

## Saint Mary Major's church



The church is dedicated to the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary, God's Mother, venerated with the title of: "Our Lady of Vasto". Its origins are very remote. Its existence can be vouched for certainly in the XII

century when a Benedictine manuscript makes mention of it. It is dated 1195 and was discovered in san Giovanni in Venere's abbey.

The precious relic of the holy Thorn is kept here. It is one of the spinous shrub's big needles that were pleached like a crown and with which Jesus's head was pierced on the Crucifixion day. The pontiff Pius IV granted it as a gift to the marquis of Vasto Francis Ferdinand d'Avalos for his attendance at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) as the delegate of the Spanish king Philip II. A fire devastated the church in 1645 but a Turkish slave threw himself into the flames and succeeded in drawing it to safety. For such a heroic deed, he was set free. This event is recalled in one of the large oil paintings located on the vault which were depicted by Andrea Marchesani in 1857.

The relic is much beloved to the people from Vasto as a symbolic manifestation of the Passion of Christ and it is celebrated with solemn rites, hymns and religious songs on Friday before holy week. It is exposed to the cult of the faithful inside of a peculiar jar shaped reliquary and it is in perennial ostension since the Jubilee year 2000 in the holy Thorn chapel, projected by the architect Roberto Benedetti in 1890, which lies at the end of the right aisle. The niche closed by two bronze shutters, that the marquis Diego d'Avalos ordered to build in 1647 with the aim of protecting it, after having been put in danger by the fire, is fitted inside the opposite pilaster.

Ancient tablets together with a sepulchral epigraph, which recalls the presence of the d'Avalos marquises at the government of the town from the XV to the XVIII century, are placed in the same area. Furthermore, there are two pictures portraying: "Madonna of the Suffrages" and "The childhood of Mary" by Marchesani between the sculptures with the semblances of St. Luigi Gonzaga and of St. Lucia. Then, there is a wooden one of St. Chiara by a remote Neapolitan school.

Along the wide nave, statues of the Apostles and of the Saints rise: St. James the greater, St. Philip, St. Andrew, St. Peter, St. Paul, St. John the evangelist, St. Judah Thaddeus, St. James the less, St. Thomas. An ancient Marian antiphon was reported across the perimetrical frieze in gold letters and written in Latin, the translation of which is: "Mary is assumed in Heaven. Let us go with trust to the throne of grace and obtain mercy and find grace at the opportune moment". Upward, a walnut pulpit is set which was made by the Vastese ebonist Angelo Raspa in 1908.

At the bottom, the dome and the presbytery stand up. They were adorned, as well as all the rest, by the Vastesi painters and decorators Luigi Palucci and Michele Roserba with pure gold and handmade stuccos. On the greatest altar, we can observe wooden choir stalls and an organ by Domenico Mangino of 1719. At its sides, there are the statues of the saints Peter and Paul while Assumed Madonna, surrounded by Angels, rises above all.

In the apse, valve shaped banisters are clearly visible and they lead to the crypt where the martyr saint Cesario's body, which is still prodigiously preserved, is kept. He is dressed in warrior clothes and holds a glassy ampulla which contains his blood. Sources state that he was in the emperor Diocletian's service who, then, condemned him to be buried alive because he did not want to abjure his own Christian faith. The marquis Cesare Michelangelo d'Avalos gave it as a gift to the church on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1695. The Saint is, therefore, celebrated on that day of the year.

The baptismal font, in dressed stone from the Maiella mountain, is situated at the side of the colonnade close to the entrance and it dates back to 1572. In the left aisle, there are the chapel dedicated to the Madonna of the Rosary of 1826 and the one devoted to the sacred Heart of Jesus of 1864. Along the way, we can admire remarkable pictures by the Venetian school of the XVI century: "The Baptism of St. Augustine", on which a

Latin inscription appears which indicates its author Alvise Benfatto named the Frise, who was the nephew and pupil of Paolo Caliari called the Veronese; “The marriage of St. Catherine”, attributed exactly to the Veronese; “Madonna of the Gonfalon” and “Ecce Homo” by Titian’s school. Others are added to these, such as a portrait of St. Filippo Neri of the XVIII century.

A bronze portal with “Our Lady of the Assumption” by the Vastese sculptor Antonio Di Spalatro dominates the main front. The overhanging bell tower, with the five Romanic windows, was elevated on a formerly existing bastion which was part of an ancient fort.

The Brotherhood of the holy Thorn and of the Gonfalon serves in this church and it is particularly active in the care of the special relic.

Roberta Palucci

In everlasting memory of the work done  
by his father in this church, Palucci Luigi.