

THE SANCTUARY OF SARONNO: HISTORICAL NOTES

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An impassable barrier to the north, a veritable line of fortification: this could describe the many Marian sanctuaries that sprang up at the foot of the Alps starting in the late fifteenth century. Like so many Golgothas, the Sacred Mounts protected from above, while standing guard in the valleys below along the major routes of communication were sanctuaries like the shrines in Valtellina, Re in the Ossola area, Oropa near Biella, Cannero on Lake Maggiore.

All of them were inspired by veneration and devotion to the Virgin Mary. Times were hard for the Catholic Church, and getting harder. After the papal exile in Avignon, the “Great Schism,” and the Council of Constance, now the impending Protestant Reformation risked spreading to southwestern Europe. For a long time, Italy and Spain were the last bastions.

It was certainly not the popes who strengthened the defenses, absorbed as they were in the pomp and splendor of Renaissance patronage and paying little attention to the *animus ecclesiae*; it was faith in the Virgin Mother that gave unity and strength to the Catholic world. In Lombardy, as well as other parts of Christendom, sanctuaries began to spring up at the end of the fifteenth century and to multiply rapidly.

This is the scenario that provides the background to the laying of the first stone of the Sanctuary of Saronno in 1498, in response to a

desire to build a grand house of worship to replace the modest chapels already existing to celebrate the miraculous manifestation to Pedretto.

Hastening to Saronno, summoned by the “deputies” to embellish the Sanctuary, on which construction started right as the new century began, were the leading artists of the time in Lombardy: architects, painters, master stone cutters, carvers, stucco craftsmen, sculptors, organ makers, engravers, and gilders.

Early sixteenth-century celebrities like Giovanni Antonio Amadeo, Bernardino Luini, Gaudenzio Ferrari, Paolo della Porta, Andrea da Milano, Giulio Oggiono (or Ongoni), Bernardino Lanino, Vincenzo Seregni, Aurelio or Giampiero Luini, Pellegrino Tibaldi, Benedetto Antegnati, Camillo and Giulio Cesare Procaccini, Carlo Buzzi, Stefano Legnani and others offered their contribution, filling the church with major works of art.

Enthusiasm for the veneration of Mary, the passion of the people, the zeal of the “deputies of the Sanctuary,” the generosity of donors, the special attention given to Saronno by the high echelons of the Church, and the fear that heresies on the other side of the Alps might spread through the Po valley generated a great rush to produce.

The result was another order of miracles to accompany the glory of the Sanctuary: this time mira-

cles of art!

The architects barely managed to raise the walls and finish the roof before a whole legion of artists poured into Saronno to make this “royal palace of miracles” more sumptuous. If anything, we must lament the fact that the piling up of decorations on top of each other and the subsequent inevitable, overwhelming imposition of the baroque style limited the ability of these masterpieces to express their full splendor and sometimes stifled the grandeur of the full effect. The overall project, prepared by an unknown architect, called for a ground plan inspired by the current trends in Lombard Renaissance art: the body of the church was formed by the atrium, the central crossing surmounted by a dome, two lateral chapels, and the main chapel at the end.

In 1507, the house of the deputies was finished. In 1508, construction of the dome was completed; it was designed by Giovanni Antonio Amadeo, one of the main architects of the school of Bramante, author of the Colleoni chapel in Bergamo, part of the façade of the Certosa of Pavia, the chancel of Santa Maria delle Grazie, and the crossing tower of Milan Cathedral.

The massive bell tower, designed by the architect Paolo della Porta, was finished in 1516.

At mid-century, a fervor to create resulted in expansion of the building: a nave and two side aisles of

five bays each were added, with the nave connecting to the earlier sanctuary.

Work went on until 1580, when the chapel of the Miracles was demolished, but only after the statue of Our Lady of the Assumption had been solemnly moved to the left nave aisle, where the beautiful Renaissance door still survives with its inscription commemorating the date of the foundation of the church: 8 May 1498.

Pellegrino Tibaldi, better known as Pellegrini, saint Charles Borromeo's preferred architect, was asked by Borromeo to design and build the facade, which was finished in 1612. Majestic but heavy, it is in a mannerist style ill suited to the elegance of the crossing tower. The work was widely criticized, to the point that engineer Carlo Buzzi drew up a plan to lighten the facade by giving it an upward thrust, building a railing across the top to support statues of Our Lady of the Assumption and four angels.

Inside the church, artists worked fervently, first and foremost Bernardino Luini, who produced forty-one figures, isolated or in groups, and two stained-glass windows. His principal works were painted in 1525, *The Presentation in the Temple* and *The Adoration of the Magi*; both compositions are acknowledged masterpieces by Luini working in fresco. *The Presentation* is more monumental, especially in its massive, serene architecture, exuding the air of the Renaissance in its noble setting; the figures are equally noble, sedate, and august.

The Adoration of the Magi is more decorative and folkloristic, with the serene, self-possessed Virgin Mary as the true center of the composition. In the transept, Luini frescoed *The Disputation* and *The Marriage of the Virgin*, two distinguished compositions as to details, even though they are somewhat

suffocated by a lack of space.

Noteworthy are the head of an old man, a clear reference to the teachings of Luini's master Leonardo da Vinci, as well as some sweet angels, saints Catherine and Apollonia, four sibyls of rare beauty, eight representations of the cardinal virtues, and women saints (Anthony, Christopher and Sebastian). The setting evokes the atmosphere of the foothills of the typical atmosphere of Lombardy. After Luini's death in 1532, Gaudenzio Ferrari was called to treat complementary subjects. From 5 April to 23, painted one-hundred-twenty-six figures, musicians and cherubs playing different musical instruments.

This spectacular composition, presents extraordinary variety and harmony, cert of music for transport into Paradise for only two-hundred scudi, along with a bed, wine, and bread. Gaudenzio accompanied this work with a total, type of ornamentation to cover the wall, and roundels narrating of Adam and Eve.

In the meantime, Andrea da Milano and Giulio Oggiono carved an Eternal giving his blessing at the summit of the dome, Our Lady of the Assumption, prophets and sibyls. Nor should we neglect to mention the admirable compositions of *The Last Supper* and *The Deposition from the Cross*. After Gaudenzio came Bernardino Lanino and Cesare Magni, who mainly frescoed scenes from the Old Testament and figures of saints on the vertical walls under the drum. Aurelio and Giampiero Luini painted *Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac*. In 1538, in gratitude for the end of the plague, the church was equipped with an organ, positioned in harmony with the rest of the building. The commission could only be awarded to the great Antegnati family of Lombard organ-makers. Its sound filled the church until 1963, when it was replaced.

Papal recognitions, pilgrimages,

and illustrious visits mark the history of our Sanctuary. Saint Charles Borromeo was "at home" here, so to speak, a man of great piety and commitment (as opposed to the Roman popes and cardinals of the time), with a strong devotion to Mary.

He visited frequently and long, and it was he who led the imposing procession of clergy and the Milanese people to move the "image of the Blessed Virgin" into the new chapel, he who presided over the trial examining the miracles, he who summoned the Oblates, an order he founded, to be responsible for the Sanctuary. Illustrious visitors to the Sanctuary include all the archbishops of Milan, the Arcimboldi, Giovanni Angelo Medici, Federico Borromeo, Alfonso Litta, Cardinal Gaetano Gaysruck, the governors of Milan, members of the Sforza and Gonzaga families, Ferdinand of Austria, Ranier of Hapsburg, the grandees of Spain and Austria, Francesco I, king of the two Sicilies, and Margherita of Savoy. The Sanctuary of Saronno is now more than 500 years old. For the entire 500 years of its history it has unceasingly been a house of worship, retreat and prayer, and the goal of pilgrimages.

This has fostered the conservation of the church and its art works with constant operations of conservation and restoration, in truth not all of them orthodox. The building survived World War II unharmed; immediately afterwards a major cycle of restoration of the frescoes was set in motion, with the collaboration of the painter Mario Rossi from Varese and the architect Reggiori. In the 1980s another cycle of restoration was initiated, focusing this time on the deterioration of the stone and stucco work. With this radical intervention, the treasury of art and faith that is the Sanctuary of Saronno has regained its original splendor.