

SARRIA CHURCH, MALTA: A GESAMTKUNSTWERK OF THE BAROQUE ERA

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Abstract: *Known as Sarria Church, the Church of the „Immaculate Conception” was erected as a votive offering in the late 17th century. The architect and painter engaged was the Italian Mattia Preti. Drawing on a number of studies on the church’s paintings and architecture, this article highlights specific elements which contribute to the overarching notion of the Gesamtkunstwerk within the Baroque Zeitgeist. It attempts to unravel the sources which provided the background for its spiritual aspirations. Finally, this typical Baroque node is placed within the international context.*

Keywords: *Gesamtkunstwerk, Baroque, rotunda, Preti, Sarria, Malta*

Rezumat: *Cunoscută sub numele de Sarria, Biserica cu hramul „Imaculata Concepție” a fost ridicată drept biserică votivă spre finele secolului al XVII-lea. Arhitectul și pictorul însărcinat cu decorarea sa a fost italianul Mattia Preti. Pornind de la un număr de studii asupra picturii bisericii și a arhitecturii sale, articolul de față subliniază astfel elementele specifice care contribuie la vastul concept de Gesamtkunstwerk în cadrul Zeitgeist-ului baroc. Scopul prezentului studiu este de clarifica sursele care au stat la baza aspirațiilor spirituale, precum și de a plasa problema în contextul internațional.*

Cuvinte cheie: *Gesamtkunstwerk, baroc, rotundă, Preti, Sarria, Malta*

Designed in 1676, Sarria Church, the Church of the „Immaculate Conception”, is a rotunda church capped by a hemispherical dome (Fig. 1)¹². Located in Floriana, a fortified town just outside the capital city of Malta, Valletta (Fig. 2), it was erected on the site of a former church funded by the Spanish Knight Fra Martino Sarria Navarra, hence its name, also dedicated to the Immaculate Conception, with the *Virgin of the Fleet* as the titular painting. This work, painted in 1586, is made by the Italian Renaissance painter Antonio Riccio and at present it is held at the Maritime Museum, Birgu³. The new church, funded by the Spanish Grand Master Nicolás Cotoner (1608–1680), was a

¹ Frank Vincentz, “Sarria Church, Triq Sarria in Floriana, Malta”, photo, accessed on May 10th, 2024, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f6/Malta_-_Floriana_-_Triq_Sarria_-_Sarria_Church_04_ies.jpg.

² The foundation stone was laid on 8 December 1676, the liturgical feast day of the Immaculate Conception (Archivum Ordinis Melitae 262, *Liber Conciliorum Status* (1672–1686), 60: cited in Leonard Mahoney, *A history of Maltese architecture from ancient times up to 1800* (Żabbar: 1988), 261 n. 14; see Leonard Mahoney, *5000 Years of Architecture in Malta* (Valletta: 1996), 323. This date was also cited in Vincenzo Bonello. “Mattia Preti architetto”, *Brutium* 42/2 (1963): 5; it was mistakenly stated as 8 September in Vincenzo Bonello. “Mattia Preti, architetto”, *Atti del XV Congresso di storia dell’architettura: L’architettura a Malta dalla preistoria all’ ottocento held in Malta on September 11th–16th (1967)*, Roma (1970): 461. The church was completed by 1678 when the titular painting was in place: Keith Sciberras, *Mattia Preti: The triumphant manner with a catalogue of his works in Malta* (Valletta: Midsea Books, 2012), 64. To assist their research with respect to the Archives of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta (Archivum Ordinis Melitae), the authors found useful the compilation by Joseph Mizzi, Anthony Zammit Gabarretta, and Vincent Borg, *Catalogue of the Records of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem in the Royal Malta Library*, Vol. III, Part I, Archives 255–260 (Malta: 1965).

³ Daniela Bisazza, *The plague of 1676 in the art of Malta*. BA dissertation, Manuscript, L-Università ta' Malta. Malta, 1998, 32, accessed on May 8th, 2024, <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/80722>; Sciberras, *Mattia Preti*, 62. It is not clear in the minutes of the Meeting of the Grand Council of 11 April 1676, at the peak of the plague pandemic in Malta, whether the old church was to be redecorated with paintings of the images of St Sebastian and St Roch to accompany Riccio’s work (Sciberras, *Mattia Preti*, 62, 281–282). Four days later, on 15 April 1676, it was evident that the church was to be rebuilt – the reasons were left obscure – and the titular was to be to the *Immaculate Conception* of the Virgin Mary: „hanno determinato, che si fabbrichi una chiesola per conto della Religione verso la cappella detta di Sarria, profanando la

votive offering for heavenly protection against the devastating 1675–76 Malta plague epidemic⁴. Its location is indicated in early eighteenth fortification drawings of Floriana available at the National Library of Malta⁵. The devotion to this church and the esteem in which it was held during the time of the Order ran high. A representation preserved at the Maritime Museum, Malta, depicts the funeral cortege from the church of the Venetian noble and admiral Angelo Emo (1731–1792) (Fig. 3).

A *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which translates as ‘a total work of art’, „is primarily characterized by the unification of different arts”⁶, a holistic approach to the synthesis of painting, sculpture, architecture, and other arts such as singing, dancing, instrumental music, theatre etc.. The term, first used by Karl Friedrich Eusebius Trahdorff⁷, emerged as one of the most significant aesthetic terms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through the writings of Richard Wagner (1813–1883)⁸. The theme of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* has preoccupied architectural historians even earlier⁹. A main issue with the study of Baroque is that it was academically and stylistically studied in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century¹⁰. *Gesamtkunstwerk* was at the core of the Baroque propaganda machine of the Catholic Church in its defence against the Reformation. Based on research undertaken by one of the authors¹¹, this article will focus on aspects of Sarria Church that contribute to the overall notion of the Baroque *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Whilst aware of Sciberras’s claim that this church was „a commission which embodied the image of the Baroque artist as a creator of the *total work of art*”¹², this article attempts to read this building in a wider international context.

sudetta cappella, e commurando nella nuova gli obblighi, che ui aranno in essa, dedicanola all’ immacolata Concettione della Madonna sua con farni il quadro nella forma, ch’e’ stato determinate, la grandezza sia come quella fabricata da Sua Eminenza nel boschetto in circa” [have determined that a church be built on behalf of the Religion towards the chapel called Sarria, desecrating the aforementioned chapel, and commuting in the new one the obligations which will be in it, dedicate it to the Immaculate Conception of his Madonna with the painting in the shape which has been determined, the size similar to the one built by His Eminence in the grove] - Archivum Ordinis Melitae 262, 50. Spike claims that the Order commenced the reconstruction of the old church „which had fallen into neglect” - John Thomas Spike. “Mattia Preti’s Pictorial Career”, in *Mattia Preti*, ed. Erminia Corace (Rome: 1989), 42; cited in Bisazza, *The plague of 1676*, 33 n. 13).

⁴ Further to the building the church, the Order initiated a solemn procession as a votive thanksgiving from the Conventual Church of St John, Valletta, to Sarria Church (Archivum Ordinis Melitae 262, 49), an annual event which ran until 1995; see Chaplaincy, *Sarria Church: An artistic expression of faith, dignity and gratitude by Mattia Preti* (Malta: 2022). This entry for the Archivum Ordinis Melitae was mistakenly cited in Bisazza, *The plague of 1676*, 32 and Denis De Lucca. “Mattia Preti – Architetto della sacra religione di Malta”, *Journal of Baroque Studies* 2/1 (2017), n. 3, as 49v. The death toll due to the plague was over 6,700 from an estimated population of circa 60,000 (Bonello, “Mattia Preti, architetto”, 1970, 461). Regarding the plague of 1675–1676, see Saviour Pisani. “The Malta plague epidemic of 1675–1676”, *The St. Luke’s Hospital Gazette* 5/1 (1970): 42–45, accessed on May 8th 2024, <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/14145/1/Malta%20Plague%20Epidemics%20of%201675-76.pdf> and Monique J. Grech. “The Order of St John’s approach to plague after Rhodes”, *Melita Historica* 16/2 (2013): 35–44.

⁵ NLM F15 and F16b – none of them have a title written on the plan, date or scale; they are attributed to post-1715 and post-1730, respectively. The archival maps are reproduced in Denis De Lucca, Stephen Spiteri, and Hermann Bonnici, *Lines of Defence: Fortification Drawings of the Baroque Age at the National Library of Malta* (Malta: 2015), 110–111, 114–115. NLM F12, which is neither dated (although it is attributed to circa 1800–1827) nor scaled, is entitled *Plan of Floriana*. It includes the location of the church and the names of the streets in the immediate vicinity, notably Strada Sarria and Piazza Sarria (De Lucca, Spiteri, and Bonnici, *Lines of Defence*, 116–118). The publication by De Lucca, Spiteri, and Bonnici, *Lines of Defence* was reviewed by the author - Lino Bianco. “Book review: Lines of defence”, *European Journal of Science and Theology* 15/6 (2019): 197–202.

⁶ Martin Schneider. “Das Gesamtkunstwerk von der Antike bis ins 20. Jahrhundert”, *Handbuch Literatur & Musik*, eds. Nicola Gess and Alexander Honold (Berlin/Boston: 2017), 435, accessed on May 8th 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110301427-026>.

⁷ Karl Friedrich Eusebius Trahdorff, *Aesthetik oder Lehre von der Weltanschauung und Kunst* (Berlin: Maurer, 1827).

⁸ Schneider, “Das Gesamtkunstwerk”.

⁹ For example, Mary D. Edwards. “The Chapel of S. Felice in Padua as *Gesamtkunstwerk*”, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 47/2 (1988): 160–176, accessed on May 8th 2024, <https://doi.org/10.2307/990326>.

¹⁰ See Lino Bianco. “In Defence of Baroque: The Wölfflin-Frankl-Giedion Tradition”, *Journal of Baroque Studies* 1/4 (2016): 5–20.

¹¹ Christine Stefanie Kunkler, *A Typical Baroque Node: Mattia Preti and the Sarria Church in Floriana, Malta* (Malta: 2016), accessed on May 8th 2024, https://www.academia.edu/20042461/A_typical_Baroque_Node_Mattia_Preti_and_the_Sarria_Church_in_Floriana_Malta.

¹² Sciberras, *Mattia Preti*, 63.

The paintings and architecture of Sarrìa Church

The paintings and architecture of Sarrìa Church – which originally included a lantern above the dome – are the subject of a number of studies. The Italian Baroque artist Mattia Preti (1613–1699) was commissioned to embellish its interior with a cycle of seven large oil-on-canvas paintings that were created in 1677–1678. They include the titular, two lunettes and four laterals. It is widely acknowledged that the paintings were either Preti's own or his Bottega's work. The titular refers to the *Immaculate Conception* (Fig. 4¹³). Reference to the person who commissioned the work is made in two of the paintings: the lunette, *Allegory of the Order of St John*, where a representation of the Order is kneeling in front of its patron saint (Fig. 5¹⁴) and the lateral, *St Nicholas of Bari*, the name-saint of the Grand Master (Fig. 7¹⁵). Cotoner opted to use his name-saint during his rule; the cherub in the painting *St Nicholas of Bari* carries his heraldic symbol, the cotton plant, a feature used extensively in the ceiling of St John's Co-Cathedral which was executed by Preti during Cotoner's reign¹⁶. The other laterals, similar to *St Nicholas of Bari*, are full-length representations and reflect the fact that they were conceived as a means of votive fulfilment during the plague. They depict *St Sebastian* (Fig. 8¹⁷), *St Roch of Montpellier* (Fig. 9¹⁸) and *St Rosalie* (Fig. 10¹⁹), all saints known as intercessory figures for the plague-stricken. Within the realm of the Catholic Church, the cult of St Sebastian as an intercessor for the plague-stricken (which flourished in the seventh century) pre-dates that of St Roch of Montpellier (which flourished in the thirteenth century) and St Rosalie (which flourished in the earlier part of the seventeenth century). The local significance of St Rosalie, the patron saint of Palermo, was enhanced when her reliquary was placed for veneration at the Conventual Church of St John in June 1676²⁰. The titular of the *Immaculate Conception* and the other lunette, *St Michael the Archangel*, explicitly depict victims of the plague (Fig. 6²¹), a theme addressed in a publication which appeared at the turn of the millennium²². According to the Grand Master, it was due to the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin and the saints that the plague was over²³.

Besides having elegant proportions, the architecture of the church reflects an interesting blend of the Baroque and the Classical trends present at the time²⁴; „the coherent articulation of the hemispherical dome onto the circular body of the church is reminiscent although on a smaller scale of Bernini's church of Sta Maria dell'Assunzione at Ariccia"²⁵, a case study mentioned in Mahoney²⁶. The main pilasters include a cotton plant sculpted in stone, a reference to Cotoner's heraldic symbol²⁷. Based on a concise study by Bonello, its design has been attributed to Preti²⁸, and it is the only church

¹³ Giglio Italiano, "Ciclo della Nuova Chiesa di Sarrìa – Immacolata Concezione", photo, accessed on May 10th, 2024, <https://mattia-preti.it/171-ciclo-della-nuova-chiesa-di-sarrìa-immacolata-concezione/>.

¹⁴ Giglio Italiano, "Ciclo della Nuova Chiesa di Sarrìa – Allegoria dell'Ordine Gerosolimitano", photo, accessed on May 10th, 2024, <https://mattia-preti.it/172-ciclo-della-nuova-chiesa-di-sarrìa-allegoria-dellordine-gerosolimitano/>.

¹⁵ Giglio Italiano, "Ciclo della Nuova Chiesa di Sarrìa – San Nicola di Bari", photo, accessed on May 10th, 2024, <https://mattia-preti.it/177-ciclo-della-nuova-chiesa-di-sarrìa-san-nicola-di-bari/>.

¹⁶ Sciberras, *Mattia Preti*, 283–284. Preti complained that Cotoner „was insufficiently impressed by the extreme exertions required to paint the vast vault of the Order's conventual church of St John in Valletta", see John Thomas Spike. *Mattia Preti. I documenti / The collected documents* (Florence: 1998), 18–19.

¹⁷ Giglio Italiano, "Ciclo della Nuova Chiesa di Sarrìa – San Sebastiano", photo, accessed on May 10th, 2024, <https://mattia-preti.it/174-ciclo-della-nuova-chiesa-di-sarrìa-san-sebastiano/>.

¹⁸ Giglio Italiano, "Ciclo della Nuova Chiesa di Sarrìa – San Rocco", photo, accessed on May 10th, 2024, <https://mattia-preti.it/175-ciclo-della-nuova-chiesa-di-sarrìa-san-rocco/>.

¹⁹ Giglio Italiano, "Ciclo della Nuova Chiesa di Sarrìa – Santa Rosalia", photo, accessed on May 10th, 2024, <https://mattia-preti.it/176-ciclo-della-nuova-chiesa-di-sarrìa-santa-rosalia/>.

²⁰ Bisazza, *The plague of 1676*, 24; cited in Sciberras, *Mattia Preti*, 62, 450 n. 159.

²¹ Giglio Italiano, "Ciclo della Nuova Chiesa di Sarrìa – San Michele Arcangelo", photo, accessed on May 10th, 2024, <https://mattia-preti.it/173-ciclo-della-nuova-chiesa-di-sarrìa-san-michele-arcangelo/>.

²² Christine M. Boeckl, *Images of plague and pestilence* (Kirksville: 2000).

²³ Archivum Ordinis Melitae 1445, *Lettere Cotoner* (1675–76), 252; cited in Bisazza, *The plague of 1676*, 27, and in Sciberras, *Mattia Preti*, 450 n. 162.

²⁴ Mahoney, *A history of Maltese architecture*, 232.

²⁵ Quentin Hughes and Conrad Thake, *Malta: The Baroque Island* (Malta: 2003), 124.

²⁶ Mahoney, *A history of Maltese architecture*, 232.

²⁷ Chaplaincy, *Sarrìa Church: An artistic expression of faith*.

²⁸ Bonello. "Mattia Preti, architetto", 1970; cited in De Lucca, "Mattia Preti – Architetto della sacra religione", 8. In his study De Lucca referred to four quasi-contemporary printed sources which highlighted Preti's development and practice as

known to have been designed by him²⁹. On 27 May 1676, the Council of the Order approved Preti's design for the new church³⁰ (Fig. 11):

„Essendosi visto il modello della Chiesola, che deve fabbricarsi, nella Floriana dedicata alla *Concettione purissima di Nostra Signora* formato dal Cavalier fra Mattia Preti di forma sferica, l'Eminentissimo e Reverendissimo Gran Maestro, e il Venerando Consiglio hanno approvato detta forma, ordinando, che il diametro sia di quarata palmi con l'altezza proportionata”

[Having seen the model of the Church, which is to be built, in the Floriana dedicated to the most *Immaculate Conception of Our Lady* designed by Cavalier fra Mattia Preti in a spherical shape, the Most Eminent and Most Reverend Grand Master, and the Venerable Council have approved this form, and ordered that its diameter is of forty palmi with proportionate height].

Thus, Preti was commissioned not only to embellish the church with his paintings but also to provide its architectural design. Prior to Bonello's study, the church's design was attributed to Lorenzo Gafa (1638–1703)³¹. However, Quentin Hughes notes there was evidence that Preti designed it³² and that only on technical matters he was „possibly assisted during its construction by Lorenzo Gafa”³³, a position which compliments that of Mahoney³⁴, or that he at least executed it under Gafa's direction³⁵.

Sciberras, an art historian and the rector's delegate for the curation of art works of the University of Malta, argues that:

„[Sarria] church significantly documents Preti as an architect and ties him down to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century image of the universal artist, an artist who could exercise himself in architecture, just like many of the great artists of the High Renaissance and the Baroque³⁶.”

This position is supported by De Lucca, an architectural historian and director of the International Institute for Baroque Studies at the University of Malta, who maintains that:

„The Church of the *Immaculate Conception* at Sarria is a unique project since it reveals the harmonious thinking process of Preti the architect and Preti the painter, revealed in the positioning and composition of all the interior sacred paintings inside

an architect (De Lucca, “Mattia Preti – Architetto della sacra religione”, 8–13), prior to discussing his architecture in Malta, including Sarria Church (De Lucca, “Mattia Preti – Architetto della sacra religione”, 17). With respect to the architecture of the church, Bonello referred to three secondary sources (Bonello. “Mattia Preti, architetto”, 1970, 463): Achille Ferres, *Descrizione storica delle chiese di Malta and Gozo* (Malta: 1866), 237–238); Giuseppe Calleja, *The works of art in the churches of Malta* (Malta: 1881), 62–63); and James Quentin Hughes, *The building of Malta during the period of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem 1530–1795* (London: 1967), 109–110.

²⁹ Sciberras, *Mattia Preti*, 280.

³⁰ Archivum Ordinis Melitae 262, 52v; cited in Mahoney, *A history of Maltese architecture*, 260–261 n. 140). It was transcribed in Bonello, “Mattia Preti, architetto”, 1963, 5; Bonello. “Mattia Preti, architetto”, 1970, 461; Bisazza, *The plague of 1676*, 3; Spike, *Mattia Preti. I documenti*, 207 and De Lucca, “Mattia Preti – Architetto della sacra religione”, 17 n. 2). Spike, *Mattia Preti. I documenti*, mistakenly cited the Archivum Ordinis Melitae volume; same applies to Sciberras, *Mattia Preti*, 450 n. 165) and De Lucca, “Mattia Preti – Architetto della sacra religione”, 17 n. 2.

³¹ Hugh Braun, *Works of art in Malta: losses and survivals in the war* (London: 1946), 5; Hughes, *The building of Malta*, 109.

³² Hughes, *The building of Malta*, 109 n. 314. Hughes, in the section of his book entitled ‘Biographies of architects and military engineers’, does not include Preti (Hughes, *The building of Malta*, 201–223) but Mahoney does include him in the section ‘Biographical notes on architects and engineers who practised in Malta’ (Mahoney, *5000 Years of Architecture in Malta*, 323).

³³ Hughes and Thake, *Malta: The Baroque Island*, 124.

³⁴ Mahoney, *5000 Years of Architecture in Malta*, 323.

³⁵ Sciberras, *Mattia Preti*, 64.

³⁶ Sciberras, *Mattia Preti*, 64.

this building which were made by Mattia, including that of the *Immaculate Conception* placed on the main altar³⁷.”

The Baroque node – a total work of art

The Baroque age is an emotionally intense period in the history of Europe³⁸. Alongside extravagantly designed edifices and the art and life within them, celebrations and theatrical spectacles were an integral part of the age³⁹. However, only the aesthetics and works of art associated with the interiors and exteriors of sacred public (and private) spaces of this age can be read today. The ceremonies that took place within such buildings and outside them can no longer be experienced as they were held back then. It is not possible to fully recall or reproduce the ephemeral aspects of the spectacle for which, in anticipation of the overall effect, Baroque nodes were designed. Extravagant festive exuberance and an awe-inspiring atmosphere with flickering candlelight encompassed the audience and heightened people’s emotions. The intense, transient character of celebrations in the deliberately designed sacred setting produced a profound gap between the fleeting moment and the eternal idea for which such ceremonies stand. It is only the architecture and the artworks within such places that have survived. They help posterity to understand this link between earthly transience and heavenly eternity. Due to this impermanence, only some aspects of the original *Gesamtkunstwerk* can be addressed in this day and age.

In the countries of the counter-Reformation, Baroque architecture and art were the all-embracing settings for such spectacles⁴⁰:

„Contending with the spread of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church, after the Council of Trent (1545–63), adopted a propagandist program in which art was to serve as a means of stimulating the public’s faith in the church. The Baroque style that evolved was both sensuous and spiritual”.

Paintings had to strictly abide with the principles of the Council of Trent, which grouped and internationalised essentially all artistic creation from the Catholic lands. Art had to be clear, simple and intelligible. The artistic interpretation of biblical narratives and church doctrines had to be realistic – that is, figurative – and serve the overall purpose of stimulating piety. For depictions of saints and their attributes, artists referred to the influential text, *Iconologia* by Cesare Ripa (c.1555–c.1622), whose first edition was published in 1593⁴¹. This was the case with Sarria Church; the lunette *Allegory of the Order* (Fig. 5), for example, is an illustration of a painting grounded in traditional, ideology-based biblical depictions alongside allegorical mythology transferred to the Christian context.

For the architectural design of Sarria Church and the paintings within, Preti’s design follows ideas that today are summarised under the term *Gesamtkunstwerk*: painting, sculpture, architecture and ornamentation are all integrated to create a sacred place for the veneration of the Immaculate Virgin. Two of the Church’s positions on Catholic ecclesiology – *ecclesia militans* and *ecclesia triumphans*, which can be freely translated as the pilgrim church and the triumphant church – run through all seven of Preti’s paintings. The former refers to the struggle of Christians against evil, while the latter refers to the beatific heavenly realm. At the time of the Church’s construction, people

³⁷ De Lucca, “Mattia Preti – Architetto della sacra religione”, 17.

³⁸ Lino Bianco. “Book review: The Baroque Mind, by D. De Lucca”, *Kultúrne dejiny / Cultural History* 10/2 (2019): 290–293.

³⁹ Denis De Lucca, *The Baroque Mind* (Malta: 2018), 750–893.

⁴⁰ Britannica, *How did Baroque art and architecture come about?*, *Encyclopedia Britannica* (17 July 2019), accessed online on May 8th 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/question/How-did-Baroque-art-and-architecture-come-about>.

⁴¹ Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia ovvero descrizione dell’ imagini universali cavate dall’ antichità et da – Opera non meno utile, che necessaria à Poeti, Pittori, & Scultori, per rappresentare le virtù, vitij, affetti, & passioni humane* (Rome: 1593), accessed on May 8th 2024, <https://www.scribd.com/document/245283071/Ripa-Cesare-Iconologia-1593#>. This edition had no illustrations. The second, published in Rome in 1603, included 684 concepts and 151 woodcuts. It was translated into French and published in Paris in 1636.

read the plague as divine punishment for their sins. Being among the suffering, the fighting *ecclesia militans* and victims of the plague, they were desperate for hope and the promises of heavenly *ecclesia triumphans*, for no other succour appeared to be at hand. This dichotomy is described in the paintings and united through the architectural structure as a foretaste of the heavenly realm with its promise of redemption. Since Pythagorean times, the circle – the shape on which the ground plan of Sarrìa Church was based – is a geometrical form associated with heaven⁴². The devotional prayers of the congregation were presumed to spiral up towards the heavenly dome, and towards God. The paintings encircling the interior of the church encourage this circular, upward swirling of prayers as they merge into one another through gestures of the saints depicted, even though the works of art are physically separated by the pilasters of the giant order with composite capitals that place each painting in a recess.

Despite the circular concept of the church, which has no clearly defined west or east end, Preti gave the altar – where the liturgy of the eucharist takes place – a suitably prominent place. On entering the church, the visitor faces it from the opposite end of the building and sees the cherubs lift a carved curtain in the reredos, almost as if they had entered a theatre and were being invited to see the titular in the moment of the *Immaculate Conception* (Fig. 12⁴³). Another example of this kind of sculptured Baroque curtain can be seen in the Cathedral of St Salvatore, Mazara del Vallo, Sicily. Being free from Original Sin, the Immaculate Virgin attracted especial devotion during times of plague, as the sickness was perceived as God’s punishment for humankind’s sins. This reredos is one of the earliest in Malta and its stylistic origin is Baroque Rome⁴⁴. Such design in reredos decoration in Malta is rare⁴⁵. The putti holding up a curtain to uncover the painting are an expression of Baroque theatre at its best; „there is enough fictive curtain material to cover the painting, therefore the unveiling action of the putti enhances the reverential property of this image”⁴⁶. The Virgin is flanked by the aforementioned four saints, two on either side, as if she were engaged in a Renaissance *sacra conversazione*, the one difference being that the Madonna is physically separated from the saints⁴⁷. Preti used this device so that the whole congregation could feel they were engaging in this sacred spiritual dialogue, and not only with the saints in the painting but with the whole affair it portrays.

The escutcheon

As noted above, „the interior has a beautifully articulated main altar bay with a theatrical sculptured ensemble around the altar painting ... [that] consists of a large sculptured drapery, in the form of a curtain, which is held open by angels in order to reveal the main painting”⁴⁸. The inscription above the sculpted drapery provides the key to understanding the whole concept and cosmological importance of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The inscription is an excerpt from *Samuel* (Book 2, 22:31), „Deus immaculata via eius eloquium Domini igne examinatum scutum est omnium sperantium in se”, which translates as „God, his way is immaculate, the word of the Lord is tried by fire: he is the shield of all that trust in him”⁴⁹ or as „This God, his way is blameless; the word of Yahweh is refined in the furnace, for he alone is the shield of all who take refuge in him”⁵⁰. The inscription is abbreviated in such a way that it attains a double meaning depending on the gender: „Immaculata via eius scutum est omnium sperantium in se” can be translated as ‘His immaculate way is the shield of all that have hope in him’ or as ‘Her immaculate way is the shield of all that have hope in her’. The latter reading of the inscription directly links the Virgin to Deus, God, but deliberately leaves the audience uncertain as to whom „eius” and „se” apply. Furthermore, the word „scutum”, which can be translated as shield, has

⁴² Robert Lawlor, *Sacred Geometry: Philosophy and practice* (London: 1982).

⁴³ Adriana Bishop, “An inside look at Sarrìa Church, Floriana”, photo, accessed on May 10th, 2024, <https://www.guidemalta.com/en/an-inside-look-at-sarrìa-church-floriana>.

⁴⁴ Sciberras, *Mattia Preti*, 281.

⁴⁵ Bisazza, *The plague of 1676*, 41.

⁴⁶ Bisazza, *The plague of 1676*, 41.

⁴⁷ Bisazza, *The plague of 1676*, 38.

⁴⁸ Sciberras, *Mattia Preti*, 64.

⁴⁹ Richard Challoner, *The Holy Bible, translated from the Latin vulgate, diligently compared with the Hebrew, Greek, and other edition* (Michigan: 1989), accessed on May 8th 2024, https://vulgate.org/ot/2samuel_22.htm.

⁵⁰ Henry Wansbrough, *The New Jerusalem Bible* (London: 1985), 425.

received a broader meaning in the history of the church. Plato considered the triangle the principal form on which the universe is based⁵¹, an idea adopted by the church and transferred to the Christian context, for example, to describe the Holy Trinity. At each corner of the triangle, one finds an aspect of the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The shift from the Old to the New Testament is enacted by applying the Platonic idea and form of the triangle to that of the shield. The „Scutum Fidei” – the Shield of Belief – is depicted in the form of a triangle and plays a crucial role in the titular of Sarrìa Church. Indeed, the whole composition of the painting is based on that form (Fig. 13⁵²). Thus, the triangular shield is the key to understanding the titular. It is a heraldic form of the *ecclesia militans*. The inscription also suggests that the shield of the Immaculate also protects human beings from the cruelty of evil and from the plague. It is imperative to bear in mind that the commissioners of this work, the Order of St John, endorsed this belief. Platonic philosophy, especially cosmology, theology and the arts, were intertwined to offer hope and provide answers to the existential questions of humanity.

The layout of the church is indeed based on sacred geometry, namely, the circle and the triangle. Its basic form is a circle, containing two overlapping triangles that generate a hexagram in the shape of a Star of David. At each of the six tips is either a window with a painting of a saint below, the titular, or the entrance to the church. The lunettes are placed on two opposite sides of the regular hexahedron (Fig. 14). At the centre is the dome that stands for God the Almighty. Although the Order originally requested a rectangular church like the one that stood there before⁵³, Preti insisted on a circular form. His application of sacred geometry underlined his ambition to maximise the effect on the congregation by giving the Holy Trinity and its mediator, the Virgin Mary, harmonious and appropriate places. This also represents the Baroque *Weltanschauung*, or worldview, on sacred geometry, the roots of which date to the Romanesque period, although it can also be traced to pagan times.

The monumental titular altar painting

The titular image of the *Immaculate Conception* presents the central drama in the church. It „is one of the most dramatic pictures of Preti’s late years.... [It] was meant to be an ex-voto asking for and celebrating divine intervention”⁵⁴. Its compositional form is based on a number of geometric shapes. There are two overlapping and inverted triangles forming a hexagram, circles symbolizing the *ecclesia triumphans*, and a rectangle in the lower tier representing the world, where the victims of the earth and the devil are located (Fig. 15). The Virgin is located in a mandorla, an almond-shaped aureola surrounding the totality of the iconographic figure of the *Immaculate Conception*. Within the mandorla heaven and earth touch. The devil crouches under an inverted crescent moon⁵⁵, as in the depictions of the *Immaculata* by Francisco Pacheco (1564–1644) (*The Immaculate Conception with Miguel Cid*, 1619, oil-on-canvas, 160 x 110 cm, Cathedral of Seville) and Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, *Il Grechetto* (1609–1664) (*The Immaculate Conception with Saints Francis of Assisi and Anthony of Padua*, 1649–1650, oil-on-canvas, 367 x 221 cm, Minneapolis Institute of Arts). Other possible sources of inspirations could be depictions of the *Immaculate Conception* by the Bolognese

⁵¹ Plato, *Platonis Opera* (Oxford: 1903).

⁵² The „Scutum Fidei” diagram: (a) scheme of traditional Christian symbolism (“Compact version of a basic minimal (equilateral triangular) version of the ‘Shield of the Trinity’ or ‘Scutum Fidei’ diagram of traditional Christian symbolism, with original Latin captions”, photo, accessed on May 10th, 2024, <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/73/Shield-Trinity-Scutum-Fidei-compact.svg>), (b) earliest known version by Peter of Poitiers, *Compendium Historiae in Genealogia Christi*, ca. 1210 (“Detail from Cotton Faustina manuscript B. VII, folio 42v”, photo, accessed on May 10th, 2024, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e2/PetrusPictaviensis_CottonFaustinaBVII-folio42v_ScutumFidei_early13thc.jpg), (c) detail from William Peraldus’s *Summa Vitorum* (ca. 1255–1265) (“Detail from Harleian ms. 3244, folios 27-28”, photo, accessed on May 10th, 2024, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/85/Trinity_knight_shield.jpg).

⁵³ Bisazza, *The plague of 1676*, 34.

⁵⁴ Sciberras, *Mattia Preti*, 280.

⁵⁵ *Revelation*, 12:1 states: „Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman, robed with the sun, standing on the moon, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (Wansbrough, *The New Jerusalem Bible*, 2040). Others consider the crescent moon a symbol of Islam on which the Virgin treads and overcomes.

school, for instance, which also show the moon with its horns pointing upwards. Although this only became church dogma in 1854, the *Immaculate Conception* was already widely worshipped during the Spanish Counter-Reformation when, in Seville, excessive celebrations in the Virgin's honour led the Spanish to appeal to Rome to turn the *Immaculate Conception* into a dogma; „the pious rich made endowments for greater festivities, and Seville's clergy sent appeals to Rome to have the doctrine of the *Immaculate Conception* incorporated into Church dogma”⁵⁶.

The crescent moon is one of the oldest symbols denoting the birth of the new, the defeat of a plague, or the victory of the good over evil. The Virgin defeats evil and the two angels next to her sheath their swords as a sign that the plague is over and that the wrath of the Old Testament God must no longer be feared. God as the Father and the Holy Spirit is symbolised in the form of a white dove, while Christ is present as the invisibly conceived son in Mary's womb. All are painted along the artwork's central axis. The general form and content follow clear lines, the pictorial language used to unify Catholic Christendom⁵⁷.

The titular of the *Immaculate Conception* can be considered alongside a contemporaneous commission executed by the Maltese painter Stefano Erardi (1630–1716) for the titular of St Roch Church in Valletta, *Immaculate Conception with Ss. Roch and Angelo the Martyr*. This church was enlarged as an ex-voto related to the plague; the building works commenced in 1680. Both churches were discussed in the minutes of the Great Council meeting of 15 April 1676⁵⁸. Erardi primarily worked in the Bolognese style, following in the footsteps of the Carracci family – in particular, Annibale Carracci (1560–1609), Domenico Zampieri (1581–1641) and Guido Reni (1575–1642). This style was regarded as an alternative option by the Maltese commissioners. Preti, on the other hand, emerged from a Caravaggio-inspired style acquired during his stay in Rome. On moving to Naples in the 1650s, he successfully blended this early style with his Neapolitan and Venetian influences to form his own late-Baroque style.

Preti witnessed two devastating plague epidemics. The one in Malta occurred nearly two decades after the one in Naples, which took place in 1656–1658. Following the Naples plague, he produced seven frescos for the gates of the city that had a significant impact on the development of late Baroque painting in Naples and the whole of Italy⁵⁹. Two sketches still survive. Comparing them to the titular of Sarria church, one can see a similar array into two tiers with a circular void space left in between in order to create tension between the two realms (Fig. 16⁶⁰ and Fig. 17⁶¹). From 1661, in the period between the two plague outbreaks, Preti developed his triumphant manner in Malta. This can be seen especially in the ceiling frescos for St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta. In Sarria Church, Preti's palette began to change. He restricted himself to the use of warm earth colours, tinged with a little red, and we can observe a general tendency towards a darker panoply. His paintings are discussed in detail by Bisazza⁶² and Sciberras⁶³.

The use of light and the Baroque bottega

As both painter and architect, an important consideration for Preti was the use of light. St Augustine linked the idea of light to that of God in a Neo-Platonic manner, the *Logos* as mentioned in the Gospel according to John (1:1–3)⁶⁴. Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) presumably is the best-

⁵⁶ Lynn Matluck Brooks, *The Dances of the Processions of Seville in Spain's Golden Age* (Kassel: 1988), 51.

⁵⁷ Louis Marin, *Sublime Poussin*, transl. Catherine Porter (Stanford: 1999).

⁵⁸ Archivum Ordinis Melitae 262, 50.

⁵⁹ James Clifton. “Mattia Preti's frescoes for the city gates of Naples”, *The Art Bulletin* 76/3 (1994): 479–501. Accessed on May 10th 2024, <https://www.mutualart.com/Article/Mattia-Preti-s-frescoes-for-the-city-gat/602BE66FF43414AE>.

⁶⁰ Web Gallery of Art, “The Plague of 1656”, photo, accessed on May 10th, 2024, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/72/Mattia_Preti_001.jpg.

⁶¹ Giglio Italiano, “Bozzetti degli affreschi per le sette porte di Napoli,” photo, accessed on May 10th, 2024, <https://mattia-preti.it/77-bozzetti-degli-affreschi-per-le-sette-porte-di-napoli/>.

⁶² Bisazza, *The plague of 1676*, 36–56

⁶³ Sciberras, *Mattia Preti*, 280–284

⁶⁴ John (1:1–3) states „In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things came into being, not one thing came into being except through him” (Wansbrough,

known example when it comes to directing architectural designs and the artistic „uomo universale”. His most famous total work of art is the bronze and gilded baldachin, 1623–1634, at St Peter’s Basilica, Vatican City. Another example is the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, 1647–1652, Cornaro Chapel at Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome. Like him, Preti made use of the idea of divine light by inserting clerestory windows above the entablature of the interior on top of the lateral paintings of the saints. These saints are positioned in such a way that natural light falls directly on those facing the aperture, as if they were engaged in a conversation with the divine light. When the light gleams upon them, the surface becomes nearly invisible to the viewer and produces a mirroring effect.

From stylistic considerations and varying quality in parts of the paintings, there is strong evidence that Preti was not the only artist engaged in their execution even though they were his intellectual creations, but that his bottega, or workshop, played a vital role in their production, as was common practice in the Baroque era⁶⁵. Cutajar noted that „due to the odd priorities of past Maltese historiography, we have been induced to forget that Preti kept a very busy bottega, apart from a fairly wider circle of imitators”⁶⁶. Spike holds that, in the case of the paintings in Sarria Church, „any assistance by Preti’s pupils must have been minimal because the standard of quality is uniformly high”⁶⁷. Sciberras believed that although the titular and the laterals „were executed entirely by the master”, assistance from members of the bottega can be observed in the completion of the lunettes⁶⁸. The fact that bottega artists were engaged by Preti links his working methods to other important workshops in Europe, for instance that of Gian Lorenzo Bernini, his arch rival Alessandro Algardi (1598–1654) and Melchiorre Cafà (1636–1667). In these art studios, the idea of the integration of the arts, philosophy and spectacle was of primary importance. Due to this holistic aspiration, the master was the director, a man with vision and knowledge; as much as being a skilful artist, he needed to be a business man on good terms with the local authorities – which meant, in Preti’s case, with the Order of St John.

Conclusions

Designed as a votive offering, Sarria Church is not only a built heritage site exhibiting Baroque and Classical trends of the late seventeenth century but a statement of Baroque life in its totality. Although nowadays one cannot fully comprehend such a spectacle, one can infer it from the holistic approach to the synthesis of the arts. Painting, sculpture and architecture – media to convey a theological message through the political establishment, the Order as represented in the figure of the Grand Master – were all directed by Preti. His humanistic approach to the arts ensured their integration in an awe-inspiring, profoundly characteristic assertion of the Baroque psyche. The end product is not only professional but vocational: an offering of thanks of the Grand Master and the Order to the Immaculate Conception who, by interceding with the saints on behalf of the plague-stricken, rid the islands of the plague, representing the triumph of good over evil.

Sarria Church is a typical Baroque node. Preti’s design made use of the Neo-Platonic geometric forms to show the underlying reality or hypostasis of the Holy Trinity as an overarching source of comfort for all mankind. He used allegories, church doctrines, Ripa’s *Iconologia* and biblical texts to depict themes such as the saints associated with the plague and the *Immaculate Conception* within a Baroque framework. Preti succeeded in interlinking the artworks with each other

The New Jerusalem Bible, 1744). St Augustine stated: „Behold and see, if thou canst, O soul pressed down by the corruptible body, and weighed down by earthly thoughts, many and various; behold and see, if thou canst, that God is truth. For it is written that ‘God is light’; not in such way as these eyes see, but in such way as the heart sees, when it is said, He is truth” (Augustine, *On the Trinity*, accessed on May 10th 2024, https://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20020924_agostino-trinity_en.html, 2023). Influenced by the Neoplatonists, St Augustine concluded that all emanated from God; „evil, [the Platonists] taught, was no substance at all but simply a defection in substance. Evil had no being whatever apart from good, for all things are good in so far as they exist”. Battenhouse Roy, *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, New York (1955), 30.

⁶⁵ Bisazza, *The plague of 1676*, 56.

⁶⁶ Dominic Cutajar. “In the foot-steps of the Master: The followers of Mattia Preti in Malta”, in *Mattia Preti: From drawing to colour*, ed. Erminia Corace (Rome: 1996), 225.

⁶⁷ Spike, “Mattia Preti’s Pictorial Career”, 42.

⁶⁸ Sciberras, *Mattia Preti*, 64.

in a spiritual, physical and emotional way; his unified concept for Sarria Church is an excellent illustration of the Baroque *Zeitgeist*. The church is not only a ‘typical’ *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the Baroque: it is a jewel, a wonderful retreat for devotion, serving its primary purpose in a sincere and fully-fledged manner.

Acknowledgements

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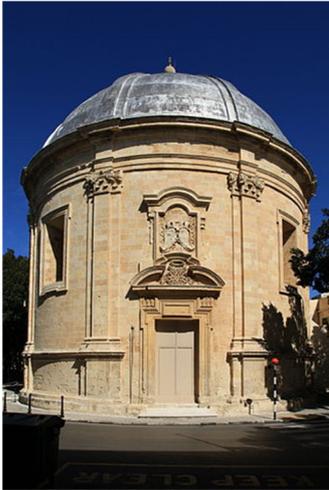


Fig. 1. Sarrìa Church as in 2013.



Fig. 2. Location of Sarrìa Church circled in red.



Fig. 3. A representation of the funeral cortege of the Venetian Admiral Angelo Emo (1731–1792) in Sarrìa Church (Heritage Malta Collection, Maritime Museum, Birgu).



Fig. 4. The titular painting: *The Immaculate Conception* (418 × 259 cm).



Fig. 5. *Allegory of the Order* (232 × 478 cm).



Fig. 6. *Michael the Archangel* (235 × 475 cm).



Fig. 7. *St Nicholas of Bari* (260 × 160 cm).

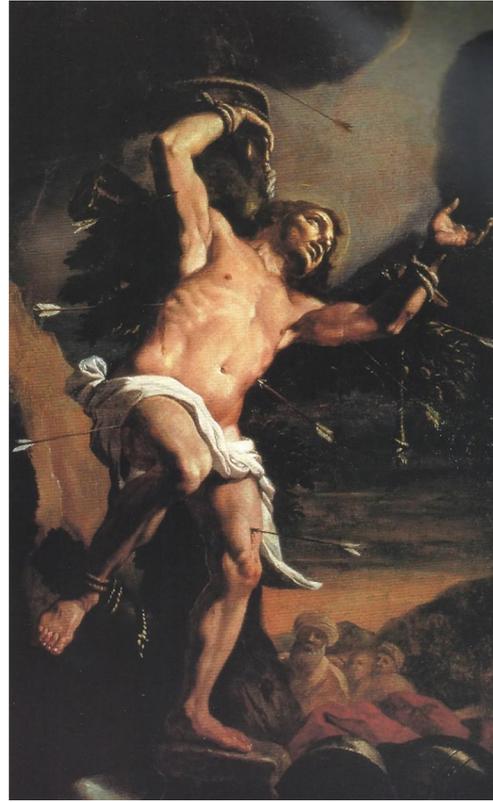


Fig. 8. *St Sebastian* (262 × 160 cm).



Fig. 9. *St Roch of Montpellier* (262 × 160 cm).



Fig. 10. *St Rosalie* (260 × 160 cm).



Fig. 12. The titular painting is set in a carved reredos with putti. The escutcheon above the drapery reads: „Immaculata via eius scutum est omnium sperantium in se. 2.Reg.22”.

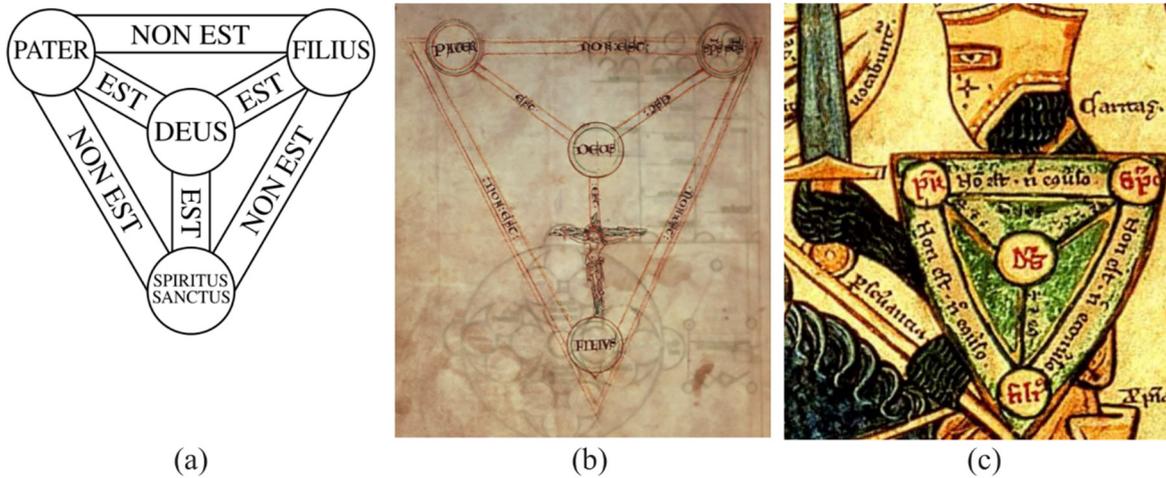


Fig. 13. The „Scutum Fidei” diagram: (a) scheme of traditional Christian symbolism, (b) earliest known version by Peter of Poitiers, *Compendium Historiae in Genealogia Christi*, ca. 1210, (c) detail from William Peraldus’s *Summa Vitiorum* (ca. 1255–1265).

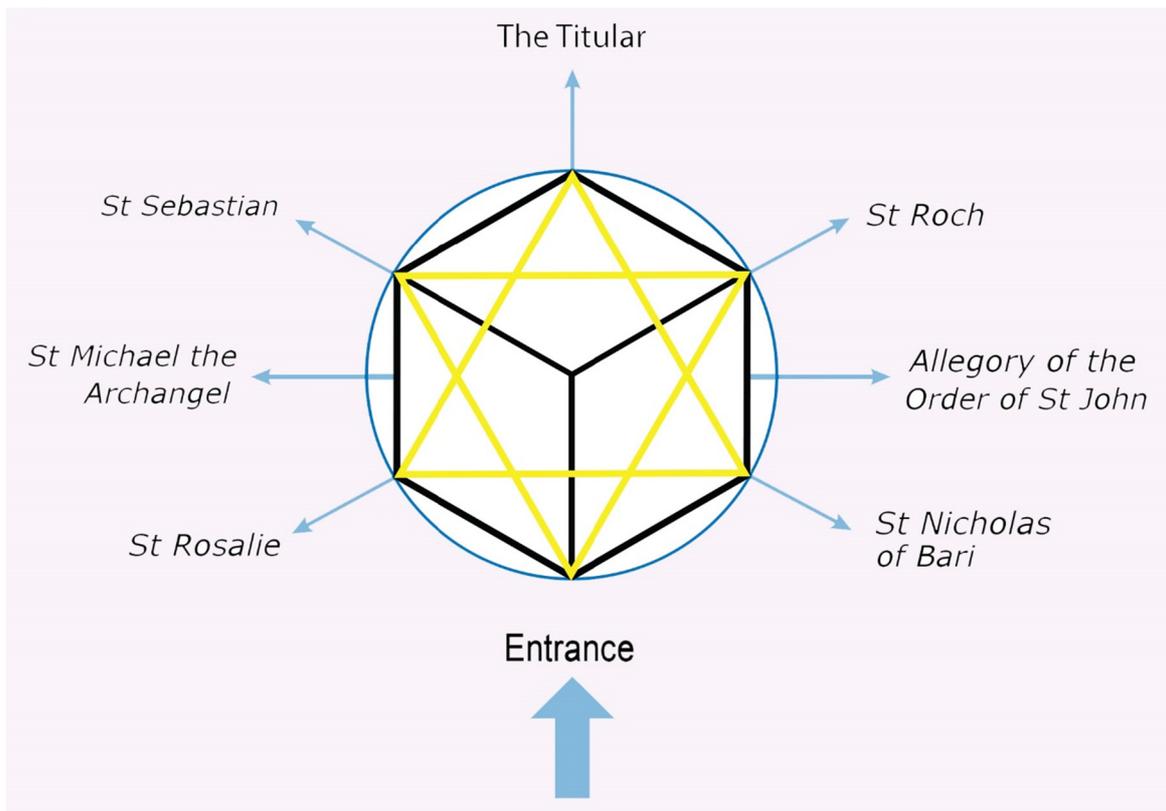


Fig. 14. A schematic outline of Sarria Church based on the form of a hexagram.



Fig. 15. Geometrical analysis of the titular painting; the base image is the same one used in Fig. 4.



Fig. 16. *Sketch of a fresco for the seven gates of Naples*, 1656, oil-on-canvas, 129 x 77 cm (National Museum and Galleries of Capodimonte).



Fig. 17. *Sketch of a fresco for the seven gates of Naples*, 1656, oil-on-canvas, 127 x 75 cm (National Museum and Galleries of Capodimonte).