

Friar Francis, the Exhibit. “Traces, Words, Images.”

I. I. (November 20, 2014)



A unique exhibition for the first time in the U.S. Every year roughly six million tourists, forty per cent of whom are Americans, come to the medieval city of Assisi in the heart of Umbria.

The main attraction is the ancient Basilica of [Saint Francis](#) [2] (1182-1226), the patron saint of Italy and probably the most well-known Christian saint in the world.

It comes as no surprise that the new Pope would choose to be named after the champion of reform in the Catholic Church. It is also no surprise that he is the first Pope ever to choose the name. Franciscan spirituality has thus come back into vogue as a model and point of reference; believers and nonbelievers alike respond to his message of poverty, brotherhood and peace.

A unique exhibit

In the past week a selection of 13th and 14th century manuscripts linked to Saint Francis has been exhibited in New York. The manuscripts consist of 19 recently restored tablets at the heart of which is the so-called Codex 338, a collection of early writings and documents concerning Francis and the Order of Friars Minor, including the [Canticle of Creatures](#) [3], the oldest known poetic text in Italian literature. It will be the first time these works of enormous historic and cultural value will be put on



display in the United States. After an initial stop at the United Nations (November 17-28), the 19 works from the Fondo Antico della Biblioteca dello [Sacro Convento](#) [4] in Assisi and the [Biblioteca Nazionale](#) [5] of Rome will be displayed in [Brooklyn's Borough Hall](#) [6] (December 12 to January 16, 2015).

An immortal message of peace

But the scope of this exhibition is really immeasurable for the symbolic, universal message that has survived for centuries and has now reached New York. So, when we were asked to help spread word about the initiative, we decided to concentrate on the link between Francis and peace, combining the old with the modern in keeping with a message as intrinsically timeless as peace.

Barefoot in New York

As you can see in the two-minute promotional video we made for the event, we decided to tell the story of Fra' Francesco dipping his bare feet in the contemporary world and walking through Manhattan, half amazed and half troubled, yet ever hopeful. In the background you'll hear a few verses from the Canticle of Creatures, Francis' book of prayers which marked the beginning of Italian literature, a moving appeal to life and the brotherhood between humanity and all of creation. How relevant these words sound eight hundred years on!

Going To See Francis

The following quotes are excerpted from *Going to See Francis: Men and Women, the Poor and the Powerful, Pilgrims at Assisi's Sacro Convento*, a book that collects curious anecdotes about notable figures, as well as many other voices—believers and non-believers, famous and unknown—unconsciously united in a long, laic prayer. The author, Father Enzo Fortunato, is the Director of the Sacred Convent of Saint Francis Press Office.

Bruce Springsteen

[Bruce Springsteen](#) [7] was one of a handful of people to visit the Basilica at night. This is what happened. I looked at the Boss: he had a look of awe and astonishment on his face. (...) He stopped a minute in front of a few scenes, in particular those depicting St. Francis preaching to birds and stripping off his garments—his renunciation of material goods and his choice to live a life of poverty. When I asked him to comment, he said, "This basilica has the colors of the Resurrection."

Patti Smith

[Patti Smith](#) [8] came on foot, without the media glitz of a star, in a poetic spirit, her look full of wonder. In the chapel of Saint Nicholas—Giotto's frescoes were under renovation then—a restorer named Fusetti handed her a brush and showed her a small spot to cover up. The image went viral, as did Smith's response: "I'm sorry, Giotto, but I did it with so much love."

Assisi Jagger

The only daughter of [Mick Jagger](#) [9] and his first wife, Jade, writes in a letter: "My 18 year old daughter was indeed named after St. Francis and his incredible work. For me he was always the first environmentalist and hippy and was a true inspiration to me from my early years. (...) I decided to call my first born Assisi and have loved the name and saint ever since. I look forward to visiting the city again soon."

Roberto Benigni

We were stunned when the actor and director received the Oscar for *Life Is Beautiful* and had this to say about poverty: "It's the greatest gift my parents gave me!" [Benigni](#) [10]—hardly a little devil!—spent four hours with us, staying for dinner in the emergency refectory. He visited the Sacro



Convento and climbed up to the vaults of the upper Basilica, dumbfounded the whole time. A little later, he wrote on our website, "Poverty generates Love, Charity leads to Ecstasy. If you add up the four initials of virtue above, you get another one—PEACE—which flies without wings toward the gates of Paradise."

Andrea Bocelli

[Andrea Bocelli](#) [11] is a good friend of the Sacro Convento. Whenever we ask him to participate in some of our initiatives, he always responds enthusiastically. Among our many memories of him, there was one Christmas that we set up a so-called "metropolitan" crèche in front of the Basilica, with contemporary figures. And then we called Bocelli in to inaugurate it. He began touching the figures while I explained who they were, saying the whole time, "Che bello, che bello!"

Carlos Santana

Can you believe thousands of young people applauded Saint Francis at a concert? It happened at Umbria Jazz. [Carlos Santana](#) [12] described the joyful sensation as a "feeling of love, because in this place a long time ago was a gentleman named Francesco d'Assisi," adding, "Saint Francis of Assisi, like [Mother Teresa](#) [13], like John Lennon, in a world of peace, without war, without violence."

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- [4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacro_Convento
- [5] <http://www.bnccrm.librari.beniculturali.it/>
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