

AN AGNOSTIC EPIPHANY ON A SACRED MOUNTAIN



What makes an Italian mountain “sacred”? And is it possible for a non-believer to experience an epiphany on one?

After decades of living in Italy, I figured it was time for an answer to at least the second question. This country has an inordinate number of *Sacri Monti* (sacred mountains) . . . and I live less than an hour from one of the most spectacular, *Sacro Monte di Varese*. I had visited it many times without realizing that it was a UNESCO-recognized World Heritage site. It is located in the pre-Alpine hills above the pretty, but traffic-clogged city of Varese, about 30 miles north of Milan, and is one of nine sites in Lombardy and Piedmont that collectively received World Heritage recognition in 2003.

UNESCO listings are based on a site’s (in this case, nine separate sites) historic, religious, architectural, and/or artistic significance, as well as the natural beauty of its surroundings.

Obviously, no news to me that Sacro Monte di Varese is beautiful. The 2.1 kilometer *Via Sacra*, or sacred way, is the iconic walk that forms the heart of the site and I have walked it in every season: in autumn, when the evocative winds toss the dried detritus of the *macchia mediterranea* (Mediterranean shrubbery) before our path; in the bleak emptiness of winter when skies are clear and you can see the snowy mountains of nearby Switzerland; in early spring, when the landscape springs back to life in all its verdant glory; and in summer, when a hot blanket of *afa* (sultry smog) settles over the mountain, limiting views and slowing my steps.

Also no surprise that *Via Sacra* has a religious component. Duh. How can you ignore the 14 chapels positioned along the trail’s cobblestone route? Sometimes, taking brief refuge in the shade of one chapel or another, I would peer inside. Beyond the metal bars guarding the grimy glass windows were life-size figures depicting what seemed to be the stations of the cross. But I am not Catholic, so what each scene *actually* meant was beyond my ken. I didn’t know when or why the chapels were built, or whether people came here on actual religious pilgrimages as opposed to

taking a weekend walk in a spectacular setting.



I paid no attention to the artwork, but rather to the views dropping down to the valley below and the village of Santa Maria del Monte—with a

number of creditable restaurants despite a population of 120—awaiting us on top. I vaguely knew that there was a church in the village and that this church housed a Black Madonna considered holy by the faithful, but nothing more.

It was time to upgrade from the superficial to the sacred. So finally, in the heat and haze of July, I decided to walk the Via Sacra with a guidebook in hand, to try and understand why this 1.3 mile walk to an altitude of 2,800 feet above sea level is part of the world's cultural patrimony.

We (my husband, my dog Giada, and I) started as usual at the beginning of the Via del Santuario, about 2,000 feet above sea level. We arrived by car and parked in the small parking lot available for visitors. A bus also brings you to this spot, and a funicular works on weekends during high season.

The first of the path's three marble arches is here, signaling the five chapels dedicated to the Joyful Mysteries of the Catholic rosary. It is topped by a sculpture of Mary holding the baby Jesus and offering the crown of the rosary to passers-by. Depending on the time of day, the arch and piazza beneath can be fiercely sunny or partly shaded.

To the right is the first of three fountains, refreshment for pilgrims. Just before the first arch is the Church of the Immaculate Conception, containing a statue of Mary crushing a serpent's head. The emphasis on Mary is deliberate, as this Via Sacra leads to the Black Madonna above.

Through the arch is a wide cobblestone pathway pointing to the first chapel. It's like following the yellow brick road, and there I was with my little dog Toto, er, Giada. A short steep walk up to the first chapel, accompanied by bees and insects but very few people that morning.

This structure dates from 1605 and is one of the earliest constructed; it celebrates the Annunciation. The interior suggests a 16th century villa and the life-sized terracotta statues inside represent Mary and the Archangel Gabriel in a happy scene, despite the absence of bright colors in the

decorative frescoes. A little dog happily raises its paw; this is one of many animals in the tableaux, relatable to the medieval pilgrims who took this path.

Unfortunately the grime of the glass windows, the iron bars, and the glare of sunshine made it hard to pick out more details of the scene in this and every chapel along the way. Explanatory metal plaques are in Italian, French, and English, but the glare on shiny metal and the small print makes them difficult to read.

Part of the artistic appeal of this Sacro Monte (as opposed to the other eight) is that the statues, frescoes, and chapels are all unique. Different architects and artists of note were commissioned to contribute their talents to the Via Sacra over the course of its completion between 1605 and 1699. So the architecture of the second chapel is more austere and formal than the first, with a sundial on one external wall. It celebrates the visitation, with statues of Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist.



Up more cobblestones mixed with grass and to the shrine of the nativity at a right-hand turn in the path. This small building has a wall on the left with a large external fresco depicting the flight to Egypt, painted by Renato Guttuso. The nativity sculptures inside suggest that the animals are much more interested in what is happening than the people. Baby Jesus lies in a genuine manger made of chestnut.

Up again, walking more easily on grass and stone than on cobblestones alone, and to the fourth chapel, rounded and with a dome. Here 20 statues depict baby Jesus being presented to the sacerdots in the temple. A little dog watches intently, as do simple country folk. The focus of the scene is the child with outstretched arms; the attending priest looks very serious. The frescoes include a scene of God and angels painted by Giovanni Ghisolfi.

The fifth chapel is imposingly set in middle of the path, as the trail itself veers left. Inside this large structure a young Jesus confronts the elders in the temple. The backdrop is grey and the floor is cracked grey concrete, so the atmosphere is sober but not morbid.

Between the chapels and the arches dividing one Mystery from another, the scenery itself is worthy of contemplation. The path twists its way left and right up the slope, offering occasional shards of shade and views of surrounding hills, the valley, the towns below, the lakes. This IS the Lake District, after all, and the lakes of Varese, Comabbio, Monate, and Maggiore may be visible on clear days.

The path became more rocky again as we approached the second arch, the Arco di San Carlo, with its attendant fountain, both dating from 1654. A sign warned us that the water here was not potable. Sad but fitting, as we were now in the realm of the Sorrowful Mysteries, and the sixth chapel represents the agony in the garden. The structure is stark and somber. It is angled north to create a darkened interior scene with the terracotta Judas bathed in shadow. A Broadway producer could not have staged the lighting more effectively.

The atmosphere was disrupted by the next structure on the side of the trail, a light tan home with a car in front. This was a reminder that Sacro Monte is not a distant location, cut off from the world, but instead is very much a part of it, the natural setting notwithstanding. The mountain has been inhabited for centuries, and more than 60 million pilgrims (counting people like me and my husband, not "pilgrims" in the religious sense) have climbed past private homes over the last 300 years.

The seventh chapel is circular and smaller than the previous two; it houses three crisp frescoes by Milanese painter Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli, aka Morazzone, who also contributed frescoes to the Sacro Monte di Varello (another in the UNESCO site). Here we see the flagellation of Christ at the pillar. A muscular Jesus is being whipped, along with the two other thieves. They are surrounded by soldiers and upset spectators and animals.

Up the grass-and-cobblestone path to the eighth chapel and the crowning of thorns. We are among the witnesses to this painful scene; among the 10 statues are more soldiers than spectators. The former seem intent on inflicting maximum damage. Through the glare of sunlight and the grime of the window glass, it's hard to tell if one terracotta observer is bowing in despair or depraved excitement.



Access to the ninth chapel is by steep stairs, and is on the straightaway rather than at an angle of the Via Sacra, as are the others. The access evokes the scene within: Jesus carrying the cross up to Calvary amid spartan rocks, soldiers, and spectators. St. Veronica has just wiped his

face and is holding up a cloth with his image imprinted on the cloth.

My husband and I needed to wipe the sweat from our faces as well, as we trudged on to the 10th chapel, with the crucifixion beneath its umbrella dome. It contains the largest number of statues on the Via Sacra (45) encompassing 33 adults, two children (one looking away in anguish), five angels, four horses (one in panic being forcibly constrained), and a dog. This work is attributed to Milanese sculptor Dionigi Bussola, whose work is found in three other Sacro Monte locations: Orta San Giulio, Varallo Sesia, and Domodossola.

A dominant figure beneath the cross is the suffering Virgin Mary, supported by Mary Magdalene and Mary of Clopas. Although unintended by the artist, I saw them as a subliminal reference to the two women who were responsible for supporting the Virgin with this Via Sacra. I recited the story to my husband (my dog didn't care). Sisters Caterina Mariggi of Pallanza (a nearby town on Lago Maggiore) and Giuliana Puricelli of Busto Arsizio (the town where we live) came to Santa Maria del Monte in 1452 to live a meditative life near the Black Madonna.

In 1476 Caterina and Giuliana founded a monastery in the town, still functioning as the order of Romite Ambrosiane. They and a third nun, Tecla Maria Cid, had the idea of building a small chapel halfway up the climb to the sanctuary, so that pilgrims coming to visit the Madonna could pause and rest from their exertions. They brought their idea to a local Capuchin monk, Giovan Battista Aguggiari. He was not only enthusiastic, he enlarged their vision. Instead of one chapel halfway up, why not construct a series of chapels representing the 15 mysteries of the rosary?

His interest was political as well as religious. The Reformation was in full swing and Catholicism was being threatened by splinter Protestant groups. A path up the mountain to a magical Virgin would be a concrete symbol of faith to inspire the devoted. Aguggiari convinced Pope Paul V of the merits of the project, and proved to be such an incredible fund raiser that this Sacro Monte—with all its architectural diversity, logistical complexity, and the contributions of many artists for the frescoes and 300

life-sized statues—was completed more quickly than any of the others.

Arrival at the third arch, l'Arco di Sant'Ambrogio, wasn't quick, but it didn't take decades either. This arch heralds the Glorious Mysteries—four more chapels and the church in Santa Maria del Monte that is the *raison d'être* for the entire site. The third fountain is beside it, and the water here is drinkable.

The 11th chapel celebrates the resurrection and is, like the ninth chapel, on the straightaway of the cobblestone path. Some scholars believe it was constructed on the site of a Roman watch tower. A risen Christ is observed by eight statues and frescoes that echo the theme of the tableau.

The 12th chapel commands an elevated position at a turn in the path, reflecting the theme of the ascension. Sixteen rejoicing figures are clothed in rich colors and their arms are outstretched. All seem to be rejoicing, as are 17 angels, plus 33 cherubs suggested in carved relief. The fresco backdrop is pale, perhaps not to compete with the emotional charge of the statues.

The imposing hexagonal 13th chapel was in the process of restoration on this visit so we couldn't get close to it. It depicts the descent of the Holy Ghost. How appropriate: to the right of the scaffold-limned structure the side of the path drops down to a splendid view of the surrounding valley.

Not far beyond is the 14th chapel, on the last turn of the Via Sacra before arriving in Santa Maria del Monte. This celebrates the ascent of Mary to heaven, with the apostles clustered around an empty urn and Mary in mid-air. It also marks the ascent of pilgrims to their final destination.

The 15th chapel is a proper church commemorating Mary's coronation in heaven. It sits just inside the tiny town that has grown up around it. The village earned its name and claim to fame when St. Ambrogio, the patron saint of Milan, defeated the Arians in 381 AD in this area and attributed his victory to the intercession of the Virgin Mary. The story has it that he

commanded the building of a sanctuary to honor her. It was constructed over Roman ruins, and pilgrims began to trek up the mountain to pay tribute to her. Her powers were seen as embodied in a wooden Madonna with child, positioned over the main altar of the church. Because wood darkens with age, these figures have become dark brown. To the right is a recent sculpture, and both Madonna and child are dark-skinned to reflect the original.



We went inside the church to complete our pilgrimage, and to pay our respects to old and new Madonnas, displayed with pomp and gilt. We did not go down into the crypt, dating back to the 5th century AD. One section was discovered recently (2013), and is open only at specific hours and

days for 10–12 people at a time. To my mind, more “mysterious” than the rosary’s 15 mysteries is the discovery that the crypt’s original walls, pavements, and frescoes bear witness to a cult that worshipped the Virgin Mary well before the sanctuary was built in 922 AD.

Another mystery: the piazza outside the sanctuary is punctuated by a bronze statue of Pope Paul VI, with sheep at his feet. This artwork was inaugurated in 1986, and honors Giovanni Battista Montini, who had come to this place many times as archbishop of Milan before he was coronated pope. As an animal loving agnostic, I found the sheep more fascinating than the bishop, in part because one sheep was sculpted with five legs. There is an ongoing debate about why local sculptor Floriano Rodini did that. Do the five legs represent five continents, or five winds, or is there a secret Masonic meaning to the extra limb? Nobody knows and the sheep weren’t talking.



As we turned back to retrace our steps down the Via Sacra, I decided that I didn't need a religious epiphany on Sacro Monte. The fact of passing so much rich art and architecture, the varied vistas of hills, valleys, lakes, forests, the occasional sweaty shiny face of a "true" pilgrim (some of

them on crutches), the combined exertion/exhilaration was reward enough.

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