

Life of Christ by Gaudenzio Ferrari

Located in the Church of Our Lady of the Graces, Varallo, Italy



The “**Sacri Monti (Sacred Mountains) of Piedmont and Lombardy**” are a series of nine mountaintop religious complexes built in the northern region of Italy during the 15th - 17th centuries. Franciscan Friar Bernadino Caimi first envisioned and began developing the Sacri Monti during the Counter Reformation. He wanted to give the many Catholics who could never travel to the Holy Land an opportunity to make a life-impacting pilgrimage, where they could more deeply contemplate the life, passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. Incorporated into the natural landscape of the hills, forests, and lakes of these nine mountaintops of Italy, a region that geographically marked a

separation between Protestants and Catholics, Caimi directed the construction of Catholic churches, convents, and life-size recreations of Holy Land sites and events of Jesus and Mary's lives. Many very impressive artistic works adorn the structures of the Sacri Monti, including numerous life size statues that depict various events of Christ's life. The paths leading up the nine mountains were fashioned to remind pilgrims of the Via Dolorosa – the path Jesus trod through the streets of Jerusalem and His climb up Mount Calvary on Good Friday.

First among the nine Sacri Monti to be completed was the "Sacro Monte di Varallo" – the Sacred Mountain of Varallo, situated on the natural rock-terraced slopes of Monte Tre Croci ("three crosses mountain"), six hundred feet above sea level. This mountaintop complex includes the minor basilica, The Church of Our Lady of the Graces, plus 45 chapels, and more than 800 life-size statues. Friar Caimi employed the artistic genius of **Gaudenzio Ferrari**, a northern Italian painter, sculptor, philosopher, poet, and musician to help him implement his vision. One highly impressive work of Ferrari is his fresco on the main interior wall the Church of Our Lady of the Graces. In 21 large panels, Ferrari (who painted and sculpted only religious subjects) painted the main events of Christ's life, from the Annunciation to the Resurrection, in stunning detail and color. While the middle crucifixion panel is given unquestionable dominance and is quite famous, the panel to its top right depicting Jesus's baptism in the Jordan – the event that began Christ's public ministry – ranks also among Ferrari's most admired paintings. In this baptism scene, Ferrari artfully captures the deep humility of the Son of God, Who came to do the will of His Father, and the sanctity of John the Baptist, of whom Jesus said, "Among those born of women there has risen no one greater." (Mat. 11: 11)



While viewing this beautiful image illustrating one of Jesus's first lessons to us – about the preeminent importance of Baptism to the salvation of our souls -- one can almost hear the fatherly voice from heaven saying, "Thou art My beloved Son; with Thee I am well pleased!" (Luke 3: 22) One can see when gazing upon this wall, how quickly the grace-filled moment of Jesus's baptism eventually lead to His brutal crucifixion and His glorious resurrection. In this one grand wall, the entire Gospel is proclaimed by the talented strokes of a painter. Try for a moment to imagine the spontaneous hush and instantaneous awe that thousands upon thousands of pilgrims have experienced over the centuries as they've entered this church and lingered long to gaze upon Ferrari's impressive "Life of Christ."

A pilgrim who has contemplated the images on this wall must surely walk away with fuller understanding of the truth that, "**All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death. We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.**" (Rom. 6: 3-4) as the good Friar Bernadino Caimi, so many years ago, hoped they would! (To learn more about Gaudenzio Ferrari's work, go to: <http://www.all-art.org/history230-8.html>)