

## **Greccio: The New Bethlehem**

“Francis loved the hermitage of Greccio where the friars were virtuous and poor and the people of the land, their poverty and simplicity were very dear to him too. For these reasons he would often go to Greccio to rest for a few days attracted by an extremely scant and isolated cell where the holy father loved to collect his thoughts”.

Legend of Perugia, 34. *Fonti Francescane*. Editio Minor, Assisi, Movimento Francese, 1986

Set within the rock like an eagle’s nest, the Greccio hermitage is an extraordinary fusion of architecture and nature. The edges of the building blend into the lush **Holm oak woods** that greeted Saint Francis on his solitary retreats.

## **The Presence of Saint Francis**

The Sanctuary is famous because Saint Francis of Assisi chose it as the backdrop to one of the highest and most lyrical moments in his life: the first **recreation of the Bethlehem Nativity** in Christianity on Christmas Eve, 1223.

Saint Francis was very fond of the inhabitants of Greccio and he was close friends with Giovanni Velina who may have been the landowner and who supported the Saint in his project to represent the birth of Christ.

The founding of the hermitage is steeped in legend. According to local myth, Francis asked a young boy from the village to throw a chunk of coal in order to establish where the convent was to rise. From the doors of the city, the coal landed on the spur of rock where the Sanctuary stands today.

Legend also narrates that in 1209, further up the mountain in the woods that grow at over 1000 metres, Saint Francis himself erected a hut for his meditation. This place is called **Mount Saint Francis** and a chapel dedicated to the saint was built there in 1712.

In addition to the legend, the first historically ascertained presence of Saint Francis at Greccio dates to **1223**. He may have passed through earlier but there is no documentation to sustain this.

The recreation of the Nativity on Christmas Eve 1223 was only one of the many extraordinary events connected to Saint Francis at Greccio. These episodes have a precise chronological order that begin in late September 1224, after he

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received the stigmata, to 1226. In 1226, six months before his death, he left for Siena and never saw his beloved Rieti Valley again.

### **History of the Sanctuary**

The brethren of the Greccio Sanctuary began to expand it from its beginning. Shortly after 1223 various structures were added to it. In fact, in the last years of Francis' life, a small community was established there and Greccio was the only Rieti settlement that built structures dedicated exclusively to the friars during Saint Francis' life.

Through the writings of Thomas of Celano, it is possible to establish the exact **date** when the Church of Saint Francis was erected over the chapel of Saint Luke where Francis first represented the Nativity. In his first biography on the Saint, *la Vita Prima*, Celano wrote, "Today that place is consecrated to the Lord and above the Crèche an altar and a church in honour of Saint Francis have been built". A chronological arch can be derived from these words that start from Francis' canonization (July 16 1228) and continue to February 25 1229 when the *Vita Prima* was presented. The current structures have been dated to the 15<sup>th</sup> century based on their architectural characteristics. The construction is attributed to local workers.

On August 11 1246, the Sanctuary was the site of a remarkable event. On this date the famous **Greccio Letter** was sent from this hermitage. Leo, Angelo and Rufino, Francis' three companions, wrote it as an introduction to the so-called *Legend of the Three Companions*, a biography on the Saint.

Not all historians agree that it is an authentic document but one fact is certain: when the authors of the letter decided to gather material on Saint Francis, they went to Greccio, a clear indication of the continuous and strong presence of the Saint at that hermitage.

About ten years after the Letter was written, the history of the Sanctuary is marked by the presence of a great intellectual: **John of Parma**. A General of the Order with a fierce spiritual drive, John of Parma was tried by his brethren in 1257 for having adhered to the heretical doctrines of Gioacchino da Fiore. He decided to withdraw to Greccio where he remained for about thirty years. In the last years of his life, he was a point of reference for the Spirituals movement and for Ubertino da Casale who visited him at Greccio. The Sanctuary thus had the reputation of being an important location during the tormented early history of Franciscanism.

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Another very important event in the history of the Sanctuary took place in 1373. Greccio as well as the other sanctuaries in Rieti and the ones in the Umbria and Marche regions obtained permission to choose their own obedience. Thus began the procession of the Sanctuary's adherence to the **Observance** movement, a movement that began within the Franciscan Order and was organized on a professional basis in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by St. Bernardine of Siena and St. John Capistrano who supported strict observance of the Rule.

### **Locations and Art**

The convent opens onto a large clearing and visitors are offered a panorama of rare beauty overlooking the Sacred Valley.

The heart of the Sanctuary is the small **Chapel of the Nativity** built in the grotto that according to local tradition is where Francis arranged the Nativity of Christ. A rock under the altar indicates the place where Christ's image was placed in the manger.

Above the altar a 15<sup>th</sup> century **fresco** depicts the Nativity. The Virgin Mary is caught in the intimate gesture of breastfeeding the Child in the presence of Saint Joseph. On the left there is a scene representing Francis' gift of the Nativity to Greccio. It shows Francis wearing the dalmatic of a deacon kneeling in front of the infant Jesus. Behind him the people of Greccio witness the miracle. The fresco is attributed to the anonymous **Maestro di Narni** and dated 1409.

Outside the chapel there are two frescoes: a Nativity from the umbro-marchigian school and a representation of Saint John the Baptist.

The Chapel of the Nativity leads down to the most ancient nucleus of the convent: the Franciscan friary with the refectory, the dormitory, Saint Francis's cell and St. Berdardine's pulpit. The **refectory** houses the humble remains of the sink and the drain the friars used to wash dishes. The fireplace was built in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The **dormitory** is made up of a room that is seven metres long and about two metres wide. The first friars of the convent lived here. The dormitory terminates with the small **cell** dug out of the rock where Saint Francis slept.

The visit continues on to the **Church of Saint Francis** built in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. The church is covered by a barrel vault ceiling decorated with a star-speckled sky and the image of Saint John of Parma. The furnishings are quite interesting: the stalls in the choir, the lectern, and the rotating wooden support of the lantern that illuminates the pages of the choir book.

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Above the altar we find a 16<sup>th</sup> century painting from the Umbrian school depicting the Deposition between Saints. On the left wall there is a 14<sup>th</sup> century **fresco** with Saint Francis and an angel announcing the remission of past sins. Above the fresco there is a precious 15<sup>th</sup> century tondo depicting the Madonna with Child attributed to **Biagio d'Antonio**.

A 14<sup>th</sup> century copy of the **portrait of Saint Francis** is preserved on an austere table above the altar in the adjacent oratory. According to legend, it was painted in 1225, a year before the Saint's death. Local tradition narrates that the portrait was commissioned by the noble Roman woman, Jacopa dei Sette Soli, a friend and protector of the Saint. Francis is portrayed suffering as he cleanses his eyes, tormented by a serious illness that afflicted him in his last years.

The Sanctuary also houses the **Saint Bonaventure Dormitory**. Legend dictates that it was erected during the period Bonaventure was Minister General of the Order (1260-1270). A narrow hallway in wood leads to fifteen small cells that are also in wood. The friars lived in these simple yet evocative spaces for centuries until 1915 when they moved into the upper floors of the building. According to legend, the first cell on the right sheltered two extraordinary friars: **Saint Bonaventure**, whom the structure was named after, and **Saint Bernardine of Siena**.

Leaving the convent proper and going into the woods we find the **grotto** where Saint Francis withdrew for spiritual retreats. It is a natural grotto that was fit with tables and rush matting to accommodate the Ragged Saint. During the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a chapel decorated with a painting depicting the death of Saint Francis was erected. The chapel was restored following the 1948 earthquake.

Further on we find the grotto of Saint John of Parma who withdrew here for thirty-two years (1257-1289) in solitude and penitence after he was accused of adhering to the heretical theories of Gioacchino da Fiore.

The path that leads to this grotto also leads to the so-called **Roccia del Tizzo** (The Rock of the Coal), the spot where the launched piece of coal landed and decided the site where the convent would be built. The same path also leads to a loggia that seems suspended in air and that offers an breathtaking view.

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From the clearing, one continues on to the **Church of the Virgin Mary** built in 1959 according to a project designed by Carlo Alberto Carpiceci. The church houses two 20<sup>th</sup> century crèches, a tribute to the first representation of the Nativity by Saint Francis. The first is by the sculptor Lorenzo Ferri and is made of wood, while the second, in terracotta, is by Luigi Venturini.

### **The Presence of Saint Francis at Greccio Through Direct Sources**

#### **The Pact with the Wolves at Greccio as told by Anonymous Reatino**

“When he lived at the Greccio hermitage, the people of the village were afflicted by several calamities: packs of ravenous wolves devoured both animals and people and hail regularly destroyed the fields and vineyards every year. During a sermon, the herald of the gospel told the much suffering people, ‘For the honor and for the glory of God, I pledge my word to you that God will deliver you from your calamities; on one condition: that you choose to give credit to what I say and have pity on your own souls by making a good confession and showing worthy fruits of repentance. But I also declare to you that if you are ungrateful for these benefits, if, like the dog, you return to the vomit, God will be still more irritated against you, and you will feel the effects thereof twofold by the fresh afflictions He will then send.’

They believed the preacher and did penance. From that moment the scourges ceased; nothing more was heard of wolves, and there was no more hail. What seemed most remarkable was that when it hailed in the vicinity, the cloud, on nearing their lands, either stopped or went off in another direction. The wolves kept their pact with the servant of God; they no longer dared violate the laws of pity being pitiless towards men because they had been converted. This lasted as long as those people remained faithful to God.”

Anonymous of Rieti. *Actus Beati Francisci in Valle Reatina*, IV, 14-20. Edited by A. Cadderi, Assisi, Edizioni Porziuncola, 1999

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