

A Guide for AT's Contemplative Journey in Italy

Introduction to this Guide

Italy has a lot to teach us. In her history, we find the viciousness and self-centeredness of the ego; we find transformation, and we find enlightenment. What you find in Italy depends on you. It depends on what you bring to each experience that you have while we are in Italy.

This guide is written to help you have a contemplative journey through Italy, one that enhances your current spiritual understanding and way of seeing, inspires deeper practice, and motivates you to live from reality rather than imaginings.

What is reality? Can you live from reality while having the experience of being a human in this world?

You can find the answers to those questions on this trip, if you look for them.

“Seek, and you will find.
Knock, and the door will be opened.”
~ Jesus

This guide is set up to coincide with our planned itinerary *beginning on Day 2*. It includes material to read before you visit a specific location, as well as material to contemplate while there. You will also find questions to contemplate at the end of each day to help you pull clarity from all of the places we visited into a cohesive contemplation.

You might want to read through the “Before” material while on the plane en route to Italy, or you might want to read the “Before” material each day just prior to visiting specific locations. You also might want to journal about inspiration and insights that come to you throughout the day or while contemplating the questions at the end of the day. Ultimately, how you use this guide and how you experience Italy is completely up to you.

Understanding the Color Coding in this Guide:

“Before” material appears in black font. That’s the material you want to read before arriving at a designated site.

Material to contemplate “While There” is in blue font.

A red border separates the material related to one site we will visit from the material related to the next site.

The questions at the end of each day are in green.

Day 2, Oct 21

THE ROMAN COLOSSEUM

Before Arriving:

The Colosseum was commissioned around A.D. 70-72 by Emperor Vespasian of the Flavian dynasty as a gift to the Roman people. In A.D. 80, Vespasian's son, Titus, opened the Colosseum—officially known as the Flavian Amphitheater—with 100 days of games, including gladiatorial combats and wild animal fights.

Inside, the Colosseum had seating for more than 50,000 spectators, who may have been arranged according to social ranking. Average spectators were most likely packed in like sardines in a can. Awnings unfurled from the top story in order to protect the audience from the hot Roman sun as they watched gladiatorial combats, hunts, wild animal fights and larger combats such as mock naval engagements, for which the arena was flooded with water. The vast majority of the combatants who fought in front of Colosseum audiences were men, although there were some female gladiators. Gladiators were generally slaves, condemned criminals or prisoners of war.

The Colosseum is an excellent symbol of the ego. As you can imagine, the upper class patrons who had the best seats in the Colosseum did not see sameness between them and those who were forced to fight to the death in the Colosseum for their entertainment. If they had seen the enslaved gladiators in the same way they saw themselves, they couldn't have enjoyed the competition. They had to see the gladiators as less valuable (or more likely, as having no value at all).

Seeing differences—seeing me and them, or me and not me—is the ego.

A Course in Miracles, Chapter 11.V, The Dynamics of the Ego says:

No one can escape from illusions unless he looks at them, for not looking is the way they are protected. There is no need to shrink

from illusions, for they cannot be dangerous. We are ready to look more closely at the ego's thought system because together we have the lamp that will dispel it, and since you realize you do not want it, you must be ready. Let us be very calm in doing this, for we are merely looking honestly for truth. ... We will undo this error quietly together, and then look beyond it to truth.

While There: Excerpts from ACIM, The Dynamics of the Ego

Clarity undoes confusion by definition, and to look upon darkness through light must dispel it.

The ego's goal is quite explicitly ego autonomy. From the beginning, then, its purpose is to be separate, sufficient unto itself and independent of any power except its own. This is why it is the symbol of separation.

The ego always attacks on behalf of separation. It is much more vigilant than you are, because it is perfectly certain of its purpose.

The ego believes that to accomplish its goal is happiness. But it is given you to know that God's function is yours, and happiness cannot be found apart from Your joint Will.

The ego believes that power, understanding and truth lie in separation, and to establish this belief it must attack.

Do not underestimate the appeal of the ego's demonstrations to those who would listen.

Would you remember the Father? Accept His Son and you will remember Him. ... Accept what God does not deny, and it will demonstrate its truth.

BLESSING WITH POPE FRANCIS

Before Arriving:

Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on December 17, 1936, Jorge Mario Bergoglio became Pope Francis on March 13, 2013, when he was named the 266th pope of the Roman Catholic Church. Bergoglio, the first pope from the Americas, took his papal title after St. Francis of Assisi of Italy. Named Person of the Year by Time magazine in 2013, Pope Francis has embarked on a tenure characterized by humility and outspoken support of the world's poor and marginalized people, and has been involved actively in areas of political diplomacy and environmental advocacy.

The tone of his papacy, which has become admired globally, was established long before his elevation to the church's highest position; however, when he was named to that post, the media quickly picked up on stories of his humility. News circulated about the fact that he returned to the boarding house where he had been staying to pay his bill personally, rather than send an assistant, and that he would choose to live in a simple two-room apartment rather than the luxurious papal accommodations in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace. In choosing to live more simply, Pope Francis broke a tradition that had been upheld by popes for more than a century.

It was not long after assuming the papacy that Pope Francis began offering more nuanced views and interpretations on key social issues about which the church holds pronounced and different doctrinal views. For example, Pope Francis said "Who am I to judge?", while referring to homosexuality. Pope Francis is seen as compassionate and progressive compared to previous popes.

Pope Francis has proven to be progressive on scientific issues too. He told the members of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences that he supported the Big Bang theory and evolution. He said, "The Big Bang, which today we hold to be the origin of the world, does not contradict the intervention of the divine creator but, rather, requires it." He also said that evolution "is not inconsistent with the notion of creation."

After expressing support of public breastfeeding, the pope demonstrated his support at a large religious ceremony. Noting how one baby crying would spark others to follow suit, he said that if the babies in attendance were "starting a concert" of crying because they were hungry, then mothers should feel free to feed them right there as part of the "language of love."

While There: Quotes by Pope Francis

“The question of truth is really a question of memory, deep memory, for it deals with something prior to ourselves and can succeed in uniting us in a way that transcends our petty and limited individual consciousness. It is a question about the origin of all that is, in whose light we can glimpse the goal and thus the meaning of our common path.”

“This is the struggle of every person: be free or be a slave.”

“Truth is a relationship. As such, each one of us receives the truth and expresses it from within, that is to say, according to one's own circumstances, culture, and situation in life.”

“Let us try asking ourselves: Am I open to the action of the Holy Spirit? Do I pray to him to give me illumination, to make me more sensitive to God's things? This is a prayer we must pray every day: “Holy Spirit, make my heart open to the word of God, make my heart open to goodness, make my heart open to the beauty of God every day.”

“There is a celebrated saying by the French writer Léon Bloy, who in the last moments of his life said, ‘The only real sadness in life is not becoming a saint.’ Let us not lose the hope of holiness; let us follow this path.”

BASILICA OF SANTA MARIA MAGGIORE

Before Arriving:

Tradition has it that the Virgin Mary herself inspired the choice of the Esquiline Hill for the church's construction. Appearing in a dream to both the Patrician John and Pope Liberius, she asked that a church be built in her honor on a site she would miraculously indicate.

The morning of August 5th, the Esquiline Hill was covered with a blanket of snow. The pope traced out the perimeter of the basilica in the snow, and John financed the construction of the new church.

Virginity and snow are both symbols of innocence, but what is innocence?

While There: An Experiential Contemplation of Innocence from a talk given by Adyashanti

When you listen innocently, you'll see that there really is something more here than a me.

When your image of the me takes a break, you'll find all you are doing at that moment is just being open. You feel yourself just being in a very relaxed, easy sense of peace. You haven't gained anything at all—you're not smarter, you don't necessarily know more than anyone else, and you haven't suddenly become holy.

The me is clumsy. As my mother used to say, "You're like a bull in a china shop." When your me is operating, it's like that bull. It tends to make a lot of noise because it's always in a slightly adversarial relationship with the moment. It produces noisy thoughts, feelings, beliefs, or opinions.

Inside, there is something that is not creating nearly as much noise as the me. You can get the sense of it now. What does it feel like to simply be awake? Whether you think you are awake or not doesn't matter—don't worry about that for now. What does the awakensess itself feel like? Just with a willingness to open, you can start to feel it.

Allow yourself to get a real taste of this. It's in a different relationship with the moment; it's not going anywhere. Have you

noticed? It's not trying to achieve something else. It's not perceiving from the past—not from the last moment, much less from the accumulation of a lifetime. It's perceiving only in this moment.

It has a profoundly innocent but wise relationship to everything. It is something primary, awake, and alive. You can sense how incredibly precious it is. When you look right into it, there is nothing there.

Awakeness is inherent in all things and all beings everywhere, all the time. This awakeness relates to every moment from innocence, from absolute honesty, from a state where you feel absolutely authentic. You find that simply walking outside and seeing a leaf in the breeze or seeing a street person on the corner is the most exquisite of experiences. You don't need anything big; each moment has a beauty all its own.

BASILICA OF ST. JOHN LATERAN

Before Arriving:

The Basilica of St. John Lateran is the oldest church in Europe. It was founded in the fourth century when Emperor Constantine gave the building to the Bishop of Rome, who converted it to a chapel to honor John the Baptist and the Apostle John.

About John the Baptist:

John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin. He preceded Jesus as a teacher. Jesus respected John's teachings and went to John to be baptized in the Jordan River. Some of Jesus' early disciples were John's disciples before meeting Jesus.

John taught the value of charity and personal integrity. He did not believe that one person was better than another regardless of his/her nationality or station in life. He encouraged every person to treat all people as equals.

About the Apostle John:

The Apostle John wrote down some of Jesus' most enlightened teachings, including this conversation with an open-minded Pharisee (a leader of a prominent Jewish sect) name Nicodemus:

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." ~ John 3:1-8

While There: Quotes from Jesus as recorded by the Apostle John

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful." ~ John 15:1,2

"Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ~ John 12:23-25

“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” ~ John 15:13

“Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am! ~ John 8:58

Day 2 - Questions for Contemplation

1. Pope Francis referred to a saying by Léon Bloy, which said, “The only real sadness in life is not becoming a saint.”

In the Book of John, Jesus said, “Anyone who loves their life will lose it.”

What do these two statements point to?

2. Today we visited the Roman Colosseum as a symbol of the ego, and we visited the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore as a symbol of innocence. Adyashanti referred to “the me” (ego) as a bull in a china shop, and he referred to awakeness as innocent, wise and alive.

Consider the ego and awakeness (or clarity) as you’ve experienced them. How would you describe the *feel* of each based on your direct experience?

3. After completing #2, look again at the statement by Léon Bloy in #1 above. Why is not becoming a saint “the only real sadness in life?”

Day 3, Oct 22

ST. PETER'S BASILICA

Before Arriving:

The apostle Peter was one of the early followers of Jesus. His given name was Simon. Jesus is the one who first called him "Petra," which means rock.

Here is the story of how Peter met Jesus, as the story is told in the Book of Luke in the Bible.

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

When NTI interprets this story in the New Testament, it says:

Things are not as they seem. This is why I ask you to trust Me and follow Me. I know how things are. You are blind to these facts, for you only know what you think you know, and that is nothing but a deep and burdensome slumber.

Step away from what you know, and come with Me. I will show you what you don't know. I will show you what you don't think is possible and prove to you that it is true.

Leave what you know. Be willing to put it completely behind you, and follow Me. What you know limits you and holds you back through your own willingness to know it. Cast what you know away from you, and I will help you to pull in a net full of what you did not believe was possible.

When Peter saw the big catch in the boat that day, he fell at Jesus knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord. I am a sinful man." "Sinner" can be interpreted as fully identified with ego. Yet, Peter's calling was strong. In spite of himself, he became one of Jesus' disciples.

Peter is an interesting character. If we look at all of the gospels, including those that did not make it into the New Testament, we find that Peter had human faults. He could be boisterous, angry, jealous, and he often experienced great resistance to truth. Yet, Peter was deeply willing, and that is what Jesus saw in him. Jesus called Peter the rock on which he would build his church.

NTI says, "You are Peter." That means that although you have human faults, and sometimes you resist spiritual practice or teachings that point to truth, *you* are the rock on which humanity's awakening is built.

While There: Quotes from NTI 1 Peter

The time has come to release misperception, which does not point to truth, and accept gladly the knowledge of the Heart.

In truth you can rid yourself of nothing, for there is nothing to be rid of. You are pure and perfect and in communication now. Nothing has ever failed or gone wrong. It is perfect, as you are.

If something seems to have gone wrong or seems to be less than perfect, you are seeing through a veil of misperception. It is only this veil that must be lifted, so you can see that it is all perfect, and it has always been.

The world is a reflection of your mind. By seeing what you see in the world and by noticing and acknowledging your feelings about what you see, you find the misperceptions that are blinding you to your Self.

Always keep your true desire close in your mind. When you see a misperception and feel the confusion or guilt or fear that it seems to bring, drop to your knees *in symbol* of returning to the desire of the Heart. Quiet the mind *in willingness* to let the whispers of misperception go. Ask what it is that you truly want, and return your mind willingly to its Source.

God will come upon you in your willingness to see nothing else.

CATACOMBS OF ST SEBASTIAN

Before Arriving:

The Catacombs of St Sebastian are best known as a place where early Christians venerated the apostles Peter and Paul and as the place where a martyr named St. Sebastian was buried. However, we visit the catacombs because of another man known as St. Philip Neri (1515-1595).

“St. Philip Neri was a man of the common people. He taught people to trust their intuition and to follow their heart’s guidance in finding God. Philip was known for his big heart and sense of humor, attracting souls through his loving and accepting personality...

His spiritual life began around age 18. “Prospects for a successful career led Philip to move at age eighteen to live with his wealthy uncle. Living near the Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino, Philip began spending more and more time in prayer and contemplation,

often going into quiet seclusion amongst the rock crags that characterize the area. It is here that he experienced a “conversion” and decided to leave the prospect of wealth for a spiritual life in Rome. ...

“His first four years were spent in rigorous study of philosophy and theology while earning a living by tutoring two young boys. This he did in exchange for a meager amount of corn and residence in a small room. After much prayer, Philip decided to put an end to his studying in order to give himself more completely to God. He began to preach in a very unobtrusive way, engaging people in conversation and gently adding comments about moral behavior and righteous living. He became known for his hearty sense of humor and his acceptance of everyone. ...

“At night, he would spend his time in prayer, making the rounds of the holy churches of Rome, especially the seven Basilicas. He most relished going to pray at the Basilica of San Sebastiano, where he would go down into the catacombs and enter into silent communion with God. It was here that Philip had a transformative encounter with the Holy Spirit. While praying, a globe of fire entered his mouth and heart, and he experienced such an intense heat that he threw himself to the floor and bared his chest to cool down. When he stood up, he felt a swelling around his heart and his body shook with an overwhelming joy. For the remainder of his life, he would feel this intense heat in his throat and heart, and his heart would undergo palpitations so strong, that people could feel them transmitted throughout an entire room. ...

“Philip encouraged everyone to take communion daily, even though this was an uncommon practice at the time. He reveled in the joy he found in the Mass and was often overcome with the devotion during his services, so much so, that he occasionally asked his [spiritual] brothers to read silly books to him prior to starting Mass. This enabled him to focus on the task at hand and not get lost in his ecstasies.” ~ Excerpts from *The Pilgrim's Italy: A Travel Guide to the Saints* by James & Colleen Heater

For contemplation while visiting the Catacombs of St. Sebastian:

While There: Quotes by St. Philip Neri

He who desires anything else but God deceives himself utterly.

Let no one wear a mask; otherwise he will do ill, and if he has one let him burn it!

Do not grieve over the temptations you suffer. When the Lord intends to bestow a particular virtue on us, He often permits us first to be tempted by the opposite vice. Therefore, look upon every temptation as an invitation to grow in a particular virtue and a promise by God that you will be successful, if only you stand fast.

Certain voluntary attachments of self-love must be cut through, and then we must dig round them, and then remove the earth, till we get down deep enough to find the place they are rooted and interlaced together.

There is nothing more dangerous to the spiritual life than to wish to rule ourselves after our own way of thinking.

He who is unable to spend a long time together in prayer, should often lift up his mind to God by short prayers.

CHURCH OF DOMINE QUO VADIS

Before Arriving:

Domine, Quo Vadis is Latin for “Lord, where are you going?”

The Church of Domine Quo Vadis is said to be the place where, as Peter fled persecution in Rome, he ran across the image of Jesus walking towards Rome. He asked, “Lord, where are you going?”

The vision of Jesus responded, “To Rome, to be crucified a second time.”

Peter took this vision as guidance that he was not to flee Rome. Instead, he was to return to Rome and let the script unfold without trying to control or manipulate it as Jesus did at the end of his earthly life.

When Peter returned to Rome, he was arrested and sentenced to crucifixion by Agrippa. Agrippa was angry with Peter, because Peter taught the virtue of chastity to Agrippa's concubines, and they left Agrippa because of the teaching.

While There: Statements made by Peter just prior to his crucifixion (Source: The Apocryphal Acts of Peter)

Before going to the cross:

And now, be not angry with Agrippa, for he is a servant of the power of his father (the ego).

At the foot of the cross:

O name of the cross, hidden mystery; O unspeakable mercy, which is expressed in the name of the cross; O nature of man, which cannot be separated; O ineffable and inseparable love, which cannot be shown by impure lips; I now apprehend thee, who is standing at the end of his earthly career. I will make thee known, as thou art. I will not hide from me the mystery of the cross once closed and hidden to my soul. Ye, who hope in Christ, think not this to be a cross that is visible; for entirely different from that which is visible is this in conformity with the suffering of Christ. And now, especially since you, who can hear, can from me, who is in the last and parting hours of his life, listen: Keep your souls from everything which you can perceive with the senses; from all that seems to be and is not in reality. Close these your eyes; Shut these, your ears. ... And you shall perceive what took place with Christ and the whole mystery of your salvation.

While hanging upside down on the cross:

On this the Lord says in a mystery, “Unless ye make the right as left, and the left as right, and the top as the bottom and the front as backward, ye shall not know the Kingdom.”

Ye, my beloved, who now hear it and shall hear it, you must desist from the first error and return again.

For what else is the Christ but the Word, sound of God?

I thank thee, not with these lips which are nailed, neither with this tongue, through which comes forth truth and falsehood, also not with this wood, which is produced by the skill of earthly nature, but I thank thee, O King, with that voice which is heard through silence, which is not heard by all, which comes not through the organs of the body, which enters not into the world and sounds not upon earth, which is also not written in books, which is also not heard by the one, nor by the other, but with this, Jesus Christ, I thank thee: with the silence of the voice, which the Spirit meets within me, who loves thee, speaks with thee, and sees thee. Thou art knowable only according to the Spirit. Thou are to me, father, mother, brother, friend, servant, steward. Thou all and all in thee; and thou the existence, and there is nothing that is, besides thee.

To him, brethren, flee you also, and learn that your existence is in him alone, and you shall then obtain that of which he said to you: “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man.”

Day 3 - Questions for Contemplation

1. At the end of the Book of John, the resurrected Jesus asked Peter to “take care of my sheep.” To others who knew him, Peter may have seemed like an unlikely choice to replace Jesus as leader. Just a few weeks earlier, Peter denied Jesus three times while Jesus was on trial before Caiaphas and the other Jewish leaders.

At the end of Peter’s life, as he was being crucified upside-

down, he thanked Jesus “with the voice that is heard through silence,” and shared powerfully clear teachings.

Contemplate Peter’s transformation from reluctant apostle to a strong, clear teacher. What clarity comes to you for you?

Day 4, Oct 23

POMPEII

Before Arriving:

Pompeii was a Roman city that was destroyed suddenly when a nearby volcano, Vesuvius, erupted in AD 79. (This was around the time that Romans destroyed the Jewish temple in Jerusalem.) We will visit Pompeii in order to look “death” in the eye and see what it can teach us.

In Chapter 17 of *The Untethered Soul*, Michael Singer writes:

It is truly a great cosmic paradox that one of the best teachers in all of life turns out to be death. ... The question is, are you going to wait until that last moment to let death be your teacher? The mere possibility of death has the power to teach us at any moment. A wise person realizes that at any moment they may breathe out, and the breath may not come back in. It could happen any time, in any place, and your last breath is gone. You have to learn from this. A wise being completely and totally embraces the reality, the inevitability, and the unpredictability of death.

Take a moment to look at the things you think you need. Look at how much time and energy you put into various activities. Imagine if you knew you were going to die within a week or a month. How would you change things? How would your priorities change? How would your thoughts change? Think honestly about what you would do with your last week.

While There: Who You Really Are by Kirtana

Could there be more
to this life we call "mine"
than a journey through space
or a story line?

More to life than the body can sense

than the mind can conclude
from experience.

Does who we are begin with breath,
depend on form or end with death?

Strip away these roles, these names
and tell me what remains,
And who you really are,
who you really are.

We measure success
by the things we accrue
or the bonds that we form,
or the deeds we do.

But these too shall pass,
as hard as we try
to hold on to form;
form will die.

But inherent in this dance of form
is the chance to see what's yet unborn.

And the choice to throw this chance away,
and be caught up in the play
of who we think we are,
who we think we are.

This is your lifetime;
it could end at anytime.
Where is your attention?

Where is your prayer?
Where is your song?

In a fortunate life,
comes a call to be free
from the cycle of bondage and mis-identity.

To wake from the dream
and finally realize
the truth of one's being
before the body dies.

So before the final scene is past,
see the screen on which it's cast.

See what's seeing this me and you.
And then you will see who...

Who you really are, who you really are,
who you really are, who we really are.

Day 4 - Questions for Contemplation

1. On Sunday, we contemplated a quote by Léon Bloy, which said, "The only real sadness in life is not becoming a saint."

Yesterday we contemplated the transformation of the Apostle Peter.

Today we contemplated life and death while visiting Pompeii.

When you look at these together, is anything stirring in you? If so, what is that?

Day 5, Oct 24

MONASTERY OF ST. BENEDICT

Before Arriving:

Biographical certainties are sketchy concerning St. Benedict. What is known is that he was born in the Umbrian town of Nursia, near Spoleto, Italy, in the waning years of the Roman Empire, c. AD 480. (St. Francis of Assisi would emerge from this same region some 700 years later).

In his mid-to-late teens, accompanied by a nurse – as would have been customary for a son of the lesser nobility – he journeyed to Rome to complete his studies in rhetoric and law. However, according to our principal source, the “Dialogues” of Pope St. Gregory the Great, written ca. AD 593, he gave over “his books and, forsaking his father’s house and wealth, with his mind only to serve God, he sought for some place where he might achieve his holy purpose; and in this wisdom he departed, instructed with learned ignorance and furnished with unlearned wisdom.” Benedict thus turned his back on the world, and a life that promised a measure of success in business or government. Still with his nurse, he left Rome and joined what can only be termed a small community of like-minded seekers in a village some 40 miles away, at the foot of Mount Affile.

At Affile, Benedict’s life would have been one of prayer, silence and much study of both holy scripture and histories of church fathers, especially the writings of John Cassian. One could suppose that, had he remained there, his career in the Church would have been radically different. However, after a period of several years a miracle was unexpectedly granted him, and whether he feared that he would be venerated as a Saint, or for some other reason, he departed.

The nature of this miracle and the effect it had on others was immediate and profound, as can be seen in the account handed down by St. Gregory. Apparently, Benedict’s nurse had borrowed

an earthenware sieve and, after using it, had left it casually on a table. It was subsequently knocked off and broke in two. The nurse was devastated over her carelessness and Benedict, seeking to comfort her, picked up the shards and began to pray; by the time he rose from his knees, the object was once again whole. There was not a mark on it.

This incident caused Benedict to become so admired, (in fact, the sieve was promptly displayed in the porch of the village church), that he may have been practically forced into the next phase of his life. He left Affile, but this time he journeyed alone, making his way to the solitude of Subiaco...

It was there that Benedict lived as a hermit, prayed and emptied himself, and sanctified his person in anticipation of the spiritual entrance of God. He lived in the cave for three years, fed daily by a monk named Romanus, who would lower a loaf of bread by cord from the cliff above.

Benedict's solitude cannot have been absolute, for as time passed his reputation for sanctity grew and he seems to have gained a great local following. Indeed, he was eventually invited by another monastery to assume the office of abbot. After some urging, he reluctantly accepted, but warned that they would find his austerities too extreme for them. Sure enough, not long afterwards, in an attempt to rid themselves of their new superior, they offered him a poisoned goblet of wine. Tradition holds that it miraculously shattered as he made the Sign of the Cross over the vessel prior to raising it to his lips.

After leaving that position, Benedict returned to his solitude at Subiaco. However, so great was his renown that disciples soon began to seek him out. It did not take long before there were a total of twelve monasteries in the valley, each consisting of a superior and twelve men under the general supervision of the Saint. ...

Benedict himself went on to found Monte Cassino where, in all probability, he composed his Rule.

Benedict's life ended with an occasion of fitting tenderness. According to tradition, he had one sister, a twin, by the name of Scholastica. Although little is actually known of her life, it is thought on good authority that she, too, had from an early age consecrated herself to God. Whether her life was lived as a solitary, at home with a family or in community with other nuns is lost to us.

St Gregory tells us that Scholastica used to visit her brother once a year and their meetings would take place in an outbuilding near the gates of Monte Cassino. During their final visit, as it was drawing to a close, she expressed the desire that he not leave her so soon, that they should talk until morning "of the joys of the Heavenly life." Benedict quickly declined, insisting that he could not for any reason remain for a night outside his monastery. Upon his refusal, she is said to have joined her hands together and, putting them on the table in front of her, reclined her head over them in prayer to God. When she once again raised her head, there was immediately such a violent thunderstorm that neither Benedict nor his monks were able to venture forth. To him she said, "I asked thee and you would not listen. I asked God and he heard me." And so, as she had willed, they spent the entire night together in prayer and holy conversation. She died not many days after this meeting. Brother and sister both died about the year AD 547, and were interred in the same tomb at Monte Cassino.

St. Benedict taught that there were four kinds of spiritual seekers:

1 – Those who are part of a spiritual community, which supports them in their spiritual development and purification.

2 – Those who have matured to the point that they are ready for solitude, facing the ego alone, "ready to stand with nothing but God's help."

3 – Those who are part of a spiritual community, but do not accept the advice and counsel of the community. "The rule they follow is their own desires; they do whatever they like."

4 – The spiritual consumers “who wander from one place to another visiting a community here, a conference there, always looking for the next best thing.”

Benedict’s Rule is written for the serious spiritual aspirant in Category #1.

St. Benedict’s Rule includes “tools for good works.”

While There: Excerpts from The Rule of St. Benedict, The Tools for Good Works

In the craft of life with God, we need tools to work with. Most of all, keep this tool close at hand: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might ... and love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:37-39)

You should not live the same way other people do; for you, the love of Christ takes first place. You don’t lash out in anger or nurse a grudge against someone who’s wronged you. (No, you’ve learned a better way to deal with the trials that everyone faces.)

Don’t fool yourself. When you greet someone with the peace of Christ, mean it.

If someone curses you out, don’t strike back with your own assault of words. Find a way to bless them instead.

Don’t be addicted to your own self-image or to anything else that promises cheap fulfillment or an easy escape from problems.

Don’t spend your time complaining or talking bad about other people.

Here’s what you should do with every spare moment you have: listen to the wisdom of those who’ve gone before you and devote yourself to prayer.

In your tears resolve to leave your addictions and protective mechanisms behind.

There's no sense acting like you've achieved sainthood. Instead, work on becoming a saint in every little thing you do so your actions might one day speak for themselves.

Respect the wise and love the inexperienced (ignorant).

These are the tools of the spiritual craft that I want to pass on to you as a master carpenter passes his toolbox on to an apprentice.

MONASTERY OF ST. SCHOLASTICA

Before Arriving:

Saint Scholastica was the twin sister of Saint Benedict. Like her brother, she left the corruption of Rome to focus on a life devoted to God. Over the doorway to the monastery, her simple philosophy is stated in Latin: Pray and Work, Peace.

I could not find any quotes related to St. Scholastica. I could only find the story already quoted above about her prayer to spend the night with her brother talking about God. However, her love for God reminds me of a Sufi saint named Rabia. While we are at St. Scholastica, we will contemplate a few poems by Rabia:

While There: Poetry by Rabia

Die Before You Die

Ironic, but one of the most intimate acts
of our body is
death.

So beautiful appeared my death—
Knowing who then I would kiss,
I died a thousand times before I died.

“Die before you die,” said the Prophet
Muhammad.

Have wings that feared ever
touched the Sun?

I was born when all I once feared—
I could love.

In My Soul

In my soul
there is a temple, a shrine, a mosque, a church
where I kneel.

Prayer should bring us to an altar
where no walls or names exist.

Is there not a region of love
where the sovereignty is
illuminated nothing,
where ecstasy gets poured into itself
and becomes lost,
where the wing is fully alive
but has no mind or body?

In my soul,
there is a temple, a shrine, a mosque, a church
that dissolve,
that dissolve in God.

This Choir

So amazing this choir of
socks, shoes, shirt, skirt, undergarments,

earth, sky,
suns, and moons.

No wonder I too, now
sing all day.

Day 5 - Questions for Contemplation

Through St. Benedict, we saw the love of God manifest as discipline. Through St. Scholastica and Rabia, we saw the love of God manifest as devotion.

1. Contemplate discipline and devotion. How does the personality-mind interpret these? What does the heart (spiritual intuition) say about them?

2. What spiritual role models inspire you the most?

Do you see them as agents of discipline, devotion or both?

3. Reflect on your spiritual aspiration(s) as you consider which is more suiting for you: discipline, devotion, or both?

4. How does discipline and devotion fit or not fit with your spiritual aspiration and spiritual path?

Day 6, Oct 25

Basilica of St. Francis

Before Arriving:

St. Francis' given name was Giovanni Francesco di Bernardone. His father called him Francesco. Francis was named after France, which his father may have been enamored with. Francis' father traveled to France frequently to purchase cloth for his mercantile in Assisi.

It's said that Francis wasn't very good in school, probably due to lack of interest. He liked to hang out with his friends, go to parties and work in his father's business. As a young man, Francis went off to war, where he was captured and became a prisoner of war. Most biographies say he returned from that experience ill and disillusioned. That's when a conversion took place in him. At some point the inner conversion took such a strong hold on Francis' heart and mind that he relinquished luxury and selfishness in a very public way. He disrobed in the town square as a symbol of giving up all possessions. He took merchandise from his father's mercantile and gave it to the poor. His very embarrassed father decided to punish Francis by imprisoning him in their basement, which is where Francis stayed until one day, while his father was away on business, Francis' mother set him free.

The freed Francis ran to the countryside to the little church of San Damiano, which is where his life as a saint began. Over the next year, without any intention of doing so, Francis gained 12 disciples. They were a merry group who referred to themselves as "God's jugglers." They worked, played, sweated and laughed in the fields with the poor before preaching to them regarding how they, too, could experience joy.

Francis is credited with being one of the first saints to see God in more than the church and holy people. Francis saw God in lepers

and outcasts, ravenous wolves, fish and birds, the sun and the moon, and even in pain and death.

In 1209, Francis and 11 of his followers went to Rome to receive the pope's blessing. They officially became an Order of the Church at that time.

He retired from leadership of the Franciscan Order prior to his death. Leaving the Order in the hands of a new leader, he did not interfere with it or try to keep it as it was when it was under his guidance.

While There: Poems by St. Francis

When I Returned From Rome

A bird took flight.
And a flower in a field whistled at me
as I passed.

I drank
from a stream of clear water.
And at night,
the sky untied her hair
and I fell asleep
clutching a tress of God's.

When I returned from Rome, all said,
"Tell us the great news,"
and with great excitement I did:

"A flower in a field whistled,
and at night the sky untied her hair and
I fell asleep clutching
a sacred tress ..."

Like Roots

Our hands imbibe like roots,
so I place them on what is beautiful in this world
And I fold them in prayer,
and they draw
from heaven's light.

The Sacraments

I once spoke to my friend,
an old squirrel,
about the Sacraments—
he got so excited
and ran into a hollow in his tree
and came back holding some acorns,
an owl feather,
and a ribbon he had found.

And I just smiled and said,
“Yes, dear, you understand:
everything imparts His grace.”

Wring Out My Clothes

Such love
does the sky now pour,
that whenever I stand in a field,
I have to wring out the light
when I get home.

Day 6 - Questions for Contemplation

1. In the introduction to this guide, I asked, “What is reality? Can you live from reality while having the experience of being a human in this world?” After contemplating poems

by St. Francis today, what comes to you as answers to these initial questions?

Day 7, Oct 26

PORZIUNCOLA

Before Arriving:

When Francis' mother freed him his father's imprisonment, he ran to a church in the countryside called San Damiano. There, as he prayed before the cross hanging in that church, he heard the Voice of God. It said, "Rebuild my church." Francis took that guidance literally and began to rebuild older, damaged churches from their ruins. Stone-by-stone, this work became his meditation.

While many biographers say the first church Francis rebuilt was San Damiano, some say it was Porziuncola. Most likely, San Damiano was the first church that Francis rebuilt, but Porziuncola was the first church *officially given to him* by the Catholic Church for restoration after the Franciscans became an Order of the Church.

Francis loved Porziuncola and spent a lot of time there. He died behind Porziuncola on October 3, 1226. The Chapel of the Transitus now marks the spot where he died.

While There: Quotes by St. Francis of Assisi

No one lives outside the walls of this sacred place, existence.

You joined our community at birth. With your Father being who He is, what do the world's scales know of your precious value? The priest and the prostitute—they weigh the same before the Son's immaculate being, but who can bear that truth and freedom?

It was easy to love God in all that was beautiful. The lessons of deeper knowledge, though, instructed me to embrace God in all things.

The holy water my soul's brow needs is unity. Love opened my eyes and I was cleansed by the purity of each form.

Our love honors God. That sounds as if it could be true, but surely *everything* He made must be perfect.

If all the tenderness in this world could reflect from my eyes, would you accept that love? If all the forgiveness the heavens have known could be offered from one face, would you accept that divine pardon?

Joy is the greatest cleanser, and it is the greatest testimony to our faith.

EREMO DELLE CARCERI

Before Arriving:

Also known as the Carceri Hermitage, there are many caves here where Francis and his followers used to retreat for solitude, prayer and meditation.

Francis and his followers lived foremost according to the following scriptures, which they took literally with reasonable right-minded interpretation. For example, they did not “hate” father and mother and other relatives, but they did fully relinquish those attachments as part of their identity. This enabled them to go to God in prayer without identity, which made them fully available to God without any attachments that would block or hinder them.

If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me. (Matthew, 19:21)

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. (Luke 9:23)

Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26)

And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. (Matthew 19:29)

In fact, the original rule written by Francis says:

The brothers should always be careful that, no matter where they are, whether in a hermitage or any other place, not to appropriate any place as their own, or even to possess it instead of another. And whoever may come to them, either friend or foe, even thief or robber, they should receive all with kindness.

While There: An Excerpt from St. Francis Interpretation of the Lord's Prayer

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven: So that we may love you with our whole heart by always thinking of you; directing our whole intention with our whole mind toward you and seeking your glory in everything; spending all our powers and affections of soul and body with all our strength in the service of your love alone. May we also love our neighbors as ourselves, encouraging them to love you as best we can, rejoicing at the good fortune of others, just as if it were our own, and sympathizing with their misfortunes, giving offence to now one.

SAN DAMIANO

Before Arriving:

When Francis' mother freed him his father's imprisonment, he ran to this deserted church. Here, as he prayed before the cross

hanging in the church, he heard the God's Voice say, "Rebuild my church."

In loving and joyous obedience, Francis began to rebuild San Damiano. As he worked in solitude, and without any intention on his part, he attracted followers who joined him in the work. Later, Francis gave the church to Clare. She lived here with the sisters who were attracted to her Order.

While There: Francis' Prayer Before the Cross at San Damiano

Most High,
Most glorious God,
Enlighten the darkness of my heart.
Grant me a right and true faith,
A certain hope, and
A perfect charity, feeling and understanding
Of You,
So that I may be able to accomplish
Your holy and just commands.
Amen.

Basilica di Santa Chiara

Before Arriving:

Clare was born in Assisi, Italy, in 1193 to wealthy parents, and was taught to read and write as well as spin yarn and do needlework. She had little interest in her luxurious surroundings, although she lived in a palace. Clare was influenced by her mother's religious devotion, and she dedicated her life to God at an early age. She also showed early on that her calling would involve helping the poor, as she set aside food from her family table to give to the needy on the streets.

When Clare was 18, Francis of Assisi came to preach in her family church of San Giorgio. Inspired by his words, Clare asked Francis to help her dedicate her life to God, and he vowed to do so. The following

year, Clare's parents chose a wealthy young man for Clare to marry, but she pointedly refused, fleeing soon after for the Porziuncola Chapel, where Francis received her. She took vows dedicating her life to God.

Clare's sister Agnes soon joined her, and they moved to the Church of San Damiano. It wasn't long before other women joined them, and San Damiano's residents, known for their ascetic lifestyle, became known as the "Poor Ladies." After Clare's death, they were renamed the Order of St. Clare. The order became known for its committed life of prayer and poverty.

Clare cared for Francis toward the end of his life and was with him when he died in 1226. Afterward, despite ill health, Clare continued to promote the growth of her order until her death in 1253. In August 1255, Pope Alexander IV canonized Clare, and today the Order of St. Clare numbers more than 20,000 sisters worldwide, with more than 70 countries represented.

While There: Quotes by St. Clare of Assisi

We become what we love and who we love shapes what we become. If we love things, we become a thing. If we love nothing, we become nothing.

Do not be disturbed by the clamor of the world, which passes like a shadow. Do not let false delights of a deceptive world deceive you.

Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! And transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation.

Never forget that the way which leads to heaven is narrow; that the gate leading to life is narrow and low; that there are but few who find it and enter by it; and if there be some who go in and tread the narrow path for some time, there are but very few who persevere therein.

Day 7 - Questions for Contemplation

1. St. Francis said, "It was easy to love God in all that was beautiful. The lessons of deeper knowledge, though, instructed me to embrace God in all things." He also said, "Love opened my eyes and I was cleansed by the purity of each form."

Contemplate these two statements together. What comes to you through this contemplation?

2. On Day 5, we saw that St. Benedict defined four types of spiritual seekers, two of which were serious and two of which were not serious. St. Clare said, "Never forget that the way which leads to heaven is narrow; that the gate leading to life is narrow and low; that there are but few who find it and enter by it; and if there be some who go in and tread the narrow path for some time, there are but very few who persevere therein."

Contemplate Clare's statement.

Day 8 and Beyond

Some of you are starting home today. Some of you will stay in Assisi. Whichever direction you are going in, you can maintain the power from your contemplative journey by reviewing these key quotes from the trip:

1. The ego believes that to accomplish its goal is happiness. But it is given you to know that God's function is yours, and happiness cannot be found apart from Your joint Will. ~ A Course in Miracles
2. The question of truth is really a question of memory, deep memory, for it deals with something prior to ourselves and can succeed in uniting us in a way that transcends our petty and limited individual consciousness. It is a question about the origin of all that is, in whose light we can glimpse the goal and thus the meaning of our common path. ~ Pope Francis
3. The me is clumsy. As my mother used to say, “You’re like a bull in a china shop.” When your me is operating, it’s like that bull. It tends to make a lot of noise because it’s always in a slightly adversarial relationship with the moment. It produces noisy thoughts, feelings, beliefs, or opinions.

Inside, there is something that is not creating nearly as much noise as the me. You can get the sense of it now. What does it feel like to simply be awake? Whether you think you are awake or not doesn’t matter—don’t worry about that for now. What does the awakeness itself feel like? Just with a willingness to open, you can start to feel it. ~ Adyashanti

4. “Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am! ~ John 8:58
5. If something seems to have gone wrong or seems to be less than perfect, you are seeing through a veil of misperception. It is only this veil that must be lifted, so you can see that it is all perfect, and it has always been. ~ NTI 1 Peter

6. He who desires anything else but God deceives himself utterly. ~ St. Philip of Neri
7. Keep your souls from everything that you can perceive with the senses; from all that seems to be and is not in reality. Close these your eyes; Shut these, your ears. ... And you shall perceive what took place with Christ and the whole mystery of your salvation. ~ St. Peter
8. We measure success by the things we accrue or the bonds that we form, or the deeds we do. But these too shall pass, as hard as we try to hold on to form; form will die. But inherent in this dance of form is the chance to see what's yet unborn. And the choice to throw this chance away, and be caught up in the play of who we think we are, who we think we are.

This is your lifetime; it could end at anytime. Where is your attention? ~ Kirtana
9. Don't be addicted to your own self-image or to anything else that promises cheap fulfillment or an easy escape from problems. ~ St Benedict
10. In my soul there is a temple, a shrine, a mosque, a church where I kneel. Prayer should bring us to an altar where no walls or names exist. ~ Rabia (Sufi saint)
11. Our hands imbibe like roots, so I place them on what is beautiful in this world. And I fold them in prayer, and they draw from heaven's light. ~ St. Francis
12. Such love does the sky now pour, that whenever I stand in a field, I have to wring out the light when I get home. ~ St. Francis
13. No one lives outside the walls of this sacred place, existence. ~ St. Francis

14. *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven:* So that we may love you with our whole heart by always thinking of you; directing our whole intention with our whole mind toward you and seeking your glory in everything; spending all our powers and affections of soul and body with all our strength in the service of your love alone. ~ St. Francis
15. Most High, Most glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart. Grant me a right and true faith, a certain hope, and a perfect charity, feeling and understanding of You. ~ St. Francis
16. Place your mind before the mirror of eternity! Place your soul in the brilliance of glory! And transform your entire being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation. ~ St. Clare
17. So amazing this choir of socks, shoes, shirt, skirt, undergarments, earth, sky, suns, and moons. No wonder I too, now sing all day. ~ Rabia (Sufi saint)
18. The only real sadness in life is not becoming a saint. ~ Said by French writer, Léon Bloy, in the last moments of his life.