

The Story of Monte Calvario

by

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1. Beginnings

It may not be realised that the Way of the Cross winding up Monte Calvario originated later than the other Sacred Mounts near Domodossola. The beginning of Sacro Monte di Varello, associated with the Friar Observant **Bernardino Caimi**, dates back to 1491; that of Sacro Monte di Varese, which had its origin with the Capuchin **Giovanni Battista da Monza**, dates back to 1604; and that of Sacro Monte di Orta, due to the Capuchin Fathers of the Convent there, was begun in 1591. The reader will have noted that all these friars were Franciscans. Since they were custodians of the Holy Places in Palestine it is not surprising that they wished to reproduce in some way the Passion and Death of Jesus in Europe. (Recall to mind the ingenuity of St Francis in re-enacting the birth of Jesus by means of the Christmas Crib). Clement XII had established the number of the Stations of the Cross to be 14, and extended to the faithful who followed the Way of the Cross the indulgences usually gained by visiting the Holy Places.

Domodossola boasted two communities of Franciscans. The Minor Conventuals lived in the ancient convent of St Francis and the Capuchin Fathers lived in another convent north of the town. Two Capuchin Friars of Domo, **Gioachino da Cassano** and **Andrea Rho**, organised the work at Sacro Monte Calvario. Tradition has it that they preached during Lent 1656 in the Collegiate Church at Domodossola. They enthused the people of the Ossola who embraced the task of building a Way of the Cross. To this end they chose the hill of **Mattarella** on which lay the ruins of a mediaeval fort.

2. The Castle of Mattarella

The hill of Mattarella rises from the plain of Domodossola to a height of 413m above sea level. Its pleasant position attracted the first inhabitants of the Ossola Valley from prehistoric times, and there are traces on a rock, which rises within the mediaeval circular wall, pointing to its sacred character in ancient times. It is thought that in the distant past the hill of Mattarella was probably the name of a pagan sanctuary dedicated to **Matrone**. Later a church dedicated to our Lady was built. There is a marble fragment of 539 A.D. which tends to bear this out, and on the summit of the hill the remains of a paleochristian church were discovered in 1701. Moreover a little over a thousand years ago a round Romanesque Baptistery was built.

Mattarella was occupied by troops either during Byzantine domination, or later in the time of the Lombards (7th c). It was at this time that a large castle was built and this served as the military and administrative centre of the Upper Ossola. It was the seat of the Lombard judiciary and also of the French Count Palatine up to the 11th century. In 1014 Emperor Henry of Saxony made over the ownership of the castle of Mattarella to **Bishop Peter III**. Here the bishop had his palace and secular court. It seems that we can attribute to him the building of the Baptistery for the use of the parish of Oxila (later called Domodossola),

The castle of Mattarella remained the property of the bishops of Novara until the end of the 14th century. In 1381 the Ossola passed into the power of the Visconti and the castle became the property of the Duchy of Milan. The castle fulfilled its purpose till 1416, but then succumbed to the Swiss who swept down the alpine passes, destroying the episcopal palace

and the castle. Further demolition took place and now only some traces of the former fortress remain, for instance, part of the tower which has lost the upper part of its bartizans and covered sentry walk. A long curtain wall is in a good state of preservation at the ends of which are two towers and blockhouses. The better preserved of these was built at the beginning of the 15th century. The ruins became quarries for the new buildings of the Sanctuary and the Convent of the Capuchin Fathers below.

3. The Building of the Sanctuary

The plan for the Way of the Cross consisted in a processional way or *Via Regia*. This would start at the foot of the hill with its triumphal arch and wind its way up by stages reaching a Sanctuary just below the summit. The various stages would be marked by chapels housing the frescoes and sculptured figures depicting the Stations of the Cross.

Firstly permission was asked from the competent ecclesiastical authority for the erection of crosses to mark the site of these chapels. This was granted on 15 July 1656 by the Vicar General Capitular of Novara. Fathers Gioachino da Cassano and Andrea da Rho were the promoters of the work. Further permission from the new Bishop of Novara was sought and granted on 29 August 1656. A committee was set up to raise money for the realisation of the work. This was approved by the Bishop and the foundation stone of the Sanctuary was laid on 8 July 1657. This date marks the real beginning of the work. The event was distinguished by a grand procession of dignitaries and people. The foundation stone can still be seen in the Sanctuary at the end of the presbytery on the left hand side. It bears the inscription of the generous donor. *Primarium Lapidem P. Joseph Maria Ruga Oppidanus MDCLVII*. (The townsman Giuseppe Maria Ruga laid this foundation stone, 1657). The Sanctuary and all the chapels were built with the gifts of money or in kind by the generous and devoted people. They are the outcome of the genuine devotion of the people of the Ossola.

The townsfolk entrusted the work to the eminent advocate, **Giovanni Matteo Capis**. This was later confirmed by the Bishop, Monsignor **Giulio Maria Odelscalchi**, brother of Pope Innocent XI. The Bishop came to the Ossola on a pastoral visit and inspected the work. At this stage the triumphal arch had been built and the Sanctuary was under way. He noted everything in detail and wisely supervised the work going on.

From now on the hill of Mattarella changed its name to **Sacro Monte Calvario**. By 14 September 1659 the Sanctuary was opened for public worship. The cupola was erected by **Tommaso Lazzaro** in 1672, the vestibule only in 1686.

However the hill of Mattarella and its ruins belonged to the State so the Sanctuary was built on state land. Suffice it to say that Capis eventually obtained from the Spanish authorities the grant of the area for the building of Sacro Monte Calvario on 22 November 1668. (The inscription marking this event is hidden by the organ). The work on the statues inside the Sanctuary was completed with the setting up of the large crucified Christ in the 12th chapel, the magnificent group of the 13th chapel and the prophets. The Bishop, Monsignor **G. B. Visconti** of Novara consecrated the chapel on 27 September 1690. A commemorative plaque (now half concealed by a confessional) was set up on the right as one enters the church.

4. Giovanni Matteo Capis

Giovanni Matteo Capis, advocate, was the son of the first historian of the Ossola. He was involved in the most important political affairs, also taking on the office of Podestà or Magistrate of the Curia of Mattarella and, moreover, the office of Syndic of the Jurisdiction of the same Curia. It was in this capacity that he got involved in the building of the new convent of the Capuchins half way down the hill of Mattarella (the foundation stone was laid in 1667). He was an ardent defender of the rights of the Ossola and championed its material, civil and religious development. He devoted himself wholeheartedly to the work of Sacro Monte Calvario from 1656, encouraging its construction and collecting the necessary funds, administering them with the greatest care. He was also Syndic of the church of Madonna della

Neve, the Elemosina di S.Spirito and of various confraternities of the Collegiate Church. He also established a chaplaincy for the service of Monte Calvario and chose the first priest, Antonio Cugnone of Trasquera. He made the whole of Monte Calvario his heir. Unfortunately after his death his relatives ruthlessly contested the will, depriving the Sanctuary of a great part of its inheritance. But Giovanni Matteo Capis must be considered to be the greatest benefactor of Monte Calvario. There is an inscription emphasising this above the entrance of the Church and a plaque in the 14th Station in which he is buried.

During the lifetime of Capis and then under the Rectorship of **Cugnone**, the Sanctuary was completed. Also the triumphal arch, and chapels 2, 4 and 9 of the Stations were built. Furthermore a small building on the hill was converted into a little sanctuary dedicated to Madonna delle Grazie and a building, which copied the Holy House of Loreto, was combined with this.

After Canon **Antonio Cugnone** came **Antonio Triponetti**, parish priest of Cisere, who held the canonry and rectorship of Monte Calvario from 1693 to 1739. During his tenure of office he decided to erect a large retreat house for the Ossolan clergy, connected to the Sanctuary. He built the 15th Station representing the resurrection of Christ (also called the *Chapel of Paradise*) which is the largest chapel on Monte Calvario. Although the Stations of the Cross normally number 14 it was thought fitting to build a 15th to depict the triumph of Christ. This is where the Via Regia ends.

It was only in 1732 that the foundation stone of the choir was laid beyond the presbytery of the church. This was completed in 1735. It was continuous with the presbytery but separated from it by an opening in which hung the large crucifix. It is now separated from the church, as the Rosminians have made it a community oratory. They closed up the opening, erecting an altar and above it a painting of our Lady of Sorrows by the Veronese painter, **Rosa Bortolan**. Before he died Canon Triponetti obtained the canonical erection of the Via Crucis with attached indulgences, which are the same as for those who visit the Holy Places. This occurred after a huge procession wound its way up Monte Calvario, pausing at each Station in meditation and prayer.

Giacomo Silvetti, rector of the Sanctuary of Boca, succeeded Triponetti from 1739 to 1759, and the priest **Antonio Malavi** from 1759 to 1799. During the Rectorship of these two priests some chapels were completed and new ones built, namely, 1st, 6th 7th 8th 10th and 11th Stations. In the last year of the 18th century work was suspended, because of lack of funds which had been diverted by ecclesiastical authority, with the aim of rebuilding the Collegiate Church of Domo.

Space does not permit a detailed study of artists and modellers of the Stations.

Giuseppe Rusnati was responsible for the stucco groups of the 15th chapel, the 9th and 10th chapel and part of the chapel called the *Vision of the Cross*. **Carlo and Giovanni Giovanninetti**, from Valsesia cast the wings for the angels round the dying Christ and for the pictures of the side chapels of the altars of the church. The chapel of the 11th Station had a tableau by the Valsesian **Giovanni Luca Raineri** in 1775. A contract of March 1781 mentions the stucco work of the sculptor, **Stefano Salterio di Laglio** who made the 20 statues and two horses for the chapel of the 8th Station.

As regards the backgrounds of the chapels, the Milanese painter, **Giovanni di Sanpietro** came to Calvary from 1699 to 1708. He frescoed the chapels of the 2nd, 4th and 13th station, the background of the chapel of the Vision of the Cross, and finally the great frescoes which cover the walls and the vast vault of the 15th chapel. The statues and background of the chapel of the 9th Station were painted in 1710 by **Tarquino Grassi di Romagnano**. The chapel of the 1st Station, later substituted by the present one, had been completely painted by **Carlo Canepa** in 1746. The atrium of the chapel of the 2nd Station and the vault of the choir of the Sanctuary, now the community oratory, were frescoed in 1735 by the painter **Secondo Sestini**. Between 1779 and 1780 the brothers **Giuseppe and Antonio Tonicella** di Cusano were responsible for the painting and decoration of the statues and backgrounds of the chapels of the 8th and 11th Stations.

5. Monte Calvario and the Rosminian Fathers

The Ossola, including Monte Calvario, suffered the consequences of the French Revolution at the beginning of the 19th century. One of the edicts of the Cisalpine Republic to which the Ossola belonged, was the law of the 27 February 1801. It authorised the Governor to suppress all ecclesiastical associations and appropriate their goods for the nation. The College and Convent of St Francesco in Domo fell victim to this law. The representative appointed to the central administration of national goods, Innocente Tosi, also took possession of Monte Calvario. Canon **Remigio Capis** appealed against this, claiming that many of the goods of Calvario were the endowment of canonical benefice. In this way he prevented everything ending up in the hands of the government. Nevertheless a great part of the goods belonging more strictly to the Sanctuary were sold off at a low price. The Retreat House remained unsold as no one wanted it. So for many years it remained vacant and at the mercy of the elements. Another casualty was the Franciscan Convent situated half way down Monte Calvario. The Capuchins were thrown out on the street and their goods confiscated.

As a result of all this no work was done on Monte Calvario for 30 years. The 1st Station, indeed, was used by the State. The Retreat House was abandoned. But after 1820 some initiative was gradually taken to redeem the situation.

This is the point at which Count **Giacomo Mellerio** enters the scene. He was a pious, generous man, a native Ossolan and an eminent politician during the government of Beauharnais, and subsequently Vice Governor of Milan and Grand Chancellor of Lombardy. He managed to persuade Antonio Rosmini, whom he knew at Milan, to accept Monte Calvario as the place where he would found his Order. Having obtained permission from Cardinal **Giuseppe Morozzo**, Bishop of Novara, Rosmini went to Calvario on 19 February 1828 to begin his work and write the Constitutions of the Institute of Charity during that memorable Lent. This marked the beginning of the material and spiritual renewal of the Sanctuary. Processions from the local parishes to Monte Calvario and the giving of Retreats recommenced.

However all was not over. Questions arose as to who owned the goods on Monte Calvario. As a result Cardinal Morozzo entrusted the work of Calvario to Rosmini and his Institute. Canon Remigio Capis and family opposed this decree; and after a long civil process the sentence of the court upheld his alleged right. The Bishop alleviated this somewhat by constituting a new administration for Monte Calvario, but the work of Rosmini was still very much restricted. And he was prevented from taking part in the restoration of the property. Count Mellerio was not impressed by the situation and left unfinished the 5th Station chapel which he had undertaken to build. Further complications followed because of a law in 1855. It suppressed the chapters of collegiate churches and confiscated the goods of the canonical prebends. This created serious problems for Monte Calvario. The Rosminians decided to appeal to the Holy See, and as a result were able to buy all the goods and chattels of Calvario. This occurred on 23 June 1863 when they paid 11000 lire to the State, of which a third was restored to the Capis family.

At this point we can say that the house of the Rosminian Fathers, the Mother House of the Order, formerly began. The 17th century retreat house was enlarged by adding a new floor and this extended to the rest of the old building. The entire hill became the private property of the Rosminians and was transformed into an oasis of peace and tranquillity. As mentioned the 5th chapel was built as a result of the generosity of Count Mellerio, the chapels of the 6th and 7th Stations were frescoed and work on the church's campanile, designed by the engineer Schioppo, began. This was rapidly finished. Note the writing on the Eastern side. *Hic antiqua basis hic nunc nova turris ad auras, perpetuum nostri cultus ausus monumentum.* (Here lay the ancient foundations; now on the same spot the new tower rises, a perpetual memorial to our intrepid faith).

The house was now assigned to the religious novices and professed members. At the end of the century the General of the Order, Fr **Luigi Lanzoni**, decided that the vast hall jutting out from the mountain should be built in order to develop the theological faculty, and that an important and valuable philosophical and theological library should be assembled for its use. The grounds were also modified and beautified.

It is interesting to note that the artistic work was still not finished and even now there is still work to be done. The chapel of the 1st Station had become a store for explosive powder and blew up in 1830. It was rebuilt in its present form in 1900. The statues were added in 1947. The chapel of the 3rd Station was the last to be built. Statues had also to be placed in the 7th Station (1940), and in the 5th and 6th Stations (1957). In 1955, on the first Centenary of the death of Antonio Rosmini, a tall iron cross was erected on the tower of the ancient castle. This is regularly illuminated. In 1908, due to the interest of the rector, Don **Arrigo Moulard**, a Lourdes Grotto was built in the piazza. It was opened in 1908. In recent years the climb to Calvary has been greatly eased by the laying of an asphalt road. But the Via Regia is used less, even though it has been wholly restored. The present arrangement is for the procession to start at the 3rd Station because it has not been possible to reuse the old path. It should be noted that the triumphal arch was stupidly destroyed in 1875 'for a more aesthetic building'. No trace of it remains except in a drawing of **Perini**.

6. The Renewal of Monte Calvario

The centre of Rosminian theological and philosophical studies had been located at Monte Calvario for almost a century. But now a decision was taken to move elsewhere. As a result Monte Calvario embarked on a new venture. Its impressive and artistic patrimony needed to be carefully preserved and to be better known. At the beginning of the 1980's the Rosminian Fathers decided to institute a Centre of Spirituality, which would be opened to religious and laity. The decisive year was 1985 with the foundation of the *Association for the Restoration and Improvement of Sacro Monte Calvario*. Generous contributions made the restoration of the structure of the chapels possible and the Via Regia was restored. The schedule provided for the restoration of all 170 statues which stood in the chapels and Sanctuary, and also the frescoes. In 1988 the Rosminian Fathers completely renovated the library to which was added a new hall dedicated to the late Fr Giuseppe Bozzetti

By a law of 27 December 1991 the region of Piedmont instituted the *Special Natural Regional Reserve of Sacro Monte Calvario of Domodossola*, adding it to the list of Piedmontese parks, endowing it with funds and thus allowing it to be open to yet greater development for the benefit of the community. Impressive initiatives followed on the setting up of a Board of Administration and the appointment of its first president of the Reserve, Don Emilio Comper.

The Retreat House and that of the religious community have been notably enlarged and converted in order to make them more hospitable as a Centre of Spirituality which is open both to religious and laity in an atmosphere of silence and prayer and beautiful surroundings. The memory of Rosmini is kept alive, especially by the preservation, in its original state, of his cell in which he came and spent the Lent of 1828. And on entering the porter's lodge of the ancient convent there is a bronze statue of him by the Trentino sculptor, Fra Silvio Bottes, and erected in 1997, showing him in an attitude of welcome and hospitality.

7. The Station Chapels

Space does not allow me to comment in detail on all the Station chapels. This will have to wait for the longer English translation of the guide to Monte Calvario in preparation. We have seen that the chapel of the 1st Station, reputedly the most beautiful of all by reason of its architecture and paintings, was used at one stage as a store for explosive powder and blew up in 1830 when it caught fire. The cause of the fire is unknown. The chapel of the 4th Station was vandalised in 1970 but fortunately the Superintendent of Fine Arts stepped in and it was restored to its original state.

The chapel, with which all are most familiar, is that of the 12th Station which is part of the presbytery of the church. It is the best of the stucco works which **Dionisio Bussola** has left to Calvario. The figure of Christ dying on the Cross was erected in March 1662, and solemnly blessed in the presence of a great crowd of clergy and lay folk on 4 April. The three statues of

our Lady, St John and St Mary Magdalen were erected by Bussola in the following year, June 1663. The background was painted by **Francesco (Cino) Bozzetti** in 1921. The angels in stucco were added in 1703.

The chapel of the 13th Station is situated in the Sanctuary on the right as one enters. The scene of *The Taking Down from the Cross* is depicted by 10 statues in terracotta which are the best Dionisio Bussola made. The tableau was placed in this chapel in 1664. The frescoes were painted by Giovanni di Sanpietro and date back to 1699.

The chapel of the 14th Station can be reached outside the Sanctuary by an appropriate stairway, and is situated under the floor of the church where the rock of Sacro Monte Calvario emerges. *The Burial of Christ* is depicted in the form of a grotto. The dead Christ is watched over by two angels who hold a sudarium over him. The statue of the dead Christ in terracotta was the first to be placed on Monte Calvario by Dionisio Bussola. It was placed there in the presence of a large crowd of Ossolan clergy and people on 14 September 1661. The body of Giovanni Matteo Capis is also buried in this sepulchre.

The chapel of the 15th Station (the *Chapel of the Resurrection*) was built on the summit of the hill, a short distance from the Sanctuary at the end of the Via Regia. The work on the 15th chapel was begun on 18 April 1690. It was during the excavations that the foundations of a paleochristian church of our Lady were discovered. It predates the castle of Mattarella. The Perini brothers designed the chapel and it was finished in 1708. The tableau of 9 figures in terracotta was executed by Giuseppe Rusnati and was begun in 1704. The pictorial work is by Giovanni Sanpietro who carried this out in 1704, and he depicted himself among the saints in glory!

8. The Sanctuary of the Crucifixion

I have already made some comments on the Sanctuary of the Crucifixion from the point of view of the history of Monte Calvario and the contribution of the artists. But one or two more points may be of interest. The Sanctuary stands on the rock of Monte Calvario in the shape of an octagon. This was extended by several chapels projecting from it, namely the 12th Station, the 13th Station and chapel opposite to it depicting the *Vision of the Cross*.

The building was begun in 1657. In 1672 the cupola of the Sanctuary was constructed and in 1686 the vestibule was built. This projects beyond the façade. The plan of this church is attributed to Tommaso Lazzaro who was one of the first donors towards the construction of the Sanctuary. Above the door, a long inscription records Capis who is considered to be the founder of the Sanctuary. On the external wall of the portico there is a cast iron plaque in memory of **Baron Gaspar Stockalper**, the well known ruler of Sempione, and benefactor of Monte Calvario.

Notable are eight prophets on their respective ledges who appear to be in conversation with one another. They are the work of **Dionisio Bussola** and his assistant, **Giovanni Battista De Magistris**, called '**Il Volpino**'. They started work on the statues in 1670.

The chapel built on the left, as one enters the Sanctuary, is that of the Vision of the Cross. Originally it was to have depicted the Nativity and the Adoration of the Kings, but placed in the context of the prophets it was thought more coherent with the whole to change it into the Vision of the Cross. The statue of the magus Gaspar was portrayed by Baron Gaspar Stockalper. This and the statue of his page were taken away and added by Rusnati to those of the chapel of the Resurrection in the early years of the 18th century.

Between the chapel of the Vision of the Cross and that of the Crucifixion is that dedicated to the Most Holy Trinity. The *Confraternity of the Most Holy Trinity for the Redemption of Christian Slaves* is associated with this. The painting portrays the Holy Founders of the Confraternity of the Trinitarians and our Lady of Mercy. On the other side, the altar of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, depicted by its painting, was erected in 1685. Both paintings are the work of Francesco Bozzetti.

The Sanctuary was completely restored and decorated for the occasion of the centennial of the Edict of Constantine in 1913. In 1978 the church was arranged to conform to the new

liturgical norms. The tabernacle was re – located and a new marble altar now faces the people. The fresco of the Most Blessed Trinity, which is in the dome of the now community oratory, is interesting, because only the Father and the Holy Spirit figure on their thrones. The third is left empty awaiting the Son at the moment of his death on the Cross. This fresco is the work of Secondo Sestini.

9. The Santa Casa and the Oratory of Madonna delle Grazie

A little chapel was built at the end of the 16th century, just outside the walls of the castle of Mattarella, in which there was a painting of the Madonna holding her child. Bishop Odescalchi wished to unite this with Monte Calvario and ordered that the chapel be enlarged in order to form the 6th Station. However this solution was not deemed suitable and it was decided to build a proper oratory. The foundation stone was laid in 1660 and the building was finished in 1667. Alongside the north wall of the Oratory of Madonna delle Grazie leant a chapel, which was to have been one of the Station Chapels. But it was never used for this purpose and served first as a sacristy for the oratory, and civilly for some years as the office of an official of the Commune of Calice and as an elementary school.

On the initiative of Giovanni Capis a model of the Holy House of Loreto was added to the side of this oratory. It was begun in 1674 and finished in 1694. Dionisio Busola made two beautiful statues of the angel Gabriel and the Blessed Virgin in 1677. At this point one joins the last stretch of the Via Regia.

10. The Casa Stockalper

Baron Gaspare Stockalper came from Torre di Briga in the Canton of Vallese. He was an eminent politician and a rich entrepreneur. He had taken refuge in the Ossola from 1679 to 1685 during the exile inflicted on him by his compatriots. He was a citizen of Domo and a friend of Capis and had been a generous benefactor to the Sanctuary. He wished to end his days near the Sanctuary and so the house was built. After his political rehabilitation he returned to his country. After his death the house was merged with the property of Monte Calvario, but sold to the French Republic on the basis of the disreputable laws of the confiscation of goods of 1801 and 1810. It was restored to the Rosminian Fathers in the first decades of the 20th century. It has recently been renovated, restored and made an agreeable place of welcome and an information centre for pilgrims and visitors. It is also the office of the officials of Ente Parco which looks after Monte Calvario.

¹ *Acknowledgement:* This account is taken from the official guide, *Il Sacro Monte Calvario*, Domodossola, 2000. The original text is by Don Tullio Bertamini. I take full responsibility for the text in its present form.