

THE CHURCH OF SAN GIORGIO

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THE ORIGINS

Founded before the year One Thousand, in the Middle Ages the church was often called "San Giorgio de pratis" because of the meadows that surrounded it and extended as far as the sea. As a parish church, the villages of the area, now lost, applied to it.

San Giorgio, which identifies an ancient centre of religious life rising along the Via Julia Augusta - the Roman road next to it (still called "Via Romana") - was probably founded by the Benedictines. It always remained a Priory depending on the abbey situated on the Isle of Gallinaria and the monks resided in it and officiated it for centuries. In 1616, when the parish church of the nearby village of Campochiesa was founded, it became a commendam for the new parish priest and it was gradually deserted (this is the why it did not undergo radical reconstructions, especially during the baroque period). Turned into a cemetery church, it was heavily damaged by the violent earthquake of 1887. The whole complex has been the object of restorations and of conservative interventions several times over since 1901.

ARCHITECTURE

The earliest structural stage of the church is attested only by the remains of an apse incorporated in the first step of the presbytery and it may be dated back to before the year One Thousand (VIII-X century?). Therefore, the church of San Giorgio is probably one of the earliest churches in the whole Piana of Albenga. The whole building was rebuilt and enlarged in the Romanesque period (presumably in the XII century). Later on, it was restored and enlarged again according to a more up-to-date Gothic style. The various stylistic and architectural stages of the church are clearly legible in the masonry of the façade.

THE EXTERIOR OF THE CHURCH

The early Romanesque church was situated about 50 centimetres below the present level and was made of different materials, as it is evident looking at the façade: the lower part was built of blocks of ashlar coming from the near stone quarries of Peagna and Cisano and the higher part was built of bricks. The limit of the early façade is identified just following the slanting lines of the brick masonry. Three cruciform windows, symbol of the Trinity and Christ's sacrifice, opened in the Romanesque masonry. The door, Christ's symbol, who declared Himself to be "the door of the sheep" (the faithful who are saved through Him), is original and has never had any changes. In the XIV century the building was enlarged and made higher, as it can be clearly seen again from the projects on the façade (they correspond to the portion of stonework above the bricks). On the façade it was opened a three-mullioned window symbolically recalling the three Divine Persons (the three lights) and the two natures of Christ, the human and the divine ones (the two small marble columns). Successively walled up, this fine window was rediscovered and restored at the beginning of the XX century. On the south-east side, towards the present parish church, three small windows were obtained (a further reference to the Trinity) and the apses were built in a rectangular shape, opened by a single lancet windows made of bricks. In the XV century they were walled up to obtain a larger space to fresco in the interior. The bell tower, in ashlar, was rebuilt on the basement of the Romanesque one and incorporated in the right aisle. In 1887, a violent earthquake devastated the West of Liguria and caused the destruction of the right aisle. A year later also the bell tower fell down. In the years 1934-1936, the Town Council of Albenga financed the reconstruction and, to make up for the expenses supported, sold the burial niches obtained in the right aisle to private citizens. The aisle is still occupied by graves. The bell tower was restored using the original material and following its exact reproduction in a water colour painted by a peasant who lived in a house opposite the church, in the space of time passed between the damages of 1887 and the whole collapse that occurred in the following year.

THE INTERIOR DECORATION

The interior of the church of San Giorgio preserves a precious cycle of frescoes which covers a period of time going from the XIII to the XVI century and attests the phases of the development and decline of the building and of the whole area around it. In ancient times, the church was completely covered with plaster painted in bright colours and the rich decoration hinted at a sense of magnificence which is well-suited to the Lord's house. If in the Middle Ages the houses of the feudal lords are covered with paintings and precious fabrics, even more must be in the house of the Lord of lords. Beauty, then, raises our heart to God and is always a reflection of the True. The paintings on the walls moreover assume, according to the Church, a didactic purpose: to educate and confirm in the Christian faith those who contemplate them. The Last Judgement, the figures of the Saints or the scenes of Salvation History and of the Virgin Mary's life are also calls to the realities of faith so that it can be lived in everyday life.

THE CENTRAL NAVE

PRESBYTERY

It is the most sacred part of the church and therefore the most richly decorated. The side walls and the vault preserve the frescoes dating back to the time of San Giorgio's greatest splendour, that is the XIV century, while The Last Judgement on the far wall dates back to the XV century. The fourteenth century paintings develop the theme of Salvation History.

On the top left of the wall are the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and the announcement to the shepherds; in the foreground, the bath of Jesus. The bathtub, where He is immersed, is in the shape of a chalice, to remember His presence in the consecrated wine on the altar just below Him.

On the top right of the wall are Christ in Majesty and St. John the Baptist interceding for mankind (the scroll in his hands bears the inscription: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the Sin of the World, have mercy on us").

On the right and on the left is the theory of the twelve Apostles among whom we can recognize:

- St. Peter with the keys in his hand (the first from the left);
- St. John the Evangelist (the third, with the book open on the first sentence of his Prologue);
- St. Bartholomew (the fifth, with the knife of his martyrdom in his hand);
- St. Thomas (the first under the window, with his finger tended to remember his examination of the wounds of the risen Christ);
- St. Matthew the Evangelist (the third, with the book open on the first sentence of Our Father);
- St. James the Greater (the fifth, with his hat and stick as a pilgrim, the uniform of his devotees going to the shrine at Compostela).

All the Apostles are around Christ (represented by the altar) because the Church is founded on them, and they have proclaimed and attested His Gospel till death. They also remind us that the Church is a group of men that walk together and that they have been entrusted to it by Christ Himself.

On the vault are the symbols of the four Evangelists and **on the keystone** (the round stone at the crossing of the ribs) is the figure of the mystical Lamb, Christ's symbol, keystone of our life. In the XV century, the large window opening **on the far wall** was walled up to have a larger area to paint in fresco and the fresco of THE LAST JUDGEMENT, the most remarkable pictorial work of the whole cycle, was carried out.

At the top is Christ the Judge; he is seated on the throne and enclosed in a mandorla (symbol of glory). He reveals his wounds and is accompanied by Angels who display the emblems of his Passion. He upraises his right hand in a sign of favour towards those who are on his right, the blessed, and lowers his left hand towards those who are on his left, the damned.

Around Him are the twelve Apostles; they are seated on stone benches.

Below Christ is St. Michael the Archangel; he is holding his scales for the weighing of the souls.

In front of him is an altar with a white tablecloth with the mystic Lamb sacrificed. It is the symbol of Christ sacrificed for our salvation.

Below is King Salomon, the fairest judge in the history after Christ. He is rising from the grave.

On Christ's right, in prayer, are the blessed. **On Christ's left**, pushed by armed Angels, are the damned going into the jaws of a horrible monster which is Hell personified.

Below, within rocky ravines, are the punishments of the seven capital vices. Each of them is indicated by an inscription: pride, greed, lust, wrath, gluttony, envy, sloth.

In the centre, below king Salomon, is the scene which made this fresco famous even outside the area: Dante, accompanied by Virgilio, meets Count Ugolino who is gnawing on Archbishop Ruggieri's skull (the episode is described by Dante in his work "La Divina Commedia" - Inferno - Canto XXXIII ").

Below, within fiery pits, are the false witnesses.

On the left, emerging from the graves, are the bodies of the risen.

At the bottom of the fresco an inscription shows the name of the client and the year of the carrying out, but not the name of the artist: in the year of the Lord 1446, on the 13th of December, I, friar Antonio Caresia, Prior of San Giorgio, had this work carried out.

The representation of the Last Judgement reminds us in a clear and realistic way that we will meet Christ and will be personally judged on love. From that judgement an eternal fate of joy or pain will come for us.

At sunset, the sun, Christ's powerful symbol, sun of justice, filters in the nave through the three-mullioned window on the façade. It illuminates the apse and the Last Judgement with a warm light to emphasize once more the Lord's final return, at the sunset of history. The magnificent scene invites us to conversion and brings us a message of hope: through the confession of our sins, Christ forgives us and saves us.

Below the scene runs a red fake curtain lined with fur. Under it, on the fourteenth century plaster, there is another one entirely made of shields of fake fur.

In the Middle Ages, the precious fabrics and the furs on the walls of the rooms were a prerogative of the houses of the rich. Therefore, it is credible to find their reproduction on the walls of the most sacred place of the whole building.

THE NAVE

Top right, between the arch of the presbytery and the first small window, are the remains of a more ancient Last Judgement (XIV cent.). We can recognize Christ, the Apostles and the Virgin Mary.

Below is a bit of plaster painted with a naked small figure emerging from a sarcophagus: it is the Resurrection of the Body.

Under the first arch, towards the presbytery, is the figure of St. Mary Magdalene (XIV cent.) portrayed with a small jar in her hand. It is a clear reference to the ointment container with which she had gone to the tomb of Jesus to anoint His body as well as to the small jar of perfumed oil that the woman sinner of the Gospel had poured on the feet of Jesus. Tradition has identified Mary Magdalene with the woman sinner who anointed Jesus's feet with expensive perfume.

On the pillars, which separate the central nave from the aisles, are some remains of frescoes of the XV century portraying Saints. They are probably votive paintings offered by some devotees for favours received or request for intercession.

The many figures of the Saints in San Giorgio's church reveal the devotion of the people of the Middle Ages to these friends of God and ours to whom they turned to obtain help and protection.

On the first pillar on the left, towards the presbytery, is St. Catherine of Alexandria, with the crown on her head and the palm of her martyrdom in her hand.

On the first pillar on the right, towards the entrance, is St. Bernardine of Siena. He is recognizable for the three bishop's mitres laying at his feet (his triple renunciation of the episcopal appointment at Siena, Ferrara and Urbino) and the words " Father, I have manifested your name", a reference to his great devotion to the name of Jesus. The Saint also preached in Albenga in 1418 and in 1431.

Next to the front entrance is the image of St. Christopher (XIV cent.), a man of gigantic stature carrying the Infant Jesus on his shoulders. According to tradition, in fact, he would have deserved to take him beyond the river without recognizing him. Having become heavier and heavier and questioned by Christopher about his identity, the Infant would have revealed Himself as the Saviour of the world. St. Christopher was invoked against the sudden death and in favour of safety during the journey. For that reason, in the Middle Ages, it was common practice to represent him on the façades of the churches or near the doors so that who saw his image and invoked him could be sure to arrive at destination safe and sound.

RIGHT AISLE

In the apse there are significant frescoes among which three figures of Saints, just over the altar table, one of the most ancient pictorial witnesses of the church (XIII cent.). The whole far wall is occupied by a fake altar-frontal containing the Stories of St. Blaise (XIV cent.). The work, by an anonymous author, reflects the ways of the Tuscan school of painters of the XIV century. It presents the Holy Martyr Blaise, bishop of Sebaste, dressed as a bishop, with the emblems of his rank and the book of the Gospels. He blesses with his right hand and shows himself as a model to imitate as well as an intercessor with God in our need. The fresco portrays, in its various panels, scenes from his life (they must be read from top to bottom and from left to right):

1. St. Blaise celebrates Mass as a hermit in a cave.
2. Is St. Blaise miraculously saving a child from choking?
3. St. Blaise forces a wolf to return the only pig to a poor widow who pleads him.
4. The widow, grateful, offers St. Blaise the head of the pig.
5. St. Blaise is torn with iron combs.
6. St. Blaise, pushed into a lake to be drowned, turns it into stone with the sign of the cross.
7. St. Blaise is beheaded.
8. St. Blaise is buried and his soul is taken up to heaven by angels.

LEFT AISLE

On the wall, the most ancient pictorial witness of San Giorgio: three figures of the Holy Apostles and one of St. Christopher (recognizable for his tallness and for the fish (XIII cent.).

Just above, there is a fresco of the XV century depicting Pope St. Fabian, St. Sebastian and St. Rocco.

This painting, from an inscription that completed it, now lost, but documented by witnesses, was commissioned by the Prior of San Giorgio together with the inhabitants of the village of Campora in 1476, at the time of an epidemic, certainly a religious donation for the escaped infection (St. Sebastian and St. Rocco are just invoked against epidemics and plagues).

A little further, there is a fresco of the XV century showing St. Mary Magdalene carried to Heaven by Angels.

THE APSE

It includes an ancient altar dedicated to Our Lady. On the far wall, just on other more ancient paintings, are the latest paintings of the church that may be dated about the middle of XVI century. These, of an anonymous author, with their poor quality are evidence of the decay of the church and of the area around it at that time.

Above, in the lunette, is the Assumption of Mary, anticipation of our resurrection, at the end of time. We can clearly see the Disciples who find the empty tomb and Thomas who, incredulous, receives from Mary her belt as a touchable sign of her assumption into Heaven in body and soul.

Below, within a triptych painted on the wall, is the Virgin Mary enthroned with the Child Jesus. He is depicted quite naked to stand for the spoliation of his divinity to assume our human condition; with his finger on the mouth he calls for silence and listening to his word, while in his hand he holds tight a little bird, symbol of the soul, to remind us that our souls are in his hands.

Angels (with the musical instruments of the time when the fresco was made) express, on the sides and at the foot of the throne, their great joy. In the left compartment there is an unidentified military Saint: he may be Arcadius, or Maurice, or George himself. In the right compartment there is St. Stephen the Martyr with the pebble of his martyrdom on his head.

The fresco, anonymous, may be dated to the first half of the year Five Hundred. Some people think that it is very close to the style of Pietro Guido of Ranzo, a painter coming from the hinterland of Albenga, at work until 1542.

A cura di Maria Rosa Delfino.