

## BOOK REVIEWS

Ugo Dovere, *Holy Places in Campania*, Naples, Massa Editore, 2000, colour illustrated portraits, 29.7 cm, 439 pp.

The glory of God in heaven has been concretized here on earth, among other things, through the monumental churches that Christians all over the evangelised world has, since early times, raised and embellished to the best of their abilities. This book attempts to attest this glory in a particular area of Italy, the mid-southern region of Campania, the capital of which is Naples.

The church is a building designed for worship for groups of Christians. It may be small and simple, just large enough to hold a neighbourhood congregation; or it may be huge and complicated, containing different spaces for various religious activities and observances, as in a grand cathedral. All churches are built for sacred purposes, no single type of church building predominates. Thus, churches vary in appearance, having been planned to suit one or another kind of religious practice.

Each church, however, is an ideal place to undergo an experience of God. Affirms Michele Cardinal Pellegrino in the foreword: "it is a place of worship where faith in God touches us and transforms us with the grace of his word and the sacraments. But it is also a place where we can gain experience of the Church and rediscover the attraction of that communion of faith and holiness that opens our hearts to all... guests, foreigners, immigrants, and the sick."

For centuries, faith, culture, art, and history have been inextricably entwined around the sanctuaries of the region of Campania, where, in addition to being centres of spirituality, they have also acted as symbols of the identity, roots, and tradition of local communities. Antonio Bassolino, former mayor of Naples and President of the Campania Region, proudly asserts in another foreword that Campania prides itself as the region with one of the highest number of important places of worship in Europe, places that attract millions of visitors every year.

The crux of Christian Campania is beautifully brought out in this magnificent publication. It is divided into twenty five parts, according to the twenty five

ecclesiastical divisions of the region. Of these, seven are archdioceses, fifteen are dioceses, two are abbasies, and one a prelature. Each of these parts is in turn divided into three sections: the first is a historical sketch of the Cathedral Church from the time of its foundation to recent times; the second is dedicated to the best known sanctuaries in the particular area; and the third is a description of other historically and artistically important churches.

The cathedral is the seat of the archbishop or bishop and the mother church of the diocese. In most instances, the present cathedral is built on the site of an ancient church and, in some cases, of an ancient temple dedicated to a Roman deity. Text and pictures further prove that the principal church is the the most important, the largest, and the best embellished church of the ecclesiastical territory.

The sanctuary is a holy place where the people, for reasons of devotion, go in large numbers on pilgrimage. Several santuaries date to medieval times and they grew out of a spontaneous devotion by the people of a particular area. The popularity of the great Christian shrines in Rome and Jerusalem that spilled from ancient times to the medieval period led to the addition of more shrines in several countries of Europe. Among the best known are those of Saint Thomas à Becket in Canterbury, England; Mont Saint Michel in Normandy, France; The relics of the Magi in Cologne, Germany; the Black Virgin of Einsiedeln, Switzerland; San Tiago di Campostella, Spain; San Michele sul Monte Gargano, South Italy, and many others. They were all bound up by an intricate web of penitential pilgrimages, relic mongering, credulous narratives, social gatherings, and popular devotion typical of the Middle Ages.

The origin of the sanctuaries in Campania, just as the better known shrines, are shrouded in mystery. However, legendary explanations on their beginnings are not wanting and some do seem to contain shreds of truth. The most remarkable thing about these sanctuaries is how places of humble and, mostly, unknown origin, were transformed into centres of great pilgrimages. Many times these sanctuaries conserve relics – a necessity to satisfy the human need for a physical contact with the supernatural world.

The third section of each division is dedicated to other churches. Though less important than cathedrals and sanctuaries, many contain treasures and uphold traditions that are equally worthy of description and recording.

The divisions are listed in alphabetical order according to the name of the

ecclesiastical division, presumably to avoid raging controversies of precedence so common in the Mediterranean Christian world. Such listing however provides a handy, though quite heavy, guide to the places of worship described.

Each page describing a particular sacred edifice gradually puts together, as in a mosaic, the history of Campania, that often saw its cathedrals and sanctuaries play a key role in the development of the surrounding areas. In these places, the spires were in the past and remain to this day an important point of reference of all forms of civic and social aggregation.

The book puts together research carried out by twenty seven historians of Campania, foremost amongst them Professor Ugo Dovere, who wrote the introduction, carried out the lion's share of the research, and co-ordinated this splendid volume. President of the Association of Professors of Church History in Italy and delegate of the Episcopal Conference of Campania for the Christian cultural heritage of the area, Professor Dovere was the man for the job. In the introduction he admirably describes the foundation of the religious belief that led to the building of these shrines throughout the centuries, their flourishing in the Middle Ages, and their progressive embellishment right up to the present times.

As an example of the hundreds of places described, it is imperative to mention the chapel of San Gennaro, patron saint of Naples, a gem of seventeenth century art, and a shining example of the faith of the Campania region, most especially of the Neapolitans for their patron saint.

The chapel, adjoining the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, was raised by the city's council in thanksgiving for the deliverance of the city from plague. It is a fine example of Baroque architecture, with additions from the classical and Roman architectural styles. The interior is a showcase of Neapolitan baroque art. The centrepiece is the large solid silver niche behind the main altar containing the admirably gilded silver bust of the saint by three Anjevin goldsmiths and the glass ampullae with the saint's blood. The liquefaction of the blood on 19 September of each year, the commemoration of his martyrdom, is documented since 1389.

The book also includes descriptions of the catacombs of San Gaudioso and San Gennaro, of the sanctuaries and churches on the islands within the region, namely, Capri, Ischia, and Procida, as well of the church at Pietrelcina. The latter was raised on the spot where, perhaps the most famous saint of Campania, Francesco Forgione

known to the world as San Pio di Pietralcina, first discovered the signs of the stigmata in 1910, stigmata that became visible to the world eight years later.

The book, in keeping with Italian tradition in this field, is magnificently laid out and printed. Each entry is also amply documented with archivistic and printed sources. On hitch is that the English translation does not always convey clearly the Italian original and any person versed in both languages immediately senses the original text. Otherwise, notwithstanding the size, this is not merely a coffee-table book, but a photographic and documented reference work to the best churches of Christian Campania.

*Gratiarum Matri Civium voto dicatum* declares in metre-high letters a sculpted statement along the frieze of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Benevento. The church was built after a public vow and dedicated to the Mother of Graces in thanksgiving for delivering the city from an outbreak of cholera between 1835 and 1837. This is in a nutshell the reason behind the building of many a cathedral, sanctuary, and church described in this book. The construction and upkeep of these monumental structures is rooted in the simple, staunch faith of the people, who, literally, impoverished themselves, to raise these testimonies to their faith.

Joseph Bezzina