

On April 30, 2025, Sister M. Mercedes Diaz and Sister M. Ignatia Cooney from the American Province arrived in Thuine for a six-week visit of our Motherhouse and nearby convents, as well as a pilgrimage that took them to Assisi and Rome. In the following interview, Sister M. Ignatia shares her impressions of this time.

The history of our congregation was well known to you before you arrived at the Motherhouse. Can you describe what your visit to the place where we were founded added to your knowledge?

Entering into the Motherhouse grounds was like walking into a story that you have read so much about, but at *that moment* becomes incredibly real. Since entering our congregation, 23 years ago, I have heard the history of Mother M. Anselma and our frugal beginnings, and then over the years more sisters would share their stories of visiting the Motherhouse, but to actually be there in reality was a profound grace.

The story that comes to mind is Mother M. Anselma reflecting on how she and Sister Marianna had first been “welcomed” to Thuine with a dilapidated house and next to nothing to eat, and then towards the end of her life gazing on all that the Lord provided in those 30 years, knowing all of this is from “the good Lord’s providence.”

For me to gaze on this more than 150 years later, is to again give thanks to our good Lord’s blessings. It also welled up in me a great joy that He called *me* to be apart of this. I didn’t know all of this 23 years ago when I entered, but I am even more grateful now that he chose me to be a part of our congregation. “It is simply the Lord’s blessings we see here.”

What was the most significant place to you in the Motherhouse? Why?

The Adoration Chapel. When I entered into that sacred place, I felt the heartbeat of our congregation. That is a powerful house of prayer and intercession, and now as I returned to Alton and make visits to our Adoration Chapel, that is the place I feel most connected to the Motherhouse and our sisters world-wide. We do truly meet each other and are connected through the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus.

What did you find the most surprising?

That I right away felt at home. I describe it as a puzzle. Prior to this pilgrimage, it seemed like I had the pieces of the puzzle but could never get them in the right order. Coming to the Motherhouse and meeting our sisters is like the puzzle piece that fit it all together. It gave greater understanding of my vocation and I saw more clearly my role within our larger congregation.

Also, I felt so welcomed from the first moment stepping out of the "Bulli." The sisters were lined up to welcome us, telling us their names, repeating them again and again so that we understood. And then again, the first afternoon after we arrived, I was sitting in the refectory, a little unsure of myself, but I wanted to again meet you and be with you and I felt a strong sense of belonging. I am grateful for each of you!

You had the privilege of traveling to the Motherhouse, Assisi, and Rome during a Holy Year of the Church whose theme was "Pilgrims of Hope." How did you experience this exhortation to hope during your travels and visits? Was there a particular instance during which you tangibly experienced hope?

To be a pilgrim in this Jubilee Year of Hope is a grace all unto itself. When I realized I would have the opportunity to make this pilgrimage in the Jubilee Year of Hope I knew God's hand was at work. Reflecting on past graces and this pilgrimage experience, I would describe Hope as being open to surprise. We had planned and prepared for this pilgrimage and this was necessary and some of these plans came to fruition but when these plans changed, we experience Hope as Divine Providence. The hopeful person lives from a deep place of providence, a confidence that the Lord delights in providing for us his beloved.

We had been praying for an increase of Hope as our departure for our pilgrimage drew near, and the Lord did not disappoint! During our time at the Motherhouse and our travels to our area convents within our German province and our time in Italy, Hope became a way of living.

An example of Hope lived in this way was our adventure to Assisi. We were told that Sister M. Relindis would be our travel companion to Italy. Two days before we were supposed to leave for Italy, we found out Sister M. Relindis would not be back from Albania—we would have to fly. We were disappointed for a moment, but were confident God had a better plan. On that flight we meet a priest friend of our

community who recognized us as Thuine Franciscans by our pectoral cross. It was a delight to meet Fr. Peter Fabritz, and knew that was a sign of God's presence with us. Then during our stay in Assisi, our Lord continued to provide us with opportunities that we knew were from His gifts of abundance. We would start our days praying to be open to how our Lord wanted to show us His love and he never disappointed. We reflected that even in our pauses, the Lord's timing was perfected.

And yes, the elusive Sister M. Relindis did joyfully make it to Assisi and we were overjoyed to finally meet her! We are grateful to say that Hope continued to guide us along the journey. I have learned, to live with Hope, is to have a deep abiding peace that our Lord wants to and will provide in my need. Not necessarily how I planned it, expected it or wanted it, but if I live with Hope, He will take care of the details.

If you were to sum up your experience in a word or phrase, what would it be?

Belonging. I had a profound experience of belonging to our Lord and belonging to our congregation in a deeper way during my pilgrimage. As mentioned above, there were pieces in my life that were fragmented, like a puzzle, and the experience of this pilgrimage brought this fragmented image into a clearer picture. I can also compare this to the metaphor of the Red Thread of prayer woven throughout our day. I can now see a Red Thread woven through my life.

What encouragement or observation would you offer to Sisters who are still waiting to make this trip?

Go with an open heart and an open mind. Pray to be open to all our Lord wants to give in this experience. If you go trying to insert yourself into the place, you may miss how the place and the experience may transform you anew.

I want to again extend my gratitude to *ALL* of our sisters on the Motherhouse grounds; within the St. Francis Province, especially the convents we visited; as well as the sisters at Denekamp and at the Oasis of Peace and Goodness, Assisi. Thank you for the generosity and charity shown to us during our time with each of you. It was an honor and privilege to meet you and share a bit of our life together. Please know I will continue to reflect on these graces and memories and promise

to pray for all of you! Till we see each other again, let us remain united in our Eucharistic Lord!