

The Parish Church of St. Stephen in Tesserete

From the slight elevation it rests on, the church of S. Stephen has been watching over the villages that comprise the parish of Capriasca for over 1000 years. Ringed around by hills, its central position and architectural harmony, which are best appreciated by looking at it face on, with the crags of the mountain called Denti della Vecchia (“Teeth of the Old Hag”) in the background, make it a panoramic object of view *par excellence*. **This most known image** of it was captured in painting in the early twentieth century by Luigi Rossi, an artist who lived in Capriasca for a long period. The church faces east, and its façade therefore makes an admirable picture when viewed in the evening, with the sun on it. In spring and summer people make a point of watching the swallows that continually fly around the bell-tower.



First mention of this church goes back to 1078. In that year a certain countess, a noblewoman from Milan of Longobard origin, had donated various possessions to the church of St. Stephen, including some mountain pastures. This was because she wanted to save her soul and those of her sons, who had killed the priest Fedele. But no document attesting this has ever been found, and the whole affair is shrouded in a veil of legend. This legend identifies the tomb of the countess (who is conventionally called the Fat Countess) with the **medieval grave** on the north side of the church. In the Middle Ages the church was the centre of the greater rural parish of all of Capriasca, and all baptisms of that greater parish were held in it. Later on, one at a time, lesser single parishes broke off from it: Ponte Capriasca, Origlio, Bidogno-Corticiasca and Sala Capriasca.

A look at the outside of the church

The walls are of living rock and, imparting to the church a cloak of bare but elegant purpose, display the skill of the man who built them. The oldest part goes back to the Middle Ages and comprises the first three levels of the bell-tower. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the church was enlarged in such a way that the bell-tower was incorporated in the façade. This can be seen also from the **date 1445** (in Roman numerals) **engraved on the architrave** of the door on the right of the façade. In the lunette above this there is a Late Gothic fresco of the Madonna with her Child, and birds carved into the stone that frames the lunette. The keystone also displays a carving.





The bell-tower is at seven levels, characterised by small arches and mullioned windows. The height of the **ball at the top of the steeple** is 45 metres. The porch was built in 1645. To the right of it one can make out traces of a large fresco that once portrayed St. Christopher.

On the north wall one can see the buttress built to take the weight of all the masonry. On the same wall, if one stands in front of the countess' grave and looks up towards the eaves, one can see a stuccoed walled-in head. In the south wall one can make out the spaces for a door and three windows that have since been walled over. One can also make out a once-white rectangle with now faded traces of a sundial.

Our visit continues inside the church

One is at once struck by the **wide nave**, on both sides of which there are side-chapels. The church has seating for up to 300 people in the pews. If one turns one's back on the altar and looks towards the back of the church, one sees a group of sculptures on the inside east wall of the bell-tower, above the nave. These are noteworthy wooden sculptures that date from the sixteenth century: the Virgin and St. John standing one on each side of the crucified Christ. They recall the events of Golgotha, when only a handful of disciples accompanied Jesus to Calvary.



Our visit continues, looking towards the altar and starting with the first chapel on the left, which is dedicated to St. Ursula. Among the saints portrayed on the seventeenth-century painting of the Crucifixion one can recognise St. Ursula carrying her cross-emblazoned flag, and St. Charles Borromeo wearing his red and white cardinal's cloak and mozetta. St. Charles, who was the archbishop of Milan, consecrated this altar on one of his pastoral visits at the end of the sixteenth century, when Capriasca still belonged to the archdiocese of Milan. Between this chapel and the next, on the wall at a height of about one metre above the floor, are the words **CASSA DELLI INCERTI** (loosely translated as "cash-box for those troubled in conscience") dated 1725. It seems to have been intended for the restitution of stolen money – or the monetary value of stolen goods – on the part of those who, fearing hell, had repented of their dishonesty.

The next chapel is dedicated to Our Lady of All Graces. It was built in 1687 by two sculptors from Capriasca. Battista Moggi and Stefano Lepori. On the black marble surrounding the wooden statue of the Virgin (first half of the sixteenth century) one finds the 15 **episodes in the life of the Madonna**, painted in oils, representing the mysteries of the Rosary. On the left are the joyful mysteries, recalling Jesus' infancy & childhood. On the right are the sorrowful mysteries, which dwell on his passion, while the five glorious mysteries are at the top. They were painted by Francesco Giorgoli, an artist from Meride near Mendrisio, and have recently been restored.



The next chapel, known as that of St. Jerome, contains two noteworthy works of art



The fresco of “the festive Christ” is a piece of iconography that takes us right to the heart of religious and popular culture at the end of the Middle Ages. Christ in his suffering is assailed by instruments of torture (hammer, nails, wood) that, when used as common work tools, should not be employed (by people at work) on feast days as these comprise time to be dedicated to the praise of God. In the whole world, images of this kind number only around one hundred. Iconography of this kind is of major ethnographic importance as it portrays – something that happens very seldom – **objects of everyday life** in the Middle Ages.

The altar of this chapel comprises three **rectangular panels** carved in white marble. The one on the left shows a sunflower, the middle one the Lamb of God, and the one on the right a thistle. All of these frequently occur as symbols in the primitive church, and impel us to entertain the thought of an ancient origin for this work of art; possibly these slabs decorated the original altar of the church.

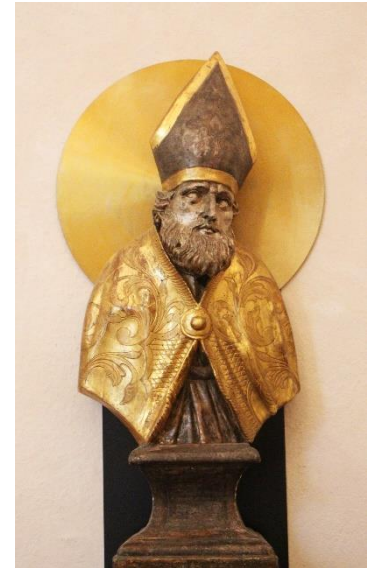




Further on, one comes to another chapel constructed during the enlargement of the church, hence in 1772. The fine baroque stucco-work that decorates it all over dates from this period. The **inscription in the ornamental scroll** identifies the saints depicted, to whom the chapel is dedicated. Expanding the many abbreviations, what it says is: "Dedicated to Catherine the Virgin Martyr, and Saints Vincenzo Ferrer & Francesco de Paola".

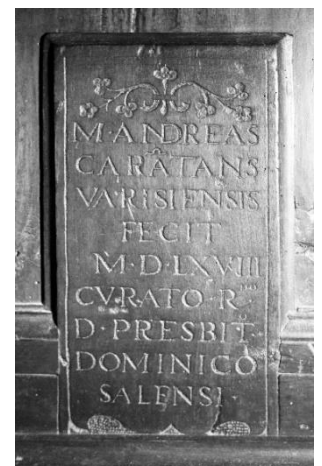
From this chapel one enters a space that serves as a weekday chapel, where mass is celebrated during the week. See the seventeenth-century

wooden crucifix that used to be carried in procession, and the **bust of St. Ambrose**. This is the saint, once bishop of Milan in the fourth century of Christianity (precisely, 374-397), who has given his name to the liturgical rite called 'Ambrosian', a rite which is still celebrated today throughout the parish of Capriasca. In matters liturgical, Capriasca depends on the Metropolitan Bishop (i.e. Archbishop) of Milan, and the parish priest of Tesserete is also a Canon of Milan Cathedral. It should be noted that the parish priest of Tesserete bears the title of 'provost', denoting that he holds office in the main church of the parish; the church itself is thereby called (in Italian) 'prepositurale'.



The **main altar** dates from the beginning of the nineteenth century. It is in neo-classical style, designed by the architect Luigi Canonica, who was born in Tesserete in 1764, but was active above all in Milan. His work includes important structures such as the Milan Arena, the enlargement of the Theatre called La Scala, and the gardens of the Royal Villa at Monza.

In the apse behind the altar the 14 choir stalls in walnut, finely engraved and decorated, are a remarkable piece of work. Low at the left end one can read their **author's signature**: Andrea Caratani from Varese, and that of the man who may have commissioned and paid for the work: the priest Domenico Salensi. They were made in 1568 and are thus to be classified as a work of Renaissance Art.





Behind the altar hangs the large 1580 painting that portrays the **stoning of St. Stephen**, the patron saint of the church. The stoning (or 'lapidation') is recounted in *The Acts of the Apostles* (7.54-60). In the painting, Stephen is clad in the vestments of a deacon with the stole worn diagonally. He had been among Christ's first disciples and had the task of attending to works of charity. He was stoned to death for refusing to deny his faith, thereby becoming the first Christian martyr, and so he can be called

'protomartyr'. In 1777, two other scenes from the life of St. Stephen were painted on the side walls of the sanctuary: on the left his ordination to the diaconate, and on the right his proclamation of faith (which took place in the synagogue) prior to the lapidation.

The mid-twentieth-century **organ** was built by the Milanese firm of Balbiani, Vegezzi & Bossi, to replace one with silver pipes. In view of a perpetual legacy at the behest of Luigi Canonica the architect, the parish is still today the beneficiary of a sum of money intended to ensure organ music during religious services. The church is blessed with singularly good acoustics, which allows the quality of reverberated sound to be appreciated in the many concerts that are put on there.



The other side of the nave



The first chapel we see on the right side of the nave is called the "Chapel of the Dead". The baroque stucco-work is most striking: on each side, just below the window, an angel's hand is resting on a real human skull. The frescoes on either side portray motives related to the theme of death. We see purgatory, St. Michael busily weighing the souls of the dead prior to their judgement by Christ, and an angel wresting a soul away from the Devil. In particular, the **fresco of the crucifixion** could be a product of the fifteenth-century

school of Seregno, north of Milan. St. John and the Madonna stand at the foot of the cross, while angels catch Jesus' blood in chalices, thereby prefiguring the sacrament of the Eucharist.



Then there is the chapel of St. Anthony of Padua, whose frescoes portray episodes in his life. Note the **altar made of imitation marble** ('scagliola'): plaster, chalk, glue and other ingredients, as in some other side-chapels, used instead of real marble.

The last side space before you get to the door houses the marble baptismal font. Though somewhat worn and faint, the frescoes on the walls are interesting. In the middle one we recognise the **Madonna and Child**, enthroned, and flanked by St. Sebastian (pierced by arrows) and St. Rocco (carrying a pilgrim's staff). The Child Jesus displays an amusing feature: there are six fingers on his left hand. These two saints (Sebastian and Rocco), held to be protectors against the plague, are also found in frescoes elsewhere in this space.



A message to all who visit this church

By means of the above comments on the artistic and religious patrimony of our church, we have tried to enable you to appreciate the good things that have over the centuries been created by Christian people in praise of God. However, we don't encounter God in his own house alone. As you leave this church, we pray that you will benefit from Jesus' promise (Mt. 28.20): "Be assured, I am with you always, to the end of time". (New English Bible)

- Please put these pages back in the box where you found them.
- An electronic copy of the same can be downloaded from the parish website at: www.parrocchiaditesserete.ch
- The book about Tesserete church (in Italian, French and German) can be purchased in the presbytery, access to which is by leaving the church by the door near the organ.

Italian texts compiled by Maurizio Cattaneo. English translation by Richard Matthews.