



Priestly People

SERVANTS OF THE PARACLETE

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*Celebrating the
Assumption of the
Blessed Virgin
Mary in Italy!*



I ♥
Ferragosto

Celebrating FERRAGOSTO in Italy!

An important summer break for Italians happens in the middle of August, at the time of the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary on August 15th each year.

A few days before and some days after August 15th, things tend to come to a standstill in Italy. Not every, but many businesses, stores, markets, restaurants, and bars, shut down for the “Ferragosto,” as it is called, normally when temperatures are at their worst, reaching 90 degrees Fahrenheit or more by midday.

The term “Ferragosto” dates from Imperial Roman times, and refers to the repose or death of the emperor Augustus in 18 AD. “Feriae Augusti” is its proper Latin name.

The time was also one of rest and celebration for the people after the successful completion of the harvest. In Christian times the celebrations rotated around the “falling asleep” or “dormition,” as Eastern Catholics and Orthodox call the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The emphasis in the Christian east is on the completion of Mary’s earthly sojourn, and in the west, on what occurred at that moment, namely, Mary being received, body and soul, into heaven. Both western and eastern Christians keep the solemnity on August 15th.

To this day, by mid-August, Italians in droves go to the mountains or the ocean, both handy destinations by car, train or bus. Fortunately public transportation still operates during Ferragosto, so getting around is fairly easy.

In the spirit of the season, and to escape some of the August heat of Rome, I spent six days, which included the celebration of the Assumption, at a little monastic hermitage outside of Siena in Tuscany, about three hours from Rome. Admittedly the temperatures there were not much less than in Rome, but it was a welcome break nonetheless. The four monks who lead a quiet life of prayer, work and hospitality, have operated the “Eremo della Vita Eterna” (Hermitage of Eternal Life) for the past three decades. They are canonically members of the international Order of the

Servants of the Paraclete.

They welcomed me warmly and I enjoyed sharing their chanting of the Divine Office and Holy Mass each day. All of their music is Gregorian chant, much of it with Italian words, but also with some Latin. The group of monks sings very well, accompanied by an organ for Lauds and Vespers and by a zither for the Little Hours. The Offices of Vigils and Compline are sung a cappella, that is, unaccompanied.

The monks built the organ and zither used in their chapel. These instruments are works of art in themselves. I am always amazed by handmade musical instruments. There is obviously musical, artistic and fine craftsmanship among the resident hermitage community.

The monks live in what was once a rural Tuscan parish and the site is stunning. The parish is now closed, but the monks, who have been there since 1987; welcome people from near or far to their daily Mass and Divine Office, in what used to be the parish church of San Bartolomeo (Bartholomew). People come especially on Sundays to attend Mass with the monks.

Because their place of residence is quite small, what used to be the parish house and church, and since hospitality is an important part of their work but difficult to do in their limited space, the monks are anticipating a move to a larger building, a former Franciscan monastery (usually called a convento or friary), within the coming year.

The new property is near the Adriatic coast of Italy and the town of Rimini, some hours away from where they are now, near Siena in Tuscany. Like their current Siena property, the new location is definitely a “place apart,” yet also accessible to the larger populations like San Marino and Rimini.

The former Franciscan convento is undergoing remodeling after having suffered serious roof damage during a winter storm and snowfall a few years ago. Progress is being made and the monks are hopeful about moving there within a year.

While I was at the Eremo della Vita Eterna, I was also able to visit the nearby monastery of contemplative Augustinian nuns, just a few miles from the monks. It takes forty minutes to walk or ten minutes to drive there.

The twenty nuns at the “Eremo di Lecceto,” are dedicated to prayer and work, like their Benedictine brothers and sisters around the world. The full name of their monastery is, “Monastero di Santa Maria degli Angeli,” that is, Monastery of Saint Mary of the Angels. Most often they are simply referred to as “Eremo of Lecceto,” (Hermitage of Lecceto), their locality.

Where the nuns are was originally the home of a group of hermits of Saint Augustine, beginning around the year 1228, dedicated to a life of solitude, penance and hospitality. Among their regular visitors was Saint Catherine of Siena, who lived from 1347 to 1380, and who came to consult the saintly hermits. Though only a few miles away in Siena, Saint Catherine had to make a fairly arduous journey to arrive at the remote and hilly location that the hermits occupied in the forest.

Those first Augustinian hermits whom Saint Catherine visited originally dwelt in caves in the rocky forest, but eventually built a church and other buildings needed for a regular monastic life. Those buildings are what the present nuns occupy.

Sixteen hermit monks of Saint Augustine were driven out of Lecceto by the Emperor Napoleon in 1808, leaving their monastery abandoned. A few years later, in 1816, the former monastery became the summer residence of the diocesan seminary of Siena. In those days seminarians didn't go to parishes or their homes during the summers, but remained at the seminary throughout their years of formation. They did get a break, but together, each summer at Lecceto. The summer residence idea lasted until 1940.

The monastery at Lecceto was then largely abandoned, with animals eventually occupying the church and cloister. Providentially, Augustinian nuns of Siena, seeking to relocate, arrived to take up their monastic life in the historic, beautiful, but very dilapidated Eremo of Lecceto.

Ten nuns came in 1972 and slowly worked to restore the ancient monastery and continue to this day with quite a few younger members, including their recently elected Abbess.

This Order of nuns also has two monasteries in the city of Rome, one near the Coliseum and one near the basilica of Saint Mary Major. They are known for good liturgy and chanting of the Divine Office and Holy Mass, which the public is welcome to attend. At Lecceto the Augustinians have a guesthouse for private and group retreats.

The Lecceto nuns made a foundation, that is, a new monastery, in 2009, at Rossano, in Calabria, southern Italy. It is called, “Casa Madonna del Buon Consiglio,” in English, House of Our Lady of Good Counsel. There too the nuns live a life of prayer and hospitality.

The Rule of Saint Augustine was written in 397. All Augustine nuns and friars, as well as Dominican friars and nuns, Norbertine canons and nuns and other Orders as well, live by the Rule that also influenced Saint Benedict. Saint Augustine states at the beginning of his Rule: “The main purpose for your having come together is to live harmoniously in your house, intent upon God, with one heart and one soul” (chapter 1, number 3).

This sums up well my own short but positive “summer break” this August, at the monks of the “Eremo della Vita Eterna” and the nuns of the “Eremo di Lecceto.”

The baying of sheep, crowing of roosters and wind rustling through the Tuscan trees, which I greatly enjoyed near Siena, was a great treat and hopefully to be repeated as time permits during this assignment in Italy. Once the monks move to their new site, though farther away, I should still be able to visit on occasion. Ironically or better said, providentially, there is also a monastery of Augustine nuns very close to where the monks are moving.

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