**6a.Vice General Spiritual Assistant SFO**

“Set me adrift in a sea of hope -- I’ll set my sail to a new horizon.” I received this card on my way to Rome. It expressed my sentiments perfectly.

I didn’t manage to get to Rome until January 1984. I left Sydney, perspiring at 42 degrees, and arrived in Rome, freezing at zero. Fr Benet Fonck whisked me off to the OFM General Curia, in Via Santa Maria Mediatrice. Fr John Vaughn OFM, our Minister General, greeted me warmly. The first thing I needed was a key. I asked the Porter in Italian “May I have a key?”, but I asked instead, “I want a slave-girl.” What was he to make of this Australian?

Fr Benet took me under his wing and showed me to my room and then to the SFO Office. But first, I had to go to Florence to learn Italian at the Scuola Lorenzo dei Medici and try to avoid outrageous mistakes. Florence was fabulous and the language course was a delight, but I could stay for only two months of the three-months’ course.

Benet was keen to get me to work as Vice General Assistant to the Secular Franciscan Order, and to translate urgent French documents, but he also wanted to take me to Assisi. We stayed for two days at the huge Convento of the Porziuncola, where you could drive a bus down the corridor. We walked up Monte Subasio in the bitter cold, to the hermitage of the Carceri. The snow was powdery, so that we could see on our mantle every single snowflake in its perfect starry shape.

Back to work, but not without the permission of the Italian Government that granted me a Soggiorno. I could stay in Italy and work without payment for as long as my religious appointment lasted.

The first word processors had just been installed and we had to teach ourselves. There was more to them than a typewriter, and the Curia’s two translators were having problems. Regina, a delightful Spanish-French lady, pleaded “Miriam! Disastro!” with the more composed Swiss translator. On another day, Regina came to work, distraught: “Wolfi has died!” I was so sorry. Who was Wolfi? “My poodle!” Wolfgang Amadeus.

In **1984,** I was set on a rollercoaster and enjoyed the steep learning curves. Never a dull moment while mastering Mass and Divine Office and conversation in Italian. For a brief time, I excused myself for not speaking the language, but people would have no more of that. “It’s a miracle! We can understand you!”, riposted the women.

My first attendance at a General Chapter of the SFO was with Benet in Madrid, in April 1984.

Working in the office, organizing files and archives, I spent a lot of time at the computer terminal, learning word processing and testing its capabilities. For a start, I translated the new SFO Ritual from Latin into English.

Benet was keen to resume his pastoral visits and attendance at national chapters, and left me to manage the office, but he let me cut my baby teeth in conducting a Pastoral Visit to the SFO National Council of the Philippines, from 9 to 23 October 1984.

I still managed to fit in three Retreats to Franciscan Sisters, one in Orvieto, another in Via Giusti, Rome, and the third in Assisi, and there were some special events for me to attend.

The European Secular Franciscans, EUFRA, held their meeting that year in Zaostrog, Croatia. The Franciscan Family of East Germany held their Chapter of Mats in Bautzen in September. I needed the approval of the German Bishops’ Conference and the permission of the Communist government of the DDR, the German Democratic Republic, to attend, and I needed permission from the Police *to leave* the country! The Capuchins in Mangalore, India, invited me to attend a Seminar for Spiritual Assistants in October. With Benet, I attended the meeting of CIOFS, the SFO International Presidency in Rome, in November.

After all that, I enjoyed a Neapolitan Christmas in Nocera Inferiore, in another Italy, another language, another world.

In **1985,** in January in Rome, snow had frozen into slippery ice when my pal, Fr Fred Doll OFM, the Canadian, who managed the new computer system, and I set out for early morning Mass with Pope John Paul II, in his private chapel. This was the first of five occasions when I had a photo taken with the Pope. When he shook hands, he was already looking at the next person, so I never caught his eye, but he became so used to meeting me that he called me “the Orstrarleean.”

We celebrated Australia Day with a formal evening at the home of the Chargé d'Affaires. One exotic matron asked me what we were celebrating. “Signora, we’re celebrating Australia Day.” “Oh”, she gushed, “I love those young men in their lederhosen!”

In the SFO office, I was working on my segment of the new SFO General Constitutions, Chapter II. We drew on the material submitted from all over the world and worked in Italian. It was a helluva job that took ten years!

The SFO office published the *Letter from Rome to the Assistants,* sixteen pages in four languages four times a year. Our office was very cramped. When the Office of the General Assistant for the Poor Clares vacated its location in a spacious parlor near the front door of the Curia, I moved in while Benet was away. It took a week to put the office together again.

I had the pleasure of a few distractions. I gave an eight-day Retreat to the community of the Australian Sister Clara Condon MFIC, at Monte Verdi, and I was the Coordinator of the Liturgy at the General Chapter of the German Franciscan Sisters of Salzkotten, in their Motherhouse on Via Aurelia.

But then, back to serious work. The OFM General Chapter was held in Assisi from 12 May to 22 June 1985, and I was one of four Secretaries in the Plenary Sessions. Each wrote the Minutes in his own language, then together we composed one text in Italian, which was translated by others into Latin for the official Acts of the Chapter. Fr John Vaughn, from California, was re-elected as our Minister General.