

Convent of St. Francis Church

The monumental complex of St. Francis in Monteleone di Spoleto is perhaps the most striking and suggestive work for its complexities of history, development, art and faith. It is like a book of stories, saints and symbols to scrutinize and read carefully. The main building of this complex is represented by the Church of St. Francis gradually built during the fourteenth century on a former Benedictine oratory of XII century. The name of the church is actually that of S. Maria or better of the Lady of the Assumption but commonly known by the name of Francis of Assisi since 1280 when they the first Franciscans settled in. In fact, until the suppression of the convent, the Franciscan order in Monteleone always used in every official act, a seal bearing the emblem of the order dominated from the image of Maria kidnapped in heaven with the initials S(anctae) M(ariae). The church is again remodeled in the fifteenth century and it is again restored and radically resized after the terrible earthquake of January 1703. The church of the fourteenth century is, in fact, more slender in proportions than the current one as indeed appears in the outer wall at the apse: the floor is raised between 1395 and 1398, with a round arch, reducing by one third the height of the original church which is accessed from the arched door on the right side and creating a new environment of worship at the bottom. The effects of this division are clearly visible in the floor inside the church that cuts the fresco of the crucifixion on the left wall, then further mutilated by the subsequent opening of a modern door that leads to the cloister. The main façade (facing north), damaged by various earthquakes, is in the upper part and partially truncated by the original crown. It is adorned with a Roman-Gothic portal enriched by a bundle of three twisted columns and naturalistic reliefs with animals, human figures and angels, made by some Lombard masters. In the top bezel there is a fresco, now evanescent, depicting Mary between St. Francis and St. Nicola. At the sides of the outer face, in particular light conditions, traces of devotional graffiti and a cross are visible. On the right flank the mighty carved buttresses give the building the character of a fortified place, accentuated by its position and its proximity to the door of the castle, along the walls. The interior has two aisles divided by stone pillars; the largest one is decorated with beautiful wooden ceiling painting by Giuseppe Frigerio Nursia (1760); the lower one is covered with vaults and ribs. The inner wall decoration are numerous cycles of frescoes, often juxtaposed with each other (made between the fourteenth and sixteenth century), unfortunately in part damaged by the many changes that take place over the centuries and restored today. Among the fonts there is one showing the Greek symbol of the Tau. The last letter of the Hebrew alphabet represents the fulfillment of the entire revealed Word of God. This letter is called TAU (or TAW, pronounced Tav in Hebraic), which can be written like this: τ X+T. It is used with its symbolic value in the Ancient Will; it is already present in the book of Ezekiel: "The Lord said: Go through the city, in the midst of Jerusalem and marks a Tau on the foreheads of the men that sigh and cry" (EZ. 9.4). Very probably, Francis was influenced in his interest in the Tau by a speech of Pope Innocent III, held on 11th November 1215, at the opening of the Fourth Lateran Council. The Pope, making own the word of God to the prophet Ezekiel, he speaks to each member of the Council: "Mark the front of the men with the sign of Tau, with the shape of the cross before it was placed the sign of Pilate. One has on his forehead the sign of the Tau when he manifests in his whole conduct the splendor of the Cross; the sign of Tau represents the crucified flesh with the vices and sins, the Tau means the glory of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus, be devoted to the Tau and the Cross." It is probable that Francis, who is present in that council in which the Franciscan Rule is approved, wants, for obedience to Pope, to be marked with the Tau of penance and, marking his brothers, to refresh the needs of vocation. The door that cuts the fresco of the Crucifixion leads to the upper cloister, once covered by vaults (now only the arch points remain) now missing and highlighting the above roof; here there are nine lunettes in tempera (excluding the first) regarding the life of St. Francis, realized in the first half of the eighteenth century. At the foot of these, and all along the corridor wall there is a small collection of epigraphic and sculptural fragments, grouped together as a small *antiquarium*, belonging to Roman, Medieval and Modern era, wanted by the parish priest Don Angelo Corona. Part of the Medieval architectural material comes from St. Nicola church, while a womanly headless statue is recovered from Trivio. There is also the Roman funerary inscription of Sesto Vettuleno, found decades ago in Forca di Usigni, in the municipality of Poggiodomo and bearing the following inscription: SEX VETTVLENVS. M.P. GRAGVS / VETTVLENA. SEX.F. VXOR. In the lower church, later used as a burial ground, the old choir preserves the vivid Franciscan frescoes that, despite heavy repainting, are an interesting example of the Southern Umbrian painting at the beginning of the XV century. In this room, used as a theater, in the right wall there are some *arcosolii* testifying the particular aspect of the lower church. The sacristy houses a small but impressive collection of sacred art which includes a Madonna and Child from Castevecchio, a wooden sculpture of XIII century.