

## **Basilica of S. Apollinare Nuovo**

### **Justification for the inclusion to the World Heritage List**

#### **Historical background**

Built by Theodoric as the Royal Palace chapel, S. Apollinare Nuovo probably dates back to the late 5th or early 6th century. It was dedicated to Christ, as the dedicatory inscription - Theodericus rex hanc ecclesiam a fundamentis in nomine domini nostri Jesu Christi fecit, (King Theodoric built this church from its foundation and dedicated it to the name of Jesus Christ, Our Lord) reported by A. Agnello (*Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis*) and probably situated in the apse of the church - indicates.

It was built next to the palace which was restructured by the Gothic king, it must have been used as a palatine basilica and it can be considered as the most prestigious among the Arian churches. The Arian cult was worshipped there till the chapel was turned over to the Catholic church with the other Gothic buildings.

After the Byzantine reconquest and after the Justinian's Edict of 561 A.D. its patron became St. Martin, Archbishop of Tours, famed for his staunch opposition to all heresies and to Arianism in particular. The splendour of its gilded ceilings gave it the name of St. Martin of the Golden Sky.

According to tradition, the remains of S. Apollinare, martyr and founder of the Ravenna Church, were brought there in the 9th century to safety from raiding pirates, and the church took his name with the word "Nuovo" added to distinguish it from another church of the same name in the city. On that occasion a crypt must have been built in the church and a campanile was erected next to the basilica.

In the 10th century the church was entrusted to the Benedictine monks who built a monastery later suppressed in the 16th century and therefore entrusted to the Friars Minor Observants of S. Francesco who enriched it with two precious cloisters, rebuilt the external portico, heightened the floor, built a big apse which was later decorated with Baroque stuccos. In the 17th century the present gilded lacunar was rebuilt.

The 16th century portico of the facade replaced the old narthex. The round 10th century campanile, so typical of Ravenna, standing at the far right of the portico, adds an effective touch to the facade. The tower, nearly 120 feet high, is lightened by the elegant apertures which, from the uppermost orders of trifora become orders of single apertures nearer the foot.

#### **Description**

The basilica is characterized by a great architectonic simplicity: it is made of bricks, its facade has a tympanum and is framed by two pilaster strips and pierced by a mullioned window with two lights surmounted by two small windows.

Twenty four columns of Greek marble divide the interior into a nave and two aisles, the nave ending in a rounded apse. Renovations carried out at different times have considerably altered its shape and proportions. In order to bring the floor to street level (presently 1.20 metres higher than the original floor) in the 16th century the columns were heightened by more than three feet at the expense of a strip of wall below the cornice supporting the processions of martyrs and virgins. The strip of wall removed was almost certainly decorated, probably with mosaics (Ricci) or polychrome stucco (Bovini).

In 1950 restoration led to the apse - semicircular internally and polygonal externally - now hiding the Baroque apse, being rebuilt to its original size and also to the fine casement ceilings, inserted by order of Cardinal Gaetani in 1611. Though this rebuilding of the apse along the line of the old foundations has helped to improve the architectural equilibrium, it has by no means restored to the basilica its ancient proportions, when the heights were different and the chapels now set into the walls did not exist.

Many fine pieces of marble are kept in the church: the ancient veined Greek marble pulpit; screens with symbols and decorative motifs; a low parapet where vines hang from an amphora surmounted by a cross flanked by two peacocks, four porphyry columns with typically Byzantine capitals, and a little four-pillared altar.

A very rich decoration must have characterized the interior part of the basilica, built with marbles in its lower part, stuccos - disappeared after the works of the 16th century - in the middle part and in its upper part with mosaics, which must have covered the apse, the triumphal arch, the interior facade and the nave. The present mosaics cover the two side walls at the foot of the nave, from the ceiling to the top of the supporting arches, in three decorative fascias. The outer band depicts a procession of martyrs and virgins; the centre one filling the areas between the windows, depicts majestic white-robed male figures (probably prophets) with nimbus and rolled scrolls or richly bound books, while the innermost fascia shows the Miracles and Passion of Christ.

The Christ scenes occupy 26 panels, thirteen on each side, interspersed with other panels repeating the same symbolic motifs, and in a recess the shape of a conch shell, hangs a jeweled crown, while the, shell itself is surmounted by a cross flanked by two white doves. In the scenes from the Life of Christ, the continual repetition of these elements gives a certain rhythm to the unfolding story and seems to invite one to meditation.

On the left wall are depicted: The Miracle at the Wedding at Cana (this panel has been extensively restored and fundamentally altered), the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes, the Call of Peter and Andrew, the Healing of the Blind at Jericho, the Miraculous Healing of the Issue of Blood, the Meeting with the Samaritan, the Resurrection of Lazarus, the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, the Widow's Mite, the Separation of the Righteous (lambs) from the Wicked (goats), the Healing of the Paralysed Man at Capharnaum, the Driving out of the Evil Spirits (the demons enter the pigs that rush into the lake), the Healing of the Lame Man at Bethesda.

On the right wall is depicted the Last Supper, Jesus on Mount Olive, the Kiss of Judas (with Peter on Christ's left, drawing his sword), Jesus Before the High Priests, The Judgement of Caiaphas, Peter's Denial Foretold, Peter's Denial of Christ, Judas Restores the Betrayal Money, Jesus Brought before Pilate (a servant is holding the water so that Pilate can wash his hands), Jesus on the Way to Calvary, The Marys at the Sepulchre, Christ Appears on the Road to Emmaus, Christ Shows Thomas His Wounds.

There is a marked difference in style and raffiguration of these two cycles. In the scenes on the left-hand wall, usually only a few figure appear, the subjects being sometimes reduced to the essential images of Christ, an Apostle and the miracolously healed person. The scenes are stripped of all superfluous elements in order to present the sacred event with maximum concentration and clarity. Realistic landscape settings are reduced to a minimum and all the scenes are placed against a neutral gold background. The scenes on the right hand wall of the nave are usually crowded with numerous figures and are more realistic in charachter. The composition is therefore less simple while the action tends to be dramatically rendered.

In the left cycle, Christ is a beardless young man: in the other, he is mature and bearded as though to emphasise his voluntary Passion. The face of Christ depicted with a beard first appears here in Ravenna mosaics and, apart from the artistry, has been the object of much discussion among scholars. Bovini is of the opinion that it recalls how "the Romans in the times

of pain and ill-fate and as a sign of mourning, let their beards grow", and this does appear to be one of the most convincing explanations.

The mosaics in the two upper fascias are clearly of traditional Roman style, while those in the lower fascia, belonging to the times of Archbishop Agnello, have felt the influence of Byzantine art.

Towards the foot of the right wall, the city of Ravenna is seen behind Theodoric's palace. The palace has a monumental peristyle on columns surmounted by a frieze that once contained a mounted king. Two-storied loggias grace the sides of the peristyle, the upper being closed in by small windows, and above the capitals are little winged victories.

The space between each column is hung with embroidered curtains which substitute the figures of what were very likely Aryan personages or royal courtiers, removed by Agnello, together with Theodoric on horseback, when the church came under Catholicism. Of these personages, only the surrounds, the shadows and in particular the hands of some of them depicted on four columns, remain. Behind Theodoric's palace, inside the city walls, are several monuments whose identity is not known.

A procession of 26 martyrs leads from the palace to the apse: each haloed martyr has his name inscribed above and carries a crown in his veiled hands. The white-robed figures emerge from a golden background and step on a flowery carpet, led by St. Martin, with a purple mantle over his candid robe, a long line of figures wending its way towards the Enthroned Christ, in an attitude of blessing, flanked by four archangels.

On the left wall facing the palace and the city is the Civitas Classis. The city, with its monuments, is surrounded by turreted walls. Two lighthouses mark the entrance to the harbour, and beyond three ships, one with a white unfurled sail, float in the sea. From the city of Classe, the walls of which contained the images of five personages removed by Agnello and substituted with gold, a procession of virgins moves towards the throne of the Madonna, preceded by the Three Kings. Dressed in white and gold, each virgin is carrying a crown.

The figure of the Madonna, flanked by four archangels, is opposite the figure, of Christ, but while Christ is shown in all His majesty, the Virgin, tall and slender emanates in Her stillness a sense of arcane gentleness.

Many artists must have taken part in the mosaic work of S. Apollinare Nuovo, for a number of different hands are distinguishable in the variations of line, style and those slight effects by which, from natural reality, one reaches the metaphysical abstract of the communion with the mysteries, expressed as though in the cadence of a liturgical chant.

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At the end of the 5th century, a fusion of architectonic and decorative elements was created in the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, some of Eastern, others typically of Western origin, in a harmonious whole which was to become the distinguishing trait of the art and architecture of Ravenna here, a new sense of space was achieved, quite different from that of contemporary early Christian basilicas elsewhere in the West.

It has, in plan, a considerable longitudinal extension, in line with Western customs and would have been finished with a semi-circular apse with a polygonal exterior, on the Constantinopolitan and Aegean model. The building work is in brick, continuing the Western tradition, whilst the pilasters of the side-walls at ground level are linked together by a cornice which incorporates the windows and is a reminiscence of Syrian churches. The columns were imported from Constantinople, bearing the mark of the Greek manufacturers, as, similarly, the elegant capitals in the form of a lyre, or the pulpit and the choircreens which are part of the priceless liturgical treasures of the church.

This abundance of costly materials in its architecture and the sculptured Greek marble is due not just to the fact that the building had a palatial function, (originally, it would have been paved with a precious marble inlay), but above all to the political intercourse between Theodoric and the Emperor of Constantinople, by whom the head of the Arian Ostrogoths was proclaimed King of Italy.

The originality of the Basilica is manifest in other aspects beside these, most especially in its architectonic proportions, in the light which suffuses the interior and in the splendid mosaics which give a completely different impression to contemporary mosaics in Rome.

The breadth of the nave, when compared to its length, is in fact greater in proportion, and, likewise, the light of the arches is longer. Here again, the height of the nave is considerably greater than its breadth, for which reason there is a feeling of spaciousness. This, moreover, is accentuated by the light, diffused equally throughout the main and side aisles and by the mosaic decorations that balance the interior's proportions and, with its scintillating effect, transform the walls into an ethereal tapestry.

Whereas Roman churches of the 5th century, such as Saints Peter and Paul without the Wall, had separate mosaic panels between the arches and the window bays, arranged in one or two orders, in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, there are long rows of male and female saints moving in procession towards the apse - a similar procession must have figured in the original Theodorician mosaics.

Between the window bays, the figures of the prophets arrest the movement towards the east and thus emphasise the verticality of the basilica, whilst the small panels at the top of the walls give balance to the nave's height. The mosaics fill the entire building, making Sant'Apollinare Nuovo a unique example of an early Christian church where the wall decorations have come down to us in their entirety.

These wall decorations are of exceptional interest in that they help us to understand aspects of the Arian religion by an analysis of their subjects and iconography, as well as giving us an insight into the political ideology which Theodoric wanted to embody; they are, at the same time, a document recording how the Byzantine domination reacted and imposed its own form of censorship in the name of catholic orthodoxy.

The twenty-six Christological scenes, dating from the period of Theodoric, represent the greatest surviving monumental cycle on the New Testament and, among those done in mosaic, are the most ancient that have come down to us, since the decorative cycle in the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, or those in the Lateran Basilica of Rome, or in St, Ambrose in Milan, have all been lost.

It is notable that the scenes, especially those in the Miracle Cycle, follow no chronological order and that important episodes in the life of Christ, such as his birth and baptism, have been ignored inasmuch as, for the Goths, who did not admit Divine Incarnation, Jesus was neither really God nor Man and, consequently, such scenes were devoid of meaning.

There are scenes represented in the cycle which are unique in early Christian art, such as the parable of "the Pharisee and the Publican", "the Widow's mite", "the healing of the paralytic of Caphernaum"; others are rare in the least, such as "the healing of the two blind men of Jericho". Other scenes, again, as, for instance, "the calling of Peter and Andrew", or "the healing of the Demoniac", have no precedents for their originality of compositional scheme.

In the cycle of the Passion, the scenes of the flagellation and crucifixion are notable for their absence, this in itself due to the fact that they would have been considered as too degrading as forms of punishment, offensive to the sensibility of the early Christians.

Of particular interest, when viewed iconographically, is the panel of "The Last Supper", defined by Van Berchem and Clouzot as "une des plus anciennes figurations de cette scène tant de fois traitée par les artistes du Moyen Age et de la Renaissance".

In accordance with Roman customs, the Apostles, instead of being seated, are gathered around a triclinium, semi-circular in form, on which are two fishes and a few loaves of bread. Christ is seated on the left, in the place of honour, whilst Judas sits on the far right.

Some scholars maintain that the presence of fish rather than the Paschal Lamb is a representation of the 'Meal of the Pure' celebrated by the Jews on the Friday evening, a practice which spread to the Arians who similarly believed that Jesus himself had eaten thus before the Passion.

Compared to other Christological cycles from the early Christian period, those in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo are unique in their choice of subjects and the succession of scenes which, evidently, must be a reflection of the religious ideas of the Goths.

Since the Arians considered Christ as above all a teacher, a guide and example to be followed and imitated in order to reach salvation, those biblical scenes which best express this conception are the ones depicted, (the calling of Peter and Andrew, the blind of Jericho, the demoniac who, after the performing of the miracle, follow the Teacher) or else dogmas of Arian faith, such as the subordination of the Son to the Father, expressed in the episode of the raising of Lazarus, in which, according to the text of St. John (John XI, 41 -42), Christ prays to the Father to allow him the working of the miracle.

The Theodorician mosaics are, equally, an expression of a culture which was certainly influenced by the Constantinopolitan world, as can be seen from the presence of numerous iconographical elements of Imperial provenance.

In the New Testament cycle, the Teacher is not dressed in the usual clothes of early Christian iconography but wears the purple, just as the Virgin and Christ seated on the throne in the lower band wear royal costumes. They are flanked by four angels who stand face on and immobile - iconographically, they are inspired by the four dignitaries in the Byzantine court who acted as guards to the imperial throne.

The scene of "Christ the judge, sorting the sheep from the goats", has an analogous derivation, likewise "the multiplication of the loaves and fishes", reminiscent of the awarding of diplomas by the Emperor to his dignitaries. There is the evident intention of exalting the majesty of Christ in the private chapel of the earthly king.

The image of the enthroned Madonna and Child is the oldest monumental image of the Virgin that has come down to us - inspired by the Council of Ephesus (432) where her title of 'Mother of God' was made legitimate, it is thus the prototype of countless other depictions of the Virgin in Majesty to be found in Byzantine and Medieval art.

What is quite unique and of complete originality for early Christian art is the realistic representation of the city of Ravenna, with its sacred palatium and the town of Classe with its port described inside a religious building, which is supposed to evoke an otherworldly dimension. Such an unusual choice for the time, and, indeed, for many centuries following, can perhaps best be explained by the desire to glorify Theodoric through the two centres of power, the palace and Classe, seat of the port, connecting the city with the sea and therefore linking it with the Orient and Constantinople., In this way it was meant to underline the role of Ravenna as the heir and worthy successor to Rome whilst, at the same time, making the Gothic king, by virtue of this, a virtual colleague of the Emperor of the East.

This ideological message was clearly expressed in the images which were effaced in a Byzantine 'damnation memoir': in the tympana of the palladium, there was, originally, a

depiction of Theodore on horseback, flanked by personifications of Rome and Ravenna, this latter having one foot on the sea and the other on land. This effacing done by the Catholics with the aim of cancelling every reference to the period of Gothic domination, was part of a general concern to reinforce the concepts of catholic orthodoxy: at the head of the line of saints, in fact, St. Martin stands out as the proud antagonist of Arianism, whilst the procession of the Virgins is led by Saint Euphemia, the strenuous upholder of the ideas of the Council of Chalcedonia (451), in which the duplex nature of Christ was re-affirmed. The trinitarian dogma, understood in its anti-Arian significance, is also made evident in the figures of the Magi adoring Christ as God.

In Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, the co-existence of wall decorations in part from the end of the 5th century and in part from the second half of the 6th century, allows us to follow the development of mosaics in Ravenna from the age of Theodoric to that of Justinian from a stylistic as well as historiographical standpoint.

The Theodorician mosaics have roots deep in the Roman Hellenistic tradition: the monumental figures of the prophets between the windows are, in fact, well delineated and rendered in a diversity of poses and attitudes which, itself, honours this tradition; whereas the processions in the lower parts, being the last mosaics to be executed in Ravenna in the age of Justinian, constitute the most perfect expression of the Byzantine 'High Style'.

In the rows of male saints and Virgins, (these latter dressed in gorgeous garments, like the ladies-at-court in Byzantium), the figures are repeated, each one with an inexpressive face, a flattened body, (the equality of souls in eternity), identical one with the other, and spaced equally; they are alternated with palm trees, themselves identical, and, in their slow progress towards the apse, they create a composition based on rhythm, which is one of the most characteristic aspects of Byzantine art.