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The gentle saint leads pilgrims on path to nature

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Our correspondent walks the path less travelled on the Cammino di San Francesco



THE HOLY Valley that encircles Rieti, 50 miles (80km) northeast of Rome, is full of open-armed statues of St Francis. They welcome hikers to the Cammino di San Francesco, a new 50-mile pilgrimage trail on paths between four sanctuaries which the gentle saint visited in the early 13th century.

The sanctuaries (Poggio Bustone, La Foresta, Fonte Colombo and Greccio) still operate as small monasteries. They have half-frescoed medieval chapels and neat courtyards where St Francis retreated to pray and compose such works as his *Canticle to Creation*.

“Even today the pilgrim can sense the pure and simple spirit of St Francis living in these places,” says Giovanni Tirelano, a Franciscan novice who acts as a guide at the Fonte Colombo sanctuary.

Tirelano, who cannot be much older than 20, wears sandals and the chocolate-brown hooded habit of the Franciscan order, tied with a three-knot cord representing his vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. He ushers visitors around the peaceful hermitage where, five times a year, St Francis withdrew for 40 days at a time to fast and pray.

In a corner of the cave’s chapel a red letter T, dating from the 13th century, has been daubed on the wall — a symbol of the cross, it is also the shape made when a monk stretches out his arms. A similar image of the saint welcoming birds has been appropriated as the symbol for the pilgrimage.

“St Francis was so in tune with the divinity of the natural world around him,” says Tirelano, that it was here in 1223 that he received the final Rule of the Friars Minor from Christ, who appeared to him in the form of an oak tree, parts of which are still visible today. Also still visible is the cell where St Francis had his eyes cauterised with a red-hot iron by the finest papal physicians of the day, having contracted glaucoma on a crusade to the Holy Land.

Each sanctuary acts as a starting or finishing post for walkers and has its own story. At La Foresta, for example, the miracle of the grapevine took place, when a wrecked vineyard produced an exceptionally good wine. At the lofty Greccio sanctuary, also known as the Franciscan Bethlehem, St Francis created the first known living Nativity scene, a tradition which is still celebrated there on Christmas Eve.

“The sanctuaries in the Rieti valley not only bring us closer to Francis but to Francis’s *forma vitae*, the Gospels,” says Father José Rodríguez Carballo, General Minister of the Order of the Franciscan Minor. “Its natural beauty led him to contemplate the mystery of Incarnation and other mysteries in the life of Christ.

“Every time I visit these graceful places I discover something new about myself. It fascinates me to contemplate the mountains that St Francis saw with his eyes, the stars that made him dream and the sounds and smells of the woods. It creates a physical connection with Francis and his feelings.”

Appropriately, St Francis, an outdoors man, has been enlisted as patron saint of the environment. Walking allowed him to meet challenges and meditate. Through his exposure to the elements and the dangers of the road he lived out an active and radical faith.

Although today you are more likely to meet wild boar than bandits, “the walk is your own version of St Francis’s battle with his soul — without flinging yourself on the thorn bushes,” says Tirelano.

The gently undulating paths, none of which is more than 21km and above medium difficulty, can be followed on foot, by bike or on horseback. In the tradition of Spain’s hugely popular Camino de Santiago (or Saint James Way), a pilgrim’s “passport” is stamped at each sanctuary and at the Temple of St Francis, 1,623m above sea level, on the often snow-capped Mount

Terminillo.

“Saint Francis is as fascinating today as he was during his own lifetime. He is always youthful because he is one of the few truly pure and evangelical people to have existed — few people have experienced Christianity so fully and so dramatically,” says Giovanni, a pilgrim from Milan who walked the path recently and is one of many who would like to see it extended to feature other places with strong Franciscan associations, such as Assisi, La Verna and Gubbio, all in Umbria just to the north of Rieti.

Work on an inter-regional project called the Itinerary of Faith, which will join the Cammino di Francesco with Assisi and Rome, has just begun and should open in the summer of 2006. The project hopes to incorporate a walk dedicated to Saint Benedict.

“The central Apennine area between Lazio and Umbria has always been strong in spirituality,” says **Diego Di Paolo**, **project manager** of the Itinerary of Faith.

It will be a few years, however, before the full medieval pilgrim route from northern Europe leads pilgrims to Rome. The ancient Via Francigena, which ran from England, France and Germany to the Eternal City, was one of the three principal medieval pilgrims' paths — the others led to Santiago de Compostela and Jerusalem.

The Italians hope to create a path that will not only one day have the same international profile as the Camino de Santiago — which is walked by thousands of pilgrims each year — but eventually also be linked to it.

Perhaps St Francis, who made the journey himself from Rome to Santiago, would give his blessing.

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