

From Assisi. "St. Francis in New York". For a " Free, fraternal, harmonious and reconciled humanity"

Letizia Airos (November 11, 2014)



Interview with Friar Carlo Bottero, the keeper of the 'Canticle of Creatures' and other precious manuscripts from the XIII and XIV centuries, as well as Papal Bulls pertaining to the Saint of Assisi, being exhibited in the United States. The Franciscan monk accompanies the exhibition comprising 19 works from the 'Fondo Antico' of Assisi's public library, located in the Assisi Sacred Convent's library. The first prestigious event is the exhibition at the United Nations headquarters (Nov 17- 28, 2014). After that, the exhibits will move to the Brooklyn Borough Hall (open to the public) and will be displayed through the Christmas period. We invite you to visit this one in a million exhibition in New York (Dec 2, 2014 - January 14, 2015)

Assisi. The extraordinary Library where Friar Carlo Bottero lives was built in 1230 adjacent to the Cathedral where Saint Francis' remains had been laid to rest. Saying that he 'lives' there seems to us



more appropriate than saying that he 'works' there.

The Library and Franciscan Documentation Centre of the Sacred Convent of St. Francis in Assisi, contain a book heritage consisting of about 120,000 volumes, of which the medieval manuscripts represent the most important collection.

It specializes in theological disciplines, history of the church and of the Franciscan tradition, as well as art and music history. It not only conserves a notable selection of manuscripts and ancient books, but also the prestigious archival material from the Convent's historic archive and from the archive of the musical chapel of Saint Francis Cathedral.

Entering Fra Carlo Bottero's world, the director of the Sacred Convent's library, is a journey through time, where you find yourself in a unique human and spiritual dimension. Here you're taken back 800 years, to a XIII century that, if you have attended elementary school in Italy, you'll immediately recognize.

But for those of you who didn't grow up in Italy we could say - hopefully Friar Bottero will forgive us for the profane and very 'American' reference - it's a bit like being in the movie 'Back to the future' by Robert Zemeckis, where a very young Michael Fox is catapulted in the '60, in a party where his parents aren't yet married. It's a sense of disconnection, but at the same time one of belonging to that past, which is our own history....

The miniatures, the texts and their tradition, the collection of musical manuscripts and prints, the incunables... it's an extraordinary world. The greatness and the importance of the bibliographic and documental heritage of this library are incomparable, and it has consistently been the object of historic, artistic and scientific literature.

The Library, after having endured the vicissitudes of history and humanity, and having also overcome the 1997 earthquake, which caused deep cracks to the Upper Basilica and unfortunately the death of four people, also conserves St Francis' 'Canticles of Creatures' dating back to 1200.

Altissimu onnipotente bon Signore, tue so' le laude la gloria et honore et onne benedictione ...

A text that Italians know very well, since elementary school, considered the first document witnessing the birth of Italian language.

A sort of birth certificate. A text deemed 'immortal' for its content which 900 years later still conveys a message to the whole humanity. A message that transcends religions, whatever they may be: a hymn of love and respect for the creation.

A message that is current like few are. A true miracle of communication.

And this miracle perpetuates itself all the way to the US. Directly from Assisi 'The canticle of Creatures', with some Franciscan manuscripts, lands in New York for an event that is in a class of its own.

It's the first time that manuscripts from the XIII and XIV centuries as well as Papal Bulls pertaining to the Saint of Assisi come to the United States. The exhibition comprises 19 works from the 'Fondo Antico' of Assisi's public library, located in the Assisi Sacred Convent's library.

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We reached Friar Carlo Bottero among invaluable books and manuscripts. The Franciscan monk accompanies the exhibition during these important New York exhibitions.



It's him who, more than anyone else, together with the 'technical' and historic content of these manuscripts, can highlight with his accounts the exceptional nature of what New York is hosting until January 14.

" I assumed the direction about eight years ago, but I had always been a regular visitor of the Franciscan Library in Assisi. The familiarity with the manuscripts of the 'fondo antico' of course developed in the last few years." This is how Friar Carlo begins to then proceed by taking us into his world. We ask him how does it feel to live in a library that is so extraordinary both for historical and spiritual reasons.

" Routine always tends to 'devalue' even the most beautiful and extraordinary things. The awareness of the preciousness and spiritual richness of many of the pieces housed in the Sacred Convent's Library is renewed especially thanks to the opportunities I have to accompany the visitors and illustrate some of the most relevant pieces to them. Observing their reactions, often the deep emotion I read on many people's faces, I suddenly realize what treasure we have in our hands and I'm able to again appreciate its value".

And he tells us about his first time: when he saw and read the 'Canticle of Creatures" from the original text.

When I was a postulant - which is when I entered the convent for a period of trial still in my secular clothes - we visited the library. I clearly remember the first page of the Canticle because of the obvious presence of the musical staff that should have contained the notes, but which had been left blank.

I didn't read the whole text, only the incipit: *Altissimu onnipotente bon Signore, tue so' le laude la gloria et honore et onne benedictione.*

What I thought was: "We missed out on the music composed by Saint Francis, but we gained hundreds of different musical versions of the canticles which have later been realized".

Something happened at a certain point that Friar Carlo had not anticipated. A woman, Ms Flavia De Sanctis, President of the no profit organization 'Antiqua', proposed to take the Canticle and other manuscripts abroad. And where to? The United States of America.

'To tell you the truth at the beginning I was quite perplexed. But the decision was not only mine to make: it has been discussed in length by numerous people who, in various degrees, are responsible of the Fondo Antico, including the Mayor of Assisi and Umbria's Archives and Books Heritage Superintendents. The main reason why it has been decided to allow what are undoubtedly the most important manuscripts to leave the Library, is the wish expressed by the permanent observer of the Holy See at the United Nations to host this exhibition at their Headquarters. Once the request had been accepted, the difficulties - which we had many of, even beyond expectation- have been dealt with patiently, one by one.

A true miracle, keeping in mind the practical and bureaucratic obstacles we had to overcome.

We ask Friar Bottero to summarize in a few words the reasons why these documents are so relevant in today's world. And we know it isn't easy to provide a synthetic answer.

"Their importance is obviously due to the figure of Friar Francis, it derives directly from being the testimony of his life, of what he said and accomplished. Although intrinsically valuable for being antique, for their contents and for the exquisite miniatures, if it wasn't for the charm radiating from St. Francis of Assisi they would be 'some of the many' medieval documents and manuscripts preserved to this day. St Francis in Assisi is a model of 'free, fraternal, harmonious and reconciled humanity"

A 'free, fraternal, harmonious and reconciled humanity': a dream in the XIII century, and a dream still today.



But what are Friar Carlo expectations of this great media exposure?

" I am personally a bit reluctant with media, I prefer the rhythm of a book read to that of a video clip or twitter. The time available to each of us is less and less, and I'd rather dedicate it to few things, done well and with no hurry... the exact opposite of the current logic of media communication. This doesn't prevent me from understanding how media offer inestimable opportunities to express what one has to say. And I believe St. Francis has a lot to say: many things are somehow unknown, and sometimes, once heard, feel as if we had always known them, they seem ancient like the innate truths we hold as human beings. I anticipate many people will be drawn to St Francis and accept our call to approach him through these traces, words and images".

Then a realistic and slightly challenging comment on the conservation procedures of inestimable treasures like the "Canticle of Creatures" in Italy.

" The protection and conservation of a collection of medieval manuscripts and documents obviously require particular attentions and the implementation of adequate monitoring protocols. We're not talking about pieces exposed to specific risks, or in particularly critic conditions, even though with the upcoming exhibition we thought necessary for all the pieces to undergo a restorative intervention" - recounts Friar Carlo. As far as the problem of safeguarding and recuperating the books heritage goes, we could open a long chapter on this matter. From this point of view Italy has the 'misfortune of abundance': the collections of manuscripts and ancient books are countless, and the available resources are obviously insufficient. And I don't have solutions to offer!"

In the end words of gratitude, veiled with emotion:

" I don't know if this is the right place, but gratitude should find its place anywhere. I would like to thank all those who have contributed to the realization of this exhibition. There are so many people to thank; I can't name them one by one, even though I would like to in order to show how much work is required to bring such a project to life. Along with members of the organizing committee, which we could define "volunteers", all animated by authentic passion and love for Friar Francis, there are many others who offered professional collaboration. Even in them I felt sincere fondness for this project, they were all strong supporters working to enable the 'Poor man of Assisi', the man who defined himself "simple and illiterate", to enter the United Nations Headquarters and bring his salute to everyone: "May God give you Peace"!

To all, thank you!"

We in turn thank Friar Carlo, after St Francis of course who maybe has performed another miracle, to bring together people able to realize such an important mission.

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