



## **The Forest of the Canticle of All Creatures**

"Some cardinals told Saint Francis that when he went to Rieti he should stop for a few days to prove his love for them. Then came the saintly man and shunning the pomp of the world and conversation of men he did not enter the city. He retreated instead to the hill of San Fabiano, near Rieti, in a church named after the aforementioned Saint. There was a priest there who had converted to an exemplary life and the father begged him to be able to stay with him for a few days".

Anonymous of Rieti. *Actus Beati Francisci in Valle Reatina*. VII, 34-36. Edited by A. Cadderi, Assisi, Edizioni Porziuncola, 1999.

Today, the small Church of San Fabiano is a convent of extraordinary beauty. It is also known as the Sanctuary of Santa Maria della Foresta or more simply, La Foresta. Those who seek peace or like Saint Francis want to run away from the "pomp of the world" will find this secluded place the ideal spot.

## **The Presence of Saint Francis**

In the summer of 1225, Cardinal Ugolino ordered Francis to go to Rieti where Honorius III and his court would put him in the hands of papal physicians so he could receive medical treatment for his eyes. Francis left from Assisi accompanied by four brothers: Leo, Bernard, Angelo and Maseo. When they were near Rieti, St. Francis found out that the city had prepared festivities in his honour. In order to escape the event, he found accommodations outside the city in the **Church of San Fabiano** where he was given the use of a house.

The Church of San Fabiano, owned by the Rieti Curia, was looked after by a poor priest. Saint Francis was offered a place to live near the priest's vineyard. Historians believe that Saint Francis lived at the Sanctuary between **September and October 1225**.

Two important events are linked to this sanctuary: the miracle of the grapes and the Canticle of All Creatures.

The **miracle of the grapes** is connected to the mass of worshippers who flowed to San Fabiano to honour Saint Francis. The pilgrims completely ruined the vineyard next to the church which was the only source of income for the poor priest who had given shelter to Saint Francis. In order to reimburse him, Francis promised an abundant harvest. When the grapes were picked, an extraordinary amount of wine was produced by the few bunches of grapes that were actually gathered.

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The Sanctuary is primarily linked to the **Canticle of All Creatures**. It is believed that it may have been written during his stay here even though critics tend to allocate its writing to Saint Damian's.

Despite this fact, the beautiful and diverse locations brimming with lush nature near the La Foresta Sanctuary seem the perfect inspiration for those everlasting words.

### **History of the Sanctuary**

The church that existed at the time Saint Francis stopped here was the **Church of San Fabiano**. There are documents on the church that date to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The **Church of Santa Maria della Foresta** was erected later. Wadding, a famous 17<sup>th</sup> century historian on the Franciscan Order, wrote that the second church was consecrated by George IX in 1217. In actual fact the first document ever written on the church is dated 1319.

At the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the complex underwent drastic renovations. The Church of San Fabiano was incorporated into a larger one. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century a convent and a cloister were built when the convent passed into the hands of the **Clareni**, a reform within the Franciscan Order promoted by Angelo Clareno on a spiritualistic basis.

The Clareni left the convent under Pius V's papacy (1566 - 1572). A few years later (1584) the Sanctuary passed into the hands of the **Observants**, a movement born within the Franciscan Order and definitively organised in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by St. Bernardine of Siena and St. John Capistrano, that sought for strict observance of the Rule. The most radical transformation to the buildings took place in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1947 restoration work located and restored the Church of San Fabiano which until that time had been concealed by the later constructions.

### **Locations and Art**

The road that leads to the sanctuary is bordered with **niches** erected in 1950 housing majolica tiles depicting the Way of the Cross. The niche closest to the entrance of the sanctuary shows the **Madonna of the Grapes**, a tribute to the miracle Saint Francis performed here.

Locating the little **Church of San Fabiano** was very difficult for Franciscan historians due to its union with the Sanctuary of Santa Maria della Foresta in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The ancient church that housed the prayers of Saint Francis is identified as the building that opens onto the cloister of the convent. From the

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Church of San Fabiano, we reach the **Cavern**, the little grotto where Francis retreated to pray.

The rediscovery of the church came about thanks to the desires of the Franciscan friar Arduino Terzi and the 1947 restorations promoted by him.

The interior was at one time completely covered in **frescoes**. Some very important paintings that were inspired by the late 13<sup>th</sup> century Roman school and the paintings in the Basilica in Assisi still remain. The surviving frescoes can be dated between the late 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The little church also houses the **tub of the miracle of the grapes** where the abundant production of wine was produced by a few bunches of grapes.

The heart of the convent is the small but charming 15<sup>th</sup> century **cloister** which is set with octagonal pilasters.

Before entering the convent, one can admire the **sculptures** by Lorenzo Ferri that depict the Canticle of All Creatures which some say was written at the La Foresta Sanctuary. The saint is depicted with his friends: Angelo, Leo, Bernardine and Masseo.

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