

St Pier Damiani (*Vita Mauri*, 1044 ca.-1072) told that upon this hill, once wooded and secluded, bishop Mauro (903-955 ca.) used to retire and pray. After his death, several miracles occurred in the place of sepulture, the popular devotion grew and the little cell he had erected became larger and larger.

After 1000 a three nave-church was built and, between 1001 and 1026, the Benedictine monastery was founded. Hugely enriched during 1200's, it received in 1318 the *statue of the Holy Virgin*, which came from the small church of Montereale. The popular devotion grew up more and more, together with the realization of small thanksgiving tablets (*ex-voto*).

The abbey was later conquered and profaned by Francesco Ordelaffi, but under the Malatestas it flourished and lived its "golden century" in 1500's: in that century it became the meeting point of the local culture, hosting several famous people and popes, too. Between 1536 and 1548 the church was given the present forms, following a project by Domenico Garavini da Brisighella (perhaps on an original one by Bramante himself). The abbey was also centre of the artistic life of Cesena, with the most valuable local artist of the century (e.g. Scipione Sacco, Girolamo Longhi and Francesco Masini) who worked there. Moreover, the young Giuseppe dalla Val di Scalve engraved his splendid chestnut choir in 1560-62 and Francesco Morandi detto il Terribilia realized the original dome (Masini decorated it in 1568-71) and the grand staircase, while Alessandro Corsi made the monumental pit of the great cloister (1588). A row of negative events in 1700's accompanied the crisis of the complex. In 1768, for example, a terrible earthquake destroyed the dome (it was rebuilt by Pietro Carlo Borboni and frescoed by Giuseppe Milani (1773-74)). Then, when Napoleon's troops invaded Romagna, the abbey was sold (1812) and only the intervention by Pietro Maria Semprini, who presented it to pope Pious VII Chiaramonti (1814), preserved it from destruction. Pious VII has been a novice in the abbey when he was young. So, when he came to Cesena in 1814, he wanted to crown the statue of the Virgin and, in the testament, he destined the whole complex to the monks; but only in 1888 they could come back to their monastery. During the Second World War the abbey gave hospitality to several refugees and was subdued to a devastating bombing. In the aftermath a *Laboratory for the Restoration of Books* was open. Today the Benedictines' complex is destination for tourists and pilgrims, and a leading subject for culture as well (very appreciated are the concerts of classic music which take place there).

Besides, thanks to the passion and alacrity of the "Società Amici del Monte", the Abbey tries to look forward to the future: recently two new spaces have been open, i.e. a *refectory* for groups (80 seats) and a *hall for conferences* (Sala Pio VII, 100 seats).

Let's begin the visit, now, to this wonderful monument of art and religion. The first thing to appreciate is the terrific view you can admire from the top of hill Spaziano (135 m.), towards the first hills of the Appennine and the plain, until the sea.

The facade of the church shows some signs of the original one and is visible only from the "little cloister" (XV cent.), which has small columns and iron pit of the 1600's. On the cloister are the Library, the Laboratory for the Restoration of Books and the Herbalistery. Of the three original cloisters, also the so-called "big cloister" still lives. It dates back to 1500's (with an amazing pit by Alessandro Corsi (1588)), but in 1700's it was rebuilt, preserving the old system to collect water which is said to have been projected by Leonardo.

The entrance to the church is situated on the right side of it and introduces to a wonderful interior which blows both for the vastity of spaces and for the absorbed silence. The shape has one wide nave with lateral chapels. Above, the decoration with 14 scenes of the Virgin's life (Girolamo Longhi, 1559), which came off only in 1914 and the bombing of 1944 miraculously preserved. Bad destiny, on the contrary, for the painting on the counterfacade, *Mosè si toglie i*

calzari prima di salire l'Oreb (Garavini, XVI cent.), almost fully re-painted. In the first chapel on the right is situated the precious *Annunciazione* (Bartolomeo Coda, 1543) and a *Capo di S. Giovanni* in circle. The second chapel hosts *S. Mauro risana gli infermi* (Francesco Mancini, 1704) and *Deposizione* (Girolamo Marchesi, XVI cent.) in circle. In the third chapel, the work which is likely to be considered the most precious painting of the church: ***La presentazione di Gesù Bambino al tempio e la purificazione della Vergine***, a work by the Bolognese master Francesco Raibolini detto il Francia (1515); in the lunetta, *Deposizione* (Girolamo Marchesi, XVI cent.)

The left chapels begin with the one hosting many relics, e.g. the body of St Agapo. In the third chapels is situated the painting *Gloria dei SS. Benedetto e Scolastica* (G. B. Barbiani (?), XVII cent.) The next one hosts a *S. Lorenzo* (Bolognese school, XVII cent.) and the last one, first on the left, a *S. Sebastiano* (Vincenzo Ansaloni (?), XVII cent.) Now you have to come back towards the grand staircase, and so to walk on the coat of arms of the Benedictines of the Congregation of Montecassino. Before climbing the stairs, on the right a *Deposizione di Cristo* (Mastelletta, 1634), on the left *Gesù con la samaritana* (Marco Antonio Franceschini, end of the XVII cent.)

After climbing the grand staircase, you are just in front of the altar. Behind, the magnificent walnut ***choir***, a masterwork by Giuseppe dalla Val di Scalve detto lo Scalvini (1560-62), and the statue of *Madonna Assunta (Assumed Virgin)*, made of painted stucco and wood (XIII cent.) – the Child was clearly added later, while the two crowns were put by the pope Pious VII (1/5/1814).

The whole decoration of this part of the church (1773-74) is due to Giuseppe Milani: at the beginning of the arches of the dome, *Principali virtù cristiane (Christian Virtues)*; on the plumes, *Quattro Evangelisti (Four Evangelists)*; on the tambour, eight *Scene dall'Antico Testamento (Scenes of the Old Testament)*; on the dome, the monumental ***Assunzione della Vergine (Assumption of the Holy Virgin)***; on the basin of the apse, *Incoronazione della Vergine Maria (Crowning of the Virgin)*; eventually, also the show and countershow of the organ (whose constructor was Giovanni Tamburini, 1914) are works by Milani.

Some paintings of the ancient Cesena lead to the deambulatory, where is preserved perhaps the most interesting part of the whole complex: the collection of ***thanksgiving tablets (ex-voto)***, one of the richest and most ancient in Europe. The tradition of painting by oneself or by a painter some tablets following mercies got from the Madonna del Monte began in 1400's and is still alive: their number (704) is going to grow more and more in the future. The scenes which are depicted concern both the history of Cesena and of Italy (e.g. a tablet remembers the breakdown of the old Theatre in 1820, another one depicts the escape from an execution after the Second World War) and, much often, the little dramas of familiar life, quite always concerning country or sea: from the illness of a man of 1400's to many disgraces in the fields, to the escape from a shipwreck in 1500's, until a crash between a "Vespa" and a car. At last, it must be stressed that the tablets have been very useful for the reconstruction of the life in Romagna throughout the centuries.

In the deambulatory, besides the collection of the tablets, three chapels with a crucifix of XIV cent. and two statues of terra-cotta representing *S. Giuseppe* (beginning of 1900's) and *S. Benedetto* (Leopoldo Lucchi, 1987). A space with the most ancient tablets introduces to the sacresty (XIV cent.), with furnishings of 1700's and a cycle of frescoes by Giovanni Cappelli (1946); on the walls, *S. Giovanni Evangelista* (Lorenzo Veneziano?, 1370 ca.), *Presentazione al tempio* (Francesco Menzocchi, 1534) and *La Sacra Famiglia e Santi* (Gaspere Sacchi, 1536). The crypt has two iron doors (by fra' Pio Nobile) and shows a Roman sarcophagus (once

gravestone of bishop Mauro) and a stone cross (IX cent.) The capitular rooms (XVI cent.) is decorated with frescoes by Girolamo Marchesi (XVII cent.) The refectory (XX cent.), at last, boasts of a caisson ceiling and a decoration with scenes of the New Testament.

The areas of the abbey which recall mostly the ancient monastic tradition are **the Library**, the **Laboratory for the Restoration of Books** (still active and very useful for the preservation of the book patrimony of Cesena) and **the Herbalistery** (with the chance of buying both the products of the Benedictine tradition, i.e. spirits and sweets, and the souvenirs of the abbey).