

love. With your grace, I made my choice and passed Your test. You helped enlarge my heart. As time went on, I felt good about what I had done and could be ever more grateful.

Amita left. She seemed to have had a good time, and I was glad. We all got back to our normal routine. I made a lot of progress in learning egg tempera painting and ceramics. Professor Otello Chiti was very proud of me because he recognized I had a gift. We had an end-of-semester art show in one of our classrooms in the office building. Since one of my paintings looked so much like the original print, the Professor thought the print was my painting when he saw it on the wall in the next room. It was quite a compliment. When the semester was over, he offered to teach me one on one if I could come back to take private lessons with him. Praise You, Lord!

The semester ended. All students left Siena, except my friend Amita, Argus, Wes, Patty (a student from SUNY Geneseo who studied with a different program stopped by Siena for a visit) and me. Lynn too had left earlier. Wes had told three of us about the exciting camping trip to Monte La Verna where St. Francis received the Stigmata. We were very much looking forward to it. It was the high point of my stay in Italy. We packed our clothes, cooking utensils and food. Wes drove us in a small car which belonged to Dr. Bill Cook. The two men sat in front, and the three women squeezed in the back. I was the smallest. Foreigners like us lost weight easily in Siena because we walked all day long. I certainly did. Most of the students, however, gained weight because their host family fed them very generously. Somehow, I was very conscious and considerate knowing Wes and Lynn were not rich. So I never asked for anything extra. Whatever Lynn cooked I would eat and appreciate. When they took me out to restaurants, I would order something less expensive and would share dessert with someone or do without dessert. Yes Lord, You have made and formed me that way since my childhood. One time, we were on a bus. We were told to be more active about getting a seat because public transportation was often crowded. Growing up in Vietnam, You, Lord, had taught me to be polite and to give up my seat for others, especially the elderly and the weak. But that day, listening to the teacher, I made the effort not to be so nice. The bus had many empty seats when we got on so I had a nice seat. When the bus stopped to pick up more people, I got up, walked away to give one of our students a message. When I got back, a man had taken my seat where my belongings were still on it. I told him he took my place and showed him my bags. He apologized and tried to walk away. He was handicapped! I hastened to say sorry and took my belongings away so he could sit more comfortably. For the rest of the trip, I stood with a terrible guilt as I told myself to never try to be someone I was not, just to fit in.

Camping on Mount La Verna

After a three hour drive, we arrived at La Verna in Umbria. It was such a secluded and mountainous region, which explained why St. Francis chose to take refuge here. The pastel green leaves and the fresh air welcomed us who so desired and hoped to experience a little of what the holy Saint spent many years of his life seeking. It was also cold and damp. We saw no cars on the road nor any people. Only tourists came to visit here because of St. Francis' experiencing the wounds of Christ, but May did not seem to be the tourist season. As the sun was setting, Wes spotted a dirt road from the main road. He turned into it. It was a spontaneous move on his part. We had no map or plan as to where we would spend the night. Perhaps St. Francis did the same thing, to stop and rest wherever and whenever he was inspired. Every place was his home because his brothers and sisters were everywhere (i. e. brother water, brother stick, sister leaf,

etc.) After a few feet, the director parked the car where it would not be seen from the road. He was so confident that we just went along and were not afraid. I was up to the challenge and ready for the adventure. From there, five of us unpacked the car and carried our belongings up the mountain, not knowing what was ahead of us. Once we reached a flat and an open area, Wes told us to stop. We began to build a fire and cooked our dinner using the soup mix. Amita was in charge of cooking. She was like the Italian mother of the group. After dinner, Argus and I descended the mountain to a stream to wash dishes. We followed the sound of the water and could not miss it! The sunset was even more beautiful. We stopped and sat there for a while in silence and had a spiritual talk as we stared at a marvelous creation of Yours Lord, our brother Sun. He was quite handsomely brilliant and beautifully bright at the same time. We talked about You, Lord. We wondered what heaven was like and how and when we would all be called home to live with You forever.

It got dark so we headed back up to the campsite where Amita and Patty had already set up a little tent for the girls to spend the night. Wes and Argus decided that they would be manly men and sleep on the tarp in their sleeping bags without anything over them. They could see the starry sky, and it was just magnificent. We were in the middle of nowhere. If anything had happened to us, no one would know. It was a clear night. That meant we would get in trouble, and we did. The heroic but inexperienced campers did not know better. We picked the wrong side of the mountain. After about an hour or two, the women were awoken by dripping water inside the tent. Our warm breath and the cold air outside made a perfect combination for great and generous condensation! My dear friend Amita yelled aloud in the middle of the night as she and I laughed. We got out of the tent trembling. Patty did not mind. She had the tent to herself but not for long because she eventually was freezing. "St. Francis is crazy!" Amita expressed freely with sarcastic laugh. I thought it was funny but it was not so because we were pretty wet and cold. The men got up and tried to make a fire for the wimpy girls. Except for the stars above, we were surrounded by total darkness! With a flashlight, Amita and I fearlessly ventured into the night to gather wood for the fire. To our horror, we spotted a freshly dug hole. Its shape and size told us that it was waiting for a casket. We screamed and ran back to the campsite. The men did not think much of it. They told us to stay put while they went away to look for firewood. They got some branches but they were damp. It took quite awhile for us to get the fire started. Patty joined us finally when the fire was ready.

We all did not sleep much that night. It was a long night, and finally the sun came up. We packed everything and carried it down the mountain. We encountered a water fountain later where Wes and Argus decided to wash their hair in the ice-cold water while the women could just wash their faces. During the day, we drove around the region to visit places. When the sun went down, we picked a different mountain in hope we would get some decent sleep. We had to make a couple of trips uphill with our camping equipment and belongings. On his second trip down, Wes spotted a family of wild pigs. The mother had tusks trying to gather her babies. She could kill us all if we disturbed the family. Wes was so worried because he could hear Argus and Amita talking as they were about to come up where the pigs were. Wes sure prayed as he signaled the students to be careful to avoid the animals! thank You so much Lord, for we were all safe! So there we were being careful to have the tarp over us that night. With sleeping bags, we looked forward to a restful and peaceful rest.

Dearest Lord, You sure had a great sense of humor. You knew we would laugh about it afterward and the story we would later tell would be more interesting. You generously gave us a cold shower during the night. We took refuge under the thin tarp and covered ourselves with anything that helped us to survive the cold. As soon as the sun rose, we quickly descended the mountain. Growing up in Vietnam, I enjoyed being in nature and doing daring things with friends. The last two days were such an escapade, and I loved it. For me at least, the memory of these days would last forever because we bonded closer through challenges and hardships. So the first thing we did after coming down the mountain was to check into a hotel. We bathed, did our laundry, had a good nap and a decent lunch. We felt so clean and refreshed! We taught a class about St. Francis. Argus and Amita knew how extreme and severe a life the holy Saint chose to live. Amita finally experienced it for herself and thought aloud, "How could he suffer like this?" One must wonder. We could not even handle a damp and chilly spring night even just for a few hours, and the beloved Saint spent days and months living here - fasting, praying and suffering with his Crucified Lord. As much as we admired him, we could not imitate him. "We are really sorry, St. Francis". Our spirit was willing but our flesh was weak! We failed miserably.

That afternoon, Amita and I decided that we would do something different and more spiritual, now that we were not busy complaining about being wet, cold and lacking sleep. We went out for a walk on a long and winding dirt road that led to where the locals lived. Surprisingly, we could see no one. It was calm and peaceful. We spotted some fresh clay along the way. I gathered two different kinds and managed to bring a little of each home to the States. We were very much enjoying ourselves, and suddenly, appeared an elderly woman. She must have been at least in her 70's. Her face was weathered. With a gentle and loving smile, she called for us, and we greeted her with our innocent and youthful anticipation. She asked who we were, and what we were doing here. Amita responded kindly as the woman kept on staring at me. She had never seen an Asian in her life! She told Amita she enjoyed seeing our cheerful smiles! She shared that the town had grown emptier and more desolate. Young people had left the town to go live in the cities where there were jobs. With a smile, she said that we should stay in La Verna, get married and have children! After Amita repeated what the woman said to me, we looked at each other and politely said good-bye to her. We hastened to find our way back, which took a while. It was a little uncomfortable for us, but we knew she meant no harm. Yes indeed, sadly, it was true that many historical towns we studied and heard about have had similar problems. We met up with the group and shared the story. They were glad we got back safely, and we were not "missing in action!" All slept well that night and could not wait to ascend Mt La Verna, the holy mountain of the miracle of the Stigmata, Your precious wounds of love for mankind, O dear Lord.

St. Francis prayed for my conversion

It was a sunny and gorgeous spring day. We were so ready to climb the holy mountain. We stayed in a hotel the day before and reenergized ourselves with a good and comfortable sleep. As we climbed, everything became open and welcoming. I loved everything I encountered; each step I walked and each breath I took, for I knew St. Francis walked here, and his spirit too was with us as we went higher and higher toward the top. Even the old and ancient tree roots looked special to me. They lived through the ages. They witnessed the stories of this place. All became alive in Your love, Lord. I could perceive that all things were my brothers



and sisters just as St. Francis experienced them. You had made them all, a big universal family - the fragrance of the fresh air, the singing of the birds, the chattering of the leaves below and above to greet us who had come from afar to seek You, Lord who once revealed Your love to the Saint. I could not help turning around to take photos. I wanted to never forget this place, the highest point, both physical and spiritual, of my stay in Italy. If I could have taken the mountain and everything on it home to the States, I would. Occasionally, we made a halt, sat down on the rocks and contemplated You in silence. We were absorbed and enthralled by what nature had to offer our weary souls.

Your presence made itself overwhelmingly. We got lost in You, Lord, just like the Saint who sought and found You. We saw Br. Wolf Mountain and the cross, which are mentioned in the Franciscan stories during St. Francis' time. Silence was the way to experience the past, to live the presence, and to be hopeful for the future. We listened and took it all in. As we got closer to the mountaintop, we felt so free from all that had held us back. Finally, we met up at the highest cliff from which we could see Mount Etna. We sat down in silence. Unlike before, we were together but did not feel the need to talk. We seemed to respect one another's sacred space. We



were calm and reverend in relating to one another as we experienced Your presence in each of us. Our souls became more and more happy and refreshed. You had touched each one of us in a special and unique way. We gathered for a group picture which would always remind me our unforgettable time we spent up on the holy mountain, Monte La Verna. At the time, looking around and looking down, I felt as if I wanted to throw my passport down the cliff. Argus and Amita agreed, but the director told us it was not a good joke. It would be quite a hassle for him to try to get us back to the US.

We talked like the disciples who did not hasten to go back down Mt. Tabor! But You knew the secret of the heart, Lord. You knew we would not last long here for we were not given the same grace to be like the Saint whom You dearly loved. May our desire to seek You in this desolate place, even just for a few hours, please You, Lord. And may the extraordinary experience help bring us ever closer to You in spirit and mind. Amen.

Sadly, we had to say good-bye and descend from the holy place. Something had touched my soul so deeply that my heart throbbed with profound sadness. Like my dear Saint, I did not want to go back down to the world. I had no choice for I was still a prisoner of my own world. Hastily, I walked fast and was ahead of everyone. I did not want to show my tears. Argus sensed my dismayed spirit so he tried to catch up to me. He knew You had awakened my heart in its inner recesses. The brother reached out for my hand to console me. He must have asked how I was doing. Now I do not recall what I responded. I just sobbed as we walked together the remainder of the journey down. Once everyone finally caught up, we had a picnic in the warm sun and walked around the open area at the foot of the Mountain before driving back to Tuscany. We dropped Argus and



Amita off. Patty came and stayed with us for the night. The next day, when Wes shared with his friends about our rather interesting trip, a friend told him that wolves had been spotted on the mountains where we stayed! Thanks be to You, Lord for keeping us safe in the wild. It would have been messy if we encountered the beasts and were attacked by them! The remaining days in Siena were tough for me. Alone, I walked around town as a lost soul. I did not seem to care much about anything though I was in the midst of people who were happy going about their daily life. Even the Italian friends noticed the difference in me. Being a bit mischievous, they asked whether I had a mystical experience as San Francesco did! There was something to that remark which only You knew, dear Lord! Already an introvert, I became much more quiet and distanced myself from the world. Finally, I was happy to go back to the States.

The dawn of my conversion

While in Siena in 1995, I heard about the Oklahoma bombing which killed many innocent lives, especially children. How sad it was that many must suffer because of the hatred of one man, Timothy McVeigh. “What can I do to help bring peace, hope, healing and happiness to the world for up to now I have done nothing with what had been given to me so generously?” You gave me the answer, dear Lord, for You knew there was no other way. I decided not to go to graduate school for architecture, but rather to become an artist of sacred art. During all the months that I was wandering, lost and alone, sacred images and stories behind them which I encountered in museums and churches had been accomplishing great things in me. You knew it was time. You brought Argus into my life to help open my heart to Your sacred love. Abba told me that may be I was attracted to Argus. I took what Abba said seriously. So I pondered and thought about it. I told Abba I was not attracted to Argus because of his physical appearance. I even asked myself if I would ever think that I would want to marry him? The answer was clear, “No”. So both Abba and I agreed that my attraction to him was something different than erotic love. What made me feel appealed to him was his love for You. On the surface, truly we did not spend much time together, but every time we did, You took us to a depth where You were always the center of our conversation. Even when we traveled together for two days, we did say anything or do anything unchastely. A couple years after coming to the Abbey and having had Abba as the spiritual director, I got to know an observer. After his time was over, who said good bye and suggested that he would travel with me to Vietnam when I told him I may go visit my sister. Of course I told Abba everything. Abba was not amused even though the man was just saying it. He told me I was too naïve, I now looking back. I sure was! Everything that I was exposed to and influenced by, led to that utterly sacrificial love of Your only Beloved Son, Jesus, who wounded my heart. My heart became restless until it rested in You, as St. Augustine said. You finally revealed Yourself to me Whom I would seek after. You also entrusted me with a special gift to help me on the journey. You so filled the sacred artists of the past with your love and creative spirit that their works continue to speak majestically of Your wonder and glory. Now You made me an iconographer to be! May all that I was, am and will be, forever love and serve You faithfully, my Savior and my God. Amen.

CHAPTER IV RETURN TO GENESEO FROM SIENA, ITALY PAINTING GENESEO CRUXCIFIX

First encounter with the Holy Spirit

After college, prior to going to Italy, I lived a frivolous and worldly life which did not have much meaning. I learned everything about football and got very passionate about it. I watched every single game during the season. I would cheer for the underdog teams. Since Wes and Lynn had season tickets, I went with them to the live games a few times. Like many passionate fans, I even had Jim Kelly, a legendary Bills quarterback's autograph! Friends would be more interested in observing me watching football than seeing the game itself. Returning to Geneseo from Italy, I had very little interest in football. I wanted to throw away everything I owned. Wes and Lynn told me to wait for about a month before I did anything drastic. What was really the meaning of life?, I asked myself. How could St. Francis do it? God gave him the grace, and he literally responded to it and radically lived out the life of the Gospel. There had not been anyone like him since. Not yet a Christian, I was in no position to join anyone. Like a lost soul, day and night, I felt as if I were wasting my time. I did some egg tempera painting commissions and continued to live with Wes and Lynn without much of an ambition for the future. It would take me a long time to be able to live out my dream of being a sacred artist and survive in the world. As St. Francis felt after he got back from being a prisoner of war, I felt so lost and almost became depressed.

Argus came to visit a couple of weeks after we got back. It was consoling to see him again. Memories from Italy came back. However, he shared with us that he would get married to his girlfriend. He invited us to go to the wedding. We were happy for him. For me, it was hard because I knew once he was married, I would not want to associate with him anymore, at least not be friendly in the way we had been while we were in Italy. He would have a family to care for, and I would not want to disturb or distract him. I was very sad. I thought I had found a spiritual friend in God, but it would not be the same anymore. I tried to distance myself so no one would notice. I really did not want to go to his wedding, but You, Lord, gave me another opportunity to learn true love. Loving someone is doing what is good for the beloved as Abba taught me. It would be about Argus's happiness rather than mine. So You, Lord, gave me the courage and the grace to sit through the wedding ceremony. As hard as it was for me not to shed tears, the ceremony was a blessing, like most marriages, because You bless their lives together in Your bountiful love. Congratulations, my dear friend and brother in the Lord! I did not think I needed to go to the reception. I went home and was very upset. I cried myself to sleep. Then like my dear St. Joseph, I had a dream. Both Argus and his wife came to me asking for help. In the dream, they were very much my little brother and sister. I loved them and was most eager to help. When I woke up, everything changed. Amazingly, I perceived a profound peace in my heart, and I prayed for them both. The love I experienced before went to a higher level. It was most pure and noble just as the Gospel defines love. I felt so free and detached from any kind of passion and human emotion. I did not think about Argus anymore, for I knew You would bless him and his wife, Amita. It truly was a miracle, Lord. I felt absolutely strengthened as I experienced the divine strength in You who are LOVE.

Every day I made sure I took walks so I could see life from different angles. As usual, I went on my daily walk. It was about mid-morning. A deep desire arose from the depth of my heart as I walked on Second Street in Geneseo. How I longed to have someone who could teach me the faith and the understanding of what it was that I so much yearned after. I did not know much about You, Lord. You were far beyond my comprehension and imagination. Knowing that Argus took medieval studies courses with the three Professors, Cook, Herzman and Kennison, and

seemed to know so much about You and Your beloved Church, I wished I could learn what he knew and even more. Yet I thought it was too late. I could not go back to school to start over. Actually, I did not want to have a degree in Medieval history. I just wanted to know You and Christianity. I wanted to know the saints, their stories, and how they loved You so much that they willed to suffer and die for their faith in You. In other words, I wanted to learn and live the Catholic faith. It makes so much sense now as I see it. As an artist whose English was not my native language, it was better for me to relate to You and learn about You more affectively through sacred art rather than reading theological books with which I would not be familiar. So You put the aspiration in my heart to want to paint a life-size crucifix using the Medieval egg tempera technique as I had studied in Italy. I went to see Dr. Cook about taking a directed study course with him on the Twelve and Thirteen Century Italian Crucifixes and the Influence of St. Francis of Assisi on the Changing the Image of Christ. He was more than happy to work with me. For the requirements, I would do research and field study in Italy where I would travel to study crucifixes and explore how they influence people's life and faith. Then I would write a paper and paint a crucifix as the final project. So I began to research, read books and also contemplate what I would paint on the cross.

The Geneseo Crucifix, private study with Professor Chitti

I drew a life-size sketch. After I added the base and the cimasa (top part), the Crucifix turned out to be 11' tall. The wall in my bedroom was not high enough so I had to move the sketch to the floor and worked on my knees. The plan was to talk to my carpenter, Uncle Paul Conklin of York, to make sure a wooden crucifix could be built which I could afford. York is adjacent to the town of Piffard where the Genesee Abbey is located. Uncle Paul is a very unique and good-natured man in his own way. His wife Donna is Wes' sister. The couple were not practicing Christians. However, their hearts were as full of love as many Christians'. I liked them a lot because they are humble and quiet. They live a carefree and hidden life. When they get involved in helping with charity events, they do so because they want to help, not just to have fun, to be praised or to be in the newspaper. Uncle Paul is somewhat like me, an artist who loves creating for the sake of art. He is not a good business man but rather a perfectionist. He does not like to be pushed around. When he agrees to do something it is because he likes it and not because he needs money. Aunt Donna worked as a nurse, and since they live quite simply, he does not need to work to earn a living. He takes care of everything in and around the house. Besides, he loves and respects nature like the dear St. Francis. He would go camping and hiking on top of



mountains and in the woods, sometimes just by himself. He is also an honest man. Once he worked on the Herzman's house, and when he got paid, he complained it was too much because he watched TV as he worked. The joke in town is that if there were a hurricane, Paul Conklin's toilets would be the ones that survived. Anyhow, after hearing my plan, Uncle Paul was up to the challenge. That in itself is a grace from You, dear Lord! I thank You.

As I continued to work on the sketch, I applied for an art grant from the New York State Council on the Arts called the Special Opportunity Stipend to help with the traveling costs and purchasing art supplies. It was about \$500.00. I managed to provide the rest. Since Wes was still working for the Buffalo/Geneseo overseas study in Siena, I stayed and