The practice of designating a particular place as a meeting place between earth and heaven, human being and the divine presence is as ancient as the story of creation. In Genesis that place was a garden. Throughout the journey of the first covenant people all manner of sites were appropriated to be holy places where God and God’s people, or a representative of the people shared visions, promises and commitments to bonds of friendship.

These shrines marked both an original encounter and then stood as markers for future generations. To arrive at one of these places required one to enter into the experience of the first pilgrims, to relive the spiritual meaning that had transpired there and to carry that memory forward as the gift and the grace of the ancestors. This gift and grace would shape the faith and the hope of future generations.

Such was the place where Jacob encountered the God of the Israelites, the God of the covenant, the God of the promise. Both God and God’s people met in other places: the meeting tent – a portable shrine, the mountain top – a favorite site of divine – human encounter, and of course the temple.

The Christian people never lost this tradition but chose and dedicated its own shrines; many of them structures, some very simple chapels others grand cathedrals; still other sites that were more open, like prayer gardens and grottos, and even caves in remote places.

The original chapel of St. Mary of the Angels was one such place, known as the Little Portion, - the Portiuncola, I suppose because of its size. It was built in a remote site in the woods near the town of Assisi. Its origins are a bit sketchy, it may date back to the 4th century as a place for a small group of hermits who wanted to detach themselves from the world. They should see it now, - the world has found it and fallen in love with it. Several centuries later Francis of Assisi is reported to have purchased it from a group of Benedictines for a basket of fish. Leave it to Francis to keep it simple!

Francis rebuilt it and some 300 hundred years after he died a great basilica was built over it. The grandeur of the basilica is like the setting of a ring, surrounding
and acting as a visible marker that can be seen for miles; but the Little Portion is the jewel, the place of memory and solitude, the place of light and grace for every pilgrim that has ever set foot on the path of Francis.

The physical markers of a pilgrim’s journey, whether they are grand or humble, like the towers of a prominent cathedral or the simple stone Inuksuk of the indigenous people of the far north, are only made sacred by the people who inhabit them for their acts of piety and praise. It was John Chrystostom who said that it is not the church building that makes people holy, it is the people who make the space holy. Did you know that sacred places breathe? They breathe us in and they breathe us out.

Such an exchange of holiness originates in the heart and the spirit of all women and men who gather, whether in solitude or in assembly, within the walls that have been made by human hands. The holiness of the place, in its use and in its intangible nature, is born from the lives of both the sinner and the forgiven, from the lived virtues of all those who are seekers of something deeper, something more truthful and something more lasting than brick and mortar, stone or steel, wood or glass.

And in that search we become the markers of the ancient and ever new encounter between the human and the divine. It is true we rejoice in finding a place to rest our weary souls, to refresh our spirits and to worship our God in the company of others.

But our task, so beautifully and convincingly enshrined in the life of Francis, is to be the visible and loving markers for all seekers and pilgrims, for hermits and busy-bodies, for all those who share our common home. And on this earth and in this world we are called to be untied by this simple and ancient truth: God is in this and at last we know it.

Phil Horrigan