

The Crypt: a treasure under the Church of “Sacro Monte”

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The structural consolidation and restoration work of the **crypt of Santa Maria del Monte** has been **thorny**. Nevertheless, the result was suggestive and surprising, with the recovery of **three frescos of the 15th century, that now are part of “the room of the Three Virgins.”**

In other words, the discovery during the consolidation work of the crypt has been a real treasure. The crypt is going to be reopened on the 1st November 2015, but it was already shown on the 21st October in a preview for the press and the authorities.

This is an idea that comes from far away: **Monsignor Pasquale Macchi** toyed with the idea of making the crypt usable again for the pilgrims many times. But he postponed the end of restoration work of the Chapels, the Viale del Rosario and also of the Sanctuary.

The Fondazione Cariplo had already guaranteed to Monsignor Macchi a grant to the amount of **70% of the working costs**. The “baton” of the work was then brought by the **President of the foundation Paolo VI for the Sacro Monte of Varese, Monsignor Luigi Stucchi**, who strove to give much impulse to the investigations and studies for this complex and thorny work and required **the foundation Paolo VI to contribute the remaining 30%.**

The complex and difficult work allowed the consolidation of the vaults of the crypt by removing the **heavy old structures inserted in 1931 and placing a metallic structure that would be able to support the weight – 72 tons – of the marble altar above it**, which is situated in the presbytery of the

Sanctuary.

The cost of the works is 1,150,000 euros. The project, the general co-ordination and the work direction have been led by the **architect Gaetano Arricobene**, while the project of the consolidation work have been signed by the **engineer Lorenzo Jurina, a teacher of the Politecnico University of Milan**. The restoration works of the frescos have been directed by **Isabella Marelli of the Superintendence Belle Arti of Milan** and run by the restorers Michele Barbaduomo and Luigi Reina, of the Laboratory San Gregorio of Busto Arsizio.

The frescos that **decorate the crypt date back to the fourteenth century**, even if **the researchers do not agree on it**. In fact some of them believe that **different scenes were painted between the 1360 and 1370** whereas others believe the execution date to the first years of the fifteenth century, because of their stylistic details similar to those of the **frescos in Schirannetta of Casbeno dated 1408**.

But the most important works concerned the hallway of the crypt, which corresponds to the outer side of the ancient Romanesque church, where two large frescos have been brought to light during recent restoration work. The most ancient one, dated back to the third and fourth decades of the fifteenth century, illustrates a donor who thanks the Virgin with Child for the liberation from imprisonment. At its side there are **Saint Leonard, praying to prisoners, and Saint Catherine from Alessandria**. The fresco reproduces the international gothic style both in the gothic architecture, used in the construction of the Dome of Milan, and in the profusion of precious details like buttons on dresses, crowns and halos made with golden faint relief.

The other more recent fresco, unfortunately very damaged in the past, illustrate the Annunciation. **The image of Mary is the best preserved, thanks to the destroyed buttress which hid and protected the fresco**. It is a work of a local artist who didn't give up on the gothic style like in the throne on which she is sitting. However the flowing coat on the drapery, the three-dimensional image recall the elongated and sinuous characters of Masolino da Panicale, operating in Castiglione Olona for the cardinal Branda in 1435.

Demolition work of the buttress also allowed the discovery of the smaller, but coeval, fresco, which portrays the Virgin with the Child. For this reason the first room in the entrance is now called "the room of the three virgins".

The room of Baroffio Museum that showed the restoration works was crowned of guests from all the institutions to see the results of the amazing restoration: among the others, there were the episcopal vicar and president of the Foundation Paolo VI **Monsignor Franco Agnesi**, the high priced of Sacro Monte Monsignor **Erminio Villa**, the Vice President of the province of Varese **Giorgio Ginelli**, the assessor for the commerce of Varese **Sergio Ghiringhelli**, **Giorgio Gaspari** in representation of Fondazione Cariplo, and people responsible for superintendence, architects and restorers who have joined the work.

The assessor for the Culture, Identity and Autonomy of Lombardy **Cristina Cappellini** explained that "the region has ensured its support also for the activities of reclamation and restoration work of the Crypt of the Santorum of Santa Madonna del Monte, taking part in another important landmark in the plan of protection and promotion of cultural heritage of Lombardy, starting in June 2013 with my itinerant department project, exactly from here, from Sacro Monte, with the President Maroni. Every time I come to Sacro Monte it is for a good occasion. For example when I came for the reopening of the Casa Museo Pogliaghi or for the previous press conference, some months ago, in which it was taken stock of the Crypt, showing the new discoveries. These facts confirm that Varese is a province culturally rich and interesting, with the most Unesco sites. Now we have to add the new treasure, the Crypt: a place of great awesomeness that could become another cultural and touristic reference of the territory."

“Here there is our history and our roots. Many people have collaborated to this beautiful work, finished rapidly. And even though the municipality didn’t have the money to take part personally, we can say we have contributed to try to make better accessible the Borgo, to come to visit this pearl” said **the assessor Sergio Ghiringhelli**.

“Sacro Monte is like the building of the Duomo. After finishing participating to an inauguration the region tell us the next step. However we have always been here and will keep on being so, for every ideas in this direction,” joked **Giorgio Gaspari** who represents the main financiers of the feat.

“Sacro Monte will be the holy door for the Jubilee. We think that the realization of this work and the discoveries made are a good sign. We can only thank those who made it possible, but there is still a lot to do. For this reason we appeal to private donors, to those who want to take care of the maintenance or of the other parts of the works. Here there is a lot to do,” explained Monsignor **Franco Agnesi**.

HOW AND WHEN YOU CAN VISIT THEM

The Crypt and the Santorum of Santa Maria del Monte and the linked spaces **will be open from the 1st November**. The management of the visit and of the surveillance personnel is entrusted from the Church of Santa Maria del Monte to Archeologistics snc.

Due to the particularity of the Crypt, **the entrances have to be “contingencies”: never more than ten people as a time**. In most of the hours there **will be guided entrances**, and just in a restricted space of the day (from 9,30 AM to 10AM and from 5,30 PM to 6 PM) it is possible to visit for free, devoted to the “silent contemplation and meditation”. In that moment there will be just the reception and surveillance staff.

For the moment the opening is planned to be on Saturday, Sunday and non-working days: in the hours of the guided tour (from 10 AM to 5:30 PM) there will be personnel with historical, archaeological and artistic knowledge, that will go with the visitors. According to a meticulous schedule **there will be a visit every 30 minutes. Each visit will last 20 minutes and will cost €5 per person.**

BETTER BOOK FOR THE CRYPT

The entrances are available by appointment: you can book online, on the website www.sacromontedivarese.it. On the website it is possible to buy the entry with a credit card. The online reservations close at midnight of the day before the visit. (NB: the service is going to start from Monday, 26th October). The visitors can also book by phone, at the number 328-8377206: in this way the reservations close at 6PM of the day before the visit. (NB: the service is going to start from Friday 23rd October).

The entrances without reservation can be done only if there are still unreserved seats. The availability of them will be confirmed on site and they are not guaranteed because the reservation have the priority: you’d better think before, in order not to have bad surprises. In the strip of free space (from 9AM), in the end, you can’t book the entrance. The free space is a silent entrance in which there is not the guided tour, and it is devoted to contemplation and meditation.

You can also book group visits, with packages that don’t include cultural offerings for Sacro Monte: **for reservations and information call 328-8377206.**

di **Stefania Radman** Translated by **Aimini, Scolari & Montemurro** (Reviewed by Prof. Robert Clarke)

