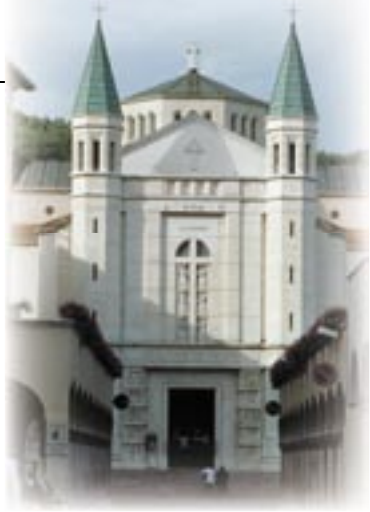


Mystical Umbria.

A pilgrimage to the places of spirituality

The Middle Ages brought a mystical fervour that is still spreading today, after hundreds of years, but Umbria was already pervaded by a deep religious spirit much earlier. In the Roman era, the river god Clitumnus spoke through the oracle, the Sybil prophesied in the celebrated cave, Jove could enjoy the ilex groves in Monteluco consecrated to him, and Mars was venerated in ancient Todi. With the advent of Christianity, Umbria became a land of saints, churches, monasteries and convents, which flourished throughout the region and were essential to its economic and cultural life. Devotion went hand in hand with art, in a symbiosis of which history has seen few such glorious examples. Imagine Assisi in the 13th century, an extraordinary laboratory of faith, architecture, and painting. In the centuries preceding the life of St. Francis, however, other important saints had sowed their seeds on these lands. First and foremost, St. Benedict, the "patron of the Western world", born in Norcia in the year 480, whose Rule gave a formidable impetus to the spreading of monasticism. Then there is St. Valentine, patron saint of Terni, where he was born in the year 175 and where his martyred body was taken upon his death. In an era of intolerance, he celebrated the wedding between a pagan legionnaire and a Christian girl, thus becoming the patron saint of lovers, celebrated on 14th February each year when hundreds of couples say their



marriage vows in the local basilica. Umbria was also home to numerous female saints, from **St. Clare of Assisi** to **St. Rita of Cascia**, still widely venerated today.

It is impossible here to mention all the fascinating places of spirituality in Umbria, but just a few should be sufficient to demonstrate the weight of the phenomenon (and inspire an excursion here and there). The **Abbey of Santa Maria di Sitria** is immersed in the park of Monte Cucco and features a beautiful Romanesque church. The Valnerina is home to the **Abbey of Sant'Eutizio**, created in the 5th century by the Syrian monks who were the spiritual fathers of St.





Monastery of San Damiano. What remained of the home of his father, Pietro di Bernardone, was annexed to the Chiesa Nuova. Outside the town centre, penetrating into the forests of Monte Subasio, you come to the **Hermitage of the Carceri**: here St. Francis and his companions gathered to pray, isolating themselves in the caves. On the monastery grounds is the atmospheric Grotta di San Francesco, with his bed of stone. St. Francis also sojourned at the **Abbey of Vallingegno**, in the church of Bovara, in Vecciano, Montefalco, on Isola Maggiore at Lake Trasimeno, at the sanctuary of Monteluco, in Rivortorto, and Narni, where he

founded the **Monastery of Lo Speco**. In Gubbio, after fleeing from Assisi, he took refuge in the storehouse of the Spadalonga family and subsequently tamed the wolf near the Church of the Vittorina; in the **Church of San Francesco della Pace**, erected over the cave of the wolf (which lived for two years in harmony with the people), the stone is conserved where the pact of peace was made between the saint and the beast. At Pian dell'Arca in Bevagna he talked to the birds. The **Cathedral of Santa Maria degli Angeli**

Benedict. Nearby are the **Hermits' Caves** with an enchanting trail that leads all the way to Norcia. In the **Abbey of San Pietro in Valle** (8th c.) you can admire extensive cycles of Romanesque frescoes, some of the most significant in Italy. Surrounded by an ancient ilex grove, the **Abbey of Sassovivo** (11th c.) stands on a fairytale landscape; it currently houses the Jesus Caritas Community inspired by Charles de Foucauld. Also worthy of mention are the **Camaldolese Hermitage of Santa Illuminata** (11th c.), a site that draws pilgrims because of the nearby **Grotta di San Francesco**, and the **14th-century fortified Monastery of San Giacomo**, which holds fine frescoes of the 15th century. Umbria also has a dense network of Marian sanctuaries, all built after the Middle Ages, including the **Sanctuary of the Madonna dei Bagni** near Deruta, significant for the six hundred majolica ex-voto pieces it conserves. But the places where the deepest devotion (and greatest curiosity) are concentrated are



undoubtedly those related to St. Francis, whose life brought about a true revolution in Christianity. Today we can imagine a fascinating itinerary following the footsteps of the saint. It would start, naturally, in Assisi, where the mortal remains of St. Francis lie in the magnificent **Basilica**. Next to the church is the Selva di San Francesco, an ancient forest (abandoned for eight centuries and now reopened to the public) that invites meditation. St. Francis was baptised at the font of the Duomo of San Rufino, and the remains of the school he attended as a child were incorporated into the Basilica of **Santa Chiara**, which conserves the crucifix that spoke to him in the

conserves the **Porziuncola**, the tiny chapel that Francis restored with his own hands and where he founded his order, and the **Cappella del Transito**, where St. Francis died on 3rd October 1226. Here the mystical atmosphere is palpable. Today, Assisi, heir of the great teachings of St. Francis, is a symbol of peace and coexistence. Each year, a peace march is held that attracts thousands of participants from all over the world.