

Guide to Siena and the Senese: [www.siena-guide.com](http://www.siena-guide.com)

## SAN FRANCESCO

A huge Gothic church with Lorenzetti frescoes. The Oratorio San Bernardino next door is also well worth visiting.

*To get to San Francesco, turn off the Banchi di Sopra into via dei Rossi (under the arch opposite the Luisa Spagnoli dress shop). Go right down to the bottom and through another arch into the Piazza San Francesco. It can also be reached from the big car-park (with escalator) called San Francesco in the valley behind the church.*



Originally, San Francesco was outside the walls of the city, and the arch at the bottom of via dei Rossi into the Piazza San Francesco, called **Arco dei Frati Minori** or Arch of the Minor Friars, was the gateway through the city walls. However, the 15th century Siennese Pope Pius II, whose parents were buried in San Francesco, was keen that the church should be brought within the city, and a new set of walls were built behind San Francesco.

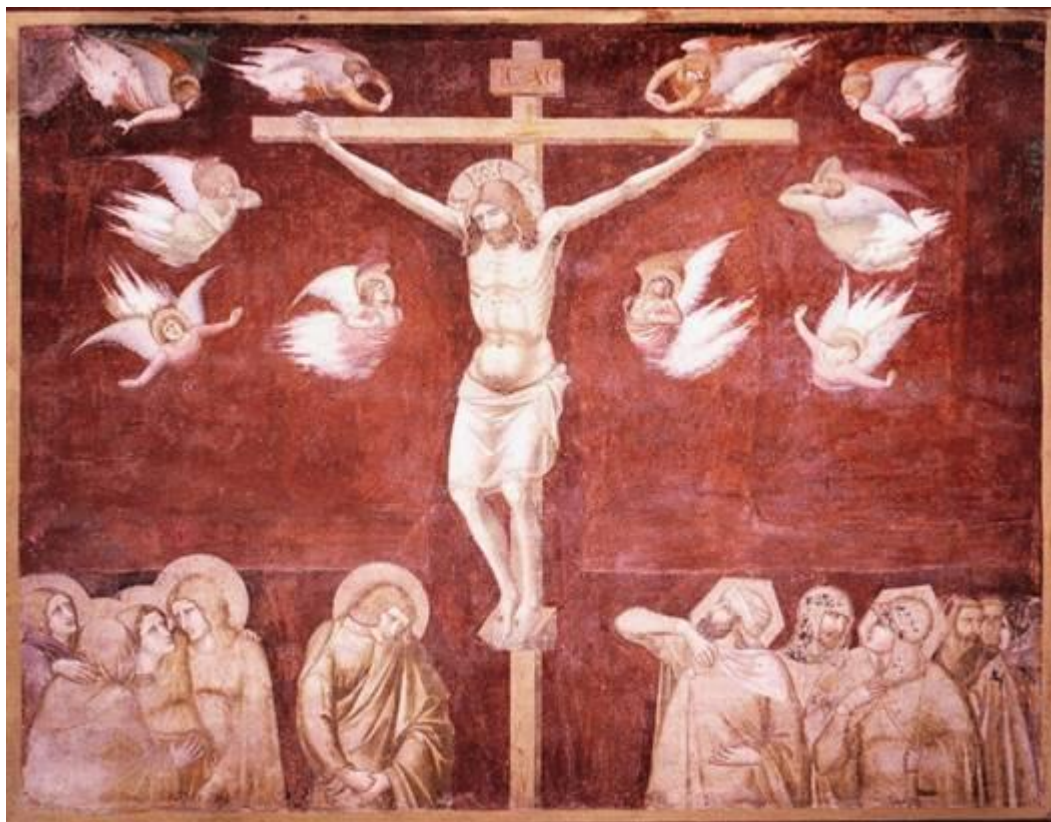
Just before the arch into the Piazza San Francesco (one of Siena's most attractive open spaces), it is worth glancing at the modern trompe-l'oeil marble statue of a topless woman at a window, on the left. Just below her, on the opposite side of the street and more or less under the via dei Rossi, lies the ancient **Fonte di San Francesco**, one of the old fountains that supplied Siena with water in the Middle Ages. It is now the contrada fountain of the Contrada of the Caterpillar (Bruco).

The Franciscans, who had a healthy rivalry with the Dominicans, usually built their churches bigger than anybody else's, and San Francesco in Siena is no exception. It is a vast Gothic redbrick building, built in the 1200s and enlarged some hundred years later. It is largely unadorned on the outside, apart from the Gothic main door with rose window above.

These are in fact 20th century pastiches; the façade was pulled down between the two world wars as it was thought to be dangerous and rebuilt. Originally, there were tiger stripes on the lower part of the façade and a quite different doorway, now to be seen inside the church.

The interior has been painted to resemble black and white marble as in the Duomo. The church was once far more garishly coloured inside, however, as can be seen from the traces of the original decoration in the chapels of the transept. There is not much to see in the huge bare nave, apart from some fragments of fresco and, on the left of the entrance, the magnificent renaissance main doorway by **Francesco di Giorgio Martini** (1439-1502) which adorned the façade before its rebuilding. Rather incongruously, it now frames what is almost a *trompe l'oeil* modern painting of the modern holy man Padre Pio. A number of large and not particularly distinguished oil paintings have been mounted on ugly iron frames in front of the side chapels instead of being hung in the alcoves of the chapels as was surely meant.

The works of real interest are the frescoes by the Lorenzetti brothers in the chapels to the left of the high altar, all that survives of what must have been an extraordinary array of wall decoration. The chapel immediately on the left of the high altar (light switch just inside the chapel, on the right) contains an intensely tragic **crucifixion** by **Pietro Lorenzetti**; even the angels in the sky have tortured faces and attitudes and it is one of the most moving paintings in Siena.



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In the third chapel to the left there are two frescoes by Pietro's brother **Ambrogio**, unfortunately less well preserved (light switch again just inside the chapel on the right). That on the right shows **St Louis of Toulouse taking leave of Pope Boniface VIII**, after he had renounced the throne of Sicily in favour of his brother Robert d'Anjou, seen here wearing his new crown and seeming far from pleased with it.

That on the left shows **Franciscan friars being martyred in Morocco in 1227** while on an ill-fated mission to convert infidels. Note the oriental dress and features of some of those

doing the martyring, more suitable to somewhere much further east, but no doubt Lorenzetti had never seen a Moroccan. All three frescoes were painted in the first half of the fourteenth century, and introduce a depiction of character that was then new to Sienese painting.

In the end chapel on the far left of the high altar there is a pleasant 14<sup>th</sup> century fresco on the side wall of the **Virgin and Child** by **Jacopo di Mino**, dating from 1400. But all except one of the paintings over the altars in the chapels are 19th century works in 14th century style. The exception is in the first chapel to the right of the altar, where there is a genuine 14th century Madonna and Child, unfortunately badly burnt in a fire in 1655. There is also some carving worth a look. On the steps to the chapel to the far right of the high altar there are two attractive 15th and 16th century tombstones, and two chapels further on, a fine 15th century sarcophagus of Cristoforo Felici, sculpted by **Urbana da Cortona**, is set high in the left hand wall .

On the opposite side of the right transept, a door leads into another chapel containing a frescoed **Virgin and Child with Saints** by the 14th century **Lippo Vanni**, painted to look like a polyptich in an ornate Gothic frame (unfortunately difficult to see because of the poor lighting). Off the left transept, opposite the chapels with the Lorenzettis, there is a large chapel with good pavement decoration, but frustratingly unlit and barred to visitors.

There are no fewer than three cloisters belonging to the monastery that used to be attached to the church. The first "**Piccolomini Cloister**" is accessible through a door next to the main entrance to the church. It is now occupied by the Law and Economics faculties of Siena University and is open during normal working hours. It was originally Gothic in style (two of the Gothic arches can be seen in the wall in the far corner), but was redone in elegant renaissance style in 1517 by a Piccolomini bishop – the Piccolomini crescent moon appears at the top of each arch. On the left side of the cloister there are steps up to the church with 18 identical crests (rather damaged) of the Tolomei family, another major Sienese family, commemorating 18 Tolomei men who were according to legend treacherously murdered by the rival Salimbeni family and are now buried underneath.

The second cloister, known as the **Sansoni cloister**, is reached through a door to the right of that leading to the Piccolomini cloister. It dates from the 15th century but has been knocked about quite a lot. Until recently, it was part of a barracks, but the soldiers have now moved elsewhere and it has also been taken over by the University. The third cloister is closed to the public. What remains of it can be glimpsed through a door on the left side of the nave of the church.

In 1730, a thief stole a precious receptacle containing some 350 consecrated hosts or communion wafers (particole), to the consternation of the population. The thief appears to have been interested only in the receptacle, as the hosts were found a month later stuffed in the offertory box of the neighbouring church of Santa Maria in Provenzano in a somewhat cobwebby state. A huge procession of clerics and townsfolk returned them to San Francesco, where they appear to have been put away (curiously, as consecrated hosts are seen as the body of Christ and are not normally kept for any time before being given in communion). Some 50 years later, somebody remembered them and examined them, to find that they were in a pristine state. This was seen as a miracle, and they were put safely away again. Since then, they have been examined at intervals, with some each time being tested for taste and consistency, and found still to be uncorrupted. What remains of the hosts after the testing etc. is still kept locked away in a chapel in San Francesco, being brought out for special occasions.

*Revised 2003, 2012 and 2015.*

## SANTA MARIA IN PROVENZANO



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This church, close to San Francesco, has one of the most attractive façades in Siena, built of clotted cream-coloured travertine in a baroque or mannerist style. It is set in quite a large piazza, enabling one to admire it with a fair degree of distance.

The church was consecrated in 1611 and contains a 14<sup>th</sup> century terracotta statue of the Virgin Mary (high above the altar in a glass case) which became associated with a number of miracles. It was in honour of this statue that the first July Palio in the Piazza del Campo was run in 1656, originating a tradition that continues to this day. At the time of the July Palio, the church is filled with the swirling flags of the contrade, and echoes to their drum rolls. On the evening before the Palio, the silk banner of the Palio is brought here and blessed. The next morning a solemn mass is said for all the contrade, and after the Palio members of the victorious contrada process to Santa Maria in Provenzano and sing a Te Deum of thanksgiving (for the August Palio, the Duomo is the church where all the ceremonies take place).

2012.