

Fontecolombo: The Franciscan Sinai

"Mount Regola, Mount Ranierio [currently Fontecolombo], was filled by the Father of divine sweetness, consecrated by the mellifluous flavour of his presence, among the festive flock of the blessed. It has become a new Sinai where, as everyone listened, the law was delivered. And on Mount Carmelo, where the soul of Saint Francis lingered on in conversation with God. We must climb mount Fontecolombo barefoot because it is truly a holy place."

Anonymous of Rieti. *Actus Beati Francisci in Valle Reatina*. II, 57-60, edited by A. Cadderi. Assisi, Edizioni Porziuncola, 1999.

The Sanctuary of Fontecolombo is situated in a secluded area in a **forest of centuries-old holm-oaks** on the slopes of the very lush Mount Rainiero. As the anonymous writer tells us, it is the Franciscan Sinai. This is in fact the site chosen by Saint Francis to write the **Rule** of the Franciscan Order. Everything is sacred here: the buildings and the woods itself because it houses the **Sacro Speco**, the Sacred Cavern where Saint Francis wrote the Rule.

The Presence of Saint Francis

Fontecolombo is the second place in the Sacred Valley, after Poggio Bustone, to see the presence of Saint Francis. Tradition narrates his first arrival at Fontecolombo in 1217. He was surely seen there between the spring and summer of 1223 writing the definitive Rule he would leave his Brothers. The Rule was probably written in a grotto where the Saint Michael Chapel stands today. This **Regula Bullata** (the Rule of the Franciscan Order) was solemnly approved by Honorius III on 29 November 1223.

The presence of Saint Francis in Fontecolombo is also tied to the cures he endured for the terrible **eye illness** that afflicted him until his death. He underwent a gruelling operation here where he was cauterised from his ear to his eyebrow. The pages from Franciscan sources that relate the operation are steeped in a lofty lyrical tone. They recount the arrival of the doctor, Saint Francis' conversation with the fire the doctor used to heat up the iron, the fear and flight of the friars before the beginning of the terrible operation and the miracle that permitted Francis not to feel pain.

Saint Francis' Eye Disease and the Cure He Received at Fontecolombo

Saint Francis' illness can perhaps be identified as the **Egyptian disease**, scientifically known as *conjunctivitis trachomatosa*, a viral disease that he contracted on his mission to Egypt in 1220. The disease was especially serious

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due to the Saint's poor health. He was undernourished and anaemic as a result of frequent attacks of malaria and the rigid fasts he imposed upon himself. Furthermore, he was reluctant to being cured because of his profound ascetic rigidity.

When the disease intensified, it was very difficult to convince Saint Francis to seek the help of a physicians. The friars closest to him were unsuccessful in convincing him. Brother Elias, vicar of the Order, unsuccessfully ordered him to accept cures but finally, at the instance of **Cardinal Ugolino**, Francis underwent an operation. The Cardinal ordered him to Rieti where a good eye doctor lived.

History of the Sanctuary

Saint Francis went to Fontecolombo to visit a small chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary. It was renamed Santa Maria Magdalene in the 17th century. The woods that surrounded the area and the humble chapel were owned by the **Farfa Abbey**. The structure may have been used as a storage space for equipment and as a hideaway to protect the monks of Farfa.

Records of the Farfa Abbey that prove ownership of this area by the Abbey allow for the following hypothesis: the monks at Farfa temporarily ceded the mount that housed the hermitage to a cleric by the name of Rainiero, thus the name **Monte Rainiero**.

According to local tradition, the name was changed from Monte Rainiero to Fontecolombo by Saint Francis himself "because of the presence of a clear and fresh natural spring" where many white doves quenched their thirst.

The date of the founding of the Franciscan sanctuary is supported by an analysis of the architectural structures: the bas-reliefs on the chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary, known as the Chapel of the Magdalene from the 17th century, carry a date from the **first half of the 14th century**.

Thomas of Celano's biography of Saint Francis of Assisi, *Vita secundâ*, or *Second Life*, confirms this date. He was the first to write about a structure called Fontecolombo proving that the Sanctuary existed before 1246 and 1247, the years in which he wrote the biography.

The hermitage is later cited in a notary deed dated 1297 regarding a donation of 40 "soldi" to the convent by Nicola Cece di Apuleggia for the purchase of habits.

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After Saint Francis' presence there, the Sanctuary went through years of great prosperity that alternated with periods of hardships.

The year 1373 was a turning point. Fontecolombo and other hermitage communities in the Rieti, Umbria and Marche areas were granted a series of concessions by the Roman Curia that would see Fontecolombo in the wake of the **Regular Observance** movement, a movement founded within the Franciscan Order and established in the 15th century thanks to St. Bernardine of Siena and St. John Capistrano who supported strict observance of the Rule. With the adherence to the movement, Fontecolombo began a happy period of growth.

Fontecolombo was a key location in the history of the Observance movement. Another movement within the Regular Observance began from here: the so called **Stricter Observance**, founded by the Spanish friar Stefano Molina in order to observe the Rule even more rigidly. In 1519 he and other friars of the Franciscan Order were granted permission to live at Fontecolombo. The Sanctuary thus became the holder of the Rule which was observed with great strictness.

Locations and Art

The Franciscan settlement sprung near a very important location from a social and economic point of view: Sant'Elia Reatino. Franciscan sources give a very detailed description of the events that occurred in the sanctuary but they fail to give an exact date of when the structure was built. Architectural analysis dates the Chapel to the Virgin Mary, which was later dedicated to Magdalene, to the beginning of the 13th century.

An important **description of the sanctuary** at the time of Saint Francis has been passed on by the so-called "Anonymous Reatino", a Franciscan friar from Rieti who described the historical events in Saint Francis' life in the early 14th century. The Anonymous writer speaks of dilapidated dwellings that were adjusted to accommodate friars. To get an idea of what these structures were like one can visit the old farmhouse adjacent to the convent: the bathroom facilities were found on the ground floor while two cells, the refectory and the kitchen were on the first floor. After Saint Francis' death, the structure was expanded with the addition of twelve cells.

The **large church** at the convent was consecrated on July 19, 1450, by Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, the diocese of Treviri, and dedicated to Saint Francis and Saint Bernardine of Siena. The building is marked by its simplicity despite various renovations undertaken including the reconstruction of the portico which was carried out in 1940.

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The **interior** layout has a single truss covered nave. The wooden choir dates to the 17th century. Above the choir, the window depicts Saint Francis and the vision of the writing of the Rule.

Along the right wall we find two valuable 17th century **wooden sculptures**. One of them depicts the Crucifixion with Saint Francis kneeling at Christ's feet. The other high-relief sculpture celebrates the miraculous episode of the Confirmation of the Rule by God which preceded the confirmation by the Pope.

The church has undergone various transformations yet it has never lost its original imprint. The first transformation took place in 1644 when the choir was extended. Later the windows in the presbytery were opened and in 1712 a new room was added to the sacristy. Modifications to the windows and the rose window were introduced in the 20th century.

Five **stained-glass windows** were donated to the Franciscans in 1925 by the famous opera singer, Mattia Battistini. Starting with the first window on the right of the entrance, the subjects depict: the offering of the location of the Sanctuary to Saint Francis and Saint Francis donating his cloak to the woman of Posta. To the left of the door there is a scene depicting the operation on the Saints' eyes followed by an episode of Saint Francis with the birds.

Above the portal, the stain-glass window features the crèche at Greccio. The lunette in the portal houses a **painting** of the Madonna with Child with Saint Francis and San Ludovico of Tolosa by her side. The very charming **cloister** to the right of the church is the centre around which the buildings of the convent are built.

The so-called **Little Convent** was built during the 15th century. It held the dormitory, the refectory and the kitchen. During the same century, a clothing factory was annexed to the convent where Franciscan habits were made.

The part of the convent called the **small fortress** dates to the 16th century and is comprised of eight rooms. The guestrooms and the dormitory, which are still in use today, were built during the 1680s.

Crossing the open space in front of the convent one reaches a gate with the words, "Take off your shoes because sacred is the land where you are." This gate opens onto a path with 14 niches housing the **Way of the Cross** in majolica, a work by the Neapolitan school dated 1745. Along the path we find: the

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Hermitage of Saint Francis, the church of the Virgin Mary and the Sacro Speco. The so-called **Hermitage of Saint Francis** was rediscovered in 1947 and it has remained practically unaltered with the exception of two modifications in the 15th and 18th centuries.

Further on is the **Church of the Virgin Mary**, also known as the Magdalene. Historians who have studied the wall structure of the building have retraced formulas that date it to the first decades of the 13th century: the pointed arch in the apse that rests on a squared altar and the frescoes in the basin.

The **façade**, originally hut-shaped, was renovated in the late 13th century. The bell tower rises from the horizontal crowning. According to local legend Francis called the friars to prayer with this bell.

In the small apse there is a **fresco** in a poor state of conservation depicting Christ on the throne with the Madonna and Child on the right and a barely visible figure on the left.

Along the right wall there are two frescoes dated between the 14th and 15th centuries representing a woman saint that cannot be identified, perhaps Saint Cuneonda, and Saint Mary Magdalene. The other wall contains a 17th century fresco with Saint Clare. During restorations in 1921, a red drawing of the **Tau** came to light in the small window. Local legend says it's a work by Saint Francis himself.

After the Church of the Magdalene, visitors are invited to see **Saint Michael's Oratory** which is situated halfway between the cavern and the chapel. The Oratory holds the **Sacro Speco**: the long and narrow split in the rock that resembles a sepulchre. This is the most sacred place in the hermitage: amongst the rocks, a simple wooden cross commemorates the presence of Saint Francis. According to local legend, the fissure of the Sacred Cavern was created by the earthquake that occurred at the moment of Christ's death. The much-laboured task of writing the **Rule of the Franciscan Order** took place in the cavern. Saint Francis must have written it during the so-called Period of Saint Michael's Lent, for whom the oratory was named after.

Above the door in Saint Michael's chapel there is an inscription that testifies to Pope Sixtus' visit in 1476.

Inside the oratory, on the altar, we find an 18th century **copper representation** by Brother Emanuel of Como which depicts Saint Francis receiving the Rule from God.

After the small Church of Saint Michael, the visit continues on to the **Grotto of Friar Leo**. Local legend narrates that when the Lord appeared to Saint Francis to give him the Rule, Leo raised his head and left an imprint of his head on the rock.

Further on, protected by a fence, we find the **holm-oak tree stump** where Francis had a vision of God. The tree fell under the weight of the abundant snowfalls in the winter of 1622. The wood from the tree was used in 1645 by John of Pisa to sculpt the scene of the apparition which can be found in the main church of the convent.

Returning to the open space in front of the convent, we reach the **Fonte delle Colombe** (dove's spring) from which the Sanctuary got its name. The path leading to it is immersed in breathtaking nature that has been left unchanged since Saint Francis walked the same earth.

The path is dotted by **three chapels**: one dedicated to the Ascension of Christ, one to Saint Anthony of Padua and the third, located near the spring, is called the Chapel of the Little Rule. The first two chapels were built in the 18th century and they house terracotta tiles showing scenes of Saint Francis' life in the Rieti area. In the last chapel, which dates to the 17th century, there are six terracotta tiles.

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