

The Basilica of Saint Francis

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Here is the center of our Franciscan universe in all its majesty. The **Papal Basilica of St. Francis** and Sacro Convento surrounding it dominates the west end of Mount Subasio on which it is built. It has a history that astounds and it's this magnificent work of art that I want to share with you as part of our celebration of the Solemnity of Francis of Assisi on October 4.

Francis died October 3, 1226; he was canonized by Pope Gregory on July 16, 1228. Just months before that event Simone di Pucciarello donated land to Brother Elias and the pope expressed his desire to build a church in memory of Francis. So the day after he canonized Francis, Gregory IX laid the first stone. What began as a rather humble edifice, however, was changed into the three level construction you see.

Under the guidance of Brother Elias designers prepared a rather simple tomb for the remains of Francis and built a vaulted church and friary complex above and around the tomb. Haymo of Faversham, brilliant British theologian and liturgist, was chosen as Minister General in 1240 and catapulted the plans to new heights. Because he could attract workers from the North the massive Upper Basilica was constructed in record time. Stories in Assisi say that up to 10,000 people worked on the upper church at a time, that working on it was given as a penance, that more than one architect was responsible for its design and that it only took 10 years to complete. There is truth in some of all that. Pope Innocent IV consecrated the altars in 1253. Impressive, yes? Such was the desire to honor the Little Poor Man of Assisi in a highly visible way.

Before I go any further with art and architecture – to this day there are people who don't care for this huge complex. The main argument is that it is completely out of character with the life and spirit of Francis. Why should such a huge building be built to honor a man so simple that he asked to die naked on the bare ground inside the Porziuncola chapel? As you see, the exterior is very plain but the interior is one massive work of art by renowned artists of the time. Every square inch is covered in precious frescoes and the finest materials were used everywhere. Did Lady Poverty abandon the ship? 800 years later I do not let myself get tangled in those arguments. The Basilica is our story. The exquisite art is a testament to beauty, to Francis and the Franciscan Movement and a testament to God. Our past is that testament, so we live with it and cherish it



To the left is a view of the **Lower Basilica**. The altar at the far end is directly above the Tomb of Francis. As you see, the interior is covered with frescoes and decorative painting, very typical of high Gothic. The ceiling bays are dark blue and each panel contains hundreds of gold stars with a tiny mirror in the center. Many oil lamps hung from the ceiling to create a dazzling cosmos for medieval pilgrims as they entered another world of holiness and beauty. The blue is pulverized lapis lazuli donated for the decoration. The frescoes were done by Giotto, Martini, Lorenzetti, Cavallini and Cimabue. Ten chapels surround the nave, creating a massive work of glorious medieval art.



Welcome to the interior of the **Upper Basilica**. The Gothic arches frame the 70 ft. ceiling and windows. The walls are actually three different cycles or story boards. The large panels closest to the floor convey the life of Francis. Above them are scenes from the life of Christ that his life parallels. The third level of frescoes at the top are from the Old Testament. All of these are magnificent in color. The nave vaulting is decorated with more lapis and stars; the bays above the papal altar and front door contain four clypeates with important saints. The mastermind of the Upper Basilica was Jerome Ascoli, Minister General after Bonaventure. In 1279 he rescinded a proclamation of the Chapter of 1260 that forbade any decoration. Jerome declared “this must be beautified and appear as the bride going to her spouse.” Scenes from the life of Francis were begun at the end of the 13th century and taken

from the *Major Life of St. Francis* by St. Bonaventure. The church is considered by art historians to be the first place to present an illustrative story in multiple cycles. Bonaventure’s work was eschatological and that is revealed by the layers of a human being’s life held transparent over Scripture. It is a marvel to behold. Multiple interpretations of why Giotto placed certain scenes in certain positions have been studied and argued for ages, but for this article, just be amazed that there are twenty eight scenes in huge panels. Nine panels have three incidents, two have four and two panels near the entrance stand alone. According to historians of the Basilica these masterpieces were begun by Maestro di Isacco and completed by Giotto di Bondone who was called to Assisi by Giovanni da Muro, Minister General in 1296. They were completed in 1300 and art historians still discuss who painted what where and when.

At the right is an example of the structure of the three layer panels. At the top: Adam and Eve are being expelled from Eden (other panel lost). Below are two healings from the New Testament. Then from Francis’ life: 1) confirmation of the rule by Innocent III in 1209, 2) the dream of a fiery chariot and 3) a friar’s vision of the heavenly thrones.

Stained glass was relatively unknown in Italy in the late 13th century so the first panels of glass were crafted by Germans before the consecration in 1253; others in the apse and transept were done by French masters. The nave windows were done by Maestro di San Francesco and dated from 1263. They comprise the most complete set of 13th century stained glass in Italy. They contain countless images of saints, along with stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, New Testament literature and the life of Jesus. Over the years I befriended the late Gerard Ruf, a Conventual friar and expert on the windows. He told me the friars of Sacro Convento still have the glass recipes from the 13th century! The windows alone reiterate our Bonaventure’s ascription of God: **Beauty Itself**.





Finally, below the Lower Basilica is the **Tomb of Francis**, one of my favorite places on Earth, of course. This is where many meet the Francis of their dreams in its utter simplicity of naked stone. It's difficult to see but above the altar is the stone sarcophagus that holds the saint's remains. After his death, he was buried in the Chapel of San Giorgio. Once the lower basilica was completed his body was transferred in 1230 to this location and Br. Elias had it buried under tons of stone rubble. Lost for centuries, a 52 day search found his remains in 1818. The present crypt was designed by Ugo Tarchi between 1925-32. In 1934 his closest friar friends, Rufino, Angelo, Masseo and Leo were reburied

in the corners of the crypt around the central tomb of Francis. At the entrance is an urn with the remains of his dear friend and benefactor of Roman nobility, Lady (Brother) Jacoba di Settesoli; she was at his side when he died. It is a joy to celebrate the Eucharist directly below the remains of Francis. When I lived in Assisi in winters of the early 90's I could spend hours alone there. That inspired more than one composition! Millions of pilgrims visit this holy crypt throughout the year, a true testimony to the life and impact of Francis. People of every walk of life, country of origin and religion come to honor the Poverello.

The Italian peninsula is the result of seismic activity. September 27, 1997 two major quakes at 2:30 a.m. and 11:40 a.m. rocked the entire area around Assisi. The second quake registered 5.7 and devastated this town of 5,000 and many in Umbria. Unfortunately, two quadrants of two of the vaulted bays above the entrance and above the papal altar of the Upper Basilica collapsed and killed two friars and two workers who were inspecting damage from the first 5.5 quake. The Basilica was closed for two years of mourning and repairs, the saddest chapter in the history of this magnificent edifice. Aftershocks terrorized all of Umbria for days. I have friends who lost their homes and businesses. But filled with faith and resilience they rebuilt and reopened and Assisi glowed with new life within just a few years.



The Basilica of St. Francis is one grandiose acclamation of praise. Art and architecture reach to the heavens he loved so much and draw people into the Paschal Mystery of Christ as modeled perfectly by Francis. All its history and precious art point far beyond themselves, as any and every true symbol does. This sacred place reveals the memory of one man and one movement, yes, but it is also a springboard to see how God transforms our world and our hearts. To enter this Basilica is to enter the world of faith, the world of metaphor and the world of Christian experience of the Holy One. Gothic architecture literally soars to the heavens with worshippers on board. Stained glass creates a kaleidoscope of color to illuminate people with the Light of the world. Frescoes, carved wood and priceless artifacts show how human imagination mirrors the creative power of the Divine Artist. Enter at your own risk, believer, for God will change your life forever!

The friars of St. Peter's pray for you every day. Join our celebration and every day of the year to see and know the goodness of God. Be filled with peace and all good. *Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm*