beata solitudo... sola beatitudo. Sono queste le parole con il quale il visitatore, che sia semplice turista oppure pellegrino in cerca di spiritualità, viene accolto all’ingresso del convento di San Francesco del Deserto, isola poco lontana dalla storica Torcello e ancor meno distante dalla vivace e colorata Burano.

Le origini del luogo risalgono al sec. I d.C. quando, in una laguna morfologicamente diversa dall’attuale, l’isola si trovava in una posizione più vicina al mare e quindi fungeva da punto per lo stoccaggio delle merci portate dalle navi in arrivo.

Bisogna però attendere il Medioevo per avere una menzione dell’isola. San Bonaventura racconta che San Francesco d’Assisi, giunto nella laguna di Venezia di ritorno dal suo viaggio in Egitto, si recò su questa isola per cercare un luogo adatto alla preghiera e al riposo. Assieme al suo compagno di viaggio, frate Illuminato da Rieti, Francesco iniziò a recitare i salmi ma venne disturbato da una moltitudine di uccelli palustri che con i loro canti non permettevano ai due religiosi di recitare le orazioni.

Su esortazione di Francesco gli uccelli subito tacquero e rimasero in silenzio fino a quando i due frati non terminarono il loro raccoglimento. Siamo nell’anno 1220 e l’isola era conosciuta come “Isola delle due vigne”, toponimo che rimanda ad una vocazione agricola del luogo coltivato a vigneto come era tipico di altre isole della laguna.

Nel 1233 il proprietario dell’isola Jacopo Michiel la dona ai frati seguaci di San Francesco e poco tempo dopo in quest’isola venne costruita la prima chiesa dedicata al Santo di Assisi, morto nel 1226 e canonizzato soltanto due anni dopo.

L’isola iniziò ad essere cono-
The "O beata solitudo...o sola beatitudo" i.e. "Blessed loneliness is my saviour" - be the tourist or pilgrim in search of spirituality, these are the welcoming words, to greet the visitor, at the entrance of the convent of San Francesco del Deserto - a small island not far from the historic Torcello and even less far from the lively and colourful Burano.

Its origins can be traced back to the first century AD, when the lagoon was morphologically different, and the island was nearer to the sea. At that point in time, it acted or served as a storage locality for goods brought by incoming ships. However, there was no mention of the island until the Middle Ages. Saint Bonaventure narrates that Saint Francis of Assisi arrived at the entrance of the Venetian lagoon on his way back from Egypt, and went to this small island looking for a suitable place to pray and rest. Together with his travel companion, brother Illuminato of Rieti, Francis started to recite the psalms but was disturbed by the calls and chirps of flocks of marsh birds. The two pious men found it impossible to recite their prayers. Francis pleaded with the birds. They immediately quietened down and remained in silence until the two friars finished their meditation. Then in 1220, the island had the name of "the island of the two vineyards" - a place name recalling its agricultural vocation and origins as a vineyard, as was typical of other lagoon islands.

In 1233, Jacob Michiel, the owner of the island, gave it to the friar-followers of St. Francis. Very soon after, the first church dedicated to the saint - who died in 1226 and was canonized only two years later - was built there. The island then became known as
The Cloister was built in the second half of the XV century by fra Nicolò Erizzo, who ran the convent from 1452 to 1460.

St. Francis of the Contrada was it one of the contradas or districts in the Venetian lagoon.

During the 15th century, a slow and unstoppable deterioration started in the Torcello lagoon area, and monasteries were not excluded either; the noble families moved to Venice, where commercial traffic had already considered the Rialto area an ideal place. Even the friars thought the “Dominante” to be more suitable for their pastoral activities. This state of abandonment was the reason for it to be called “Deserto” or deserted; and from this - “San Francesco del Deserto”. The Franciscans returned and were obedient to their order until 1806 when Napoleonic decrees to abolish religious orders also struck this community of
Tourists are permitted at established times and bookings are required for groups. Please consult the following website for more information: www.sanfrancescodeldeserto.it

Bibliographical references: M. Molin, O beata solitudine, o sola beatitudine. L’isola di San Francesco del Deserto «Quaderni Torcellani n. 7», Venezia, 2015 (forthcoming publication).

In alto /at the top
Il convento è circondato da un giardino di pini marittimi, cipressi secolari e altre piante antiche, popolato da numerosissimi uccelli.

The monastery is surrounded by a garden of pines, cypress trees and other ancient plants, populated by numerous birds.

monks. From that moment onwards, the island became military government property until 1858, when through intervention of Father Bernardino dal Vago da Portogruaro, it was given by the Austrian government to the Patriarch of Venice who in turn donated it as a perpetual holding to the Franciscan monks who still take care of it today.

The island is a haven of peace and tranquillity, with its two monastery courtyards, annexed church and garden, a place of retreat and comfort for anyone in search of himself, aided by a Franciscan simplicity and hospitality, that is offered by the four monks taking care of the place and welcoming whoever knocks at their door.