

Leprosaria

The chapels of San Rufino d'Arce and La Maddalena are all that remain of the six leprosaria that existed outside Assisi in the valley. Both Francis and Clare ministered to the leper outcasts at this site. These chapels lie at an intersecting point between Rivo Torto, the Porziuncola, and San Damiano. Each place is about 1 mile from the leprosaria. Note, until the institutional church forced Clare into a cloistered life, she and the sisters came every day to minister to the lepers.

San Rufino d'Arce was the chapel for the men.

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This is a very small chapel. I am standing at the back wall taking this picture. It is maybe 16 feet long. San Rufino d'Arce is named for "little Rufie" whose crypt you saw in the Cathedral of San Rufino.

New candidates to the Franciscan way of life began their formation process by living with and ministering to the lepers.

The mayor of the town of Assisi had to go house to house once a year and ferret out anyone hiding with the disease; much like the Nazi's did with the Jews. The new cases were presented to the bishop. There was a formal church liturgy, similar to an investiture for religious life. The lepers were given a special dress "habit". They were given a cup and were instructed that they could not drink from any river or well used by ordinary people. They were given gloves for their hands and instructed that they could never touch anything used by other people with their hands. They were given a beggar bowl and a clapper to alert people they were coming. They could not travel on any street that was not wide enough to allow others to pass without possibly touching them. They could not live with anybody unless they were related. Then the bishop poured ashes on their heads. Then the lepers were processed out of town to the leprosarium led by the cross, the bishop and clergy, the lepers and followed by towns people and relatives.

La Maddalena was the women's chapel. It was formerly called San Lazzaro d'Arce.



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This was visited by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007.



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Francis, Clare, and the early companions reshaped their understanding of penitential life, of poverty, and of fraternity by living and working with the lepers. They followed Jesus literally by “washing their feet”.

Conversion begins when we take ourselves where we do not want to go—with the despised and the outcast. It is lived out in our compassionate and merciful presence among them.

Who are the lepers in your personal life, your living situation, your neighborhood, the world?

Have you experienced a moment when that which was most bitter to you became sweetness, joy and peace?

How have you been “initiated” on your spiritual journey by contact with those who are poor or alienated?

What opportunities do you take to serve others by “washing their feet,” doing all in memory of Jesus?