

# Historical introduction and guide to the visit of the Church "Santa Maria degli Angeli"

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The *Chiesa di S. Maria degli Angeli* (Church of St. Mary of the Angels), together with the adjoining Monastery, was constructed between 1470 and 1474 in the traditional late-Gothic style typical of the Pallavicino state, with polygonal apses that imitated the main parish church. It was built by the sons of *Orlando Pallavicino "il Magnifico"*, whose names were Giovanni Lodovico Pallavicino and Pallavicino Pallavicino.

The year following completion, the Grey-Friars took possession of it and in 1480 it hosted a meeting of the provincial Chapter of the Order.

The Church retains intact its *austere Gothic lines*, so characteristic of many religious buildings in the Emilia and Lombardy regions, and it has many similarities with other Pallavicino works in Busseto, Cortemaggiore and Zibello.

The *portal* is adorned with fine terracotta work displaying motifs of intricately-woven garlands, leaves and knots and cherubs with bunches of grapes, believed to have been mould-cast in Polesine in the kiln of Jacopo de' Stavalis, using designs by Rainaldo.

Above the portal is a lovely *fresco depicting Our Lady of the Assumption in Heaven*, sitting in the midst of three angels and Saints Bernard of Siena and Anthony of Padua. It was re-painted in March 1952 by the Cremona artist, Mario Schiavi.

Immediately inside the church to the left is a wooden statue of *Padre Pio of Pietrelcina*, a recent work (2 May 1999) by local artist Giancarlo Pizzelli.

At the entrance to the central nave are two lovely *holy-water basins* in marble, dating from the late 1600s.

The left nave houses four interconnected chapels, all adorned with elegant capitals and niches. These are the Chapels of: (1) *St. Anthony of Padua*; (2) *St. Rita of Cascia*; (3) *Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception* and (4) *St. Francis of Assisi*. The latter two chapels were created as early as 1478, while the first two were not completed until 1484. In the first chapel, originally the burial site of the Pallavicino family, is a fresco of *Madonna del Canale (Our Lady of the Canal)*, a very fine work dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> century attributed to a follower of Francesco Squarcione. Originally, this fresco was displayed on its own in the Oratory or chapel of the same name that was located next to the church, but which was pulled down in 1906.

At the end of the fourth chapel is the superb group in polychrome terracotta depicting *Compianto sul Cristo Morto (The Lament over the Dead Christ)*, sculpted by Guido Mazzoni around 1476-77 and exhibiting extraordinary psychological insight. Tradition has it that the two kneeling male figures are the brothers Giovanni Lodovico and Pallavicino Pallavicino, the Marquises of Busseto at the time and founders of the Monastery. At the front of the grotto is high-relief stucco work with *Mourning Angels* and *Coat of arms of the Marziani family*, dating from the mid-1700s.

Next to the Lament by Guido Mazzoni is a marble monument to the Franciscan monk *Father Ireneo Affò*, native of Busseto (d. 1797), one of the *most famous scholars of his day* and distinguished historian of the City of Parma.

At the rear of the left nave is the last chapel (5), that of the *Blessed Sacrament*, which has undergone numerous changes over the years and was inaugurated in its present form in 1902.

At the end of the central nave is the *Main Altar*, completely rebuilt in 1926, together with the large presbytery, to commemorate the 7<sup>th</sup> Centennial of the death of Saint Francis. Behind the main altar and above the *Choir and*

*Organ*, is a large *Crucifix*, the work of artist Lorenzo Ceregato.

Dominating the triumphal arch are two stucco-work *blazoned Angels* that support the large coat of arms of the Franciscan Order.

In the nave to the right, newly restored, is the *Madonna col Bimbo e S. Pasquale Baylon* (Virgin with Child and St. Pasquale Baylon) by Clemente Ruta (1732).

This canvas depicts St. Pasquale Baylon (one of the patron saints of Busseto) in the act of intervening in favour of the City of Busseto with the Virgin Mary.

Next to this is *Cristo caduto sotto la Croce e la Veronica* (*Christ fallen at the foot of the Cross and Veronica*), fragment of a fresco by Nicolò Dell'Abate dating from the years 1543–1544.

Also inside the church are 14 stations of the *Via Crucis*, added in June 1932. Each of the stations is skillfully carved in white marble.

Near the right nave is the *Interior Chapel of St. Catherine*, now used for weekday masses during winter months. Inside, note the delicate stucco work and frescoes with *Saints and Franciscan notables* by Pietro Rubini (the two ovals on either side of the altar) and by May.

Next to the Chapel of St. Catherine is the *Sacristy*, currently the home of the wonderful *Madonna col Bimbo* (*Virgin with Child*) by Antonio Campi, dating from approx. 1580.

Connecting the church with the monastery is the *Cloister* that dates, in large part, from the origins of the monastery itself, although it continued to be enlarged up until the 1800s. Of special note its *small loggia*, recently restored and dating from 1924.

The *refectory* houses a large canvas of the *Ultima cena* (*Last Supper*) attributed to Michelangelo Anselmi and dating from 1538–1540.

During the period the monastery was active, the upper floor of the structure was reserved for those who had taken the vow of seclusion. These areas may be visited and still manifest the traditional simplicity of the Franciscan order. Of special interest the *corridor that leads to the cells* with its unique *clock* built-in to the wall.

The *library*, with its noteworthy collection of books and manuscripts, still houses many rare volumes dating from the 1600s and more recent years. A number of years ago, it also contained the initial letters of ten important anthems illuminated by Francesco da Castello, dating from approx. 1474.

Other important works include:

- *S. Felice da Cantalice che riceve il Bimbo dalla Vergine* (*St. Felice of Cantalice receiving the Christ Child from the Virgin Mary*), attributed to Frà Semplice of Verona, dating from the early 1600s;
- *La Madonna Immacolata* (*Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception*) by Ignazio Stern from approx. 1722, from the Capuchin Fathers of Fidenza;
- *Il Beato Giovanni Buralli che celebra la Messa* (*Blessed Giovanni Buralli saying Mass*) by Carlo Angelo Dal Verme, dated 1779;
- *La Peccatrice Innominata* (*The Unnamed Sinner*) by an unknown artist of the Flemish School, 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, there is the *Oratorio della Madonna Rossa* (*Oratory of the Red Madonna*), a lovely chapel located in the corner of the garden near the square in front of the train station and whose upkeep was traditionally entrusted to Busseto seminarians.

**La Chiesa e il Monastero di S. Maria degli Angeli**

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