

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

MEMORY AND HOPE

L'Aquila, the capital city of central Italy's Abruzzi region, has been an important cultural center since the Middle Ages. Founded in 1248 by Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Sicily, as a bulwark against the power of the papacy, its construction was completed in 1254 under Frederick's son, Conrad IV of Germany; its walls were finished in 1316. L'Aquila quickly became the second city of the Kingdom of Naples and an important market town. Within a few decades it was a crossroads between cities within this kingdom, thanks to the so-called "Via degli Abruzzi," which ran from Florence to Naples by way of Perugia, Rieti, L'Aquila, Sulmona, Isernia, Venafrò, Teano and Capua.

Many important events involved L'Aquila and the Church during the Middle Ages: negotiations for the succession of Edmund, son of Henry III of England, to the throne of the Kingdom of Sicily; on December 22, 1256, Pope Alexander IV elevated the churches of Saints Maximus and George to cathedral status; and on August 29, 1294, the Abruzzese hermit Peter da Morrone was consecrated Pope Celestine V in the Romanesque Church of Santa Maria di Collemaggio (1288) with its splendid rose windows and pink and white geometric stonework façade. (His tomb is in the chapel to the right of the apse.) A few months later, on December 13, he became the only Pope in the history of the papacy to abdicate, and no subsequent Pope has taken the name "Celestine." Pope Clement V canonized him in 1313. To mark the 800th anniversary of Celestine's birth, Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed the Celestine Year from August 28, 2009 through August 29, 2010.

During the 14th and 15th centuries—L'Aquila's Golden Age—the generals of the Franciscan Order chose the city as the seat of the Order's general chapters. Bernardine of Siena (1380-1444, canonized in 1450 by Pope Nicholas V) of the strict Franciscan Order of Observance, visited twice, and after his death here in 1444, his followers, particularly Friar John Capistrano (1385-1456, beatified in 1694 and canonized in 1724) and Capistrano's fellow-student Friar James of the Marches (1391-1476, beatified in 1624 by Pope Urban VIII and canonized by Pope Benedict XIII in 1726) initiated an impressive building program which centered around the hospital of San Salvatore (1466) and the convent and basilica of St. Bernardine, designed along the lines of Santa



TO RESTORE L'AQUILA'S RELIGIOUS PATRIMONY



Processional cross (1436) by goldsmith Nicola da Guardiagrele from the Church of St. Nicholas in Monticchio. Top, silver-and gold-plated reliquary of St. Celestine V from the Basilica of Santa Maria di Collemaggio

Maria del Fiore in Florence but a long time in the works (1454-72), to which their founder was translated on May 14, 1472. Its second chapel on the south aisle has an altarpiece by the Tuscan Renaissance artist Andrea della Robbia. Nearby, in 1481, Adam of Rottweil, a pupil and collaborator of Gutenberg, opened the city's first printing press.

L'Aquila's prosperity ended in the 16th century when the Spanish viceroy Philibert van Oranje partially destroyed the city and established Spanish feudalism in its countryside. In 1799 the city was also sacked twice by French troops.

Throughout its history L'Aquila, partially situated on an ancient lake-bed which amplifies seismic activity, has been plagued by earthquakes. The first one on record dates to December 3, 1315 and seriously damaged the Romanesque Church of St. Francis in nearby Pettino. Another struck on January 22, 1349, killing about 800 people. Others followed in 1461, 1501, and 1646 before the most destructive of all up to then, on February 3, 1703, which killed 3,000 people and destroyed almost all the region's churches. Soon after Pope Clement XI decided to repopulate the city, it was shaken again in 1706 and then again on July 31, 1786, the most serious of all, when more than 6,000 people died.

Just over a year ago, on April 6, 2009 at 3:32 AM, disaster struck again in this lively university town of c. 75,000 inhabitants located on the hillside just beneath the year-round snow-capped peak of Gran Sasso, at 2,914 m. the tallest summit of the Apennine chain. Rated 5.8 on the Richter scale, this quake was Italy's deadliest in almost three decades and the first to strike a major city since Messina was destroyed in 1908. It left 308 people, including 20 children, dead, around 1,500 people injured, and 65,000 homeless in L'Aquila and 26 nearby towns. Between 3,000 and 11,000 buildings, many of them important religious monuments, were severely damaged. The apse of the Basilica of St. Bernardine of Siena, L'Aquila's largest Renaissance church, was seriously damaged, and its campanile collapsed. Almost the whole dome of the 18th-century Church of Anime Sante in Piazza Duomo (or Cathedral Square) fell. Santa Maria di Collemaggio collapsed from the transept to the back of the church, and Porta Napoli (1548), the oldest gate to the city, was destroyed. The third floor of Forte Spagnolo, the 16th-century (1534) Spanish



Portraits by Giulio Cesare Bedeschini of L'Aquila's four patron saints: St. Bernardine of Siena, St. Maximus, St. Celestine V, and St. Equitius. Below, the habit of St. Bernardine of Siena from the Franciscan monastery of San Giuliano outside L'Aquila

castle housing the National Museum of Abruzzo, caved in, as did the cupola of the 18th-century Baroque Church of St. Augustine, damaging L'Aquila's state archives. Losing part of its transept, not even the cathedral was spared.

On the morning of April 10th, which was also Good Friday, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone led a state funeral for the victims. The Vatican had granted a special dispensation to hold a Mass on Good Friday, the only day on the Roman Catholic calendar on which Mass is not normally held. Soon afterwards, on April 28, the Holy Father visited the area.

It's estimated that reconstruction will cost \$16 billion and take about 10 years. At first Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi refused foreign aid, saying that Italians were "proud people" and had sufficient resources to deal with the crisis. This comment and other inappropriate and offensive judgments caused further indignation, especially when, in an interview with the German N-TV, he said that those left homeless should consider themselves on a "camping holiday." Almost immediately Berlusconi pulled his customary about-face and has accepted aid from the governments of Austria, Brazil, Croatia, the European Union, France, Germany, Spain, Greece, Slovakia, Israel, Portugal, Iran, Macedonia, Mexico, Russia, Serbia, Slovenia, Switzerland, Tunisia, the Turkish Red Crescent, Ukraine, the United States, and the Vatican, as well as corporations, celebrities, and private individuals worldwide.

One such example: On in the Vatican Museums until May 31 is a splendid temporary exhibition called "Memory and Hope: Liturgical Furnishings to Be Saved from the Earthquake-Stricken Abruzzi Region," consisting of some 190 works of art rescued from the damaged churches in the diocese of L'Aquila and surrounding towns. The aim of the exhibition is to raise money for their restoration by "adoption." Before the opening on March 31, 40 of these works had already been adopted, but there are still 150 to choose from. Contributions by single individuals, groups or institutions can be made by transfer to the bank account in the name of the archdiocese of L'Aquila: Arcidiocesi dell'Aquila, IBAN IT33 Q 05584, 03200, 000000061704 at the Banca Popolare di Milano, Agenzia (Branch) 251 in Rome. For further information please contact the archdiocese of L'Aquila at 011-39-0862-332301.



"Memory and Hope" is divided into five sections: works of art from several churches in the archdiocese of the province of L'Aquila; works of art from places connected to St. Bernardine; works of art from Santa Maria di Collemaggio; works of art from the Cathedral of St. Maximus and St. George; and works of art from other damaged churches in L'Aquila. "If famous works of art are damaged, they will almost always be restored," said Antonio Paolucci, director of the Vatican Museums, at the press opening. "This time it's different; the works of art here come from a territory, not from one or two monuments; many of these works of art are humble, for use in daily liturgical ceremonies, and would have been forgotten if we had not put them on display here where they can be admired by our 20,000 visitors a day."

On the bright side, thanks to "Memory and Hope," previously unknown works of Nicola da Guardiagrele (1385-1462), the Abruzzi's most famous goldsmith, have been discovered, as has a long-lost part of a reliquary. For the first time ever on public display is St. Bernardine's original tablet with the IHS monogram and the three miters representing the bishoprics he refused, not to mention his habit and other personal belongings. The painted terracotta Madonna and Child (1507) by Saturnino Gatti from Santa Maria di Collemaggio, saved miraculously by a broken ceiling beam which blocked it from falling, usually goes unnoticed as its home is a wall-niche several meters above the church floor.

The exhibition appropriately opens with a splendid anonymous silver- and gold-plated reliquary bust from Santa Maria di Collemaggio of St. Celestine V, one of L'Aquila's four patron saints (the others being St. Maximus, St. Equitius, and St. Bernardine). Other artifacts of extraordinary beauty and intricate craftsmanship are two processional crosses by Nicola da Guardiagrele.

Also recently opened in Rome's Castel Sant'Angelo and on until September 5 is another exhibition, "S.O.S. Art from the Abruzzi: An Exhibition So As Not To Forget," of works from the region saved by Italy's several police forces. Of particular interest is Celestine V's papal bull establishing *la perdonanza Celestiniana* (still celebrated every year on August 28 and 29), a precedent for Boniface VIII's first official Holy Year in 1300. ■