

THE CHURCH AND CONVENT OF SAN SEBASTIANO

The reading of the papal bull sent in 1474 by Sixtus V to the bishop of Gravina, Monsignor Giacomo Appiani (1473–1482), informs us that the construction site opened in 1450 for the building intended to house the Observant Friars Minor (originally dedicated to Saint Mary of Peace and whose works, as the historian Francesco Gonzaga reported in 1587, were temporarily interrupted due to disputes between the Universitas and the Orsini family) could be reopened. Only a few years after the building's completion, in 1483, a plague broke out: the people of Gravina decided to erect an altar to Saint Sebastian within the church; once they believed themselves permanently freed from the scourge, they dedicated the entire complex to the Saint.

On the outside, the church presents a façade that has been heavily altered over the centuries. In its original layout, it must have been very similar to those of the cathedral, San Francesco, and San Domenico—churches built during the same period and following similar stylistic principles—thus tripartite and revealing from the exterior the varying heights of the naves.

During the eighteenth century, the twelve-ray rose window was replaced by a large quadrilobed window, a gabled bell tower was installed, and the crowning was remodeled with a curvilinear profile, including scrolls and an enormous Orsini coat of arms.

Even in the mid-twentieth century, the upper part of the façade underwent a further and rather inexplicable intervention, which removed, except for the window, the aforementioned Baroque elements.

The interior features three naves separated by octagonal columns. Here too, as in the other buildings from the same era mentioned earlier, the original roof was surely trussed; it was later modified with a false ceiling “made of wooden planks [...] worked into squares and painted with red and yellow roses on a turquoise background” before being finally replaced by tuff vaults. During these significant renovations—which also gave the façade its Baroque appearance—the interior volume and decorative elements were heavily modified: the large triumphal arch delimiting the presbytery was reshaped, the seven “elongated windows [...] on the two lateral walls” were walled up, and two new quadrilobed side windows were opened into the central nave, which was newly decorated with white and sinuous stuccoes.

Three chapels further define the building's layout and its side aisles: the Carmine and the Crucifix chapels to the left, and the Deposition chapel to the right.

The first, founded by the Orsini family in the first half of the seventeenth century, houses a contemporary wooden altar—an exquisite work by Fra Giuseppe da Soletto—with a painting attributed to Fra Giacomo of San Vito dei Normanni depicting Our

Lady of Mount Carmel with souls in purgatory. The presence of a wooden tabernacle on the altar, though stylistically consistent with the entire structure, is visibly the result of a later addition. This “gracefully carved” element clearly comes from the now-lost high altar “erected facing the choir,” and bears signs of crude cuts—severing a decorative band with phytomorphic motifs—made to adapt it to its current setting. Moreover, the fact that the altarpiece is largely obscured by it confirms this displacement.

The second chapel, also built in the same years by the Guida family, houses a magnificent crucifix in the form of a *Christus Patiens*, the work of a skilled sixteenth-century woodcarver.

The third chapel, dedicated to the “Sepulchre of the Lord [...] 48 palms long, 12 wide,” is the oldest, as indicated by a plaque dated 1577 (probably repositioned inside), and also the one that must have had different dimensions and arrangement, extending into the adjacent room parallel to the left nave. It contains a particularly valuable piece: a terracotta *Christ in the Tomb*, long and too hastily considered to be made of papier-mâché, and only vaguely mentioned by local historiography.

Among other notable artworks, a series of seventeenth-century wooden reliquary busts is preserved, each representing the saint to whom the venerated relics belong. Another reliquary is a small freestanding statue of Saint Sebastian. The counter, cabinet, and kneelers in the sacristy, painted with mostly vegetal motifs, are the work of a seventeenth-century cabinetmaker.

Also of high craftsmanship is the wooden sculpture, dating from the second half of the seventeenth century, depicting Saint Paschal Baylón.

Another friar, Giuseppe da Gravina, signed in 1678 the church painting of the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*.

The same Gravinese friar is also responsible for the cycle of frescoes depicting Franciscan stories in the cloister of the adjacent convent, which is structured on two levels.

The lower level of the cloister opens onto the courtyard through twenty arches—five on each side—resting on a series of double columns attached to piers; these same columns sit on a parapet with a central passage in each corridor and are topped by leafy capitals supporting ribbed vaults. The ten vaults (excluding the corner ones) of the north and east corridors, unlike those of the other two sides, are alternately ribbed and, together with the transverse arches and side corbels, define ten bays.

The upper level includes two porticoed corridors (one of which is now partially enclosed) on the north and east sides, and two other enclosed corridors with five small windows each.

The open-air courtyard is marked at its center by the presence of an underground cistern and a well used to collect rainwater.

A few years ago, a seventeenth-century fresco representing the *Last Supper* was discovered in the gap between two walls, clearly inspired by Leonardo's version. It is, finally, not unreasonable to imagine that the wall on which it was painted belonged to the ancient refectory.