



## THE PRECIOUS JEWELS OF THE MONASTIC ORDERS

# ANCIENT ABBEYS IN THE LOWLAND OF MILAN

**Among these monasteries we like to present the Cistercian centers of Chiaravalle and Morimondo, and those of Viboldone and Mirasole founded by the religious order of Humiliati. We must not forget that, in the past, in the vicinity of Chiaravalle and Viboldone, the navigable channel Vettabbia, dating back to Roman times, was an important means of transport of goods towards the Lombard capital, thus connected with the river Lambro, the Po and with Comacchio.**

### **ABBAZIA DI CHIARAVALLE**

The Cistercian Abbey of Santa Maria di Chiaravalle, was founded in Lombardy, already home to numerous Benedictine monasteries, in 1035, thanks to the generosity of the Milanese population. It is the work of the noble Burgundian San Bernardo (1090 - 1153), abbot of Clarivaux and charismatic leader of the young Cistercian religious order, an important branch of the great Benedictine family. Like the nearby abbey of Morimondo, the church and the adjoining monastery of Chiaravalle were built according to the tradition of the Cistercians, exploiting the typical local bricks. The abbey, erected near the Roman road towards the river Po, brought prosperity and importance to the economy throughout the area, thanks to the work of reclamation of the

monks and the consequent flourishing of farming and agriculture. The imposing elegant tower, which still stands with its conical spire on the green countryside of Milan, was a symbol of reference for all the surrounding areas and a sign of the undisputed power of the monastery and the religious order. Excluding the period from 1798 (abolition of the contemplative orders and therefore of the abbey by the Cisalpine Republic) to 1952, the Cistercian monks have always inhabited the abbey of Chiaravalle, enlarging it and making it prosper, thanks to the three rules of their monastic life: prayer, meditation and work. The church, overlooked by the fourteenth-century octagonal tower, has a Romanesque facade, with a classical portico. The interior, with the nave and two aisles, has a striking perspective bounded by cylindrical pillars in Burgundian-Cistercian style that bear the slight cross-vaults. The choir, with two rows of carved stalls decorated with panels illustrating the life of St. Bernardo, is a work by Francesco Garavaglia (17th century). After passing the intersection of the nave with the transept, dominated by the octagonal dome richly frescoed, we find the presbytery with the main altar almost leaning against the back wall. The right wing of the transept leads to the sacristy and a door on the left gives access to the cemetery. In 1900 the cloister was restored and partly rebuilt, in a magnificent Gothic-Burgundian style with some Romanesque reminiscences. On the western side of the cloister there are the cellar and the dormitory of lay people; on the south side there are the kitchen and the refectory with three bays and cross vaults, still used by the monks. Starting from the origin (12th century) to the end of the 20th century, all periods of history have left extraordinary artistic evidences in the monastery complex, as proof of the spiritual and economic vitality both of the Cistercians and the nearby city of Milan. Although the founder had prohibited any form of decoration, since the beginning of the 14th century the church has been enriched with paintings of great value. In every detail of the abbey, art, history and spirituality, today as yesterday, have always been inextricably linked. Among the works of art, it is noteworthy the late-fifteenth graffito, by an anonymous artist, on the north wall of the Chapter House, representing Castello Sforzesco, later used by Luca Beltrami to rebuilt the Filarete tower of the castle itself. In 1490, in the Cappella della Passione, Bramante depicted "Cristo alla Colonna", now at the Pinacoteca di Brera and in 1512 Bernardino Luini frescoed the "Madonna con il Bambino e due angeli musicanti", on the wall of the staircase leading to the dormitory. In the left transept there is a masterpiece of Giacomo Manzu, one-piece of Carrara marble, a tribute to his friend Raffaele Mattioli (1976), depicting the resurrection of the whole humanity ("Resurrexi et adhuc sum tecum").

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### **ABBAZIA DI MORIMONDO**

The abbey of Santa Maria di Morimondo was founded by the Cistercian monks near Milan, on the border with the territory of Pavia, in 1134. The architecture of the abbey, with the simple austerity of its walls, bears witness to the rigors of the monastic life. As indicated by the rules of S. Bernardo, the monastery as a whole has many similarities with that of Chiaravalle: the first community formed by twelve monks and an abbot, the structure of the church and the monastery complex with the usual distribution of the rooms, the choice of an area rich in water and trees to get wood for the construction site and as combustible, the auxiliary work of lay people often hosted in the nearby farms called "Grange", the armarium (library) where an intense study was carried out to get to know God's word. Finally, we note the inevitable presence of an important fresco (Madonna and Child with St. John, among the saints Benedict and Bernard) depicting the Madonna, to whom all Cistercian churches were dedicated. What characterizes the church of Morimondo is the essentiality of the construction made of simple linear bricks, that preserves, even with the passage through the Renaissance and the Baroque style, the primitive simplicity of the lines. However, it differs from the other Cistercian churches of the twelfth century because it already features some elements of Gothic style that give it a heightened sense of verticality. Another peculiar characteristic of the abbey of Morimondo is that it was built close to a depression and thus stretching out on several floors sloping towards the south side.

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### **ABBAZIA DI MIRASOLE**

In the first half of the thirteenth century, about ten kilometers from Milan, in today's town of Opera, the abbey of Mirasole was founded by the Order of Humiliati. The origin of the order had its motivation in the desire for a return to uncorrupted Christianity, renewed in its spirituality. Religious and lay people who adhered to such aspirations devoted themselves to agriculture - particularly rice cultivation, and processing of wool undertaken with advanced methods. Consequently, they established in a farm-abbey, the medieval farmhouse from which the structure of the Lombard farm gained inspiration in modern age. Around the farm courtyard were all the buildings: the houses, workshops, stables, barns, the church and the cloister. The medieval farmhouse of Mirasole

gradually became a prosperous commercial center, away from the humility of the original intention, so as to lead to the suppression of the Order itself (1582).

A gate-tower, on the eastern side, leads into the vast courtyard. The church, built in the 14th century, is dedicated to Santa Maria Assunta and has a rose-window and the Humiliati's ancient symbol "Agnus Dei" on the façade. The interior with a nave and a coffered ceiling, is enriched with some remarkable frescoes, such as the Assumption of Mary, a work painted by an anonymous artist around 1460. As in other abbeys, a series of concerts of sacred music is held in the abbey of Mirasole in October, every year. The fifteenth-century cloister has a portico divided by arches, overlooked by the refectory, the meeting hall, the head office and the chapter house. Now the abbey houses the Medical and Historical Library of Ospedale Maggiore of Milan, to which it has belonged, by Napoleon's order, since 1797. In the vicinity of the Abbey of Mirasole, there are two interesting natural areas: Tolcinasco and Lamberin, opening soon to visitors.

Cascina Mirasole

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Closed on Tuesday

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### **ABBAZIA DI VIBOLDONE**

The Abbey of Viboldone, one of the most famous monuments of medieval Lombard art for the beauty of its architecture and its fourteenth-century frescoes, was founded by the Humiliati in 1176 (the same year in which the Milanesi defeated Barbarossa at Legnano) and completed in 1348. The Humiliati was an order formed by religious and lay people who preached a return to frugality and austere life based on renewed spirituality, opposed to the dissolute life widespread within the Church itself. They were called Humiliati because of their simple way of dressing and also because they led the humble life of workers. The occupation for which they were justly famous was the wool processing, featuring very innovative systems at all stages: choosing the raw material, carding, spinning, weaving and selling of the fabrics themselves marketed throughout northern Italy. The Humiliati also played a determining role in shaping the landscapes of Lombardy as well as in the introduction and development of particular crops, such as the water meadows which allow a cut of the grass every 30-40 days, and the cultivation of mulberry trees. These innovations were slowly assimilated by the civil society and became one of the factors of economic and cultural growth of the whole Lombardy. Chosen for their ability and integrity of life, the Humiliati monks were also appreciated as accountants for public finances, even beyond the regional boundaries. The abbey reached its maximum splendour in the first half of the fourteenth century, but its fame brought the community to a disastrous end: having become rich and corrupt, the Order of the Humiliati was suppressed by Pope Pius V in 1571. After various events, including the restoration of the monastic life with the advent, in 1581, of the Benedictine monks who stayed there for about two centuries, the suppression of religious orders in 1773 caused the devastation of the ancient abbey, which was largely demolished, and even the slow but inexorable dispersion of its artistic heritage. Since 1941, after years of disuse, the abbey has been home to the Community of Mother Margherita Marchi, founder of the Oblate Benedettine (an Order of Catholic nuns). To Cardinal Montini, elected Pope Paul VI on June 21, 1963, the Community of Nuns owes its stability in the abbey and the construction of the new monastery. In 1964 Archbishop Giovanni Colombo inaugurated the new convent, broad and functional according to the needs of a modern monastic community, as designed by architect Luigi Caccia Dominioni.

The gabled brick façade, defined by the roof with hanging arches, is tripartite by two semi-columns and characterized by a portal with white marble decors. The lunette above houses the marble sculptures of the Madonna and Child with Saints and, in two Gothic niches there are the statues of St. Peter and St. Paul. The door of the church, made of black wood, dates back to the time of the construction of the façade. Above the lantern of the church stands the fourteenth-century bell tower, with the same decors and colours of the façade. The interior of the church, sober and linear, has a rectangular shape with a nave and two aisles of five bays each, divided by brick columns. Of great interest is the decoration that represents an example of fourteenth-century Lombard painting, particularly the frescoes of the dome with the "Madonna in Maestà e Santi" (Virgin in Majesty with Saints) and, on the opposite wall, the "Giudizio Universale" (The Last Judgment), depicting Christ with the blessed on the right and the damned on the left. Also very important are the frescoes of the fourth bay: the "Annunciazione" (Annunciation), "Adorazione dei Magi", (Adoration of the Magi), "Presentazione di Gesù al Tempio" (Presentation of Jesus in the Temple), "Battesimo di Gesù" (Baptism of Jesus).

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