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## Brother Sun, Sister Rock: The legacy of Francis of Assisi between faith, ecology and geology (by Maria Chiara Piazza, Italy)



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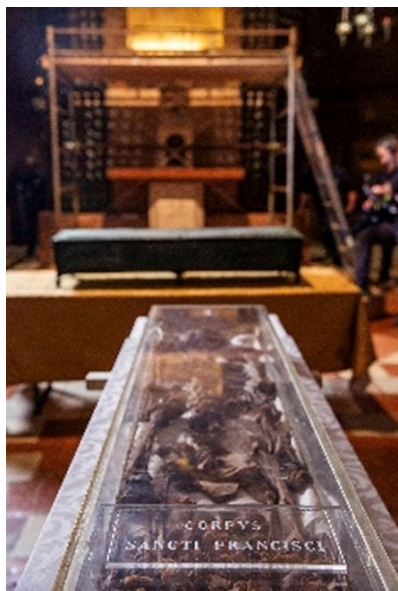
In 2026, Italy and the Franciscan community are experiencing a moment of exceptional significance: the eight-hundredth anniversary of the death of Saint Francis (1181/1182–1226; fig. 1). As highlighted by the [INGVambiente Blog](#) (in Italian), this anniversary is known as the *Centenary of the Transit* and marks the conclusion of the three-year period of commemorations that began in 2023 to honour the most important milestones in the life of the Saint.



*Figure 1 - Saint Francis, detail from Cimabue's fresco in the Lower Basilica of Assisi, Italy. Work in the public domain.*

Born in Assisi between 1181 and 1182 into a wealthy family, Francis abandoned material privileges after the traumatic experience of imprisonment during the war against Perugia. Between 1202 and 1206, he underwent a profound spiritual

crisis that led him to renounce all possessions and embrace a life of radical poverty grounded in the Gospel. His goal was to imitate Christ by living among the poor and marginalized, a choice that immediately attracted many followers. In 1210, he founded the first Franciscan Order, a revolutionary movement that operated in the streets rather than within closed monasteries. Obtaining the Pope's approval, however, was not easy. In those years, the Church of Rome viewed with suspicion movements that preached radical poverty, since many of them had fallen into heresy and openly challenged an ecclesiastical institution that appeared far removed from evangelical simplicity. Yet, despite these difficulties, Pope Innocent III (1161–1216) ultimately approved the Franciscan Rule. Francis' earthly journey ended in 1226 at the Porziuncola, the small church, close to Assisi, Italy, where it had all begun. Only two years after his death, in 1228, he was proclaimed a saint by Pope Gregory IX (1170?-1241), forever sealing his impact on history.



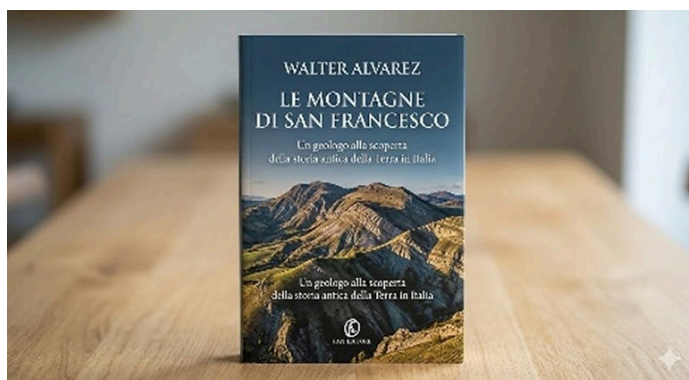
*Figure 2 - The tomb of St. Francis in the Crypt of the Lower Basilica of Assisi, venue of the exhibition for the Centenary of the Transit. Public domain image/Historical Archive.*

The year 2026 is marked by numerous events celebrating this historic milestone of eight hundred years. The heart of the commemorations is Assisi, where the Lower Basilica hosts an exceptional event: an extraordinary exhibition of the remains of the Saint, open to the public from 10 January to 22 March 2026 (fig. 2). It is a rare and precious opportunity for the faithful and visitors to encounter more closely the historical and spiritual figure of Francis in an atmosphere of profound participation.

The tribute to the "Poor Man" will not stop at the Basilica. Throughout the year, the entire Umbrian region will come alive with a rich calendar of art exhibitions, concerts, and academic conferences, transforming the area into an open-air cultural laboratory. Further prominence has been given to these celebrations by Pope Leo XIV, who proclaimed a special Franciscan Jubilee Year. The aim is clear: not only to honour a figure from the past, but also to encourage contemporary pilgrimage and invite each of us to reflect on the message of peace that Francis bequeathed to the world, a message that is more relevant today than ever.

Perhaps not everyone knows that there is an invisible yet remarkably

resilient thread linking St. Francis to geology. The places chosen by the Saint for prayer were not accidental: the unique rock formations of the Apennines profoundly influenced Franciscan spirituality and, in more recent times, have even guided important scientific research at the global level. An extraordinary example comes from the renowned American geologist Walter Alvarez, best known for his studies on the extinction of the dinosaurs, who dedicated the essay *The Mountains of Saint Francis* to Central Italy (fig. 3). In this work, Alvarez transforms geology into a story accessible to everyone, revealing how the heart of Italy preserves some of the secrets of our planet's history. Stones are not inanimate objects; they are jealous guardians of a memory that stretches back millions of years. Following Alvarez's journey, we discover that Italy is a mosaic shaped by cataclysmic events and slow transformations. The journey takes us to Rome, revealing that its famous seven hills are the result of ancient and violent volcanic eruptions. It then leads us to Siena, where it is still possible to observe traces of a distant era when the city lay beneath the sea, and across Abruzzo, a beautiful region still marked by the scars of recent earthquakes. The turning point of this scientific journey comes in Gubbio. It was here that Alvarez discovered evidence of an event that forever changed the fate of life on Earth: the impact of a giant meteorite approximately 65 million years ago. That tremendous impact was one of the causes of the extinction of the dinosaurs and half of all living species. Yet, paradoxically, it was precisely that cataclysm that freed the biological space necessary for the spread of mammals and, ultimately, for the emergence of humankind. It is evocative to



*Figure 3 - Cover of the book "The mountains of Saint Francis" by Walter Alvarez, published by Fazi Editore (Italian Edition). Image used for illustrative purposes for blog reviews/insights and generated with AI.*

think that the paths travelled by Francis in search of harmony with 'Creation' are the very same ones that have enabled science to decipher the origins of our world.



*Figure 4 - St. Francis and the wolf of Gubbio, detail from the Sansepolcro polyptych by Stefano di Giovanni, known as Sassetta. Work in the public domain.*

Walter Alvarez's essay is not only a scientific treatise, but also an invitation to rediscover the places dear to the 'Poverello' (an affectionate and respectful nickname traditionally used for St. Francis of Assisi) in a new light. Take Gubbio and the evocative Bottaccione Gorge: it was there, among the rocks that formed the backdrop to the famous episode of the wolf (fig. 4), that the scientist identified a layer of iridium, a very rare metal that bears witness to the impact of an asteroid 66 million years ago. It is a fascinating contrast: in the same place coexist the memory of a miracle of peace and the geological evidence of a cosmic cataclysm.

Moving towards Tuscany, we encounter La Verna, one of the most mystical places in the Western world. Here, geology almost seems to defy the laws of physics: the entire sanctuary stands on enormous blocks of limestone that appear to float above a layer of unstable clay (fig. 5).

Between these folds of the earth lies the Sasso Spicco, a deep fracture where Francis loved to withdraw in prayer. For Alvarez, this place represents the perfect union between the majesty of nature and spiritual asceticism.



*Figure 5 - Detail of the sacred forest at the Sanctuary of La Verna. Image in the public domain.*

The history of this extraordinary place officially began in May 1213, when Count Orlando Cattani of Chiusi in Casentino donated Mount La Verna to Francis. Yet La Verna is not only a place of spirituality and geology; it is also a hymn to biodiversity. The limestone cliff culminating in Monte Penna rises abruptly from the landscape, crowned by a forest that has remained almost intact for eight centuries.

Thanks to the attentive care of the Franciscan friars, who regarded the forest as a direct manifestation of God's creation to be revered and protected, we can still admire today a magnificent mixed woodland. Among centuries-old beech trees, silver firs, hollies, and yews, the forest of La Verna represents a rare example of nature preserved through time: a true garden of 'Creation' that continues to speak to us of respect, balance, and harmony. The Sacro Monte della Verna is not only a monument of geological significance, but also the setting for events that seem to transcend reason. It was here that, during Lent in 1224, Francis received the Stigmata, the deepest sign of his union with the divine.

Yet alongside these great miracles, tradition also preserves accounts of extraordinary episodes that reveal an uncommon harmony between Francis and the animal world. It is said that, upon his first arrival, Francis was welcomed by a multitude of joyful birds, a sign that the Saint immediately interpreted as a divine invitation to remain in that solitary place. And what about the falcon that lived among the branches of the beech tree above its stone bed? Every morning, with its song and the beating of its wings, the bird awakened Francis for Matins prayer, like a faithful companion in ascetic life. Anyone who visits La Verna immediately senses what the ancients called the *genius loci*: a spiritual energy that seems to emanate from the stones themselves. Passing through the archway leading to the convent, visitors are greeted by an inscription that leaves no doubt: "*Non est in toto sanctior orbe mons!*" ("There is no holier mountain in the whole world!"). Within this sacred landscape, the bare rock and the ancient forest are not mere backdrops, but true protagonists. Here, mysticism merges with matter: Franciscan spirituality becomes almost tangible among the shadows of the beech trees and the verticality of the cliffs, offering those who pass through an experience that goes far beyond a simple tourist visit.



**Figure 6** - *The Miracle of the Spring*, fresco by Giotto (c. 1295-1299), Upper Basilica of Assisi. Work in the public domain.

The link between Francis and geology is also reflected in great art. In the famous fresco *The Miracle of the Spring* (fig. 6), Giotto depicts the rock with such realism that it has attracted the attention of scientists: the limestone stratifications typical of the Apennines are rendered with an almost photographic precision, testifying to an observation of nature far ahead of its time. This respect for matter is also embodied in the *Relic of the Earth*, preserved in the Chapel of the Transit in Assisi: a powerful symbol of the Saint's body returning to dust and of his sacred love for the soil, regarded as an integral part of 'Creation.'

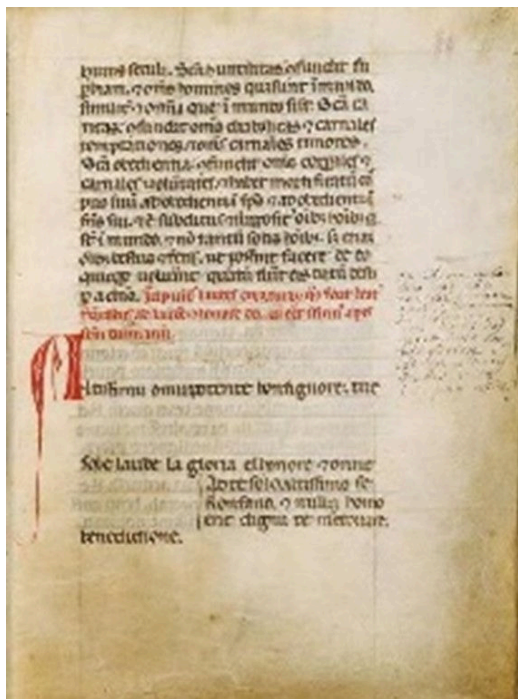
From a literary point of view, moreover, one cannot fail to celebrate the *Canticle of the Creatures* (fig. 7), which, eight hundred years after its composition around 1224, remains a manifesto of extraordinary modernity. Written in the ancient Umbrian vernacular, this hymn to life radically breaks with the medieval vision of *contemptus mundi* – the idea that the earthly world was merely a place of sin and suffering to be despised.

For Francis, however, nature is a mirror of the Creator. His prayer is imbued with optimism and a sense of universal brotherhood that embraces every element: not only living beings, but also wind, fire, water, the sun, the moon, and, certainly, Mother Earth. It is a vision in which humanity is not the master, but the brother of all that exists.

The Franciscan legacy has profoundly influenced the way we look at science today. Seeing rocks not merely as inert matter, but as "signs" of the history of the world, is an approach rooted precisely in this spirituality. St. Francis, rightly considered the patron saint of ecologists, anticipated by centuries a modern ethics of respect for the Earth. By calling every element of 'Creation' "brother" or "sister," he taught us that protecting our planet is not only a scientific necessity, but also a moral and emotional duty.

In this regard, one cannot fail to remember the tragic earthquake of 26 September 1997, which struck Umbria and the Marche regions. Two powerful seismic events, with magnitudes of 5.6 and 5.8, hit the heart of Central Italy. The epicentre was identified near Colfiorito, but the damage extended across 48 municipalities. The final toll was severe: 11 victims, around 100 injured, and as many as 80,000 people displaced. Among the most symbolic images of the tragedy was the collapse of the vaults of the Basilica of Assisi (fig. 8). In the Upper Basilica, four people lost their lives, including technicians and members of the religious community.

Yet, amid so much pain, many spoke of a true miracle. While the world watched the images of the collapse, the challenge of rebirth had already begun. An almost utopian restoration project was launched to recover the frescoes by Giotto and



Cimabue. More than 80,000 fragments were carefully collected in order to reassemble an immense puzzle. Restorers and volunteers worked for years to restore the beauty of the Basilica.

**Figure 7** - Incipit of the Canticle of the Creatures, Codex 338, Library of the Sacred Convent of Assisi - XIII century. Work in the public domain.



**Figure 8** - The Vaults of Cimabue after the collapse due to an earthquake in 1997 (source: [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Restauro\\_della\\_basilica\\_superiore\\_di\\_Assisi#/media/File:Volta\\_Cimabue.jpg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Restauro_della_basilica_superiore_di_Assisi#/media/File:Volta_Cimabue.jpg); CC BY SA).

By 1999, the church had already reopened, becoming a symbol of a region that refused to surrender. The so-called “Umbria Model” was adopted for safe reconstruction. The consolidation techniques tested at that time later helped protect towns and villages during the 2016 earthquake. To this day, Umbria and the Marche regions remain an example of reconstruction carried out with both technical expertise and deep human commitment.

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