

St. Francis of Assisi

How he impacted my life



BY ANGELA ALIOTO

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When Father Patrick Summerhays, vicar general and moderator of the Curia in the San Francisco Archdiocese, asked me to write a short essay about how St. Francis has influenced my life, I thought, “influenced my life?” He is my best friend forever, and has been ever since I first visited Assisi as a spoiled 15-year-old only daughter with five brothers and a Sicilian father and mother.

Since that incredible day as a kid 50 years ago, I’ve walked in the footsteps of Francesco. I have done some over-the-top crazy things like jumping over the rails at his monasteries so I could lie on slick marble that was Francesco’s bed. For hours, I would talk with him, a bit of a fanatic, a joyful one.

From the little things like visiting the trees in Bevagna where he spoke to the birds, to praying/talking to Francesco for hours in front of his tomb, my heart is filled with his special joy. A few years ago, when I was struck with pounding headaches that required surgery, I went to visit his tomb intending to argue with him angrily about my injury. To my surprise, instead, I held tight onto the wrought iron that surrounds his tomb and wept tears of joy: “Thank you, Francesco. Thank you so much for all the years of my life spent in joy because of you. As a Franciscan, you gave that to me, and I am so grateful.”

And I’ve seen him give that joyfulness to so many others. In 2008, with Cardinal William Levada, I built (it took a village), the only approved “locus sanctus” of the Porziuncola Nuova in San Francisco at the National Shrine of St. Francis, identical to the one Francesco built in Assisi (Santa Maria degli Angeli).

I have seen every walk of life from the



Above, Angela Alioto in front of the Porziuncola Nuova in San Francisco at the National Shrine of St. Francis. Below, the interior of the Porziuncola Nuova matches the aesthetic and spiritual atmosphere of the Porziuncola in Italy, from the mural depicting the barrel vault, to the paintings of the flagellation of Jesus and other murals.



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poorest of the poor, to the sad and lonely, from beggars to strippers to billionaires, who come into the Porziuncola Nuova and weep and feel Francesco’s joy coming into their lives. Make friends with Francesco. He will lead you directly to our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Francesco saw the face of Jesus everywhere he looked: in the trees, the flowers, the animals, the insects and every homeless person and even in the face of his enemies: Just Jesus everywhere he looked. How great is that? Then, immediately you are loving Jesus as close to how much Francesco did. It is possible, and that love is eternal joy!

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As I write these words, I am in Assisi, hoping to bring relics and great works of art of Francesco to my city that is named after him, to celebrate both the 800th anniversary of his death and the 250th anniversary of the founding of Mission Dolores by his Franciscan brothers. While looking at Francesco’s robe, spattered with blood from the stigmata, I said: “This is what San Francisco needs” – not just the words, but the physical presence of St. Francis.

As I asked the Franciscans to let me bring his relics to our beloved city I told them, “I haven’t seen a homeless person since I’ve been in Italy. We have up to 3,000 people in any given year over the past several decades sleeping on the streets of San Francisco. We need to feel St. Francis here.” Because every human soul needs hope and joy, and Francesco gives us that.

If you go into the Porziuncola Nuova at the National Shrine in San Francisco, Francesco becomes your friend, as he is mine. You will feel him. Talk to him. He changes lives. He can bring all of us in San Francisco together, the rich and the poor, the believers, the doubters and the atheists.

Where there is despair, let Francesco bring you hope. Where there is sadness, let him bring you joy. It’s that Franciscan joy that San Francisco needs now.

Pax et Amor ■