building a more beautiful and fraternal world. Work then made us economically independent and this is important to us.

Please do not forget that! And live your life to the fullest!

Your sister Armida

Porziuncola

Sister, good morning!
Brother Francis speaks to you.

Today I am happy because I know that you are going to visit a place which I loved so much: the Porziuncola!

How much memories this place brings me back to mind!

What profound experiences I had within its walls! How much inspiration during my encounters with my Lord! How much tenderness I received from my brothers in what I always considered as the Crib of the Order! ...

Yet a lot of worries, trials and conflicts too! Yes, because, we must face it, there were these too at the Porziuncola. Life, indeed, is made up of all these.

I know it is not the first time that you come to this place.

I would like to remind you a very important event that happened to me in this Church. I always want to share with you the most important events of my life, for I have a special affection for you.

It happened one day, when I was very young and the way to go was not yet clear to me, that I was here for a fundamental encounter with the Gospel. I define it 'fundamental' because at that moment I felt like a brilliant light illuminated my mind, so that the Most High revealed to me that I should live according to the way of the Gospel and invite everyone to accept God's love and make penance.

From then on, all doubts disappeared. And after that no one else could teach me what to do anymore, for the Gospel became my only teacher. In that way I understood that my life, my role, my mission, must consist in proclaiming to others that God is love, and that He loves us and that we too must love Him.

You know very well that since the arrival of the very first friars at St. Mary of the Angels, the initial thing they did was to go out to the four corners of the world, to embrace it as a great cross, proclaiming through their life and words, the unending love of God for us.

Sister, this is what you too should do today at the conclusion of the days spent in my city. Like the first friars, you too shall be sent to the world. You will go with the blessing of God bringing with you the memory of Sister Clare and mine, since we both love you. Yet, most of all, sister, preserve in your heart like a vase of clay, this small seed of God's Word that you received, so that it may take roots and bear much fruit.

Now that you are 'going back to your city', most probably you are full of fears and start to ask, what to do and how to act. Allow me to tell you that the most important thing is 'to be', only after, if it will be possible, will 'doing' follow. The former is more important; the later, without the former, is nothing. Thus, most of all, strive 'to be' yourself; discover your identity, trace it, perfect it day after day. The best way to realize your mission is 'to be' yourself, and your 'being' is of a minor sister. Thus, I exhort you, as I often do with my friars minor, as you go in the world, which is the place of your mission, may you not engage in arguments or disputes, do not judge others, but be meek, peaceful and sober, gentle and humble, speak kindly to everyone, and be pleasant. And in every house you enter say first of all: peace to this house".

Go, sister. Leave calmly and full of trust. May the smile in your face never fade. May your eyes shine tenderly always; your ears always ready to listen and your arms open to welcome. Go! inspired, illumined by the light of faith, driven by the strength of hope, lightened by the fire of love.

Sister, may the Lord bless you and keep you always.

Experience his mercy in every moment.

Walk towards the horizon under his gaze and you will never lack the gift of his peace.

My sister, may the Lord bless you.

Your brother

Francis

ARMIDA

Under the gaze of Mary

Dearest sisters in the Sacred Heart,

Here you are today walking towards the great Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels, which encloses a precious pearl for all of us Franciscans: the Porziuncola.

Yes, a precious pearl as Francis told us; a precious pearl for us too.

In fact, after the Pope, Benedict XV, assigned me the formation of young women throughout Italy, I will not hide from you that I was happy, but at the same time restless.

So, I went to Assisi. It was 1918, the Second World War had just ended. I went to the Portiuncula and prayed there for a long time, as you will do this evening.

In agreement with the Minister General of the Friars Minor, here I made my personal consecration to God for the apostolate in the world. I was at peace!

In the profound joy of that moment, I asked God: "Lord, will you give me sisters who, like me, desire to walk on this path?". And in the depth of my heart it seemed to me that the Lord was answering me: "Yes."

And here you are, my sisters, from so many parts of the world, beautiful and courageous, burning with love and determination.

Thank you, Lord: your promise multiplies our desires!

I am happy that you have chosen to remain at the Portiuncula in prayer and adoration during the evening. Under the gaze of Mary, who has always been present here. I've always loved the night, with sister moon and bright and beautiful stars.

In the night the heat of the day calms down, voices and noises are stilled, we remain before God the way we love! Poor beloved creatures.

Do not fear if your prayer will not be as you imagined it; shadows or lights may arise in your heart... but you are before Him and He knows you and loves you, so you cannot be afraid.

Always be sure of His Love, in the happy hours and in the dark ones, my sister.

And know also that your sisters in this ideal and vocation pray for you every day, as you do for them.

It was here that Francis experienced the power of fraternity; may Sorority be a force for you too!

Feel united with each sister and supported by them on your journey.

From here Francis sent the friars on mission, on the roads of the world, as indicated in the Gospel: "like sheep in the midst of wolves".

Fraternity and mission go together; I've experienced this in my own life.

Yes, because in going we are not alone, and the Gospel we proclaim is a program of fraternity: "brothers and sisters all" as Pope Francis reminds us!

We are sent as sisters to live a universal fraternity, starting precisely from our experience of community.

I hope that your silent prayer, lived together at the Portiuncula, will give you the strength to set out again with joy and to go to the ends of the earth as Francis and Clare did.

Your sister Armida

San Damiano

Sister, good morning!
Brother Francis speaks to you.

A little while ago brother Leone came to tell me that the sisters of San Damiano are joyfully waiting for you.

He was there early this morning to say the Mass with them, and he told me that he found them a bit worried while preparing for your arrival.

Truly, I rejoice for your coming in this dear place, very much loved, not only by me and by sister Clare, but also by you, since it was here that the first twelve Missionaries made their first profession.

Oftentimes it is very difficult to understand your situation as a Missionary, but do not be discouraged: little by little you will understand what it means to 'live on the roads of the world'.

To get down to San Damiano perhaps you will follow the usual pebbled path surrounded by olives and cypress trees.

I know that you wanted to go unnoticed, protected by the shadow of the night, with the intention to renew your commitment to the Gospel.

This gesture, in the night and quite in secret, reminds me, in a certain way, the commitment of sister Clare who, in the night, took a flight away from her father's house, to give herself up to the Lord at the Porziuncola. And, after courageously overcoming several trials, she finally took refuge among the walls of San Damiano to live together with the other sisters the great adventure of faithfulness to what they have promised. You recalled this on the first day of your arrival in Assisi.

I must confess to you that one of the greatest virtues I admired most of sister Clare is her fidelity. Yes, because it is one thing to say: "I commit myself" moved by the enthusiasm of a passing moment, and it is another thing to conserve the same enthusiasm in the midst of life's problems and conflicts. And I remember, that for the refined and noble daughter of Favarone, things were not easy from the very beginning. How much courage she showed before his cousin Monaldo and the rest of the armored soldiers when they tried to take her by force from the Benedictine monastery of Bastia where she took refuge during the first days after she left her father's house! What firmness she had before the same soldiers when they wanted to attack St. Angelo in Panza to abduct her sister Agnese! What strength of soul before the Cardinals and Popes who insisted to water down their rule of poverty! What suffering she faced in saving the purity of the Form of Life which one day the Lord inspired me for them! How much patience and calmness during the 25 years of illness! What a courageous and heroic act in defending their chastity before the threat of the Saracen troops who decided to invade Assisi and its surroundings!

I think that you yourself noticed with your own eyes, the strength and courage of Clare in the past, during your devoted visit to the main corners of the sisters' convent.

I am sure that they spoke to you eloquently of the heroic journey traversed by this woman in faithful observance of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ; the barren walls, the small choir of rustic tables, the roof beams without a ceiling, the earthen floor and the sobriety of the refectory.

Today, the time has come for you to renew your commitment to live according to the Gospel. I exhort you, under the gentle gaze of the San Damiano Cross, to allow yourself to be guided by the example of sister Clare.

Then you will be able to understand better poverty as giving up ownership to make you free, since it does not detach you only from things, but also from yourself. You will then be able to accept others and be involved in the fate of the victims of every form of poverty. You will also learn the sense of justice in managing goods that should be for the use of all human beings. You will be urged to be coherent with what you've promised, learning to assume simplicity in your lifestyle and in your action, in things and in your being.

You will understand that obedience consists, most of all, in the constant effort of listening and following the will of God expressed through others, through events and through creation. You will learn that the fraternal dimension of obedience, the most difficult of all, is not childish obedience and slavery, but a responsible act at work and the ability to 'verify' within the Institute.

Finally, you will discover that chastity is, most of all, the freedom to love everyone, with an undivided heart, rather than a heart shared with one person alone. God does not love a divided heart. You will understand that your consecrated chastity is a response of a 'total' and whole heart to the unique and universal love of God. You will notice the need for your love to be fruitful, not with the fruits of the flesh, children, but rather your words, thoughts, actions, your entire self and time, your being...

Sister, may God be in your heart and in your mind and in all your being, this entire day.

This is the wish of your brother

Francis

ARMIDA

Our origin at San Damiano

My dear sisters,

If I compared Porziuncola to a precious pearl, San Damiano is like a diamond for all of us: the most precious stone!

There were only twelve of us, a few scattered throughout Italy.

November 19, 1919 was the beginning of an extraordinary adventure, which continues today, thanks to each and every one of you!

Thank you, my sisters. It is great to see you here to repeat your 'Yes'.

I have thought many times that perhaps it was not a coincidence that our Institute began right here. In fact, this is the church that Francis repaired with his own hands at the beginning of his vocation and here he received the calling to "repair the Church" (from the voice of the Crucified One). A message that still resonates from these walls for us too who are called to live in the Church as co-responsible and prophetic lay women.

When I lived, women had no voice in the Church, now the situation is slowly changing, but to me the road still seems a long way.

This is the place where Chiara lived her life, faithful to the ideal she embraced when she decided to follow Francis. Her faithfulness is a sign for us, but Chiara reminds us that fidelity does not mean being stagnant. Clare remained faithful until her death, and she interpreted Francis' message for her and her sisters; she applied it to their lives as women; she lived it in welcoming those who turned to them.

This small and simple church reminds you that littleness doesn't have to scare you. What matters is to become significant, as this place has become, because it is capable of preserving and bearing witness to the message of the Gospel.

Tonight, do not be afraid, sister, if you are small and poor. You too, dearest little sister, right here this night, surrounded by sister moon and the stars³, surrounded by so many sisters, bearing your land and your people in your heart, you are about to go up to the altar, to make your offering.

The greatest love is resounding in your heart... pause longer for a moment, reflect again on the magnitude of the act you are about to perform; you are going to lay at the altar not something of you, but rather all of yourself. Think about it, not to turn back in fear, but to meet Him with full awareness, with boundless trust, with ardent love.

He has called you: you cannot doubt this, and today you are responding to the invitation. Fear not, then. He will be your strength, for you are giving yourself entirely to Him...

May his grace descend upon you to renew you as in a second baptism; you are a Missionary of the Kingship of Christ! He is the King, you are the bride who, for the extension of his Kingdom, prays, loves, works, fights, suffers.

Feel the height and greatness of your intimacy, the value of this mission of yours ...

³ St. Francis, *Canticle of Creatures*.

In chastity, in poverty, in obedience you will be an apostle in the world; in humility, simplicity and charity you will bring to your brothers and sisters Jesus, who reigns in you as the undisputed Sovereign.

Kiss your Crucifix. Only on the Cross, united to Jesus, will you be able to bear lasting fruit in your life. Clinging to Him, all stretched out in the ardent desire to love Him and make Him loved, take up your life with courage.

Go Missionary of the Kingship of Christ ...⁴

Go, then, little sisters, with courage and love. I have full confidence in you!

Your sister Armida

⁴ From an unpublished and undated letter of Armida Barelli.

La Verna

Sisters, Good morning!
Brother Francis speaks to you.

I know that you traveled a long way to reach this mountain of La Verna.
Welcome to this holy mountain, the peak of my sufferings and my joys.

Today, I would like to speak to you of what happened to me in this beautiful place, but to be sincere, I don't even know how to do it.

It was, in fact, a very strange and special thing, marvelous and sublime, that I still feel confused, astonished and, most of all, ashamed of it.

Yes, that is the truth.

There could be no other feeling after experiencing in the flesh the marvel of God's love, gratuity and the magnificence of his love, in view of our feebleness.

For, I say it once and for all, everything that happened here was nothing but a fruit of his love.

I cannot explain it very clearly, however I believe that it did not happen by chance, accidentally or casually. I have the impression that it had a beginning long way back.

For you to understand better, I think it all started at San Damiano, that morning, the most beautiful in my life, when I contemplated before the San Damiano Cross. Surely, I can say that sister Clare is right now prostrated before Him, praying for you, as she has promised me!

Yes, I remember that, from then on, the Crucified Lord entered my deepest being, invading my entire self and gave a new meaning to my existence.

As time goes on, I feel more convinced that the pain and passion of Christ were the pain and passion of man.

This feeling arrived at a point to have such a force in me that, many times, it pushed me powerfully towards the lonely woods to find relief in weeping.

It was the same force that drove me to the high mountain, which I was already visiting often, since the time I received it from Count Orlando.

I will never forget that when I went up there, in the middle of August that year, my heart was filled with pain, from the misunderstanding of my brothers and the awareness of my incapacity to serve them and that I cannot control myself, thus I decided to come back with some of my companions and retire in the quiet of this huge rocks, to pray and have silence, on the Lent of St. Michele.

They were 40 days of sweetness and relief, but also of intense pain, of unexplainable suffering, an indescribable anguish, of infinite depression ... until one day when I could not resist any longer so I prostrated on the rock, as a sign of love and passion ... forgetting myself.

I woke up later, at the break of dawn, in the morning and noticed that my hands ... my feet ... my side ... were oozing with cold blood.

I already told you that the confusion was so great yet greater still was the embarrassment.

I thought of my brothers ... and of my people too ... and I understood that it would not have been possible to keep this secret.

So I felt the littlest of all, the worst, the sinner of sinners and it is for this that I had to let go into the will of God and abandon myself, like a child, in the womb of his mercy.

From then on, I can say with certitude, that only God is enough for me!

Sister, how wonderful God is!

He is holy, he is one and only. It is He who works wonders. He is strength, power, the highest Omnipotent King, Father, King of heaven and earth. He is three in one, Lord God of God, goodness, all good, the highest good, the living and true God.

He is love, charity, wisdom, humility ... patience, beauty and gentleness. He is security, quiet, joy, hope, gladness, justice, temperance. He is our richness and fullness.

Sister, he is our hope, our faith and our charity. He is our life eternal, our great and admirable Lord, our merciful Savior.

Please forgive me, sister, if I talk to you in this manner, if I repeat the same things which I already wrote to friar Leone, yet when it comes to God, I cannot control my enthusiasm. It is like water that starts bubbling inside of me, clear and fresh ... water that never ends.

From everything I said, sister, you'll understand why you are up in this holy mountain.

You will discover Him and contemplate Him through the century old trees, leafy branches, grains and broken twigs of old. You'll hear Him through the hum of birds, the carpet of humid green moss and in the humble worms that intercept your path, in the rocky cave where the universe hides,

Sister, you who come from the working world, and from the city ... you, more than any other woman today, need deep moments of active contemplation, so that, getting back to your work, you can be a contemplative. Otherwise, you will end up being a machine, a robot without soul ... thus, your existence would have no sense.

My sister, abandon yourself to God.

Your brother asks this of you

Francis

ARMIDA

Among the centuries-old trees

Dearest little sisters,

I am happy that today you are climbing the mountain of La Verna.

From the gentle slopes of Mount Subasio, where Francis was born and where, for him and for us, it all began, you will walk on the rugged, rocky and impervious mountain of La Verna, where Francis received in his flesh, the sign of the wounds of the Crucified, where his body was made like the body of the Beloved!

Here we wanted to build, not without problems, our second Oasis, after the one in Assisi!

We did it during the war and I still remember that it was impossible to find furnitures, especially wool for mattresses.

"And the wool came from so many sisters: parcels and postal packages, railway packages. We filled a big room with them. We had it washed, cleaned, put in new covers and we managed to make 81 mattresses, and as many pillows and quilts."⁵

And yet we wanted with all our hearts, to offer all of you the experience of this place, where beauty becomes sublime and the heart is lost in the immensity of Love.

Yes, this place is truly precious, because La Verna marks the earthly summit of that way of love that St. Francis had intuited in Assisi, on a starry night of his youth: a way of sacrifices and intoxication, of poverty, of humiliation⁶, of joy and beatitude.

It is here that Francis definitively embraces the poor and crucified Christ, but he can do so also because:

- he had embraced him in the leper
- he had listened to him at San Damiano
- he had met him in the poor
- he had recognized him in the humiliations of his life
- he had followed him in the labors and pains that his brothers caused him...

This poor and crucified Christ is our King of love, whose name we bear.

I have seen, with joy, the journey that the Institute has made with the whole Church to understand what Kingship means. I thought that it was the journey of Francis, within the Church of his time, rich and powerful.

He is the King whom you are listening to and recognizing in the crucified, offended, humiliated men and women of your countries.

He is the King who becomes a servant and teaches us true minority: "*let the greatest of you be the servant of all*" (cf. Mk 9:35).

He is the peaceful and humble King who gives his life to show us, as he did to Francis, the way to peace.

It is he, little sisters, our King of love who invests you with his love... to love him, to see him loved, to make him loved⁷ everywhere and always!

And Francis, our great brother, repeats to each one of you the blessing he gave to Brother Leo:

*"May the Lord bless you and keep you,
May he show you his face to you and have mercy on you.
May he turn his gaze upon you and give you peace.
May the Lord bless you."*

Your sister Armida

⁵ A. BARELLI, *La nostra storia*, p. 175.

⁶ A. GEMELLI, *Il francescanesimo, Vita e Pensiero*, Milan 1965, 22.

⁷ A. BARELLI, Issue 50, Circulars on the Institute, Barelli Historical Archive, Milan.

From Assisi to the whole world

Sister, good morning! Brother Francis speaks to you.

Sister Clare sends you a special greeting. At the first light of dawn this morning, I spoke shortly with Clare. I'd say she was quite short-tempered and agitated. She already knew you would be going to visit her. In any way, she was happy and full of joy.

Her eyes were shining with a special light, full of tenderness and hope.

They told me that they saw you in Assisi at night. They were observing you as you passed through the Porta Nuova and when you reached the town square. They told me that, sometimes you appeared recollected and sometimes distracted.

Someone hiding at the Cathedral of San Rufino observed you from a distant behind the columns and told me that at a certain point, tears seemed to roll down from your eyes. And through the candlelight you held, your tears shined liked two diamonds.

This city was a witness of much love, many pains, a lot of struggles and hope.

Today you are here again in the town of Assisi with its tall towers, stone buildings, elegant temples and century old doors. It is the town of the great ... of the powerful.

We will leave this city, not to abandon it, but to witness to all the new strength of the Gospel.

Since the day I happened to enter the small church of San Damiano, my life was changed. That day San Damiano was empty, filthy and ruined. I went straight ahead before the Crucifix on the wall.

What a marvelous moment it was!

I won't ever forget it!

I will never be able to express in words what I experienced that morning, which is the most wonderful in my life ...

One thing I can say with certainty though, is that for me, at that moment, the face of Christ was shining with a new light.

I saw in his wounded and bloody body a concentration of the entire world's pains. I understood through his wide opened eyes, looking calmly towards eternity, a new horizon hidden and getting lost.

Today's pain and the hope of the future; this was the great teaching I had in that encounter with my Lord on the Cross. Thus, from then on, I started feeling a change in my life. I started giving meaning to my being.

I understood that I can no longer go on filling me up with the unending vanity of this world nor continue thinking of the unreasonable game of war.

I recall that after the long talk with Him, my Lord, a mysterious strength carried me away from the small church. My feet became very light, my heart beating fast, and my eyes wanted to embrace the whole universe.

It was then that I looked again at the valley and, in the distant hovel of the lepers, I understood that today the blood of the Crucified flows among them.

From that moment on my heart was filled with a foolish anxiety, an unbearable desire to take upon myself the very pain of the world and ... and without being aware of it, I felt tears rolling down my eyes.

I was crying for the pain of Christ and for the pain of the world, I was crying because Love was not loved.

Ohhh! I'm sorry, sister, for all these things that are very personal. It was so spontaneous sharing them to you.

For now, and in conclusion, I would like to ask, that when you think of your night at San Damiano, stop, pray and contemplate the Cross. And it will give a different meaning on how you'll look at your own land.

There you will discover those who live in inhuman conditions, without having the essential things to live.

There you will see those who suffer for social injustices and those who cannot find a job.

There you will see the immigrants from all over the world, discriminated for their language, culture and color of skin.

There you will discover the lifeless face of the children who have not known the caress of a true father and they grow without a future.

There you will perceive those who drown their personal problems in alcohol and drugs.

There you can notice them in the abused women; both those who seek for it and those who have no other choice for survival.

There you will observe those who are in difficulty because they think and act diversely from others. And finally, there you will see many others ... who have lost their sense of living or those who are seemingly condemned not to find it ever.

Live without judging others, but be meek, peaceful and sober, meek and humble, speaking to all affably, as it should be. And in every house you enter, say first of all: peace be to this house."

Go, sister. Live serenely and confidently. May the smile on your lips never fade. Let tenderness always shine in your eyes. May your ears be always ready to listen and your arms open to welcome. Go promptly, enlightened by the light of faith, impelled by the strength of hope, kindled by the fire of love.

Sister, may the Lord bless you and keep you always.

Experience his mercy at all times.

Walk to the finish line under his gaze and he will never fail you with the gift of his peace.

Sister, I wish you a happy return to your land, to your city in the company of the little ones and the poor.

Clare and I, whom you will meet today in her mortal remains, wish you peace and every good.

Your Brother

Francis

ARMIDA

Go safely

Dearest sisters,

I would stay hours and hours listening to Francis and to the fascinating story of his life. I feel that he is truly a living image and a concrete witness of the Gospel, because this is the only thing he wanted: to live the Gospel!

And that's what we want too, isn't it? We reiterated it last night:

To live like Jesus, to be his disciples. Above all, to love as He loved.

It is a fascinating journey that requires us to have the courage to listen, to pray and to contemplate.

Let us always place ourselves before the Lord, the Cross of San Damiano. Today I asked that you be given a copy of the Crucifix of St. Francis so that you may take it into your homes so that you can turn your gaze to Him every day.

In the Cross of San Damiano, I have always been struck by the open eyes of Jesus: eyes wide open to the world, eyes of the living and not of the dying.

If you look closely, other personages are painted on the same cross. Jesus is not alone at this moment to remember both his death and his resurrection.

As I progressively understood my vocation, I also understood that it was possible to be totally His and at the same time live fully in the world as a lay person.

And I realized that the persons painted on the Cross of San Damiano points out exactly that.

Jesus becomes man, he becomes part of our very humanity; Mary gives him a body of flesh like ours and, like us, he experiences pain and death. However, it reminds us that this his body is destined, like ours, for eternal life and that God's last word is not death. On this cross are painted women and men, Jews and pagans, saints and sinners... symbolically, all of humanity to whom the Good News of Jesus is addressed.

Well, my little sisters, as our dear Fr. Gemelli reminded us:

*"A Franciscan does not despise the world... he does not flee society in fear or disgust... St. Francis' renunciation is different: he does not deny the beauty of life, because that would be to disavow his Love; he does not deny love; he denies possession and the desire for possession. Stay in the world, but don't take a crumb of it; admire and love as much as you like, but seeing the Creator's work in everything."*⁸

This poor freedom is the heart of our lay vocation. Consecrated, yes, all for the Lord, but in the world: *"lay saints" like the Christian virgins and martyrs of the first centuries... secular but holy*,"⁹ like the women of the San Damiano Cross.

I felt my heart leap with joy!

Love your life, my sisters, love the world with its lights and shadows, and know that God is faithful. He will never fail!

How much work, how many obstacles, how many struggles in my life, but the Sacred Heart has blessed everything and has always made my and our actions fruitful.

He will do the same for each one of you.

Never cease to be amazed at the miracle of the world! It is enough to think that God calls all things by name (Ps 147:4).

It was precisely under the gaze of this Crucifix that our Institute was born in 1919.

It was a day in November, when in Italy the sky is gray and the rain falls slowly, but the sun was shining in our hearts.

Yes, this is where our spiritual family was born! Under the eyes of the Crucified King, naked and poor, who continues to speak to our hearts! *Dear San Damiano! We love it because St. Clare and her*

⁸ A. GEMELLI, *Il francescanesimo, Vita e Pensiero, Milan 1965, 22-23.*

⁹ A. BARELLI, *La nostra storia, 15.*

*sisters lived there for a long time, guardians of the most genuine Franciscan tradition! We love it because so much of the life of our Institute has taken place within these sacred and crude walls. Cultivate these memories in your hearts; they too are a gift from God.*¹⁰

As you can see, San Damiano is not inside the walls of Assisi.

It is located halfway between the plain and the hill: it stands between the city of the rich with its walls to protect it and the plain, without walls and defenses, where the poor lived.

I don't think it's a coincidence that our Institute was born here.

It reminds us that the poor are our teachers, they are those with whom the Lord identifies himself.

Contemplating the Crucified One, a naked and bloodied man, unjustly condemned and humiliated, always urges us to recognize Him in the little ones, in the suffering, in the oppressed.

It reminds us that the only possible way for us is to be builders of peace, unarmed with open arms like Christ in San Damiano.

In this is perfect joy. Have a good journey, my sister. I will always be close to you!

I greet you with the words of Clare:

*"Go safe and peaceful, my blessed soul
because... He who will seek thee, also sanctified you,
and after creating you, he put in you the Holy Spirit
and has always looked on you like my mother her son
little one that I love.
And you, O Lord, be blessed for creating me."*

Your sister Armida

¹⁰ A. BARELLI, *La nostra storia*, 187.