# We are Sleeping Under Strange Skies:

# The Feast of the Portiuncula David B. Couturier, OFM. PhD, DMin.

I

n 1971, the Rolling Stones released their song, *A Moonlight Mile*, which speaks of dreams, hopes and home. Let me quote a few words:

*I'm sleeping under strange strange skies*

*Just another mad mad day on the road*

*My dream is fading down the railway line*

*I'm hiding sister (But) I'm coming home*

*I'm just about a moonlight mile on down the road*.

As I thought about this feast of the Portinuncula, I imagined Francis of Assisi on the road, as he was so often, trying to sleep under strange, strange skies, and wanting only to come home to the one place on earth that he cherished more than any other – the little church of Our Lady of the Angels, in the valley 2.5 miles below the town of Assisi.

He loved that spot. As he tried to come out of his emotional and spiritual breakdown after his horrible experience of war, Francis found this spot. It was just a broken down church, in muddy fields, deep in the forest of large oak trees. It needed help. It begged for repair.

Francis spent months rebuilding this long ignored space, stone by stone. It was the mirror image of the project of his own life as a twenty-something trying to make sense of an adolescence wasted in greed and violence, beholden to an apocalyptic God of threatening judgement and angry retaliation. In this spot, Francis wasn’t just rebuilding a church; he was reconstructing his life. He wasn’t just renovating a sanctuary; he was repairing his soul.

This little chapel used to welcome pilgrims searching for God, but that was a long time ago. Now, it was as empty and as vacuous as Francis had come to see his family life and church experience, when he stood naked in the public square and handed back to his father all his clothes and everything of the past.

Francis wanted to fill this empty place with the abundance of God that he was beginning to feel in fraternity with the stars and the planets on a moonlight night. He wanted to replace the silence of this hollowed-out portion with the symphony of praise he was already beginning to hear from the doves, crows and nightingales that preached to him.

And the Portinuncula became his sacred space beyond loneliness and emptiness. Once he had only stones and dreams. But now, he had fraternity – with brothers, with sisters, with lepers, with the birds of the air and all creation. It was here that he found the “peace that passes all understanding.” It was here that he welcomed Clare, cut her hair and clothed her in the new abundance of God. It was here where 5000 brothers gathered to plan their new life of economic and spiritual freedom. It was here 800 years ago today where pilgrims could come for an indulgence and experience pardon for all their sins and feel the love of a God who is good, all good, supremely good, all the time and for everyone.

Sisters, we are sleeping under strange, strange skies. We once lived in an enchanted world, where people could feel God everywhere, a God who could be found in the book of nature and experienced in the book of Scriptures. But, not now.

We are sleeping under strange skies when philosophers and pundits proffer us a disenchanted life, where the infinity of God is replaced with the infinity of goods in a consumption-driven world.

We are sleeping under strange skies when we no longer want to build bridges across cultures and all we want to do is build walls to keep people out and the world far away.

We are sleeping under strange skies when we threaten the planet, ignore refugees, reject strangers, and allow women and children to be trafficked for sexual and commercial purposes.

We are sleeping under strange skies when we still question whether women should be equal in society or in the church.

We are sleeping under strange skies when we still have to debate whether black lives should matter or whether life in the womb should be protected.

We are sleeping under strange skies when a Pope named Francis is trying to lead the church to become more focused on the poor, but is ridiculed and dismissed by his own Cardinals.

But, Sisters, it is time to re-find our home, to re-center our lives and to choose again our “little portion.” Francis loved the Portinuncula. Might I suggest that it’s time to love Allegany, this little portion on the Southern tier, in the shade of the Enchanted Mountains. I’m not talking about Allegany the town but about Allegany the mission.

I am like one of those pilgrims who came upon the Little Portion deep in the forest in the time of Francis.

Over the years I have come upon Allegany in the simple beauty of her mission and in the quiet meaning of her prophecy. More than 25 years ago, I watched Kathy Uhler introduce the international compassion of Christ at the United Nations, long before other religious got interested in sustainable development and human trafficking. I met Margaret Mary Kimmins moving dioceses to social justice and then, in her first administration, moving to make sure that Allegany mission would be continually creative through grants for generations to come.

I went to Jamaica and saw the educational system that scores of Alleganies had built, offering young people a future filled with promise and hope. I went to Florida and saw what health care looks like when the Allegany mission meets the health care needs of the poor and disenfranchised.

I have gone upstairs. The rooms upstairs here may seem a long way from the ministerial frenzy of places like New York City, Camden, St. Petersburg, Kingston Jamaica, and Anapolis, Brazil. But, Allegany love connects all these places. Health care is love care whenever Alleganies are involved. Beneath every ministry and binding every act of Sisters is the fire of a Franciscan love.

And so, Sisters, I am not afraid to sleep under strange skies – as long as I am close to Allegany.

And that is what I pray for each and every one of you. The times may seem strange; the work of faith and justice may get more difficult and tiring. You may have to experience a mad, mad day on the ministerial road sometimes. But, Sisters, you have a home; you have a little portion of God’s beloved community. It is Allegany, the dream, the meaning and the mission.

May it always bring you peace and everything good, now and forever. Amen.