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**THE VIA FRANCIGENA EUROPEAN CULTURAL ROUTE:  
ORIGINS, DEVELOPMENT, OPERATION, AND INVOLVEMENT OF  
LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES**

By Mrs Adelaide TREZZINI  
President of the International Association Via Francigena

## **Mrs the President, Ladies and Gentlemen**

The short time available to me means that I have to be relatively concise, because this is in reality a very vast topic, ranging from the establishment of cultural routes in general to the way one route in particular operates, the Via Francigena (VF), for which I am partly responsible.

The routes create a cross-cultural pan-European space across state boundaries, an open space in which it is possible to seek new solutions, to try out new ideas, share experiences... and “push back the horizon”,

as a former Director of the Culture and Cultural Heritage Division of the Council of Europe put it.

**The COUNCIL OF EUROPE CULTURAL ROUTES PROJECT began as follows** (information provided by the Director of EICR: the European Institute of Cultural Routes)

**1964:** a working group entitled *Continuous Europe* put forward a cultural route project

**Its main aims were to increase awareness:**

1. of a real European cultural identity
2. of the relationship between European cultural geography and the possibility of establishing tourist networks
3. of European cultural heritage, by preserving and enhancing it as a source of social, economic and intercultural development
4. of the value of cultural tourism in the leisure activities of Europeans by creating major sites and crossroads of European civilisation

A *cultural route* is taken to mean a route covering one or more countries or regions organised around a theme of European historical, artistic or social interest, by virtue either of the geographical route followed or the nature and scope of its range and significance.

In **1985** the Council of Europe proposed the **Santiago de Compostela Pilgrim Ways**. This first cultural route symbolised first and foremost the process of European construction and was to serve as a reference and an example for future projects.

**Three challenges** were clear from the outset:

1. **A political challenge: to make the programme a catalyst** for renewed European social cohesion
2. **A challenge of identity**, without ignoring differences
3. **A democratic challenge**, to extend cultural tourism to a broader section of society

Twenty years on, typical themes underlying the cultural routes programme are:

- Peoples
  - Migration
  - Major currents of civilisation
  - **Pilgrim ways:** Santiago de Compostela + VF; the Celtic, Viking and Phoenician Routes, the Mozart Route, the Silk Route, the Baroque Route, among others
- ORIGINS of the Via Francigena Cultural Route

To return to today's topic, I can sum up the history of the VF as follows:

In 58 BC, Julius Caesar opened a "Via Romana" which rapidly became the backbone of the road system of Western Europe, the shortest route between the North and the Mediterranean. The route coincided in part with the Celtic "Tin Road", which stretched from Cornwall to Switzerland and Marseille, and with the European network of Roman roads.

In the wake of the Arab dominion over Jerusalem, (640 AD), Rome became the principal destination of Christian pilgrimages and remained so until the beginning of the cult of Saint James in Compostela, Galicia, in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

In Italy, in the Middle Ages, the line followed Lombard routes based on Roman roads. It was called the "Iter Francorum" from 725 and the "Via Francigena" for the first time in 876.

Over the centuries the road changed its name, depending on the origins of those using it: "**Via Francigena**" or "Francisca" in Italy and Burgundy, "**Chemin des Anglois**" in the Kingdom of the Franks (after the conversion of England in 607) and "**Chemin Romieux**" because of its destination, Rome.

In 1154, when crossing Lake Geneva in Switzerland, the Icelandic monk Nicolas de Munkatvera observed in Vevey a crowd of Franks, Flemings, English, Germans and Scandinavians all making their way to Rome.

The Via Francigena was used above all by popes, emperors, bankers, merchants, pilgrims and brigands. When Holy Years were proclaimed, starting in 1300, the numbers using the route could often amount to tens of thousands of persons a year.

The pilgrimage to Rome along the Via Francigena fell out of fashion around the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1985, Giovanni Caselli, a specialist in the archaeology of roads, produced a report on the maps and the route followed by Archbishop Sigeric of Canterbury when he travelled to Rome in 990 AD to receive the pallium or investiture mantle from Pope John XV. The 80 stages listed in the brief diary of the Saxon Archbishop's journey comprise the key points of the network of roads known as the Via Francigena which had been built up over the years, with numerous variants.

Significant sections of paving and Roman and medieval tiles from the Via Francigena are still to be found in Italy, Switzerland, France and Britain.

The VIA FRANCIGENA PROJECT aims to link these remains as a thread running through the history, religion, art and economy of Europe.

By way of introduction to how it developed, allow me to quote a few extracts from the preface by the Director of EICR to the Guide-Vademecum published in 2002:

"In 1994 on the representation of the Italian Ministry of Tourism, the Committee for Cultural Itineraries of the Council of Europe agreed to promote the theme of the Via Francigena, to complement that of the Pilgrim Way to Santiago de Compostela, and thereby form the larger theme of historic pilgrimages in Europe.

Work groups were set up by the Ministry of Tourism, and exhibitions and conventions were organised. A leading objective of this initiative was of course to set up a route for the Jubilee in Rome in the year 2000.

For the first two years, the itinerary and the network it engendered was financed by the European Union. But ministerial strategies evolve and the Ministry of Tourism turned to a more decentralised structure, allowing local authorities to form their own plans. The initiative of relaunching a truly European co-operation fell to Mme Adelaide Trezzini, who decided, a few years ago, to create an Association to promote the historical study of the way and provide pilgrims as well as tourists with information on lesser known sections."

## DEVELOPMENT of the VF project

**My enthusiasm and commitment to restoring the VF as a European cultural route came about by chance. In 1995, perhaps because of my dual Swiss and Italian nationality, I was asked by ANGT (Italian National Association of Tourist Guides) to promote the VF in Switzerland.**

The **sequence of stages** in which the project developed was dictated by an instinctive logic since I had no experience other than my training as an art historian.

It was crucial to be certain of a number of key factors:

1. First of all, the **validity and significance** of the **PURPOSE** of the route. In this particular case, the Tomb of Saint Peter was in no historical doubt. There were also, for example, the military road which had existed since ancient times, the pilgrim route – since the 4th century – the road to Italy of the Counts of Savoy and the great fairs held in Champagne that attracted the whole of Europe, and was hence the route of the Lombard bankers, and so on.
2. The **validity and significance** of the academic historical interest, and of the cultural heritage preserved along the route. These were demonstrated by preliminary research carried out over a 60km stretch from the Great St Bernard Pass (2,400m) to St Maurice near Lake Geneva.
3. It was also essential to see whether it was possible to join up the **surviving ancient stretches of the route** in order to **recreate a historical route**.
  - ❑ In order to carry out this research, initial contact was made with the religious and civil regional authorities in the cantons of Valais and Vaud and with the Swiss Register of Historic Roads in Bern. During three meetings arranged in Martigny between 1996 and June 1997, great interest was shown in the VF by those taking part: long-established monasteries, education departments, cantonal directors of ancient monuments, cantonal archives, heads of cantonal museums, regional prefects, municipal authorities and regional and local cultural associations. I was asked by the Regional Association of Martigny to develop the VF in Valais. An Association Via Francigena was received warmly locally, but the regional ramblers' association objected and the project fell through.
4. And of course it was vital to secure the **support of the Council of Europe (CE)**: when we submitted our project "the Sigeric Route, from the Channel to the Alps" in June 1997, the head of cultural routes, Mr Thomas-Penette, warmly encouraged the establishment of a VF association that would finally get this cultural route off the ground.
  - ❑ In September 1997 the AVF (Association Via Francigena) was set up as a private-law, non-profit making, non-religious and apolitical body with the Secretary of the Pontifical Cultural Council Bernard Ardura, the Geneva academician and archaeologist Charles Bonnet and ANGT as its founder members.
  - ❑ A year later, in September 1998, José Maria Ballester of the CE acknowledged that the action taken by AVF fell under the CE cultural routes and asked us to collaborate with other bodies and associations with a view to creating a European VF network.
  - ❑ To this end, EICR signed a partnership agreement with AVF in the same year, which was then renewed up until 2003.
5. The **promotion and publicising** of the VF project in regions which were completely unaware of it took place largely through

- ❑ the website [francigena.ch](http://francigena.ch) in June 1998, and in particular a section “Useful addresses for VF information” as it was vital to provide an overview of the outcomes of the VF project between 1993 and 1997 for the Italian local and regional authorities.
- ❑ the Swiss local and regional press, which led to the first statements of intent for collaboration and financial support
- ❑ the Philatelic Bureau of Vatican City, which agreed to work with us to produce the VF postcards published in 1999, and the City and Canton of Geneva, which at our request organised a continuing training course on “Heritage and Tourism” at the University of Geneva for the Léman Region, an initiative which was extremely successful.

The last factor, but by no means the least important, was the **interest among the specialist public** whose **requirements had to be known** if they were to be **catered for**.

AIVF was firmly convinced that the VF only made sense if it incorporated a EUROPEAN dimension, and in order to achieve this the approach adopted was above all one of SYSTEMATIC INFORMATION:

1. A *mailing list* was drawn up of ALL regions, provinces and municipalities, tourist offices, parishes and dioceses, cultural associations and sports clubs along the route.
2. At the end of 1998, a special website attracted international interest among Santiago pilgrims, which resulted in urgent demands for logistical organisation along the VF (accommodation in convents and parishes, inexpensive lodgings, recommended maps, certificates of completion of pilgrimage on arrival at St Peter's, information for pilgrims, signposting, whether the route was along footpaths or merely major or provincial roads with heavy traffic, etc).

We are coming to the CRITICAL POINT of this new route.

The Italian Government, Regions and Provinces had been thinking in terms of an IDEAL VF.

And indeed a number of excellent publications had appeared, which were well illustrated. There had been numerous tourist and cultural events such as historical pageants focusing on *Archbishop Sigeric*, but there had been very little actual walking along the VF. Sports clubs such as CAI (the Italian Mountaineering Club), the Confraternity of Pilgrims to Rome and the IVS (Italian Register of Historic Roads), among others, had completely ignored the VF on the ground that it almost exclusively followed tarred roads and was therefore of no interest. In academic terms, exhibitions, numerous seminars and study days on topics related to the VF had been organised here and there by municipalities and provinces, some of them funded by local banks; a feasibility study had been commissioned by the Region of Tuscany, for example.

ALL of this was of great promotional value, but it was not enough to restore what was intended primarily to be a WALKING ROUTE.

It was former pilgrims from different parts of the world who had walked the Camino de Santiago that restored the VF to its PRESENT-DAY IMPORTANCE. Following in the tracks of Giovanni Caselli, a British (female) pilgrim, was one of the first to walk the entire VF route from Canterbury to Rome in 1990.

It was obvious that no sustainable plan of **LOGISTICAL ORGANISATION** had ever been drawn up. Where were we to begin?

Future VF pilgrims were our “advisers”, in the sense that one of the main goals of AVF was to do EVERYTHING POSSIBLE to make the genuine but difficult pilgrimage to Rome easier for them.

- At the start of 2000, sole priority was given to listing all inexpensive accommodation facilities, since that was part of the spirit of pilgrimage and reflected the likely budget for a journey that might be 1900 km or more, and could last anything from a fortnight to 2 or 3 months, in foreign countries. This was by no means a simple undertaking.

The same method was used in succession with ALL convents and parish priests, most of whom had NO facilities for accommodating pilgrims. In France the situation was dire from this point of view, with elderly priests serving 10 or 15 parishes.

All the information collected was published in an initial **Vademecum Via Francigena**, for Italy in June 2000, for Canterbury to the Great St Bernard in 2002, and then in 2003 a 2<sup>nd</sup> edition appeared covering the Great St Bernard to Rome and including the stretch from Arles via Montgenèvre and Turin, at the request of the many pilgrims who wanted to walk from Rome to Santiago de Compostela.

EICR looked askance at our impatience to bring out these guides, reckoning that the VF would take at least 10 years to organise. We were in a hurry, for the VF was so precarious that it might rapidly disappear.

The sales of the Guide-Vademecum (650 copies sold of the 1st edition, 585 already of the 2nd) show that we were right since they were designed FOR pilgrims, and although these guides were of minimum weight and size, they were packed with essential informations.

This all led to a revival of general interest among a number of local authorities and institutions. New VF publications have been appearing regularly over the last 2 years, two VF Italy guides in 2004, for example.

- The issue of **CO-OPERATION**, advocated by the CE in 1998, has proved far more difficult than we expected.
- a) In the case of the **local authorities**, 2001 saw the creation of a co-operative association of Italian municipalities along the VF by the mayor of Fidenza (half-way along the VF in Italy). Its President, Massimo Tedeschi, personally asked the members of the AIVF committee for effective collaboration, arguing that our two VF associations represented two sides of the same VF coin, one institutional and the other private. All our initiatives have been made available to them, but for 4 years we have waited in vain. Why?

Numerous seminars and VF days have been organised WITHOUT the participation of AIVF. In addition, we have a link on our website to that of the municipalities along the VF, but despite their promises, they still do not have a link to ours.

Let us not forget, however, that it is the exception that makes the rule: the small but active municipality of Altopascio, near Lucca, has done everything in its power to help us to bring the VF back to life.

In Pavia, the director of museums offered free entry to the Castle of Sforzesco (13<sup>th</sup> century) to pilgrims who are FRIENDS of the VF. This outstanding initiative led us to draw up a list of medieval monuments and museums, FREE-FRANCIGENA, which has been joined by several museums in the canton of Vaud, including the Lausanne Cantonal Museum of Art and History – yet another opportunity to appreciate shared European culture. Furthermore, the commune of Ballaigues in the Jura and the Swiss Federal Customs Department reopened the footpath across the Franco-Swiss border, on the recommended old route Pontarlier-Orbe – a great achievement for the European VF.

In France, the tourist offices of Péronne-Somme and Langres-Haute-Marne have collaborated admirably by putting a Via Francigena page on their websites. Others have supplied full tourist documentation, and a number of publications and slides.

Since spring 2004, AIVF has, through its contacts with the Regions of Tuscany and Latium, been actively advocating renewed participation by the Italian Regions in the VF project, which is indispensable. At the behest of the Region of Latium, we are developing an inter-regional project, and by last November, 5 of the 7 regions involved had joined.

They are chiefly responsible for the safety of pilgrims, the maintenance and signposting (if possible standardised) of VF roadways and footpaths throughout the country, the supervision of academic research, the organisation of major tourist and cultural events, and above all for the use and CONSERVATION of monuments.

Following the publication of excellent press articles (in, among others, LE TEMPS, Switzerland, on 15.8.2001), close collaboration began with the Institute of Geography of the University of Lausanne. After exciting preliminary university work and post-university work for TOPOFRANCIGENA-Switzerland, the collaboration suddenly stopped.

As the Director of EICR put it, "the continuation of VF is something of a miracle". We therefore felt it was time, in 2001, to INFORM the **states concerned** of the progress made with the project thanks to the wholehearted commitment of the Association.

The Holy See became a patron of the VF project of AIVF, followed by the Italian Ministry of Culture, the French Ministry of Culture and Communication, and the Ministry of the Interior of the Helvetic Confederation.

In any initiative there will be negative points. Allow me to mention a few:

- ❑ AIVF has not been informed of or invited to the events and presentations concerning the VF organised since 2002 by EICR in Luxembourg, in Strasbourg and in association with the Municipality of Fidenza, among others (although this is provided for in our partnership agreement).
- ❑ We have had no further contacts with the Centre for European Culture in St-Jean d'Angely, France, since holding two conferences on the VF there in 2001.
- ❑ The activities and initiatives of AIVF are no longer mentioned in the EICR bulletin.
- ❑ We have been boycotted by certain public and private associations and institutions.
- ❑ We are grateful to the CE for honouring AIVF at the last moment in its reference to the VF as a "Great CE Route" in Poland on 9.12.2004.

To return to the VF itself, you will agree that every cultural route needs ITS OWN **IDENTITY**.

For the VF we chose a **logo** which expresses 3 factors specific to the VF:

The time factor – it has been in existence since antiquity (Peutingerian map based on a 3<sup>rd</sup> century map)

The geography factor – *omnes viae Romam perducunt* – all roads lead to Rome – with the idea of a convergent network of Roman consular roads

The destination factor (expressing religious pilgrimage or the pilgrimage of man on Earth)

The Manual of Standards for European VF Signposting, inspired by that of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela since the two routes are similar, was compiled in collaboration with EICR and accepted by the CE in July 2001. The press launch was originally planned by EICR for 2001, and then for 2003 in Luxembourg. The Region of Latium is expected to launch it soon.

**Collaboration in the technical sector:** here I must mention the indispensable collaboration with ramblers' associations from Great Britain to Rome; but in its efforts to identify a RECOMMENDED

VF route, the Association has met with refusal on the part of six organisations out of 22, even though we had set up the group *Friends of the VF for walkers and cyclists* in 2001 in Milan.

But in the last few months, there has been one piece of marvellous news: in order to draw up the TOPOFRANCIGENA-Italy, we had the idea of actively involving the chief officers of the **provincial police forces** along the VF in finding an IDEAL ROUTE for pilgrims, and 4 out of 7 are collaborating; officials responsible for the environment, shooting and fishing have identified the whereabouts of, for example, over-zealous sheepdogs and rivers that can be forded.

### **Collaboration by religious institutions**

We appreciate the constant and effective support of the Holy See for the cause of the VF and the initiatives of AIVF.

### How pilgrimage along the Via Francigena OPERATES

Our principle has always been, and still is, to provide the maximum amount of precise information about difficulties that may be encountered: for example, the shortage of accommodation and facilities to buy food on long and very isolated wooded sections with an average population of only a few inhabitants per square kilometre in France.

As organised by AIVF, the way the Route operates is very simple:

The website [www.francigena-international.org](http://www.francigena-international.org) is usually the point of contact with intending VF pilgrims, who can be classed as pilgrims once they have already walked 2 or 3 routes leading to Santiago de Compostela. Intending VF pilgrims who express interest in this new pilgrim route want information about accommodation, maps of the VF, signposting, the percentage of tarred roads, recommended guidebooks and where they can be obtained, whether they are given a certificate when they reach St Peter's, and so on and so forth. They expect the VF to be exactly like the Camino – a motorway for pedestrians that leads to Santiago, where everything is arranged and organised FOR THEM.

In 2000 we started warning intending VF pilgrims that NOTHING of that sort exists, that they would be true pioneers with all the advantages and disadvantages that that entails; and that AIVF had been set up to help them to arrive safe and sound in Rome, since it is they who will bring this ancient pilgrimage route back to life.

After 4 years of relentless work, we are now in a position to send them: an **order and membership form in 5 languages** for our publications and products, such as the **VF pennant** and the broach with the **keys of St Peter**, for we could not let pilgrims arrive in Rome with nothing but the St James scallop shell. Rome is not Santiago, and every pilgrimage had its own emblem even in the Middle Ages.

We have two **VF Guides-Vademecums** indicating:

*Stages in km – type of road – altitude – tel. and fax nos. of municipal authorities – tourist offices – Internet access points – inexpensive accommodation (max.£35-€55-CHF100 for 2 people/day): hotels – bed & breakfast – youth hostels – shelters – camp sites – religious accommodation – places to visit and see: especially medieval sites and museums*

**These pocket-sized books have been supplemented since 2004 by two Topofrancigena, made up of 40 geo-cultural maps in colour showing the historic route – nowadays often the main arterial roads – a recommended route, and often an excursion route.**

**The maps are the vital element, but it is unfortunately impossible to obtain them on their own, since walking maps are only available for the mountains in Italy. With a maximum weight of 450 gr, walkers thus have ALL they need to walk from Canterbury Cathedral to St Peter's in Rome.**

Intending pilgrims can contact our **co-ordinators** in their preferred language in France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Italy and Switzerland.

They often immediately join the FRIENDS of AIVF and receive the documentation they have ordered which will enable them to choose in advance THEIR own route.

FRIENDS receive free of charge:

- ❑ a FRIEND of AIVF card, a pilgrim passport entitling them to special reductions (70% of the accommodation listed, free-francigena, etc)
- ❑ 1-2 special sets of VF pilgrim credentials, to certify their journey along the VF
- ❑ and a VF Pilgrims' ACCOMMODATION LIST from Canterbury to Rome with updates to the 2 Guides-Vademecums (changes in accommodation are inevitable), the most recent advice and 2 stickers for their rucksacks.
- ❑ For the last 2-3 years, pilgrims have found VF information on arrival at the Information Office in St Peter's Square.
- ❑ The chance to visit the Church of San Pellegrino with the 9th century fresco of Christ Pantocrator inside the Vatican, and to visit the Camposanto Teutonico, the 9<sup>th</sup> century cemetery for German-speaking pilgrims.

THEIR and OUR journey along the VF ends as follows:

Even after a genuine *peregrinatio*, there were no **reception arrangements for pilgrims at Saint Peter's Basilica** in Rome until 2001 (except in exceptional cases). Anyone accustomed to Santiago was VERY disappointed.

To remedy this, AIVF organised, in close collaboration with the Vatican:

1. A Basilica Register of VF Pilgrims (which provides some statistics), in which pilgrims may write their impressions and the reason, not necessarily religious, which led them to make the pilgrimage to Rome.
2. The award of a Testimonium parchment (donated by AIVF) certifying completion of the pilgrimage after walking at least 130km from the Church of San Sepulcro Acquapendente (the former place of pilgrimage which replaced Jerusalem when that became inaccessible), at a ceremony, depending on the availability of the priest, in the Vatican Grottoes.

Whenever I can, I am delighted to meet pilgrims near St Peter's Square, since their experience will enable us to improve our help to future pilgrims.

The question of **FUNDING** is probably troubling you.

EICR had anticipated a request for financial support from our Association back in 1999. Our requests to our partner EICR in subsequent years for financial assistance to create the VF Guides-Vademecums and the TOPOFRANCIGENA have gone unanswered.

Despite everything, all our initiatives have been made possible thanks to occasional grants, self-funding from subscriptions and sales of VF publications and products, and above all due to the generosity and voluntary work of the FRIENDS and members of AIVF, to whom we once again extend our thanks.

Clearly this is not the best solution since it depends on individual generosity.

But our experience shows the very significant support that a **private voluntary association** can give to a **public project** in the field of culture, by abiding by the rules of faithful and balanced collaboration in both financial and human terms, without becoming like a Wild West adventure, as has sometimes happened.

The solution?

It is for each of us to find one so that other cultural routes can be CREATED and an AUTHENTIC Europe CONSTRUCTED. I thank you.

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Plenary Assembly of the CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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