

Untold Italy Episode 308: Travelers Guide to the Legacy of St Francis of Assisi

Celebrities don't get much bigger than Francis of Assisi. Popular in life thanks to his charismatic personality, Francis's legend continues to this day, 800 years after his death, with people of all faiths. Italy's patron saint had a short but impactful life and left an enduring legacy with his message of love, humility and compassion. We're going to find out why he's so important to Italians on episode 308 of the Untold Italy podcast.

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, the travel podcast, where you go to the towns and villages, mountains and lakes, hills and coastlines of Bella Italia. Each week, your host Katy Clarke takes you on a journey in search of magical landscapes of history, culture, wine, gelato, and, of course, a whole lot of pasta. If you're dreaming of Italy and planning future adventures there, you've come to the right place.

Katy Clarke:

Benvenuti. Welcome, friends. Today's episode is a little different as we're going to get to know one of the most important figures in Italian history, and that's St. Francis of Assisi. Even if you are not Catholic or like me, you don't practice any religion. There is so much to admire about this man from central Italy who lived over 800 years ago. From wealthy beginnings, St. Francis's life changed course and he embraced a life of poverty and simplicity in solidarity with the poor and marginalized.

Katy Clarke:

I'm Katy, the founder of Untold Italy, and we're a modern travel company that hosts intimate small group journeys across regional Italy. We also assist independent travellers with one-to-one trip planning services and our travel app is full of curated recommendations for the whole of Italy, from the top of the boot to the toe. Now, every week on this podcast, we love to talk with locals, fellow travelers and experts so that you can get a deeper insight into Italy and its culture and people. And we want to help you focus on the experiences that matter to you.

Katy Clarke:

Today we're chatting with Sarah Marano, an important member of our Untold Italy team who has lived in the Umbria region of central Italy for 20 years and has come to learn about and respect St Francis and the impact that he had on the area where she lives and his enduring impact on Italy as a country as a whole. Now, Sarah is going to share with you why St. Francis is so important to Italians and especially in 2026, as it is the 800th anniversary of his death and it's being commemorated in many events and ceremonies throughout the country. So let's

welcome Sarah onto the show and hear all about St. Francis. This very important figure in Italian history.

Katy Clarke:

Bentornata Sarah, thanks for joining me on the Untold Italy podcast again.

Sarah Marano:

Hi, Katy. Thanks very much for having me back.

Katy Clarke:

Well, it's lovely to have you with us as always, sharing your deep knowledge and insight into Central Italy, its culture and traditions. So today we're going to talk about a very important figure from Italy's history and someone who's really shaped the culture of the country. But before we do get started, I'd love for you to reintroduce yourself to our listeners.

Sarah Marano:

Thanks, Katy. So I'm Sarah and I live in Umbria and my husband Salvatore and I, we have an agriturismo here and we've been welcoming guests into our home for almost 20 years now. That's how we came across lovely Olivia and Katy from Untold Italy. Our paths crossed. And like Untold Italy, what we really try and do at our agriturismo is connect people with authentic experiences and locals. And one of our local people, while he might not be mortal, he is very much alive in Umbria, and that is St. Francis.

Katy Clarke:

So listener Sarah is a very important part of our team that she's forgotten to mention. So she's also running the very efficient operation of our tours behind the scenes and she does an amazing job of that. And she also leads some of our tours in, including in Umbria. If you're lucky enough to join us on one of those, you get to spend a lot of time with Sarah and getting to know the area. So the reason why I wanted her to come on the show today is because there's a big anniversary coming up of St. Francis, the 800th anniversary of his death. And it's very significant in Italy and I think to really understand why it's significant, we need to understand a little bit about the person. So Sarah, can you tell us a little bit about St. Francis and what makes his story unique?

Sarah Marano:

So St. Francis, yeah, he really was a very unique man. Whatever your religious persuasion is, there's no doubt that a man called Jesus and St. Francis existed. And Francis was very similar to Jesus in the fact that they were both very charismatic men. They both had very strong personalities. They were both great storytellers. They were the Netflix of the day.

Sarah Marano:

And they were both very philosophical. They were both centuries ahead of themselves in their thinking. And they also were completely non-judgmental and they were very happy to wander amongst all levels of society and they wandered amongst the people that people were scared

of, the criminals, the prostitutes, the lepers. They were very unique in that. Not just in their own day, but even today. You know, it's a very unique quality in somebody. The thing about St. Francis in particular was that he was the son of a very wealthy family in Assisi. There are various different ideas of how and when things happened with him, but I could basically be here for hours telling you about St. Francis.

Sarah Marano:

But the long and the short of it is, is that Francis renounced his wealth to follow a simple life of poverty and prayer, and his family denounced him. And when we talk about a few places later, I'll tell you a little bit more about how that happened. But, yeah, it was - that's a pretty big move again in those days, and these. To literally throw off your riches and decide to follow a life of simplicity. And he was in that respect. He was also, you could say, one of the world's first eco warriors, because he understood the value of nature and creation and protecting that and enjoying that.

Sarah Marano:

So that's kind of who he was. Today - how I think of him today is if he was around today, he'd be the sort of person that you would employ to be a motivational speaker opening a conference. That's how I think of him.

Katy Clarke:

So did he pull people along on his journey? Was that he had that unique quality to do that?

Sarah Marano:

Well, indeed. Exactly. So coming back to the whole point about him being this very charismatic man, and you have to remember, as I say, there was no Netflix. People were illiterate. And he was a traveler as well. He literally traveled far and wide. I mean, St. Francis is the gateway to Umbria, but actually he traveled a lot.

Sarah Marano:

And when you consider he was only 45, 46 when he died, and he had his sort of epiphany to follow this life of simplicity only about just over 20 years before he died, he traveled all over Italy and he went to the Middle east, which is a huge achievement in those days because obviously there were no fast speed trains to get him from A to B. So he traveled far and wide. And he literally liked going through the forests, the towns. He literally - he went everywhere and he told stories. I mean, the church will say he was preaching, but actually, he was just storytelling. He was the sort of person that was able to get people excited about religion and Christ. I mean, that's what his life's work was.

Sarah Marano:

He devoted himself to Christ. And in fact, you'll see if you go to Assisi, you see the tile, which is a crucifix with no Christ on it, but it's like a T shape, so it's got no fourth top on the cross. And that was a symbol of St. Francis, and it was like his signature. So when he wrote letters and documents, he used to use that symbol on the end of his communications and

correspondence and writing. And his Franciscan brothers and followers had it on their sort of robes. I mean, I call them potato sacks because they literally look like Hessian potato sacks. But Francis, it was a symbol for him because it.

Sarah Marano:

For him, it was a constant reminder about Christ and what he did for mankind. So you see them everywhere in Assisi.

Katy Clarke:

So you live now very close to Assisi? Well, closer than me, anyway, which is not that difficult. But did you know about St. Francis before you moved to Umbria? Or how did you first connect with him?

Sarah Marano:

I was raised in a very strict Catholic family, so I don't really remember a time when I didn't know who St. Francis was. But until I came to Umbria, my thoughts on St. Francis were that he was a kindly fellow who was good with animals. But then when we came to where we are in Umbria, and obviously, I'm very biased, but I think that we live in a very special particular hilltop. Just for reference, for anybody listening, we are - if you drew a line directly from Perugia to Gubbio, we're halfway between. And it's a particularly beautiful area.

Sarah Marano:

Well, everywhere in Italy is beautiful, isn't it? Let's face it. But it's particularly beautiful. And two of our neighbors come into this story because one of our neighbors is the son of a very famous Italian, a chap called Dario Fo. And he is to Italy what Shakespeare is to England. He's an incredibly famous playwright, and he's won the Nobel Prize for literature. So every Italian knows who Dario Fo is. And Dario had a holiday home here on his son's property, next door to us. And there's this chap, Dario's prodigy, Mario.

Sarah Marano:

You can't make this stuff up. But Mario translates Dario's work into English, and he performs Dario's work all over the world. And the reason why I'm talking about these people is - Dario died about 10 years ago, but one of his last works that he did. Sorry, I'm jumping around the story a bit here, because there's lots of things that connect into one. But when Francis was alive, as I said, he was this really, really popular man. And in fact, actually, he was so popular that the Pope actually wanted him dead, but he couldn't afford to have him killed because he feared for his own safety. So what he did was he waited until Francis died, and then he ordered everything that was ever written or documented on St. Francis to be destroyed.

Sarah Marano:

And Dario Fo has collated - obviously, things were hidden away and buried and so forth. And he did this incredible piece of work where he didn't write things, but he found various writings and stories and accounts of things in St. Francis life. And he put them together as a

play. And Mario translated it into English. And like I say, these guys are neighbors, so we know them.

Sarah Marano:

And Mario came to me and I helped him with some of the editing of this play, which in English is called Francis the Holy Jester. And a jester was a very derogatory figure in court, so he called it Francis the Holy Jester, because that is how the Pope thought of Francis. He just thought he was this entertainer, this derogatory entertainer that was there to entertain people. So through this, I got to hear a very different account of not just Francis, but also some of the things that he did. And again, take religion out of this, because Francis was just a man at the end of the day. Yes, he devoted himself to God, but in those days, and we're talking about 800 years ago, as you said, everybody was God-fearing, everybody was Christian in this land. So he had no choice for it to be about God. So it was really exciting being involved with Mario and Dario's project.

Sarah Marano:

And I just got to hear about St. Francis from a very different perspective than lots of theoretical books and perhaps more religious sources will tell you. And Dario was a very - he was known for being very anti-establishment. So you can imagine how this upset quite a few apple carts. And this is something that I should just say, actually, that my account of St. Francis is my account of St. Francis living here in such close proximity to Assisi, being so lucky to know so many eclectic people around here, and also local folklore and mythology, because we're talking about 800 years and Chinese whispers.

Sarah Marano:

And there's always a different account of history from different people, isn't there? And it's the same thing with any important figure. So I got this very different appreciation for the story of St. Francis and just how instrumental he was in changing people's minds, getting them interested in God, religion. But also, we could do with him right now in the world because he was also a fantastic mediator and peace negotiator. There's a very important story about how Italy, as we all know, has only been a united country for just over 150 years. And before that, it was just lots of different, say, warring factions, if you like. And Bologna and Imola used to constantly battle against each other.

Sarah Marano:

And to cut a very long story short, Francis was asked to go and speak to the people of Bologna in the main square. And there's this very bloodthirsty account of how he did this very animated show in front of them using a Neapolitan dialect. It's all very strange. He used reverse psychology on the people of Bologna, and he basically was telling them what terrible things they were doing to each other. Again, I won't go into the details here, but it's all very bloodthirsty and animated. But three days later, Imola and Bologna came together, signed a peace agreement. They never warred since. And that peace agreement is still in the town hall in Bologna, where you can go and see it.

Katy Clarke:

Wow.

Sarah Marano:

So, you know, he was a very influential man, and he was invited to go to all sorts of places to go and speak to people. Not necessarily just to get them to play nicely together, but to get people interested in the word of God. So, for example, one of the Lords of Greccio, which is a little village in Lazio near Rieti, Francis was invited to go and preach to the people there. And he happened to be there on one of his visits on the night before Christmas, so Christmas Eve. And he decided to use the villagers to reenact the Nativity in this cave. And he got hold of a local ox and a donkey and a few sheep. And so the villagers came to be Mary and Joseph and the key figures, and I believe a doll, kind of a rag doll, was used for Jesus.

Sarah Marano:

And they reenacted the scene because, again, as I said earlier, people were illiterate. And so this was the way to teach them. Interactive learning, isn't it? And the people enjoyed it so much that they made it into an annual thing. And hence the first Nativity. And that is how the Nativity scene first started. And they carved the Nativity scene into the rocks. And if you go there, it's a lovely, pretty little village to visit. And there's an international museum of nativities in there. And also all around the little village, it's a bit like going and seeing street art, but it's all old frescoes, if you like, just dotted around the village.

Sarah Marano:

And also, if you look closely between the cracks - between bricks and rocks, you can see tiny little carved sculptures and things, or little Nativity scenes that people have just sort of pushed into nooks and crevices. So it's a pretty little place. Everywhere involved with St. Francis, there's a sanctuary that seems to be clinging onto a clifftop or a hillside. So people associate St. Francis with Assisi. And of course, Assisi is oozing with amazing places to see associated with St. Francis, but there are so many other places around Italy that were very, very significant for him, too.

Katy Clarke:

That's fascinating, because I didn't know that story. And the presepe, which is the Nativity, is really important in Italy, actually. I mean, when I was growing up and I wasn't Catholic, I was Church of England, but we still had the Nativity scene. I don't see them so much these days. But in Italy, they're everywhere, aren't they?

Sarah Marano:

Oh, absolutely. And it's really, really important. Although they have Christmas trees here, too, in Italy. Certainly in England, decorating the Christmas tree was something the whole family did together. You know, it wasn't just that you came home from school one day and it was there. Everybody got involved. And in Italy, the whole family get involved with putting the presepe together. And we're talking about people - it taking over people half their living rooms or even bigger sometimes.

Sarah Marano:

So it's a huge thing. And there's the street in Naples, which is incredibly famous for all of the Nativity scene. I mean, you have no idea the amount of things that you can buy to put in a Nativity set until you've been to Italy. And that street in Naples is really worth going to see, apart from the fact it's in a really beautiful part of Naples - my favorite part of Naples - it's amazing to see. I don't even know how to describe if you say all the figures, it doesn't really do it justice.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, it's kind of like a little. It's like Lego, but not really Lego. It's like.

Sarah Marano:

It's.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, it's like a little Sylvanian family.

Sarah Marano:

Yes.

Katy Clarke:

Like little figurines. And some of them aren't that little either. You know, it's very interesting. So, Sarah, you mentioned that St. Francis was talking in a Neapolitan dialect. Do we know why?

Sarah Marano:

So I think that the reason why he used that dialect was that he was always thinking about how he could capture people's attention in a way that nobody else had done before. So I think that it was so different that it hooked people in and engaged them in what he had to say. Hopefully, it's not nearly as strong as a Neapolitan dialect now, because I don't know how they would have understood, but whatever their understanding was, it certainly did the trick.

Katy Clarke:

I'm curious how he learned it.

Sarah Marano:

Exactly. That's what I was thinking, I mean, we've got all of the great Italian scientists like Leonardo da Vinci and Galileo, but, you know, brilliant minds aren't always just scientific, are they? He clearly had a knack for language and the communication. So maybe he just had a fantastic ear and was able to pick up tongues very, very easily.

Katy Clarke:

Well, we know he didn't have a phone that was taking up all his brain space, so it was probably a lot of - probably a lot of extra space to learn languages, but. Oh, so it's so interesting. So maybe if we just have a little talk about Assisi, because it's a very special place and it's one of the places that people do know about Umbria. If they don't know much about Umbria, they do usually know about Assisi. And it's kind of a typical place of Umbria, but it's very special in its own right, too.

Sarah Marano:

Yes. I mean, let's face it, Assisi is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and it is pristine and it's beautiful. It's set in the foothills of Monte Subasio, and it's a beautiful medieval town. And in fact, the addition of the basilica, which poor old St. Francis would be turning in his grave to know was erected in his name, this big, huge thing. But it adds to the visual appeal of Assisi because it's right on the edge of the city. And in fact, I'm kind of digressing from your question a bit, but when St. Francis died, and the point where he died is a very important thing to talk about as well, but when he died, his friends, that is his first disciples, his first Franciscan monks, they hid his remains, but for fear of them being taken.

Sarah Marano:

He was so famous. He was very ill at the end of his life, probably because of the... well, a people didn't live as long then, but also the way that he lived his life was so harsh that he became very ill and his friends wanted to take him to Siena to see a doctor, and they carried him on a stretcher there. And they got almost all the way there when he said, I just want to go home and die in Assisi. So. So they had to take him all the way back. And on that journey, every village they stopped in on the way there and the way back, they were hoping that he would die there because then their village would become so famous, because he was literally famous, which is quite incredible for such a short amount of time, and like I say, the lack of modern communication that we have now. So when he died, they had to bury him straight away to hide him and keep him safe.

Sarah Marano:

And the basilica is out on the edge of the town, and that's because it sits on a place that is now called Paradise Hill, but was once called Hell Hill because it's where all of the people that were not considered acceptable to live in the city walls were made to live. So, again, the social outcasts, the criminals, the lepers, and it's also where they used to hang the criminals and so forth. So it was a very undesirable place. But it's where Francis used to go and hang out a lot. And so that's where they hid his remains in Hell Hill. It made for a perfect place then, for this beautiful basilica to be built in his name, which did actually start being built a couple of years after he died. But what people consider the basilica is actually a huge monastery, which is architecturally, it's very, very beautiful. And it helps frame the city of Assisi.

Sarah Marano:

So it just... it's picture perfect. And the hills around Assisi are covered in olives and vines, and the sunflowers are out at the time in July. June, July. So it just makes it picture postcard perfect. It's beautiful to look at, and the lanes and the alleyways. And of course, it's filled with lots of churches of huge significance. And you can imagine a figure like St. Francis inside his basilica.

Sarah Marano:

The frescoes are just absolutely incredible. And Italians always wince when I hear, when I say this, but I actually prefer it to the Vatican City for several reasons. A, I find the frescoes inside the Basilica of St. Francis, the frescoes, for me, are a burst of artistic color. For the time that were painted, it was very, very bright and colorful. And a lot of the frescoes in there are painted by Giotto. And of course, frescoes were used again for teaching people because they couldn't read. So they told stories so that people knew how and why to follow God and so forth.

Sarah Marano:

And Giotto did lots of these frescoes, especially in the upper basilica. And Giotto, apart from the fact that he was of color, he was a cartoonist, obviously, he was told what he had to paint, but then he had to tell a story within each of the frescoes. And he was a very much more simple painter. Like I say, he was a cartoonist, the original Walt Disney, if you like. And so he was less about cherubs and more about, hey, this is what happened, and making it fun. And so, yeah, I find it more spiritually uplifting being in there, rather than quite oppressive and "you're all going to go to hell if you don't do the right thing", which I feel a lot of the time in a lot of the churches, other churches with great pieces of artwork. So Assisi is significant because it's beautiful.

Sarah Marano:

It's significant because of St. Francis, and so many churches and basilicas are now there. And of course, you can't talk about Francis without including Clare, because Santa Chiara, Clare, was the female version of Francis, and she did exactly the same as him. She renounced her wealth to follow a life of simple prayer, only she was a woman and she couldn't go out and about talking. I mean, she would have been probably burnt at the stake for being a witch if she did such a thing. But Clare and Francis were very, very good friends. And Francis told Clare to go and set up her order of nuns in this little convent just underneath the city walls of Assisi. And there you can really feel who Clare and Francis were, because, as I said, the pair of them will be turning in their grave with their basilicas because it goes against everything they stood for.

Sarah Marano:

But this little convent, Francis loved it there. And it's said that that's where he had his epiphany and where he decided that he needed to rebuild the church. And there's lots of story around that, but it's where Francis, one of the last things he did was write the Canticle of the Creatures, which is a very, very famous. And he's... he wrote it there. He liked being

there. It was a place where he felt at peace, and he and Clare were very good friends. So that is another really lovely little place.

Sarah Marano:

There are beautiful frescoes in there, but they're very rustic. They're very rustic. They're simple, they're fading. Everything about the little chapels, you really, really feel who they were rather than the big basilicas, which are beautiful. The artwork inside the Basilica of St. Francis is amazing, but I think the Basilica of St. Clare is far more architecturally pleasing because it's got these amazing flying buttresses. But at San Damiano, you really, really get a sense of who they were, and you can almost feel them.

Sarah Marano:

And you can feel the peace as well, because although Assisi isn't very big, it obviously is well known, so there are a lot of visitors there. It's still not as crowded as anywhere like Tuscany and some of the other big places in Italy, but it is a place where you'll feel more tourism than anywhere else in Umbria.

Katy Clarke:

So the basilicas are the obvious attractions in Assisi for people that are interested in the life of St. Francis. But are there some other, smaller or maybe more unusual sites that you like to show people when you're in Assisi?

Sarah Marano:

Yes, I think one of the places where I always tell people to go and see and this is more to do with visiting Assisi itself, not just anything to do with St. Francis and St. Clare, although there's a connection, is that people flock to the basilicas and they don't go and explore the lanes and alleyways around Assisi and see what they stumble across. Because when you just take a lane away from the main drag, then you find lots of little artisans, some really nice ceramic artists that are just little local producers and they're often sitting in their workshops painting away and they stop to say hello and welcome you in to show you around. But you get to watch them as they're working and you never know. There's always some sort of little exhibition in a little church tucked away somewhere. So it's about stumbling across unexpected experiences, but also a place where you never find anybody.

Sarah Marano:

And yet I think it's actually a really nice. It's a very pleasing church is the church of San Rufino. And it was very significant for Clare and Francis because it's where they got baptized. But you go into the piazza in front of that church and you go into that lovely, great church and there's just nobody there. So you get it to yourself. You get Assisi without the crowds. And yet it's. It's like everywhere in Italy and all of these towns and cities, they're just literally heaving with beautiful architecture of every size, shape and description.

Sarah Marano:

And just there's nobody there. So like I say, it's Assisi to yourself.

Katy Clarke:

So this big anniversary this year, which is the 800th anniversary of his death, and I guess it's from the sounds of it, from what you're telling me, and I'm not Catholic and I don't have this deep understanding of the local area as you do, but something tells me that he may not be. May not have been that impressed with this big hoo-ha that's happening around the anniversary. What is actually happening and do you think it's in keeping with the spirit of St. Francis?

Sarah Marano:

So I think the big thing that everybody's talking about, the first big thing that's happening for the 800 year anniversary, is for the first time ever, there's going to be a public veneration of his relics, of his remains. They are exhuming them and they are going to be on display in the crypt in the Lower Basilica. And they are coming out for a month between 22nd February and 22nd March. And you can go online and you can book, and the site is in English and in Italian. And for anybody who is a very, very serious, devout St. Francis follower, this is a huge deal. And you can only imagine the people of Assisi and the Italians, how they're going to be out in droves for that. His remains have been studied by scientists and religious officials, but this is the first time that we see him on display.

Sarah Marano:

Unlike Clare, for example, who you - you see her, she's got a glass tomb, you can actually see her. Francis has never been out on display.

Katy Clarke:

Wow

Sarah Marano:

Yes, indeed. And in fact, as you've just given me, a reminder of another place where I always used to say to people to go, but it's becoming very popular now. A very significant church in Assisi, to the Life of St. Francis, was the church of Santa Maria Maggiore.

Sarah Marano:

St. Francis's father was so frustrated with Francis. There's a backstory, but the long and the short of it is that Francis father was so frustrated with Francis that he dragged him in to that church to go in front of the bishop, for the bishop to kind of deal with him and sort of tell him to pull his socks up and start behaving and listen to his father and obey his father. But in fact, it had the complete opposite effect. And it was that point that Francis, this tells you the kind of man that he was, he literally stripped off completely stark naked and said, you're no longer my father. And it was that point that he literally - he left his family.

Katy Clarke:

Wow.

Sarah Marano:

But anyway, in this church now, most recently, the church has become a place of religious pilgrimage to. To also see Carlo Acutis, who is the most recent saint and teenage saint. And Carlo Acutis had great affiliation with Francis, and he asked to be buried in Assisi. And he has been given this spot in this very particularly significant church to St. Francis. And now there is people streaming in daily to come and see Carlo Acutis, who, like Clare, is in a glass tomb for us to see.

Sarah Marano:

But going back to the 800 years of St. Francis, it's a very, very significant event, the public viewing of his remains. But other than that, there are so many things that are going to be planned. Lots of religious things, like lots of extra masses in the upper Basilica every day, and they'll be in English as well as Italian, and there are all sorts of things that are going to be happening all over Italy anywhere that has anything to do with St. Francis, which is going to be a whole array of places, are going to have a lineup. We have yet to see what they are because we're still in 2025. So at the beginning of next year, things will start becoming publicly available.

Sarah Marano:

So look out on Assisi tourism board and anywhere that was significant to St. Francis, like Greccio, the place with the Nativity, like La Verna, where he received the stigmata, and a whole plethora of places. Already in Gubbio, we have seen a new addition. In one of the basilicas this year, we have a hologram animation of the story of St. Francis taming the wolf of Gubbio. And this is something that's very special to my heart, because, as you know, we are in Gubbio, and I love Gubbio. I was there last night. Every time I go there, I feel like I'm going there for the first time and feel so lucky to live there. But after Francis finished stripping off his clothes, the first place he went to was he trekked across the hills to Gubbio because he had friends there.

Sarah Marano:

And he went and hung out and spent a bit of time there, I'm sure, to work out what his next move was going to be. But he used to go to Gubbio a lot. And the Taming of the Wolf is probably one of the most, if not the most famous story of St. Francis, because we all know that he was a lover of animals. But the story. Do you know the story of the Taming of the Wolf?

Katy Clarke:

No. I think you should tell us, Sarah.

Sarah Marano:

One version is that there was this ferocious wolf in Gubbio that was causing havoc among the townspeople, ravaging them and the animals, and very, very frightening. And basically, Francis came along and he spoke to the wolf and he tamed the wolf, and then the wolf lived happily ever after with the townspeople, and everything was okay. But personally, from what

I've known and heard through various locals, like I say folklore, and especially through the findings of Dario Fo, I think that Francis was just a man who obviously loved animals and nature, but he just wasn't scared of the wolf. And so I think that people need something to blame, and he just wasn't scared of the wolf and was happy to be near it. But some people see it as a bit of a metaphor, that story. They see it as a metaphor that, as I've said to you, that he was a great mediator of people. Some people say that it was the fact that the wolf was the aristocracy of Gubbio and how Francis managed to negotiate better terms for the peasant people within Gubbio.

Katy Clarke:

Ah, it's so interesting. There's. I mean, there's obviously so many stories. One thing that we haven't touched on, Sarah, is why is he the patron saint of Italy?

Sarah Marano:

Well, I think that basically a summary of everything that we've really talked about this morning. I think that he was such a significant figure, a famous figure, and he was such an ambassador for faith, for peace, and his deep love of nature and creation. And so who better to have as your religious, spiritual figurehead for Italy?

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, it sounds like he embodies everything, the culture. You know, there's one thing I think that doesn't come across so well, maybe in English language promotion of Italy so much, but they're very - they have a very strong respect of nature. And, you know, most people that I know in Italy love going out for hikes and going out into the countryside and have that strong connection to the countryside. And I think we don't necessarily get that impression when we see things about Italy in our countries, because it's usually always about the big cities and the art and architecture and all of that, which, you know, of course, we all love. But one thing that Italians do find very important to them is the connection to the land. And I think maybe that's why St. Francis is so important to them.

Sarah Marano:

Indeed. And actually talking about your connection to the land and the countryside, one thing I haven't touched on at all, because, as you say, I've been talking about the art and everything that's associated with him posthumously. Actually, there's the St. Francis way, which is a pilgrimage route, which there are all sorts of 'Francis Ways' out there, if you Google it. But actually, one very important part of any of those walks is the walk between Assisi and Gubbio. And I did that myself quite a few years ago. And they say it's 40km, but like most things in Italy, they say one thing and the reality is something different. Because it was 56km, I did it the wrong way around, because you're supposed to go from Gubbio to Assisi.

Sarah Marano:

But actually, I did it from Assisi to Gubbio, because if you do it from Gubbio to Assisi, then the first thing you're met with is a huge ascent. So I did it the other way around, so that I was doing it as a huge descent, which was very welcome at the end of the walk, but it takes two

days and you stay in a little convent halfway through. But basically, you literally walk the way that Francis would have walked. And for me, when I'm standing in Gubbio in the main square, and I look out over the hills and valleys, you can see Sebastio in the distance. And every time I stand in that square, I think about the walk that I did, and I think about St. Francis, and I think about how - what good choice he made to come to Gubbio first.

Sarah Marano:

But also for me, that's St. Francis. The artwork and all these churches are great places to go and see. But actually, for me, St. Francis is right there, as you said, it's him in those hills, wandering around, being totally happy because he was a man who - he experienced true happiness, which is something even to this day, that people struggle with.

Sarah Marano:

He was happy with the simple things in life. And that's what I think of when I stand and look at that beautiful view. I think of him walking across those hills, and it's a great way to connect with everything to do with St. Francis, but also Italy, because as you said, Italians are great lovers of nature. You get on that pathway, stay in one of those little convents, but you meet people. And that's the other thing. Italy is all about the people, and he was, too. And you get on that route and you chat and you're meeting people, and it's just connecting everything.

Sarah Marano:

And do you just remember all of the good messages about life? If we're just kind to each other, then everything's going to be okay. And that's what Francis has boiled down to, really.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. And I think we can all appreciate that, even if we do not share the same religion, but we can all share those sentiments. And I really appreciate that part of Italy as well, because the connection to the people and the land and having conversations and being more in community with people and nature is. Is something that's very special. So if St. Francis gets us to remember that 800 years later, then I think that's a great outcome.

Sarah Marano:

Yes, definitely. Definitely. He's still most certainly spreading the word.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. I mean, I think people can really aspire to that, can't they? Okay, thank you, Sarah. I would love talking to you about these local insights around Umbria and St. Francis and all the little stories that make the country come to life and appreciate that you're so thoughtful about everything that you do and you prepare and you're so excited about St. Francis, and I know that our guests have really appreciated that on tour, too. So I'm very much looking forward to hearing how the activities to remember St. Francis unfold. I guess everyone will give you the website that they're going to be putting that on for Assisi. And there's no doubt there is another big website that they're creating.

Katy Clarke:

And in great Italian style, it will probably won't be ready until the exact day before it needs to be or even after. It'll be fantastic.

Sarah Marano:

Exactly. Exactly. And you just reminded me again about the tours, our tours. I mean, today I've given a few snippets of a few places to go, but I purposefully kept something secret because when people are on our tours, there are lots of little secret hidden places that we go to that you have to come on one of our tours to come and find out about.

Katy Clarke:

And I think we should do a big shout-out to the people that have been on tour with us before because they really did enjoy coming to Assisi and seeing some of these very special places with Sarah. So hello to everyone that was on our Umbria tour earlier this year. Sarah, thank you. Thanks for sharing all about St. Francis with everyone. And we can't wait to see everyone in Umbria one day, whether they're staying at La La Cuccagna with Sarah and Sal, which many podcast listeners have done, or you're coming on tour, discovering the little sites of Assisi around or the very special places that we love to show people. So thank you,

Katy Clarke:

Sarah. Grazie Mille. Thank you for joining us today.

Sarah Marano:

Thank you very much, Katy. Thanks a lot.

Katy Clarke:

Ciao.

Katy Clarke:

My goodness, what an interesting and impactful life St. Francis had. And it makes me wonder, really, how many people alive today will be remembered this way. Kindness, compassion, and respect for nature. It's actually not that difficult, is it? Well, it shouldn't be. Among all the noise of our modern lives, I'm very happy that someone with such a positive message has endured through the centuries. And understanding a little bit more about St. Francis really makes your visit to the beautiful city of Assisi and the other sites related to St. Francis so much more powerful and poignant. But I can see the impact of this man not only through the sites and places that you visit throughout Italy, but also in the Italian spirit of conviviality, the art of conversation, and their natural generosity of Italians. And I really hope that continues for another 800 years. Sarah mentioned quite a few places related to St. Francis and of course we put them into the show notes on our website along with the full transcript of the episode at untolditaly.com/308. We've also got a whole section on these sites in the Umbria Region Guide available as part of the premium version of the Untold Italy app.

Katy Clarke:

Before I go, you know we absolutely love hearing your feedback and reviews. It's what keeps Untold Italy growing and it helps more Italy-loving travelers just like you find us. If you enjoyed this episode, please think about leaving us a rating or review in your favorite podcast app. That's all for this week. Next week we're staying in central Italy and exploring beautiful, beautiful Tuscany. But until then, it's ciao for now.