

From Tolve (Church of Saint Anthony of Padua) to Oppido Lucano (Convent of Saint Anthony) via the Sanctuary of the Madonna del Belvedere

A moderately challenging itinerary, 10.9 kilometres long, with 520 metres of ascent and 410 metres of descent, taking approximately three and a half hours to complete. The route links three places of great historical, artistic and spiritual value: the Church of Saint Anthony of Padua, the Sanctuary of the Madonna del Belvedere, and the Convent of Saint Anthony. The walk unfolds through gently cultivated hills, valleys and ancient rural roads, crossing a landscape that preserves the contemplative dimension of rural Basilicata intact.

In Tolve, the Church of Saint Anthony of Padua was built in 1585 at the behest of the Provincial Father, Crisostomo da Rivello, in an area that then lay outside the town walls but has since been absorbed into the urban fabric. Dedicated to Our Lady of the Olive Tree, it housed an image of the Virgin seated upon an olive stump, a symbol of humility and peace. Beside it stands the former convent, arranged over two storeys: on the ground floor were the guest quarters, the refectory, the kitchen, the cellar and the storeroom, while the upper floor contained nineteen monastic cells. Alongside the complex stretched a large vegetable garden, cultivated by lay people in the service of the community. During the seventeenth century, the convent experienced a period of great vitality, particularly under the guidance of Father Ludovico and Father Antonio, becoming an important religious and cultural point of reference for the people of Tolve. However, tensions with the nearby Franciscan Convent of the Most Holy Annunciation were frequent, driven by disputes over ceremonial precedence as well as by ideological differences and contrasting approaches to evangelical poverty. The Capuchins, devoted to austerity and simplicity, embodied a spiritual ideal distinct from that of the Conventual Franciscans, who were more closely associated with the management of property and resources. The convent remained active until 1865, surviving for more than half a century after the suppression of religious orders imposed by the decree of 1809.



Figure 1. Church of Saint Anthony of Padua with the former convent (Tolve)

Continuing towards Oppido Lucano, the route passes through a landscape dotted with olive groves, cultivated fields and small rural farmsteads, until it reaches the evocative Sanctuary of the Madonna del Belvedere, set on a hilltop about three kilometres from the town centre.

The sanctuary, dedicated to Our Lady of Purity, houses a polychrome wooden statue of the Virgin and Child, carved from a single block of poplar wood and dating from between the mid-fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. According to tradition, the image was miraculously discovered by a farmer in an oak tree on Mount Belvedere, where the Virgin is said to have expressed her wish to be venerated. Each year, on Ascension Day, the statue is carried back in procession to the sanctuary after having been kept in the mother church of Oppido Lucano

during the Easter period. This rite, deeply rooted in popular devotion, remains today a moment of intense collective participation.

The building itself, simple and intimate in character, features a plain façade and a single-nave interior, where the image of the Madonna enthroned with the Child in her arms stands out as the object of profound veneration by the faithful.



Figure 2. Sanctuary of the Madonna del Belvedere (Oppido Lucano)

The final stage of the itinerary leads to the majestic Convent of Saint Anthony, founded in 1482 by the noble family of Francesco and Caterina Zurlo for the Observant Friars of the Apulian Province of Saint Nicholas. The complex, equipped with two cloisters, a refectory, gardens and monastic cells, was enlarged during the seventeenth century and, from 1593 onwards, became one of the principal seats of the Reformed Franciscans of the Province of Basilicata.

The church, dating back to the foundation of the convent, has two naves covered by barrel vaults, separated by a large triumphal arch that leads into the presbytery with its cross vault. The gabled façade, incorporated into the convent buildings, is decorated with hanging arches and features a round single-light window and a portal framed by a blind arch.

Inside, in the three large halls adjoining the cloister, a remarkable cycle of frescoes painted in 1558 by Giovanni Todisco di Abriola is preserved. One of the leading Lucanian painters of the Renaissance, Todisco depicts Old and New Testament scenes such as *Nebuchadnezzar and the Three Youths in the Furnace*, *Judith and Holofernes*, *Christ and the Samaritan Woman*, *The Fall of the Manna*, and the *Miracles of Jesus*. The compositions, marked by formal balance and lively expressiveness, reveal the artist's stylistic evolution towards a more mature and harmonious Renaissance language.



Figure 3. Convent of Saint Anthony (Oppido Lucano)

The walk from Tolve to Oppido Lucano, via the Sanctuary of the Madonna del Belvedere, is a journey that weaves together history, art and faith, crossing centuries of Franciscan and Capuchin devotion within a landscape that preserves the spiritual depth of rural Basilicata.