

## Restoration Works Carried Out In The Vatican Grottoes

After the creation of the new chapel for Sts. Benedict, Cyril and Methodius, Patrons of Europe (1980), and the enlargement of the Chapel of the Polish Nation dedicated to Our Lady of Czestochowa (1982), the Knights of Columbus offered the necessary support to the Fabbrica di San Pietro for the restoration of important works in the oldest and most venerated sites in the Vatican Grottoes.

The continuous work of about 10 restorers from the EdilRestauri, coordinated and directed by expert technicians from the Fabbrica di San Pietro, was needed to carry out the restoration of a pictorial surface of



Vatican Grottoes, facing the peribolus of St. Andrea's Chapel

approximately 400 square meters. During thirteen months of patient work, the important pictorial decorations in the semi-circular passageway around the Confession and the two chapels dedicated to the Madonna della Bocciata and delle Partorienti were cleaned, consolidated and restored. Here the damage caused by humidity and by adverse microclimatic conditions in the past was particularly evident. This delicate intervention permitted the rediscovery of

the original chromatic values and the importance of these paintings, which, in their original version, date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Parts of them have been attributed to Giovan Battista Ricci da Novara. These paintings illustrate some of the most significant miracles which have occurred near the



Vatican Grottoes, view of the Tomb of Pio XII

tomb of the Prince of the Apostles and reproduce monuments and structures from the lost ancient Basilica. Similar procedures were also used on the memorial tablets in the Oratory where the tomb of Pope Pius XII can be found.

The restoration remedied the precarious state of these artifacts, which had been steadily deteriorating, by

removing abundant salification on the surface of the works, anchoring frescoed plaster to a supporting wall, and stabilizing the pictorial film. In addition, the delicate task of removing paintings that had been painted over originals in order to guarantee the visibility of murals compromised by damage from humidity and smoke from lamps, lanterns and candles through

the years challenged the technicians. On the vertical walls of the chapels dedicated to the Madonna delle Partorienti and della Bocciata, patient and careful work by the restorers revealed once more the elegant simulated polychrome marble decorations and the marvelous drapes with flowers and vegetal motifs painted in gold on a red background simulating refined embroidery. These priceless paintings, expertly chromatically restored, had been hidden under a double coat of pale white. The recently completed work also involved the placing of a socle of travertine, the installation of a new lighting system, substituting PVC tubes for iron oxidate conductors.

The restorations accomplished in the Vatican Grottoes has returned to this area, so important in history, art and religion, the pictorial decorations with their chromatic values from early 17<sup>th</sup> century and the following century. Thanks to the works carried out with the support of the Knights of Columbus, today, it is possible to admire these extraordinary paintings, which the relentless passing of time had altered, compromising their appearance and their preservation.

## The Chapel of the Madonna della Bocciata

### An ancient Chapel

On the southern side of the *peribolos*, beyond the chapel of St. Veronica, there is the oldest chapel in the area around the sepulcher of Peter, the Chapel of the *Bocciata*.



Vatican Grottoes, Chapel of the *Bocciata*,  
Madonna with Child  
Attributed to school of Pietro Cavallini

It originates from the very small oratory commissioned by Gregory XIII in 1580. It was created when the new basilica was under construction, under the paving in the southern transept (today of St. Joseph), where the sainted Popes Leo I, II, III and IV had been buried. In about 1592, Pope Clement VIII had the room prolonged and joined the new *peribolos* of the grottoes.

In 1607, when Clement VIII moved the relics of the saint-popes to the basilica, the oratory was dedicated to St. Sebastian. In 1676, a wall was built to separate the front of the oratory (the present-day chapel) from the back where the relics had been found, and the room became smaller.

The separated back was then opened toward the present chapel of the Partorienti, as it can still be seen today. In the same year, a mosaic representing the Apostle Paul was found during the

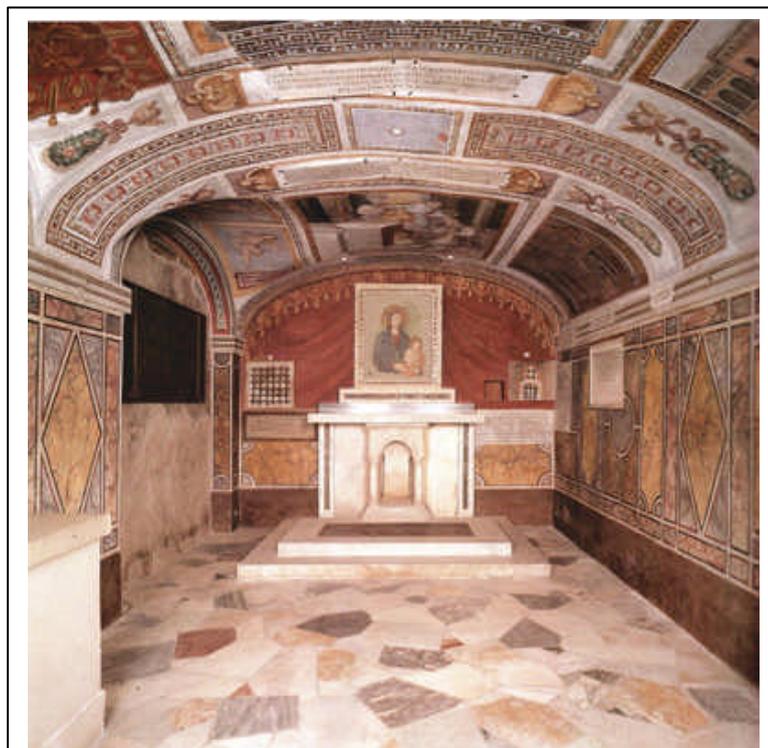
demolition of the apse of the old basilica.

It was brought to the chapel in 1607, placed on the new altar; and the chapel was re-

dedicated to St. Paul.

On February 21, when pope Urban VIII had the present Marian image placed there, the chapel was given a new name of the *Bocciata*,

The painting is a fragment of a medieval fresco framed in Cosmatesque marble elements. It was once believed to be the work of Simone Martini, but now it is generally attributed to Pietro Cavallini (1273-1321) or his workshop.



Vatican Grottoes, Chapel of the Bocciata  
after restoration

The majestic and solemn Madonna (once probably enthroned) directs her intense gaze upon the spectator as she turns slightly to the Child on her lap, whom she holds with her left hand and presents with the right one. The Child imparts His blessing as He looks down at the figure of the commissioner of the work, now missing, whose one extended arm can still be seen. The image was originally located in the portico of the old basilica, between the Ravenna Door and the Door of the Dead (to the south).

It became famous after a miraculous event in 1440, according to the testimony collected by Nikolaus Muffel from the court of Emperor Frederic II in 1453. A drunken soldier, in a bout of anger for the florins he lost in a game, in a sacrilegious gesture hurled a stone or a ball at the Virgin's face. The lesion is still visible on her left cheek. Drops of blood appeared on the image and fell down onto the stone paving. During the restoration of the portico in 1574, Pope Gregory XIII had the image removed and taken to the *secretarium* of the Basilica. In 1608, when the ancient building was demolished, the image was placed in the peribolos of the grottoes. It was the object of great veneration and became

even more so in its present location dating from 1636. As recorded in the inscription to the right from the altar, attached to the wall and protected by iron grates, to the sides from image of the Madonna, there are two stones from the ancient paving of the portico, where, according to tradition, the miraculous blood fell. Their surface has been worn away by the touches of the faithful.

## The Chapel of the Madonna delle Partorienti

### A place of centuries of devotion

The biggest among the old chapels in the grottoes, this chapel was created by Paul V by opening the outside wall of peribolos (the present entrance) and by excavating under the floor of the basilica, to the left from the oratory of Popes Leo. As noted above, the oratory was divided into two parts: the rectangular room where the relics



Vatican Grottoes, Chapel of the Partorienti,  
Madonna with Child  
Attributed to Antoniazio Romano

of Popes SS. Leo I, II, III and IV were buried was joined to the new chapel. Until 1949 it was still on the ancient level, two steps higher. Once the architectural part was finished, the altar was constructed and on October 5, 1616, the image of Our Lady, venerated as the Madonna delle Partorienti, was placed on it. The name comes from the special devotion manifested towards the painting by women expecting a baby, when it was still in the old basilica.

It was the first chapel in the grottoes to be dedicated to the Madonna and, despite the 20<sup>th</sup> century modifications, it has preserved its ancient flavor as well as the atmosphere and the memory of the Constantinian basilica.

The painting is a surviving fragment of an early Renaissance fresco attributed today to Antoniazio Romano (1452-1510) and his workshop. The painting was once bigger and, judging by the rings

around the figure of the Virgin, was protected by an aedicula with four Cosmatesque columns from the tabernacle of the Holy Veil. In 1950, it was inserted in a white Carrara marble cornice with an inscription commemorating the restoration by Pius XII.

In the old basilica, this sacred image of the Madonna venerated by women expecting childbirth was located in the left transept, in a shrine with an altar founded by Cardinal Giovanni Gaetano Orsini (d. 1385) and later decorated by Cardinal Giordano Orsini (d. 1438). When the transept was demolished, the fresco was salvaged and in 1574 was placed and venerated on the dividing wall between the old basilica and the new one under construction. In 1605, when it was decided to demolish the remaining part of the Constantinian basilica, the sacred image was taken to the back of the old grottoes. That location, however, was not easily accessible and in 1616 Pope Paul V moved it to the chapel bearing the same name in the Vatican Grottoes.

The image is full of noble grace and delicate sentiment. The Virgin's affection for the Child is immediately perceptible. With her left hand she is holding the standing Baby Jesus to her bosom while He is giving His blessing. In her right hand, in a gesture of respect, Mary is holding a transparent veil in front of the Child. The Virgin is bending her head towards the jovial face of the Son but, at the same time, she is gazing at the faithful turning to her. On the sides of the image are two fragments of late Medieval Angels reggicortina (holding a drape), in bas-relief.