

THE PARIS MONASTERY BEFORE BIC

Reggio Calabria to Paris

It took only enough time to reach the truck's destination before Eugenio invited me to get out.

He confirmed that, three days later, the exact same spot would be where he would meet me again for the trip back home.

I took out my phone and searched for the location where I would be spending the night. The distance was 3.6 kilometers.

So I began walking, reflecting on facts, events, and the strange series of circumstances that had brought me there, unable to hide an occasional smile while waiting to reach my shared accommodation.

When I finally arrived, the building looked unusual. It was a mixture of church, mill, and agricultural warehouse.

But I was in France. Things that seem bizarre to Italians are often considered perfectly natural there. Or at least, that was what I believed.

I pressed the intercom. Instead of a buzzer, I heard the ringing of a bell, the same kind used in churches when communion is being celebrated.

A short man appeared. Bald. Dark-bearded. Wearing a monk's habit.

I explained that I had made a reservation and had already paid online. He took my identification document, checked the details, handed me the key to locker number three, gave me a note containing the Wi-Fi password, and then escorted me toward the shared room.

While we walked, he asked what had brought me to Paris. I replied: "Women."

The moment I said it, I immediately had the feeling that something was escaping my understanding. But what?

He continued walking ahead of me. A few moments later he opened a large door and invited me inside.

I entered what looked like a warehouse containing sixty bunk beds and only two bathrooms. Women on the right. Men on the left.

Not even during my Italian military service in 1984 had I experienced anything remotely comparable. The largest barracks I had ever seen housed twenty people.

Here, however, my colleague from two thousand years ago seemed determined to send me another message: "Frega, you haven't seen anything yet."

I found myself inside a marketplace of people from every nation and every tradition. It was not a shared room. It was not a hostel. It was something entirely different.

In Italy, such a place would have caused public outrage, attracted judicial investigations, and dominated the news cycle. Here? Perfectly normal. Welcome to France.

Yet the institution was Catholic in nature, and I wanted to understand how such a thing could exist.

Eventually I discovered that it belonged to a religious congregation led by a Catholic order whose cardinal had once been excommunicated by the Vatican because he had refused to adapt himself to the established format.

So he had created a system of his own.

After connecting my phone to the Wi-Fi network, a message from Chanel arrived. She asked whether I had arrived safely, what hotel I was staying in, and informed me that if I gave her the address she would personally come and pick me up the following morning for our appointment.

I replied that I had arrived only a short time earlier. The journey had gone extremely well. And as for the hotel, it had kindly provided a car and driver, so I would already have transportation the next morning. Nevertheless, I thanked her for the offer.

That evening, inside the shared hall, something unexpected happened. A group of people of Indian origin and another group from Brazil were listening to the same music at the same time.

The more I listened, the more familiar it sounded. Then I realized why. They were on gillettenarrative.com.

That was what my colleague from two thousand years ago had wanted me to see. And it made me happy.

The following morning, after walking my three kilometers, I took the metro toward the Champs-Élysées and arrived well ahead of schedule.

I stopped outside the entrance. For a moment I wondered whether I was doing the right thing.

The answer was yes. Because I was not asking anyone for money. And I was free to listen to the world.

Ferdinando