

## Letter from Baschi

# My Pilgrimage to La Pasquarella

By Ruth Ellen Gruber

**O**N THE SUNDAY after Easter I woke up at 4 A.M., threw on several layers of clothing, and rushed out of my house into the cold in order to be at the church in the nearby village of Morre at 4:30. I had decided to join local people on their pilgrimage walk to La Pasquarella, a medieval hermitage set high in a narrow gorge leading up off the Tiber River into the stony, tree-covered hills of southern Umbria.

The hermitage includes a small church across a plaza from a cave dug into the rock beneath an overhanging crag. The church's sanctuary is almost bare, except for a painting of the gift-bearing three Magi adoring the Madonna and Child that decorates the arched apse behind the altar.

There has been some sort of shrine here for nearly 1,000 years. Its origins and history—"rich in legends, popular beliefs, demonic traditions, miracles," as a local writer put it—color patterns of life even today.

A church is believed to have been built here in the 11th century, as a monastery of the Camaldoli, an austere, reclusive order founded at the beginning of the cen-

tury by St. Romuald, an Italian monk who quit the Benedictines because they were not strict enough for him. The monasteries he and his followers established housed monks who lived a communal life as well as hermits who prized isolation. In the 13th century, the Umbrian poet and mystic Franciscan friar Jacopone da Todi spent nearly a decade here,



Photo © Ruth Ellen Gruber

steeping himself in the ascetic life after giving up worldly pleasure following the death of his wife.

The aptly descriptive original name of the church was the "Santa Maria dello Scoglio" (St. Mary of the Rock). One story goes that the Madonna, astride a horse, appeared atop a cliff on the rocky heights at a spot called Salva Regina. From there, in one great bound, she leaped all the way

across the chasm, landing where the church was then built.

According to another legend, people from the nearby village of Acqualoreto found an image of the Madonna at the site of today's shrine. They carried it back to their village church, but every time they did so, over and over again, the image miraculously returned to the place where they had found it—and where the shrine was then constructed.

Yet another story holds that the church was erected after the Madonna herself emerged from the Tiber near the site during a particularly devastating flood. The painting of the Madonna in the sanctuary is said to possess miraculous properties too. It is believed to be the work of a 17th-century Umbrian artist, Pietro Paolo Sensi, who also painted frescoes and altarpieces in several other tiny local churches.

A section of the Pasquarella Madonna seems discolored by dampness. A neighbor of mine once explained that some believe this is a portent—that the Madonna's face is actually sweating. In the past, he told me, priests and other faithful col-

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lected the moisture from her face on cloths and preserved them as holy relics.

“Pasquarella” means “little Easter.” The shrine is the focus of pilgrimages that take place three times a year: at Epiphany, the January 6 holiday celebrating the adoration of the Magi; on the Sunday

state highway 448—was built in the mid-1960s and is the main artery between the two ancient hill towns of Todi to the east and Orvieto to the west. It also connects central Italy’s two main north-south highways, the A1 Autostrada, or toll road, and the four-lane E45 superhighway.

A signpost on 448 marks the dirt access road to the Pasquarella parking lot. From there, you walk a little over half a mile or so along a well-maintained path up into the gorge. Local tourism authorities manage the area, and there are picnic tables, fireplaces for barbecues, and public

hidden pool in the middle of the woods. Friends and I walk our dogs there occasionally, but it has been a long time since I have seen the waterfall in action.

Before the 448 was built, this was the only way to reach the Pasquarella. Today few people even remember the route: It is easy to get lost among the network of trails and logging roads on the wooded slopes. Though I set out for the Pasquarella more than once, I never found the right path.

The narrow Pasquarella gorge is one of the so-called “gorges of the Forello.” It cuts south from the Tiber at a point where the river passes through a steep-walled, winding channel known as Il Forello, or “the hole.” Historically, it has been a dangerous stretch of water, almost inaccessible and full of rapids, whirlpools, rocky outcrops, waterfalls, and hidden tunnels.

In 1929, an American writer named Harold Donaldson Eberlein sailed down the Tiber with two friends in a rubber canoe, from the river’s source in northeast Umbria all the way to Rome. The trip resulted in a book, *Down the Tiber and Up to Rome* (1930), to which all three contributed. It is a charming description of their trip, and its most dramatic sections deal with their passage through Il Forello.

People they met in Todi, about five miles to the east, warned them of “terrible danger” and impending disaster. The warnings, Eberlein wrote, gave them a clear mental picture of what might lie ahead: “the river gradually narrowing till you come to a cleft in the mountain; sheer walls towering around a turbulent stream about 40 or 50 feet wide; a passage that never saw the sun; probably a narrow path running along the face of the cliff; a rocky island and, beyond it, a waterfall; and then a black tunnel through which the water boiled.”

The trio set off from Todi at 6 A.M., determined to navigate the feared stretch. They found the banks a wild tangle of trees and shrubs and brambles. One of them, who went ahead alone to scout the route, wrote:

“The walls of the mountain were sheer, jagged cliffs, with no vestige of the path we had expected to find, but owing to the lowness of the water a few rocks were

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**HOLDING OBJECTS BEFORE THE MADONNA PAINTING**

after Easter; and on the last Sunday in May. On these days priests from several nearby villages celebrate hourly masses from early in the morning until sunset. The faithful come to worship, filling the little sanctuary to overflowing. Loudspeakers broadcast the prayers to the plaza outside, where rows of tall, thin devotional candles flicker under the cliff.

After the service, many congregants reach into their pockets and handbags to produce a variety of personal belongings—car keys, wedding rings, watches, and the like. They hook them onto the forked end of a long pole held by an aide who then lifts the laden pole aloft and waves the objects in front of the painting of the Madonna, to receive her blessing.

The area below the shrine, meanwhile, becomes the site of a *fiesta*, where itinerant vendors set up stands selling everything from toys to clothing to candy to more substantial refreshments. A particular favorite is *porchetta*, a local specialty consisting of a whole roast pig that is sliced and served as sandwiches on fresh rolls.

It is easy to reach the Pasquarella by car now, and that is how most pilgrims and *fiesta*-goers choose to arrive. An asphalt road swoops along the Tiber River and the south bank of Lake Corbara, artificially created when the Tiber was dammed about 45 years ago. This road—

toilets. A zig-zagging path, paved with stone and edged with a rustic handrail, leads up the face of the cliff to the plaza where the church is perched. Feast days draw thousands of people; the lot overflows early and parked cars tail back several miles along 448 in both directions from the turnoff.

**T**here is an old road to the Pasquarella, too, and it is on this ancient trail that, on feast days, local priests usually organize a special pilgrimage. The road leads to the shrine from my own village, Morruzze, through the forest, above and parallel to what is known here as the Fosso—a deep stream bed, in some places resembling a sunken canyon, that runs down from the hills into the Pasquarella gorge.

The waters that flow through the Fosso form one of those mysterious streams that appear and disappear according to the season or the rainfall. At times a wild torrent, it vanishes at some places into the porous, karst-like terrain, only to re-emerge further along the rocky channel. At the bottom of the deep valley almost directly below my house, the waters—when in full flow—cascade over an abrupt lip of stone, forming a waterfall that plunges dramatically into a serene,

showing above the surface along the right bank. I swam across to them. And so I went on, swimming backward and forward for about two miles.

“It was one of the most eerie experiences I have ever undergone. I was all alone and there was no sound except that of water rushing through rapids. Perhaps—who knew?—the dreaded waterfall might be round the next bend. Towering walls of jagged rock glowered above me, wide enough apart, however, to let in the welcome light of the sun. Each time I entered the water, with the roaring of the turbulent stream ahead, I wondered whether I would be swept away by some swift current and carried over the waterfall before I could save myself. . . .

“At one point I thought that at last I had come to the notorious spot. The walls of the gorge were at their highest. I had walked as far as I could on the left bank, and 50 yards ahead of me a large pile of stones had been thrown up on the other bank. The water before me was deep, dark and ominous, and round the bend I could hear the raging of a troubled torrent. I entered the water with more trepidation than I had ever before known in my life. I swam across. Round the bend there was merely a more tempestuous rapid than usual, and when I had walked the length of the couple of hundred yards at my disposal I found the country was widening out again.”

He went back and met up with his friends. In their rubber canoe, the trio became—locals told them—the first people in memory to sail through the Forello.

The book describes wild countryside, with “great tracts of forest” coming right down to the river. The “only evidences of human habitation were a few distant walled villages and ruined castles on the mountainsides, silhouetted against the dark blue-green of the forests.”

Village elders have told me stories

about the time before the lake was formed, when the area was isolated and unpaved roads were the rule. They walked miles

along dirt tracks with their mules to weekly markets. Today, it is difficult to imagine that it was once so wild. The scenery is stunning, yes. And, as Eberlein and his friends recounted, there are still ancient ruined fortresses and tiny villages on the hilltops.

But the construction of Lake Corbara and Route 448 along its shore softened, and in a sense tamed, the landscape. The 448

has become something of the main street of this rural area. Cars and heavy trucks whiz by. There are restaurants, a café, a gas station, a lakeside hotel or two, billboards, parking lots, even prostitutes.

**T**HIS YEAR, I wanted to join the Pasquarella pilgrimage precisely in order to trek through the woods on the old road and recapture some of the history (and mystery) of the region. Neighbors had described the scene from years past: groups trailing their priests, singing hymns and stopping for prayers as they followed the footsteps of others who had passed along that way for centuries.

Usually, I was told, pilgrims set out at midnight from towns and villages as far as 12 miles or more away. They would walk through the night on main roads to reach Morruzze an hour or so before daylight and, plunging into the forest from there, finally reach the Pasquarella at around 7 A.M., just before the first mass of the day.

I don't like waking up at 4 A.M., but I felt the experience would be worth it. My friend Candida, who was born and grew up in Morruzze, also wanted to join the pilgrims and follow the ancient path. We got to the meeting point just as the group was setting off.



Photo © Ruth Ellen Gruber

#### CANDLES IN THE PLAZA

Alas, our dreams of tracing the old trail were dashed. Given recent days of driving rain, the priest in charge had become afraid that the old road would be either washed out or too muddy. The pilgrimage would go on, he decided, but it would instead circle around and follow the main, asphalt roads. It was a much longer route, and much less redolent of tradition. But, he argued, it would at least be dry.

There were only about a dozen people in our group, and everything was astonishingly well organized. In front of us a jeep from the local Red Cross led the way; a Red Cross ambulance followed behind—just in case. Although it was pitch dark, the sky was clear. A crescent moon lit our path, and the constellations glittered above: the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper, the big “W” of Cassiopeia.

The priest set a rapid pace. The darkness amplified the thud of our footsteps and the swish of our clothing in the silence of the night. Dogs barked in farmyards as we passed, and at one point a village dog joined the group and tagged along. People conversed in low voices. Periodically, the priest led a prayer—the *Ave Maria*, recited over and over. Occasionally, a hymn was sung.

By the time of the first mass at the Pasquarella, the little sanctuary was crammed with congregants who had come the more conventional way, by car. After the service, and after the ritual blessing of keys and rings and watches, we all trailed down to where the vendors had set up their *fiesta* stands.

There I found another surprising demonstration of how tradition survives in (adapts to? defies?) a world of change. The stands sold the same stuff as always—food, toys, clothing, knickknacky junk. The proprietors, though, were different. At least half of them were Muslims, new immigrants to Italy whose very presence reflected recent global and societal evolution. Speaking Arabic and wearing headscarves as they proffered their wares at this homegrown Christian celebration, they added yet another strand of color to the rich millennial tapestry.