

San Giuseppe Calasanzio Church (Formerly San Domenico)

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San Giuseppe Calasanzio Church is a real treasure chest preserving a great historical heritage, still unknown to most people.

The fascinating fortunes of this building started in 1567. Initially dedicated to Saint Dominic, the church has been entrusted to several religious orders during the years. The present dedication to St. Joseph Calasanz comes from the Piarists, as he was the founder of the Order. The Piarist Fathers have been managing the church from the second half of the eighteenth century to the first years of the nineteenth century. The church doesn't officiate since 1972.

San Giuseppe Calasanzio has the typical late Mannerism structure—a single main body with five chapels on the right and four chapels on the left, a short transept and a deep apse.

The nave is spacious and well proportioned. The church furniture—comprising several altars and altarpieces—is very heterogeneous. The side chapels are furnished with elements that have probably been made by various authors. Their variety suggests that they have not been planned together with the church and that some private citizens to whom the chapels were assigned took part to the construction, decorating the altars to their liking or depending on the trend of the time. The dating of these works demonstrates that they are subsequent to the church and that the original ones have been replaced during the centuries.

The altarpiece in the third chapel on the left stands out for its very rich decoration. Originally, it preserved a picture of the *Beata Vergine delle Grazie*. This Virgin has always been reckoned miraculous and held in reverence by the community of Correggio, especially after the tragic earthquake of the 13th of March of 1832 and the earthquakes of 1996 and 2000.

In 1832, despite the great seism activity, not much damage was done to the town; the community interpreted this fact as a miracle and deepened the devotion to the Virgin. As a sign of gratitude, they decided to give more room and prominence to the miraculous picture, that up to that moment had been preserved in the third chapel on the left. Since the chapel couldn't be enlarged due to the closeness of the convent, the image was moved into another one, originally dedicated to Saint Dominic, that was enlarged and became a real shrine with small rooms that served as sacristy. Its polygonal shape altered the church layout.

Noteworthy among the paintings is the altarpiece that originally decorated the high altar. Commissioned by cardinal Girolamo Bernieri around 1600, this picture by Federico Zuccari depicts the *Assumption of the Virgin Mary* and is now preserved in the apse of the Cathedral of Reggio Emilia. In 1783, when the church passed from the Dominicans to the Piarists, the Fathers replaced the *Assumption* with a work by Gian Filiberto Pagani, called *Beato Giuseppe Calasanzio in gloria e miracoli del beato* (1784). This work is still in Giuseppe Calasanzio church. The gilded frame around the picture—too wide for the *Beato*—is still the one that framed Zuccari's *Assumption*, made of richly carved wood. It shows the family coat of arms of the cardinal that commissioned the work. Many of the paintings that decorated the church are now exhibited in the Civic Museum of Correggio.

The opening of a gravestone in front of the high altar and some trials in the transept have demonstrated the presence of several small rectangular tombs in San Giuseppe Calasanzio church.

The church has no crypt, but there is an ossuary under the presbytery. Many people in Correggio demanded to be buried here, especially the Confraternity of the Holy Rosary members, as the spiritual association had his base in this church.

The bell tower dates back to 1613. Its upper part is a truncated pyramid-shaped cusp with octagonal base. Originally pyramid-shaped, this spire has been mutilated during the earthquake in 1832.

Despite careful research has been carried out, the architect of San Giuseppe Calasanzio church is still unknown. The name Gaspare Vigarani appears several times in the documents, but he probably had a minor role in the edification of the complex.

San Giuseppe Calasanzio has the typical structure of the churches built after the Counter-Reformation. At that time the Protestant schism threatened the Catholic Church, drawing believers to a new denomination where there was no room for the ecclesiastical hierarchies, since the direct relationship between God and the believers was privileged.

According to the documents, the building of San Giuseppe Calasanzio started in 1567, a few years after the conclusion of the Council of Trent (1563), in which for the first time the Catholic Church officially discussed how art and architecture could stem the advance of the Protestant schism. This church is not only an example of Counter-Reformation architecture, it is also one of the first buildings in which the Counter-Reformation norms were applied. From a comparative analysis, researchers have found out that previous or coeval examples of this architectonic model in the north of Italy are very rare.

Many elements are typical of the Counter-Reformation architecture. The single main body—without naves or columns dividing the space—allows to maintain the eye-contact between the believer and the officiant and leads the believers to pay attention to the rite. The use of light, too, is typical of the period; while the nave is illuminated only by the windows of the façade and the feeble, soft light favours the spiritual contemplation, the light in the area in which the altar rises is brighter. This light comes from a window in the upper part of the choir and a series of small windows in the tambour of the cupola, where the wings of the transept meet the nave. This bright light that comes from above lends sacredness to what happens on the altar, it stresses the essential role of the clergy and emphasizes the moment of the transubstantiation. The pulpit that overlooks the nave is another way to underline how necessary the clergy is to the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and to the mediation between the Scriptures and the believers.

The Council had also reminded the importance of the worship of the Virgin and the Saints, a precept that is reflected in San Giuseppe Calasanzio church. For instance, the altar of the left transept is dedicated to the Madonna del Rosario, being the Rosary an issue discussed in the Council. The Rosary, especially the Mysteries, is a way for believers to recall the whole sacred history, which is presented in a way that appeals to pity and other very human feelings.

We can reasonably say that San Giuseppe Calasanzio is not just an important example of the implementation of the dictates of the Council of Trent when the Lutheran turmoil was putting a strain on the Catholic church. It is also one of the very first examples of implementation of this new model in the Emilia Romagna region and in the north of Italy. Moreover, it anticipated by ten years the publishing of *Instructionum fabricae et supellectilis ecclesiasticae* by Borromeo (1577), a text that divulged the architectonic model recommended by the Council in the whole peninsula.

For all these reasons, the former Dominican church—little known and not sufficiently studied until now—should be reevaluated as a very important chapter of the local history.