

Poggio Bustone: Saint Francis Begins His Mission of Peace

"Good day, good people!"

Luca Wadding, the famous 17th century Franciscan historian wrote about Francis' arrival in Poggio Bustone in 1209. He described how Francis and his companions, who were being persecuted, were in search of a hospitable place and found it in Poggio Bustone.

Climbing the road that leads to the hermitage, one rediscovers the simplicity and joy of this greeting enveloped by the same untouched nature that Saint Francis saw and loved. The Sanctuary is surrounded by verdant **woods** and looks out onto a mystic panorama: the Sacred Valley and the splendid Lakes Lungo and Ripasottile Natural Reserve to the north.

The Presence of Saint Francis

The oldest hagiographers of Francis indicate his first presence in the Rieti valley near Poggio Bustone. Saint Francis stopped here to pray in a secluded grotto in the woods. It was here that he had the **vision** of the total remission of his past sins. And it was in Poggio Bustone that he predicted the extension of his Order and made the prophecy that his mission of peace would begin from here. As was his custom, the precarious accommodations he found were near Poggio so that he could preach to the people of the village.

Further proof of Saint Francis' presence in Poggio Bustone involves a **public confession** he made. A crowd gathered near the hermitage to hear a sermon by the Ragged Saint. The people were stunned to hear a mortified Francis confess to eating food seasoned with lard during Lent.

The sources that document this episode do not mention the date in which it occurred making it impossible to place it chronologically.

History of the Sanctuary

According to tradition, the church in the Sanctuary, dedicated to Saint James, was originally the property of the **Farfa Abbey** that donated it to the Friars Minor in 1217. The site donated to the Franciscans was situated strategically to favour preaching: it was near Rieti and it was near the roads used by shepherds and those that led to the nearby regions.

Due the direct presence of Saint Francis, the Poggio Bustone hermitage became an active and vital centre starting from the first half of the 13th century even

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though few architectural records of this early phase remain. Historians, in fact, date the convent complex to the beginning of the **14th century**.

The hermitage lived moments of great growth that alternated with moments of standstill that reached semi-abandon and total abandon. Between the end of the 14th century and the 15th century, the Sanctuary flourished thanks to its adhesion to the **Observance** movement, a movement that began within the Franciscan Order and was organized on a professional basis in the 15th century by St. Bernardine of Siena and St. John Capistrano who supported strict observance of the Rule. The year 1373 marks the beginning of this important event. In this year, Poggio Bustone, along with other fraternities in the Rieti area, Umbria, and the Marche, obtained permission to choose their own obedience and joined the movement.

Locations and Art

A document dated at the beginning of the 14th century and written by the so-called *Anonimo Reatino* (Anonymous of Rieti), a friar whose name is not known, narrates the existence of **two hermitages**: an upper one where the Saint had the vision of total remission of his past sins, and a lower one.

The **upper hermitage** can be identified by the little church embedded under a rocky mass and hidden by the woods. During Saint Francis' time, it was a simple grotto. The first building dates to the beginning of the 14th century and it adopted a single nave covered by a barrel vault.

Two periods can be identified within the church, a 14th century part that surrounds a 17th century altar. This space was discovered in 1947 and it may establish the first Franciscan settlement in the area.

The **lower hermitage** is the actual church and convent of Saint James. The upper hermitage is reached by a thirty-minute walk on a **path** through a wood of Holm oaks, Maple trees and Hornbeams that culminates in an enchanted location made holy by the presence of Saint Francis.

Around the year 1650, **six chapels** were erected commemorating the miracles that took place here and passed on through popular legend.

The **first chapel** houses the rock upon which the Saint laid his bible when a storm was about to strike: as soon as he placed the book down, the stone melted as if it were made of wax.

The **second chapel** was built on the site where Saint Francis sat leaning against a rock on which the print of his hood can still be seen.

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The **third chapel** houses the imprint of the Saint's elbow, the **fourth** is dedicated to the apparition of the devil and to the imprint he left on the rock. The **fifth chapel** preserves Saint Francis' footprint and the **sixth** the imprint of an angel.

Going towards the lower hermitage, the **Votive Temple** built by Carlo Alberto Carpiceci rises near the clearing of the convent. It commemorates the mission of peace that the Saint began from Poggio Bustone. Near the door we find the words Saint Francis left his disciples, "Go forth modestly, two and two, and proclaim peace to all men". Inside there is a statue of the Saint by Lorenzo Ferri.

The convent **church** is dedicated to Saint James the Major. The front opens from a portico that was reconstructed in 1951 according to a design by Alberto Carpiceci. The church was erected in the 14th century and was renovated several times. During the 17th century two chapels were opened, one dedicated to Saint Anthony of Padua and the second to Saint Francis. The last intervention took place after the 1948 earthquake.

The **interior of the church** is austere. It has a single nave covered by a trussed roof. The apse, on the other hand, is covered by an elegant cross vault. Due to the particular architectural elements (brackets and ribs) used to build the church, historians have dated its construction to the first decade of the 14th century.

Along the right wall a 15th century tablet depicts the **Madonna with Child and Saint Joseph**. On the same wall, a 17th century fresco of a **Pope between Saint Francis and Saint Anthony of Padua** resurfaced during restoration work following the 1948 earthquake. Behind them is an interesting representation of the Poggio Bustone Castle that allows us to reconstruct the ancient urban layout of the village: it was surrounded by walls, dominated by towers and a belfry, and had two entrance gates.

The **cloister** is located on the right of the church and the convent is built around it. A small portico with pilasters and columns that was incorporated in the cloister is what remains of the original structure. One wall of the cloister preserves a painting of the **Madonna with Child**, a precious and exquisite 15th century work from the Umbrian school.

The pilgrim's **refectory**, decorated with two 17th century paintings of the Last Supper and the Virgin Mary between Saint Francis and Saint Claire, offers an interesting view

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The Presence of Saint Francis at Greccio Through Direct Sources

Hypocrisy Under Accusation

“Around Christmas time one year a large crowd had gathered at the Poggio hermitage to hear the sermon. Francis began with the following: ‘You believe me to be a holy man and so you have come with devotion. Well, then I confess that during this period of Lent I have eaten food seasoned with lard’. And like so many other times, he attributed what was actually a concession to his illness to sins of gluttony.”

Thomas of Celano. *Vita Seconda*, XCIV, 131. *Fonti Francescane. Editio Minor*, Assisi, Movimento Francescano, 1986

Predictions by Saint Francis

“One day while he was living in the upper hermitage of Poggio, in the Province of Rieti, and was thinking bitterly about his past, he felt filled by the joy of the Holy Spirit who reassured him that his past sins had been fully remitted.

On another occasion in the same hermitage, swept away and completely submerged in a marvellous light that widened the horizons of his spirit, he saw his future and the future of his sons very vividly. Following the ecstasy, he returned to the friars and told them: ‘Be strong, my brothers, and rejoice in the Lord; don’t be sad because you are few, and do not fear my simplicity and yours; because the Lord has shown me with a truthful vision that God will make us a large multitude and his blessing will help us grow in many ways.’”

Anonymous of Rieti. *Actus Beati Francisci in Valle Reatina*, VIII, 17-20. Edited by A. Cadderi, Assisi, Edizioni Porziuncola, 1999

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