

CONFERENCE ASSISI 2024

THE FRANCISCAN PLACES

The PORZIUNCOLA and the BASILICA OF SANTA MARIA DEGLI ANGELI.

Data from the sources

1. Place of Francis' first confrontation with the Gospel (1Cel 22).
2. Place of Clare's consecration (LegCh 7-8).
3. The Portiuncula, cradle of the Order (3Comp 32-35; 2Cel 18).
4. Place of Chapters or "gathering" of the brothers (3Comp 57-59).
5. Death of Francis (1Cel 116).

The Portiuncula is located in an area at the foot of the City of Assisi, St. Mary of the Angels.

Remaining for a long time in a state of neglect, it was restored by St. Francis, who clearly understood his vocation here and founded the Order of Friars Minor here in 1209, entrusting it to the protection of the Virgin Mother of Christ, to whom the little church is dedicated.

Francis' confrontation with the Gospel, in the little church of the Portiuncula, indicates a culminating moment of his initial conversion. After listening to the priest's explanation of the Gospel, the young Francis by now had no more doubts and made the decision to live according to the demands placed before him by the Lord.

In 1216, in a vision, Francis obtained from Jesus himself the Indulgence known as the "Indulgence of the Portiuncula" or "Pardon of Assisi," approved by Pope Honorius III.

At the Portiuncula, which was and is the center of Franciscanism, the *Poverello* gathers his friars each year in Chapters, to discuss the Rule, regain fervor and set out again to proclaim the Gospel throughout the world.

The construction of the basilica of St. Mary of the Angels was begun in 1569 to replace the various buildings erected to protect the Portiuncula and the cell where Francis died. The basilica responds to the dual purpose of protecting the priceless relic that is the little chapel of the Portiuncula and gathering the crowds of pilgrims especially on major feasts.

The Chapel of the Transit (or death of St. Francis) in the right side of the apse of the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels, not far from the Portiuncula Church.

The small structure, in fact, was nothing more than the infirmary of that group of huts in which St. Francis had gathered the first group of friars. The saint died in this place on October 3, 1226 after composing the last verses of the Canticle of Creatures, those dedicated to "*sora morte*," and expressly asking to be laid to rest on the bare earth.

On the left wall of the chapel remains the wooden door from 1200 and on the altar, laid in a reliquary, the cincture used by the saint.

Francis died among his friars, on the bare earth, poor and with a heart overflowing with joy because he was faithful to Our Lady poverty to the last.

Here at the Portiuncula chapel Clare unites with the friars

Clare's consecration in the Portiuncula chapel was not the expression of mere passing enthusiasm, but the result of mature discernment despite her young age.

Armida Barelli:

For Armida this Church is the place where she definitively chose the path of "consecration in the world."

After being commissioned by Benedict XV to establish the Young Women (of the Catholic Action) throughout Italy, Barelli, at the invitation of Father Cimino went to Assisi. "You need another pause for recollection before diving into work. Come on October 3 and 4 to Assisi. On the feast of St. Francis, I will celebrate Mass at the Portiuncula for the nascent Young Women, and you will make your consecration to God for the apostolate in the world, with the little personal Rule that I myself will prepare for you." This the Minister of the Friars Minor told her.

On Oct. 3-4 Armida spent two days of prayer at St. Mary of the Angels, in the Little Church of the Portiuncula, undistracted by the coming and going of pilgrims, and on the morning of the 4th, in the chapel of the Portiuncula, recalling the tonsure of St. Clare, "she took the vows of the evangelical counsels from the hands of the successor of St. Francis."

A question presented itself insistently to her soul that immediately became a prayer:

"Will you give me, Lord, other sisters who want to devote themselves totally to the apostolate to make you known and loved in the world, renouncing to create a family of their own?". In the intimacy of her heart, it seemed to her that the Lord answered, "Yes." (from M. STICCO, *Una donna fra due secoli*, Ed. OR, Milan 1983, 113-114)

Canticle of Brother Sun (or Canticle of Creatures)

*Most High, almighty, good Lord Thine are the praises and the glory and the honor and every blessing.
To you alone, Most High, they are confined, and no man is worthy of you.
Praise be to you, O my Lord, for all creatures,
especially for Sir Brother Sun, who brings the day that enlightens us
And it is beautiful and radiant with great splendor: of you, Most High, it bears signification.
Praised be You, O my Lord, for sora Luna and the Stars:
in heaven You have formed them clear, beautiful and precious.
Praised be You, O my Lord, for Brother Wind and for the Air, the Clouds, the clear Sky
and every time for which to thy creatures thou givest sustenance.
Praised be You, O my Lord, for Sister Water, who is very useful, humble, precious and chaste.
Praised be You, O my Lord, for Brother Fire, with which You enlighten us in the night:
and it is robust, beautiful, strong and joyful.
Praised be you, O my Lord, for our Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us
and produces diverse fruits with colorful flowers and grass.
Praised be You, O my Lord, for those who forgive for Your sake and endure sickness and suffering.
Blessed are those who endure them in peace for they will be crowned by you.
Praise be to you, O my Lord, for our Sister Bodily Death, from which no living man can escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin. Blessed are those who will be found in your will
For to them death will do them no harm.
Praise and bless the Lord and thank him and serve him with great humility.*

SAINT DAMIAN

Data from the Sources

While praying in the church of St. Damien, the young Francis received an invitation from the Crucifix to repair his Church (3Comp 13; 2Cel 10; LegM II,1).

The church is the heart of the shrine, the place where young Francis' conversion took place.

Built in different periods, the oldest part is the one at the back with the off-center apse and the choir added in 1506.

The place, dedicated to St. Damian, was enriched in 1150 with the Byzantine-Syrian icon of Christ Crucified who spoke to Francis. The image is now preserved in the Basilica of St. Clare within the walls of Assisi.

Before Francis' encounter with the crucifix at St. Damian's there was his encounter with lepers. Nearby there were several lepers' hospitals (*San Salvatore delle Pareti [Casa Gualdi]*, *San Lazzaro* and *San Rufino d'Arce* [Church of the Magdalene]) that were frequented by the young convert. The service experience he had with them is closely related to his encounter with the Crucifix.

The front part of the church, united by the ogival vault - on which St. Clare's Dormitory is located - is a remodeled development perhaps by Francis and Clare. Stones from Roman times and natural rock ledges emerge at the entrance walls.

The attention of the faithful is also captured by the wooden tabernacle placed on an ancient column in the center of the choir.

In this place, the young Francis understood his own calling. After addressing his prayer "High and glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart..." to the Crucifix, Christ answered him and entrusted him with the mission to "repair the Church," not the one made of stones but of men, through his own faith in God.

From 1211 the Church became an integral part of the Monastery of St. Clare and the "Poor Ladies" (today "Poor Clares"). In the seclusion of this place, Clare and her sisters, lived the evangelical ideal inspired by the life of Mary, the Mother of the Lord, considered by Francis and Clare "Daughter and Handmaid of the Father, Mother of the Lord, Bride of the Holy Spirit."

Francis' last act on this earth also took place at San Damiano: his stigmatized body was shown to the Poor Ladies on the morning of October 4, 1226. The grate was unhinged, and Clare and the sisters were able to have the Seraphic Father in their midst for veneration.

Armida Barelli:

In the small choir of St. Clare our first sisters gave birth to the Institute on November 19, 1919.

Maria Sticco writes: Father Gemelli had called together the first recruits with a personal letter, setting the meeting in Assisi from November 17 to 20. The small handful gathered at San Damiano, under the presidency of Father Arcangelo Mazzotti, and there they had the revelation of Franciscan spirituality and at the same time of their own vocation; they had it in a *Fioretti*-like atmosphere, all fragrant with the citron and myrtle, which Father Bonaventura Marrani had chivalrously lavished on the uneven floor of the little choir. But an atmosphere of authentic *Fioretti*, not romanticized! Uncomfortable living, vegetables in oil on the friar's table, hard stones to kneel upon, unheated small rooms. There was nothing mellow or soft from the preachers, they did not prospect a sunny life, but a life of the cross; they forbade sentimentality, they imposed meditating, thinking, studying, acting to defend the heart from surprises, to love God's will to the end. Their language was also out of the ordinary. (from M. STICCO, *Una donna fra due secoli*, Ed. OR., Milan 1983, 165-166)

On the occasion of the birth of our spiritual family and our first Holy Retreat, we thought of making a gift to the dear little church of St. Damien that had welcomed us as it did with St. Clare and her sisters.

The high altar of the church that was in Baroque style is in clear contrast with the poverty and simplicity of those sacred walls. We offered Father Provincial the sum to make a new altar, simple in Assisian stone, in a style suited to that shrine of Our Lady Poverty.

Behind the altar is written in Latin: by the Franciscan Tertiaries of the Social Kingdom of the Sacred Heart. (This inscription is still there today, bearing the first name of the Institute). (A. BARELLI, *Our History*, pro-manuscript, 1952, 61).

Last Thanksgiving Prayer of Clare

"Go securely and in peace, my blessed soul.

For you will have a good companion for your journey.

*Go forth, for the One who created you and sanctified you,
also poured in you the Holy Spirit*

He has always loved you tenderly as a mother her dear child.

And you, Lord, are blessed because You have created me!"

CHURCH OF SANTA CHIARA

Data from the sources

In addition to the various events that took place in the former church of St. George (the school of the young Francis, the place of his first preaching, his first burial and his canonization) today it interests us as the place where Clare's body rests (LegCh 48). And it is where the Crucifix of St. Damien is conserved.

The church was built, after the death of St. Clare, between 1255 and 1265, The architectural style is Gothic, and closely resembles the almost contemporary basilica of St. Francis of Assisi.

The tomb of the saint was ready in 1260, while the crypt that houses it was built later.

The exterior is characterized by three large arches that support the left side of the building.

The facade is made of white and pink stone and is divided into three bands.

Among the main works that can be admired there are:

- the Chapel of the Crucifix, which houses the original crucifix of St. Damien who spoke to St. Francis in the hermitage of San Damiano; there are also numerous frescoes from the 13th-14th centuries;

- the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, which with the Chapel of the Crucifix formed the ancient church of St. George: there are 14th-century frescoes in it.

For Francis and Clare, there is no encounter with God and men that is not transformed into new behavior, into concrete and effective gestures.

Armida Barelli

Tell you my emotion in passing before my dear Assisi where on October 4, 1918 I promised to dedicate myself to our Association? I could not. I remained standing at the corridor of the train, at the window, from the appearance of the first house until the last one disappeared. Everything I saw: the Portiuncula down in St. Mary of the Angels, the Church of St. Francis and St. Clare up there in Assisi, S. Damiano in the declining hillside, *Rivo Torto* in the plain, and *Le Carceri* at a distant, lost in the wilderness. (from M. COLLI-B. PANDOLFI in *'I write to you from the train. Diary and letters of Armida Barelli*, Ed. Vita e Pensiero, Milan 2022, 83.)

And with all my soul I prayed to my St. Francis whom I seemed to see roaming the streets and districts of Assisi, he, the great and beloved patron that Benedict XV gave to Catholic Action, to permeate us with his seraphic spirit: simplicity, joy, humility, detachment, zeal and love.

Prayer to the Crucifix

*Most high glorious God,
Illumine the darkness of my heart.
And give me straight Faith,
certain hope and perfect charity,
wisdom and knowledge,
Lord,
that I may do thy holy and true commandment. Amen.*

THE BASILICA OF SAINT FRANCIS

Data from the sources

Four years after the Saint's death, his body was transferred from the church of St. George (now St. Clare) to this Basilica, built in his honor (LegM XV,8).

According to tradition, it was Francis himself who indicated the place where he wanted to be buried. It is the lower hill of the city where, habitually, the "lawless," those condemned by justice, were buried. On that hill was built the new basilica, at the edge of the walled city.

The basilica consists of two overlapping churches, linked to two different construction phases: the first linked to Umbrian Romanesque, of Lombard derivation, the second linked to Gothic of French matrix.

The lower basilica was begun under the superintendence of Brother Elias in July 1228.

Work was to be completed in 1230 when the body of the saint was moved there, laid in a sarcophagus under the high altar, where it is still preserved in a small crypt.

Also placed at the four corners of the crypt are the bodies of the blessed friars Angelo, Leo, Masseo and Rufino and, along the staircase leading from the basilica to the crypt, the body of the blessed Jacopa dei Settesoli, a Roman noblewoman.

The most distinguished artists of the time from Giotto to Cimabue to Simone Martini collaborated on the basilica's decorations.

Also in the lower basilica is a room housing the relics of St. Francis, a small but significant collection of objects that belonged to the saint.

The upper basilica has a simple "gabled" facade. The upper part is decorated with a grandiose central rose window, with symbols of the Evangelists in relief on either side. The lower part is enriched by the majestic, played portal.

The interior architecture shows the most typical features of Italian Gothic: pointed arches crossing the nave. In contrast, the lower band is smooth, and was arranged from the beginning for the creation of a bible for the poor, represented by the didactic fresco decoration.

The upper basilica contains the most complete collection of medieval stained glass in Italy.

The lower band of the nave of the upper basilica is occupied by the most famous cycle of frescoes, that of the Life of St. Francis: 28 scenes from St. Bonaventure's *Legenda maggiore*, which, at the end of the 13th century, constituted the official biography of the saint.

Francis rests in the heart of the Basilica, almost representing its foundation. Beside him are his friends, fellow travelers and witnesses of God's work in the poor man, and Donna Jacopa. Some have attributed special symbolism to the basilica with its two overlapping churches: the lower one, dark and low, would be the symbol of the life of penance; the upper one, bright, spacious and elegant, would be the symbol of glory. The former is the foundation of the latter. Francis gathered in glory the fruits of his path of penance and minority and from this place he invites us to follow an identical path. We will only be able to make our contribution to the "building of the city" to the extent that we remain in the world without being of the world.

Armida Barelli

The pilgrims (that is, the first twelve sisters) descended into the crypt where the body of St. Francis is intombed in the jealous love of Brother Elias, within the impenetrable slab of stone. "Here we are at the root of the beautiful things that you have seen so far," Fr. Gemelli said, "and of those that you will see; of those that will also take place because of you if you are worthy of the high calling."

Then, kneeling among the twelve pilgrims, he turned to St. Francis in prayer that he might enlighten them during those brief days, that he might give his spirit to the work that was being started in his name, in his house.

Fr. Arcangelo Mazzotti, in leaving the monument said, "These are the consequences of Franciscan spirituality. You have not yet seen the humble springs. You do not know Lady Poverty. You know nothing about Franciscanism if you do not know St. Damian." (A. BARELLI, *Our History*, pro-manuscript, 1952, 42-43).

*You are holy, Lord God only,
Who performs wonders.
You are strong. You are great. You are most high.
You are almighty King, You holy Father,
King of heaven and earth.
You are Triune and One, Lord God of gods,
Thou art good, all good, supreme good,
Lord God, living and true.
You are love, charity. You are wisdom.
You are humility. You are patience.
You are beauty. You are meekness
You are security. You are quietness.
You are joy and gladness. You are hope for us.*

SANCTUARY OF THE VERNA

Data from the sources

Apparition of the winged seraphim; impression of the stigmata (1Cel 94-95; LegM XIII,3).

La Verna is one of the most relevant places of Franciscanism.

The foundation of an early hermitic nucleus dates back to the presence on the site of St. Francis, who in the spring of 1213 met Count Orlando of *Chiusi della Verna*, who, impressed by his preaching, wished to make him a gift of the Verna mountain, which subsequently became a place of numerous and prolonged periods of retreat.

In the following years a number of small cells and the small church of Santa Maria degli Angeli (1216-18) arose. The decisive impetus for the development of a large convent was given by the episode of the stigmata (1224), which occurred on this mountain, favored by the saint as an ideal place to devote himself to meditation.

Francis' last visit to the mount took place in the summer of 1224. He withdrew there in August for a 40-day fast in preparation for the feast of St. Michael and, while absorbed in prayer, received the stigmata. From then on, La Verna became holy ground.

The stigmata were not in Francis a sudden or isolated phenomenon from the rest of his life. It could be said that his body began to bear the wounds of the Crucifix from his encounter with the crucifix at St. Damian's. That image of Christ had remained so deeply imprinted in his spirit that one day, while praying on this mountain, it became evident in his flesh through the stigmata. We, as heirs of Francis' spirituality, must ask ourselves to what extent our Christ identifies with that discovered by him and whether we have been able to keep it intact. La Verna reminds us that we too must be crucified with Christ for the salvation of the world.

The Quadrant Square leads to the Basilica Maggiore, dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption, consecrated in 1568. Built between the 14th and 16th centuries and remodeled several times, it is introduced by a portico that extends on the right side almost to the bell tower, and has a Latin cross plan with a single nave and cross vaults.

Inside, the most important traces of Andrea della Robbia's workshop are preserved.

The oldest work is the Annunciation (c. 1475). In the chapel to the left of the chancel is the Ascension (c. 1490). On either side of the chancel are the two figures of St. Francis and St. Anthony Abbot (c. 1475-80). On the right is the Nativity (1479).

The chapel, the heart of the sanctuary, built on the site of the miraculous event, was built in 1263, with a single nave, covered by a cross vault.

A plaque on the floor marks the place where the miracle of the Stigmata is said to have occurred.

On the back wall is a monumental ribbed altarpiece depicting Christ crucified among angels with the Madonna, St. John St. Francis and St. Jerome mourning at their feet, executed in 1481 by Andrea della Robbia.

La Verna place of the seal of Francis' love for his Lord, but above all place of Christ's Passion for Francis.

Here the transformation of Christ's friend into the visible portrait of Christ Jesus Crucified is accomplished.

Mystery and Surprise meet and the indelible sign of God's Presence remains in the rock and flesh.

Among these trees Leo receives the Blessing and all good and delight continue to pour upon us all.

Armida Barelli:

Father Gemelli spent Holy Week at La Verna, which in twenty years of Franciscan profession he had never been able to see. [...]

Resolutely, with that formidable will which dominated his feelings, his time, his work, and with that power of detachment and that capacity for concentration which enabled him to attend to many different things, he left on the plains his concerns as Rector of a University, his nags as a scientist, his commitments as a writer and publisher, and on the little carriage for the steep road to Verna he soon found himself what he was and what he wanted to be: a friar of St. Francis, a poor and simple little brother like that of friar Galdino, who wrote naive pages in "*Vita e Pensiero*."

1924: seventh centenary of the stigmata. Where better to celebrate it than at La Verna? Father Gemelli meditated on the mystery of the cross and Franciscan joy.

"Our Family today does not correspond to the integral purpose for which it was instituted." Why is that? "All of you together have continued to live the same rhythm as that before you entered the Family. The great majority among you are pious and good women, who will certainly sanctify themselves and sanctify others, but what is needed is not to have pious tertiaries, not religious *sui generis* but consecrated to God in a total immolation of activity and prayer." "There is a need for personal sanctification in that form of work which each one, independently of the others, assumes as her own means of contributing, in Franciscan life, in the implementation of the social Kingdom of the Sacred Heart."

"But isn't a good Franciscan formation enough for all this? - Father Archangel asked him. - Isn't the Third Order seriously understood enough?"

"Not enough."

"What do you want then, Augustine?"

He wanted what he alone had: a lay mentality in an immolated life of faith, foreseeing for his tertiaries the mission reserved for the laity, consecrated to God in the world, which the Second Vatican Council would sanction forty years later. (from M. STICCO, *Una donna fra due secoli*, Ed. OR, Milan 1983, 311)

Armida Barelli, in late October, announced to Father Guardian that she and her brother Eng. Fausto and some young ladies would go up to the Oasis on November 20 to see the status of the work and decide on the completion of the Chapel. She also thanked him for accepting the small gift. What was it about? On the occasion of the birth of the Oasi, the *Opera Regalità* wanted to remodel the small bell of the Stigmata. The initiative was accepted by the friars of La Verna who were happy to receive it and place it on the bell tower of the Stigmata. (Areti-Bastanzetti, 1939)

Prayer of St. Francis

*O my Lord Jesus Christ,
two graces I pray thee to give me,
Before I die:
the first, that in my life I may feel in my soul and in my body,
as much as is possible, that pain which thou, sweet Jesus,
sustained in the hour of thy most bitter passion,
the second is that I feel in my heart, as much as is possible,
That excessive love of which thou, Son of God,
You were kindled to willingly sustain so much passion for us sinners.*

Blessing to Brother Leo

*May the Lord bless you and keep you.
Show His face to you and have mercy on you.
Turn His gaze upon you and give you peace.
May the Lord bless you, Brother Leo.*