

From Oppido Lucano (Cave Church of Saint Antuono) to Acerenza (Diocesan Museum)

A moderately difficult itinerary, 11.3 kilometres in length, winding through Lucanian valleys and hills of great scenic and cultural appeal. With an elevation gain of 670 metres uphill and 370 metres downhill, the route can be completed in around three hours and forty-five minutes, offering an immersive experience that brings together rock-cut art, spirituality and history in one of the most authentic landscapes of inland Basilicata.

The walk begins in Oppido Lucano, an ancient hilltop settlement, where the extraordinary Cave Church of Saint Antuono lies just outside the town centre. Hewn directly into the rock and remarkably well preserved, it represents one of the most significant examples of sacred rock-cut art in Basilicata. The church was created by the Antonine monks between the late thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries, during a period marked by the widespread growth of eremitic life and small monastic communities carved into the hills of the middle Bradano area.

The interior of the church preserves a cycle of nineteen frescoes dedicated to the Life of Jesus, dating to the first half of the fourteenth century. Arranged along the nave walls, the scenes depict the main episodes of Christ's life, from the Nativity to the Crucifixion and the Entombment. Although characterised by stylistic simplicity and a popular figurative language, the paintings stand out for their powerful narrative and spiritual intensity. The vivid yet restrained palette and the expressive gestures of the figures reflect an art deeply rooted in popular devotion and in the contemplative life of the monks who once inhabited this place. Set within the silence of the surrounding hills, this rock-cut complex is one of the rare surviving intact examples of medieval sacred painting in Lucania, and an essential reference point for understanding the spread of Christian worship in the region's rural areas.



Figure 1. Cave Church of Saint Antuono (Oppido Lucano)

Leaving Oppido behind, the route winds through vineyards, olive groves and open pastureland, following ancient paths that once linked monasteries and small villages. The landscape, marked by gentle slopes and wide horizons, accompanies pilgrims and walkers alike on a journey of slowness and contemplation, guided by the natural rhythm of the Lucanian hills. Along the way, there are several panoramic viewpoints open towards the Apennine ridge and the *calanchi* of the Bradano, in a continual dialogue between nature and historical memory.

The journey concludes in Acerenza, one of the oldest and most evocative villages in Basilicata, dominated by the majestic Cathedral of Saints Mary of the Assumption and Bishop Canio, a masterpiece of Norman Romanesque architecture in southern Italy. In the heart of the historic centre, within the ancient episcopal palace, lies the Diocesan Museum, founded in 2007 at the initiative of Monsignor Giovanni Ricchiuti. The museum houses a valuable collection of sacred artworks, archaeological finds and liturgical objects, bearing witness to the deep continuity between faith and culture that has characterised the diocese over the centuries.

Among its most significant rooms are those dedicated to pre-Roman and Roman artefacts, featuring ceramics and objects of Daunian and Canosan tradition, and the section devoted to sacred art, displaying paintings, wooden sculptures and liturgical furnishings dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Of particular importance is the painting *The Martyrdom*

of Saint Laviero, attributed to Filippo Donzelli, notable for its dramatic intensity and refined use of colour originating from the former Church of Saint Laviero. Equally noteworthy are the marble bust of Julian the Apostate, a Roman-period artefact, and the lapidary section preserving inscriptions and architectural fragments ranging from the Neolithic period to the Roman Imperial age.

The Diocesan Museum of Acerenza is not only a place of conservation but also a meeting point between faith and knowledge, where religious heritage intertwines with the civic and artistic history of the region. Its collections tell the story of a Basilicata that, despite its geographical isolation, has always been a crossroads of cultures and spiritual traditions.

The itinerary from Oppido Lucano to Acerenza is therefore a journey through memory and faith, a route that connects the rock-cut origins of Lucanian monasticism with the great sacred art of the medieval and Baroque periods. Among silent landscapes, olive-covered hills and ancient religious architecture, this walk invites the rediscovery of Basilicata in its deepest and most authentic dimension—a land where spirituality becomes landscape, and the landscape itself seems to turn into prayer.



Figure 2. Diocesan Museum of Acerenza