Parish Church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Francavilla al Mare (1948)

The Search for a Measure

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Abstract: The Parish Church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Francavilla al Mare is an example of the great attention paid by Quaroni to the role of the church as a special theme of architectural design that for centuries expressed the identity of Western urban settlements by defining the symbolic space of the community. Vadini frames the church in Francavilla within the cycle of "three churches from the neorealist period" of Quaroni's work. Separated from this triad is the project for the church of the Sacra Famiglia (the Holy Family) in Genoa, from 1956 already appeared to transmit a sense of an Italian society that, only a few years after the War, had already abandoned the hierarchical and symbolic certainties of tradition.

Keywords: religious architecture, space and faith, post-war architecture.

«The churches of the Prenestino and Francavilla have in common the same reference model, probably worked out in his head, without drawings, in the idleness of his prison cell, and which derive, albeit with several differences, from the works in concrete by Nervi and Morandi; a model which, however, in the case of the Prenestino church, [...] has been combined with a theory derived from the Gothic churches of Europe: the pilasters are very slender and set edgeways-on, but up above – the use of concrete allows certain things to be done – they divide into two and bend the two parts over to form vaulting which is joined to the pilasters beyond, in both directions, and each of the individual vaults join up in the central vault which covers the large nave. The side naves are very low, only a little higher, relatively speaking, than the height of a person, while the central nave is extremely high; these two dimensions, one pressed downwards towards the earth and dimly lit, the other soaring towards the heavens, with its vault illuminated brightly, are an attempt to symbolise the dialogue between the human and the divine, between the material and the sublime, between brutish reality and the possibility of escape from this material realm, which is the basic principle of all religions, revealed or otherwise, and which, in the form of Christianity that was prevalent in medieval Europe, achieved its highest achievement.»[1]

Measure originates in the intimate condition of an architect tried by the events of war, though firmly intent on returning to professio-

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1. Quaroni 1985, *Premise*, p. 61

nal practice. Ludovico Quaroni returned to Italy in 1946 after spending more than five years in an Indian prison. His years of detention were undoubtedly a period of profound contemplation, but also a cultural experience that would develop new interests in all of his architectural and urban research. A lengthy period of suspension, about which Quaroni would say «I spent the entire War with nothing to do»[2], of self-criticism over the EUR, but also of the evolution of personal ideas about the culture of architectural space. It was an occasion for returning to the idea of the *architecture of the city*, what is more with an education in Oriental taste, a definitive comprehension of the great urban civilisation of the Middle East that, from a purely aesthetic attraction, was initially translated as a paradigm, as a term of comparison with European culture, and successively as an inspiration to the design of architecture, from the small to the large scale. The post-war drive toward the reconstruction of a community, European and above all Italian, the need to rediscover the role of art in the dynamics of a Modern city in crisis, would serve as the stimuli for «conferring a heroic dimension on his work»[3], something Quaroni felt very strongly; it could be said that this marked the beginning of a cycle of the "spiral" that ranges from the Termini Rail Station to events in the Lucanian cities of Matera and Grassano.

The architecture of the Middle Eastern city was his ideal model for favouring an encounter between cultures, a space of learning that would reveal, or perhaps from which would re-emerge, an intuition for our space of dwelling as a possible synthesis, a syncretism, between the instinctive/spontaneous soul of the Mediterranean and its reflective/weighted Northern European counterpart. It is clear that Quaroni's stylistic signature was already extremely complex and varied at the end of the 1940s, once again rendering as impossible as it is inopportune his classification within the precise historical-cultural *fil rouge* established by post-war architectural historiography. It would be overly generic to proceed with a specific investigation of a single work such as Santa Maria Maggiore, or a single text, or to evaluate them using traditional aesthetic or theoretical tools, of those of the discipline of architecture.

2. Ochetto 2011, p. 14
3. Ciorra 1989, p. 36

In the end it is Quaroni himself who warns us that to enter his world we would be best not to make distinctions between life, education and profession. In vain could we search for a specific Quaronian syntax for the parish church of Francavilla al Mare, his "design" is linked to past situations and considerations not yet objectively expressed by Quaroni at the threshold of his fiftieth year; various cultural instances flow together here in total indifference, from the baroque to the post-modern avant-garde. There has been opportune talk of cycles in Quaroni's architectural development, «the spiral of the tower of Babel that, as it winds upward, passes the same point though observing it now from on high».[4] This comports examining groups of projects, texts and Quaronian attitudes in order to identify a key to understanding a language in a state of constant experimentation that tends toward a formal synthesis between spontaneity and "necessary monumentality". The wrapping manoeuvre inside the mythological tower preferred by Quaroni thus leads toward the interior of a cycle of a higher order, without any interruption, in which it is not possible to extract even one single image. Hence we must deal with a series of images, drawings, buildings and texts that together wish to speak to us of time and the qualities of their relative sites, even through subtle overlapping nuances. Precisely architecture as text.

Thus the cycle of Termini, Prenestino, Francavilla, in which we find the "clarifications" of an increasingly more similar formal/structural pattern, must be considered an experimental series that is part of a single research in which the variable that justifies the measure of the dynamism of the volumes is to be sought only in the living context either expected or imagined there, civil or religious as the case may be. From the Termini Station to the church in Francavilla al Mare, passing through the church in Rome's Prenestino neighbourhood, Quaroni identified occasions for questioning the functionalist scheme that no longer appeared objectively positive; the epitome indicated by the cultural crisis was now organic in origin. Hence the adhesion, apparently absurd, to Bruno Zevi's "architectural current" of the APAO (Association for Organic Architecture) was the space of confrontation with the

4. TERRANOVA 1985

so-called Roman School and a criticism of past and present, regarding the significance/role of organic architecture in an Italy to be reconstructed; in Quaroni's vocabulary this was certainly a more ethical and expressive language with respect to exasperated rationalist functionalism. After all, it was only there that Quaroni could glimpse, as Tafuri stated, «those cultural components capable of stimulating and guiding the best Italian energies in view of a hegemonic function for culture»[5]. The inseparable physical/metaphysical relationship between urban history and its society (civitas), now in a state of crisis, is the backdrop that Quaroni took from his time in India. Thus upon his return he worked toward the redemption of a new relationship between man-city, a new mysticism, also (and perhaps above all) through those symbolic/religious occasions within the city to be reconstructed. The problem of urban space was a priority, there was a need to indicate a widespread quality, there were the problems of reconstruction in many bombed and disoriented cities. From this moment onward, for his dedication to the profession, to teaching, to the recounting of architecture, for his transversally profuse application in favour of a culture of design, Quaroni should be placed among the rank of intellectuals to whom we recognise a sort of educational mission useful to a cultural reconstruction. His contribution restarted from a spontaneous impulse toward the progress of civil society using means that were cautiously not exactly self-referential, its architectural form was continually an occasion to experiment with a new dialogue between the historical-social-cultural condition and human creativity, between the external world and architecture, precisely a sort of «final investigation of the relationship between art and life».[6] And for Ludovico Quaroni, the competition project for the parish church of Santa Maria Maggiore, in 1948, was one of those 'occasions' for investigating a new tie between a society that had lost its way, architectural space and religious faith.

        In a cultural climate of political and social tensions marked by an urgency for new stimuli as well as possibilities for the arts, such as that between the immediate post-war period and the early 1950s, the theme

5. Tafuri 1964, p. 78
6. Ciorra 1989, p. 7

of religious space was confronted by Quaroni the architect as a search for a measure of expression within which to comprehend all of the cultural components triggered by the return of democracy to Europe; thus an architecture that was constructive, organic, the identification of a neo-expressionism aimed at resolving those contradictions perpetuated by the Modern Movement between the two wars, when all too often its architecture tended to exclude any relationship with the presence of the individual.

From the project for Francavilla onward, Quaroni began to turn his attention, in a scalar manner, toward the relationship between man and building, between building and interior space and, further still, between building and landscape. In the search for that measure of expression – between the exaltation of dimensional relationships in the baroque manner and the recovery of the structural advances and symbolic values of gothic architecture – form represented a synthesis between a mystic-laic dimension of the sacred and a commissioned liturgy. As known, these principles were tested just prior to the competition for Francavilla (1948) in the project for the church in Rome's Prenestino neighbourhood (1947) through the use of reinforced concrete, considered by Quaroni the material most suitable to expressing a plastic-symbolic continuity in religious architecture. It is the evolution of Quaroni's new language that begins precisely with the church in Prenestino, continues in Santa Maria Maggiore and culminates in the church in the village of La Martella in Matera, in the early 1950s. Hence the three churches must be understood with a sensibility that progressively recognises a structuralist, then expressionist and neorealist approach. It must be stated right away that the articulated and complex church of the Sacra Famiglia in Genoa (1956) belongs instead to an entirely different cycle, there in progressively more laic forms, an abstract, almost pagan double space, with an opposing, symbolically illuminist liturgy and structuring of symbols.

Between September 1943 and May 1944, Francavilla al Mare, like many other towns along the Gustav Line, was the theatre of disastrous wartime events. In particular, in December 1943, the eighteenth century church of Santa Maria Maggiore, whose baroque forms were inspired by the school of Vanvitelli, commonly known as San Franco from the moment the remains of the patron saint were interred inside,

was mined and razed to the ground by the German military. The project to reconstruct this parish church commenced immediately following Italian Liberation, when the diocese in San Giovanni Teatino, prior to being convinced of the need to hold an architectural competition, considered entrusting the project to a local engineer who, however, presented a philological reconstruction of the former church. This solution was immediately rejected by the Central Papal Commission for Religious Works of Art in Italy that, instead, desired a project that would symbolise the re-foundation of the religious community and the city.

In the end for the reconstruction of the church of Santa Maria Maggiore the decision was made to proceed with a national competition organised by the *Unione Cattolica Artisti Italiani*, held in 1948 and won with decision by Ludovico Quaroni. Yet, as mentioned, the entire story can be anticipated to 1947, in other words beginning with the development of the project for the Prenestino church in Rome: an occasion that remained on paper, though which proved to be a fundamental preliminary study for the church in Francavilla. For Quaroni the design of Santa Maria Maggiore became a more complex experience than that in Prenestino, richer in its spatial implications and suggestions at the urban scale, given the indeterminacy of the site in Rome. In any case, the project for the Prenestino remains a sort of symbolic prototype, figuratively and structurally, with solutions that would be revisited and taken to their limit in Santa Maria Maggiore the following year. The hall is raised significantly, illuminated from above by a low and intentionally dark deambulatory, of baroque inspiration, as the emblematic separation between the earthly and spiritual realm, for many aspects already a liturgy in accordance with the dictates of future Vatican Councils. The exasperation of space (high-low) and its treatment in chiaroscuro would once again be defined three years later in San Vincenzo de' Paoli in La Martella, in the direction of the single nave where, what is more, Quaroni would insert an original opening in the sacred space, home to a highly religious "community": when necessary, a large sliding door extends the nave out into the church square. Thus the space of gathering is undefined, similar to the local cave churches. Here, in the original village, everything is centred on the church-monument, as much at the urban scale as at that of the landscape. In Francavilla Quaroni could

now measure up to a site, a real space in which to experiment with the relations that develop between a monument and its context: theatricality, monumentality and axiality are the themes around which his architectural and urban research rotate. The building thus tends to carve out its own formal and functional autonomy, though without opposing the sober qualities of the site. It is a process of revealing a presence that appears to adhere to the beloved image of the medieval city. The site, progressively freed by demolitions, raised an urban problem to be resolved and the new space for worship, through its internal/external spatiality, was able to unravel this knot by reordering urban elements and the points of access from above and below, the levels of the gentle slope atop which the church would be constructed. The geometry of the parish complex is thus born within the limits of the reorganisation of the system of circulation, both the vehicular network that would surround the church, with the exception of the side along the church square, and the pedestrian paths that for the most part would affect the sides facing the valley, to the north-east and north-west, where an articulated system of steps connects diverse terraces that rise up to the historic centre from the sea. Though the project is based on the same spatial and structural principles utilised in the previous project, the adaptation to an urban setting conditioned the geometry and proportions of the church that here generate an elongated octagon, as opposed to the Latin Cross plan used in Rome, a figure that further exalts the disproportion/tension between the church hall and the deambulatory. Through his own mystical dimension and an original laic conception of the liturgy, Quaroni gave life to a highly expressive and monumental spatial form, an encounter/collision that brings into play his capacities to imagine a space of contemplation but also of encounter; the theme of this project is an occasion for an interior cultural-religious exam in the search for a meaning of the value of mysticism and its possible survival in a world that, as Adriano Olivetti would say, was resuming its "journey".[7] Looking at the studies for the church in Prenestino, the project for Francavilla al Mare clearly borrows the spatial and structural concept, though it sets itself apart for its proportions, in plan and elevation; no longer a basilica, but now

7. Olivetti 1949

based on a central plan with volumes attached on the exterior, more suitable to the site atop which the church was once again to rise. There is a return of a *classical language as a latent rule* – Antonio Terranova would say - and an obvious reference to the Nordic neo-avant-gardes. Santa Maria Maggiore brings with it the structural and ideological model of the gothic, a baroque attention to light, German expressionism and Swedish classicist reformism, and even a Miesian rigour in the use of materials. *The work of architecture is only one*[8] for Quaroni. The tall nave that symbolises the ascension toward the heavens; «*the dialogue, between human and divine*», is neo-gothic in its imprint though structurally there is a trust in contemporary research and the cutting edge applications of reinforced architecture of a Nervi or Morandi; the hall is volumetrically and symbolically juxtaposed against the added external elements, dark and massive, destined for the faithful and minor saints. These latter serve as the entrance to the lateral deambulatories, two couples of side chapels, one of which forms the extremes of an ideal transept and apse. The celestial elevation is reinforced, inside and outside, by the same contrast between light and materials. With respect to the Prenestino project there is no longer any repetition of the side bay; here the couples of bays beyond the connecting beam rise up, limiting the gothic continuity of the column-vault, while above the flattened lunettes remain, excavating and later carving into the underside of the cloister vault to create a suggestive and diaphanous cross of light. The emphasis on the structural frame, which tends toward an intentionally complex geometry more akin to the project for Termini Station than the Prenestino church, is the identification of structuralism and expressionism, the evident signature of a professed monumentalism. The structural system is thus clearly legible, also from the exterior, and permits a full and logical comprehension of the interior architectural space. The spatial qualities of the interior are exalted by a baroque light, captured and modulated from above that, in the central space, slips down the white plastered walls and arrives all the way to the floor, focusing on the splendid *majolica* tiles of the main altar by Cascella, whose graphic motifs evoke the iconography of pre-Vatican II Catholicism. Then there

8. Quaroni 1985, p. 45

are the large windows above the apse and above the two adjacent chapels, with their minor altars, that intercept a dim, mysterious light, almost absent in the afternoon, also because it is filtered first through the splendid, richly decorated metal grates-sculptures of Andrea and Pietro Cascella, and secondly through historiated internal windows.

The entire parish complex, that in its final version was also to have included a baptistery, is enriched on the exterior by spatial and urban components that "work" toward its insertion within the town. It is perhaps the first result that truly permitted Quaroni to gauge the urban role of the religious building-monument within the fabric of a city. This testing ground would prove useful to the Sacra Famiglia in its Genoese context that would mark the point of inversion in scale, from architecture to urbanism. Thanks to the expressive strength of its design, the parish complex assumes the function of an urban hinge and through various material and spatial characteristics the church manages to institute a dialogue both with its immediate hilly surroundings, and with the nearby marina. In fact, to this day, the communicative strength of the monument can be captured from afar, from the sea by those navigating its waters, or from the waterfront or travelling along the state road running below, as one begins to catch a glimpse through the hilly vegetation of the large volume of the nave and the lattice of the isolated bell tower. These imposing forms dominate the town's buildings, strongly characterising its profile within the landscape. Having reached the upper area, a large articulated mass in stone – which begins by defining the entrance to the church square and then winds, tight to the walls of the church all the way to the rectory – appears on the one hand to hold back the advancing nave, on the other to tangibly mediate the connection to the earth of the entire complex. Even the relative, slightly inclined copper roofs, with their large scuppers and delicate floor marker, collaborate in the measured passage between the imposing and vibrant vertical walls in projecting bricks – walls marked by the rhythm of the externally exposed concrete piers – and the intimacy of the stone-clad surfaces between the houses. The rigour employed in the use of materials cannot but bring to mind Quaroni's interest in the "Romanic tradition", yet at the same time perhaps hi appreciation for both the work of Erich Mendelsohn, for his expressionist use of brick,
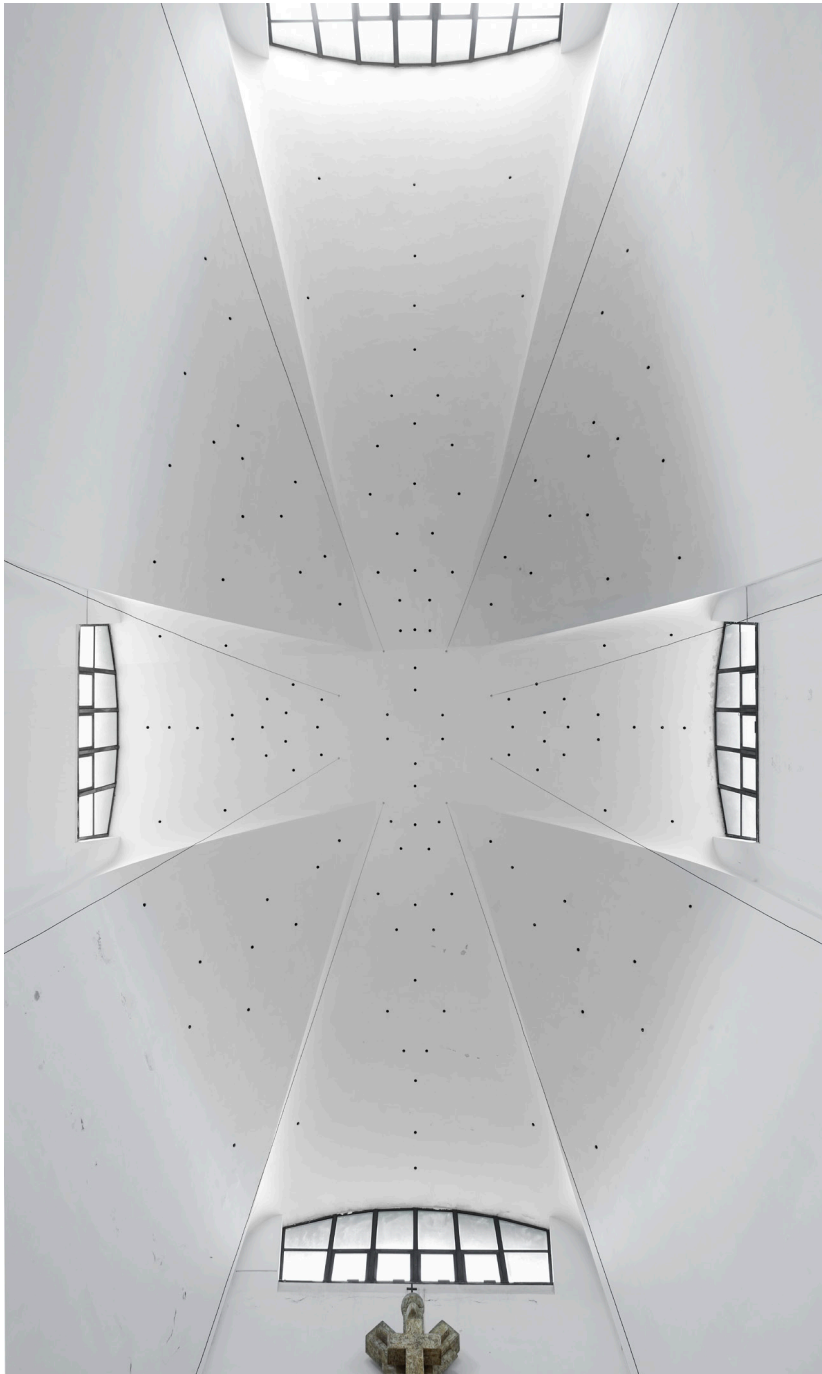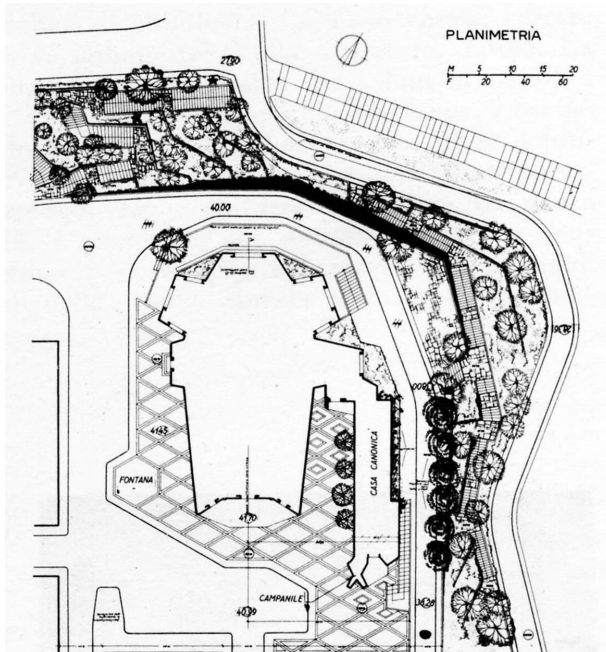
and that of Gunnar Asplund, for his "classical" declension of stone[9]; and for the maniacal attention of a Mies van der Rohe when he nonchalantly placed antique materials alongside modern ones and, finally, for the monumentality of the masonry mass, for the power of matter, recounted by a Louis Kahn. The construction of the church was a drawn out affair, due to delays in financing, with the result that it was opened and consecrated only in August 1957, in occasion of the celebration of the patron saint. Almost a decade, coinciding with a crucial period of debate and development for Italian architecture and urbanism. Despite this, the project for Santa Maria Maggiore, for the problems it raises and for the instances to which it attempts to respond, must be inserted within the cycle of initial experiences of revisionism in Italian architecture between the end of the War and the early 1950s. With respect to the original competition-winning project, at least two variations were made to the design of Santa Maria Maggiore, and if on the one hand the projects regularly incorporated the liturgical indications provided by the client – in the wake of the prescriptions triggered by the Second Vatican Council – on the other they aimed at adapting the overall project to a context that was gradually being defined by demolitions in the town. Furthermore, the first project did not include a bell tower, already a vague theme in the competition brief, while the rectory, detached and substantially parallel to the main axis of the nave, was initially connected to the church only by an extension of the chapel/transept to the north-east. No longer set within an urban fabric, but now the generator of one, the church was enriched by a system of paving in the church square and to the south-east by a proposed hexagonal-plan baptistery (never constructed, its intended location was later occupied by Pietro Cascella's hexagonal fountain) and the lattice-work bell tower terminating the rectory, completed in 1956. Parallel to the changes to the town centre and the evolution of studies on the relationship monument/city, the requests of the Papal Commission for a greater presence of the altar following the reforms under John XXIII induced Quaroni to present the final project for the interior and exterior furnishings as well as the new spatial relations consequent to the plans for the baptistery
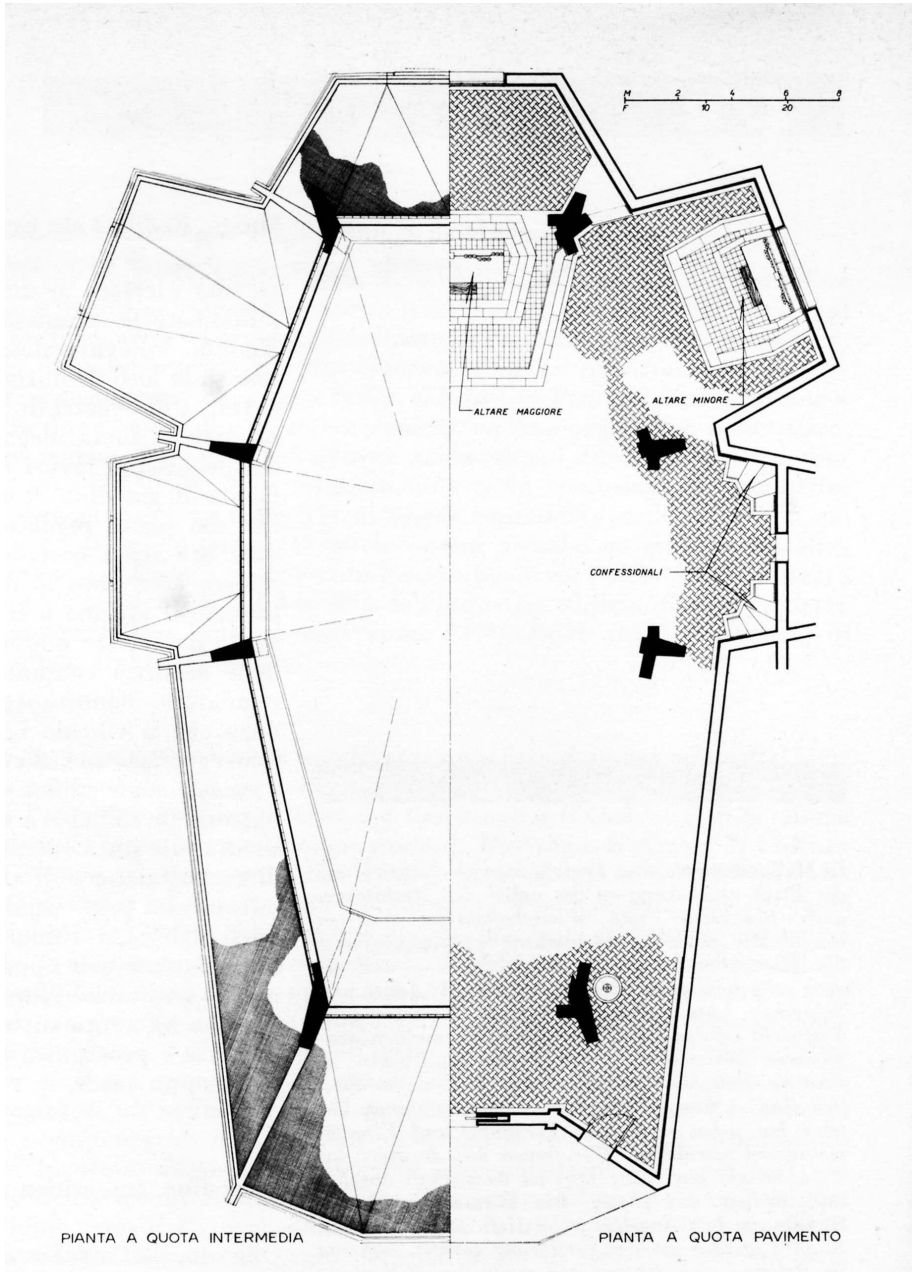
9. Ciucci 1985

and bell tower. Than tension toward a co-penetration of the arts, the auspicated dialogue between architecture, painting and sculpture, led Quaroni to call once again on Pietro Cascella, with whom he shared a strong relationship given the contemporary realisation of the sacred furnishings for the church in La Martella. The first phase of Cascella's sculptural work, already the author of the Enthroned Madonna and Child on the façade (sculpted into the bricks and richly decorated), was aligned with pre-Vatican II iconography. The interior furnishings had been studied for an emotional liturgical celebration, in which the faithful were passively involved in a "theatrical space" designed to inspire religious ecstasy. In the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65),
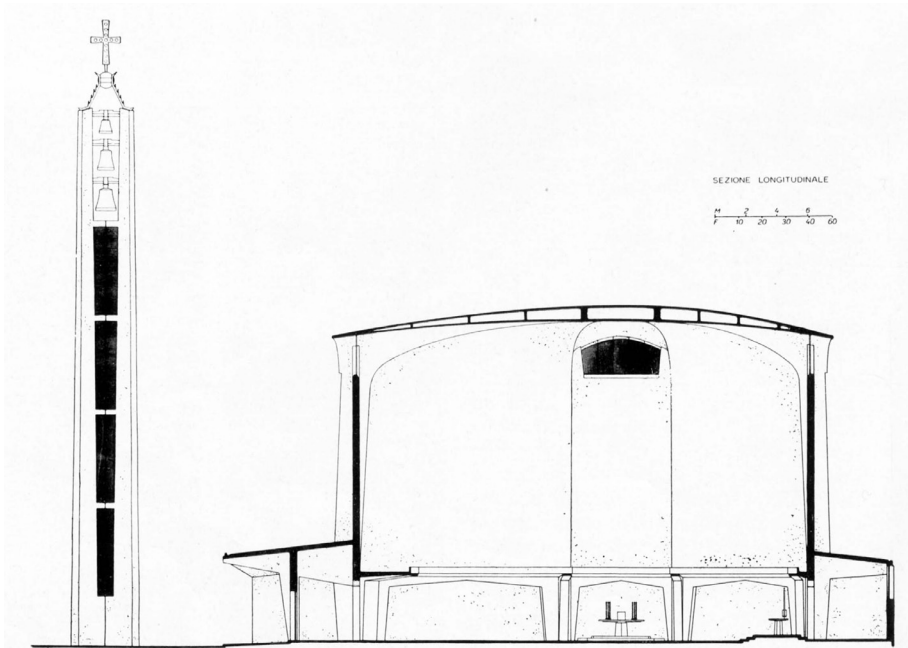
Santa Maria Maggiore also received a new iconographic system that respected new liturgical and cultural-local directives: the works of art were to connect religiously and symbolically with the theme of the renaissance of the city. In occasion of maintenance works, Quaroni and Cascella implemented a new iconographic programme concentrated on the main altar whose position was to be revised together with the furnishings of the Eucharist, now required to heighten the participation of the faithful. The largest work of the Pescarese sculptor, a monument to the rebirth of Francavilla al Mare, is a large marble celebration of the resurrection set above the main altar. Instead, the band of polychrome marble set into the original paving, along the nave and transept, as well as the mosaics on the chair backs in the choir are more recent works by the sculptor, realised by Gabriella Esposito, during the restoration and completion works carried out in 1992-93. The new interior iconography also finds references on the exterior, in the church square: a sculptural frieze on the front of the entrance canopy, the stone portals that frame the three doors, two symbolic sculptures of good and the resurrection, respectively a lion with a serpent in its mouth and the fountain beneath the host, are all works from Pietro Cascella's late phase.
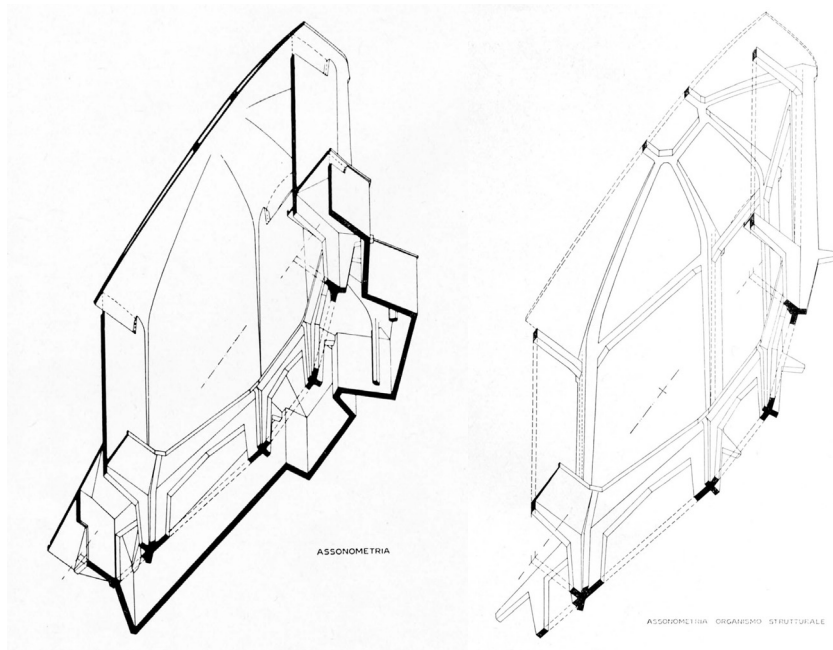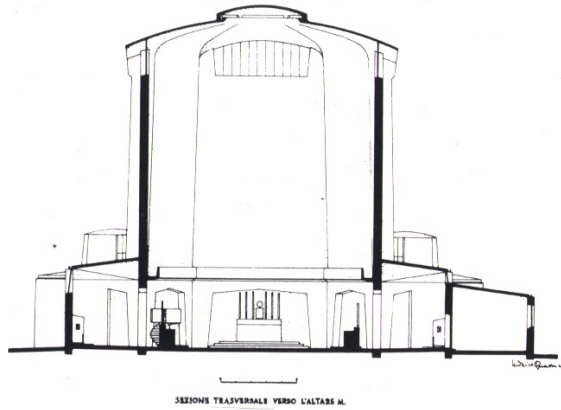

Planimetric view

ALTARE MAGGIORE

ALTARE MINORE

CONFESSIONALI

PIANTA A QUOTA INTERMEDIA   PIANTA A QUOTA PAVIMENTO
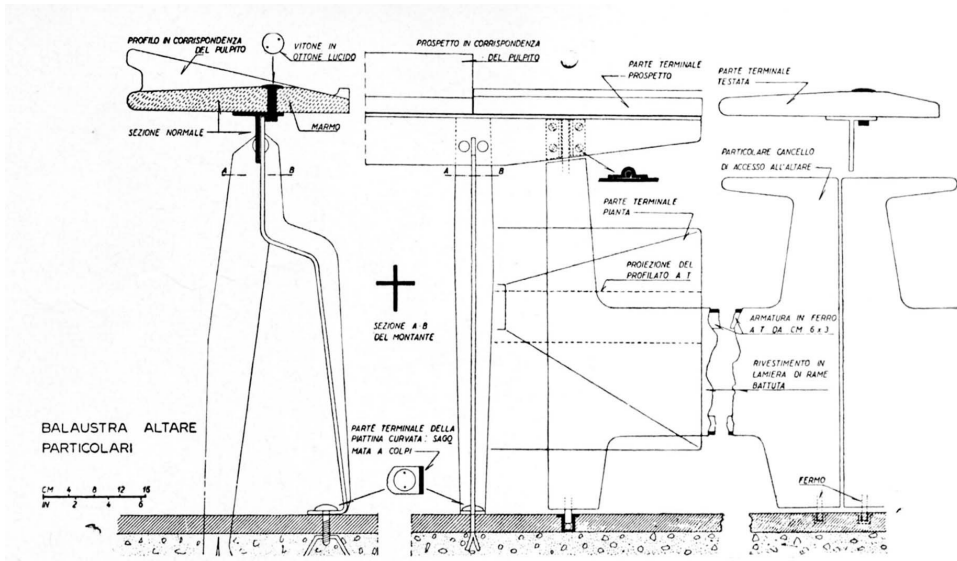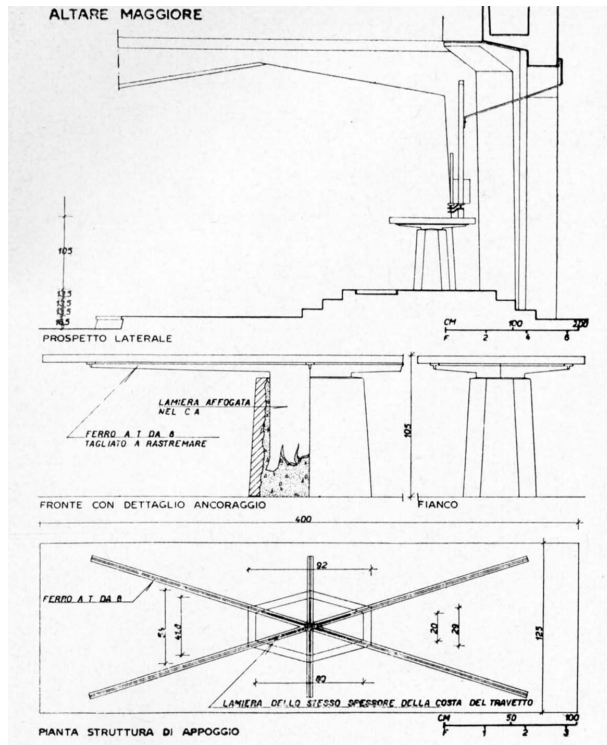
Floor plans at different levels

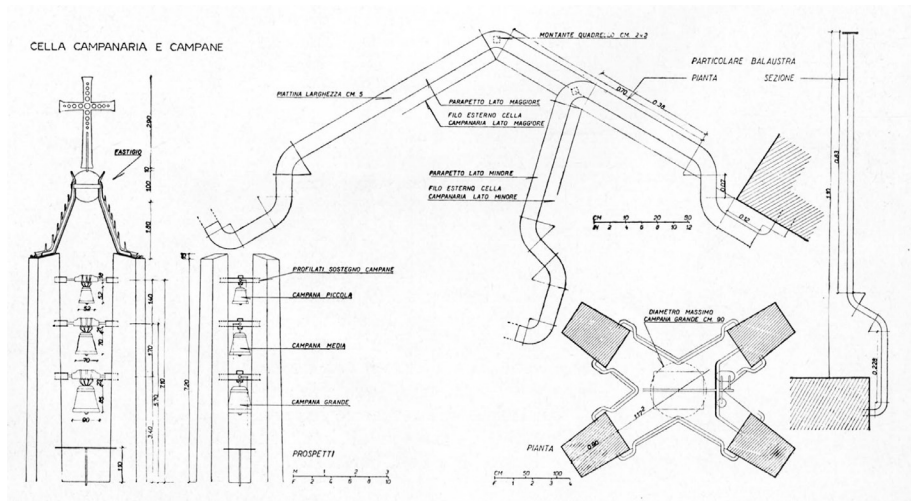*Longitudinal section*

Axonometric studies

Cross section
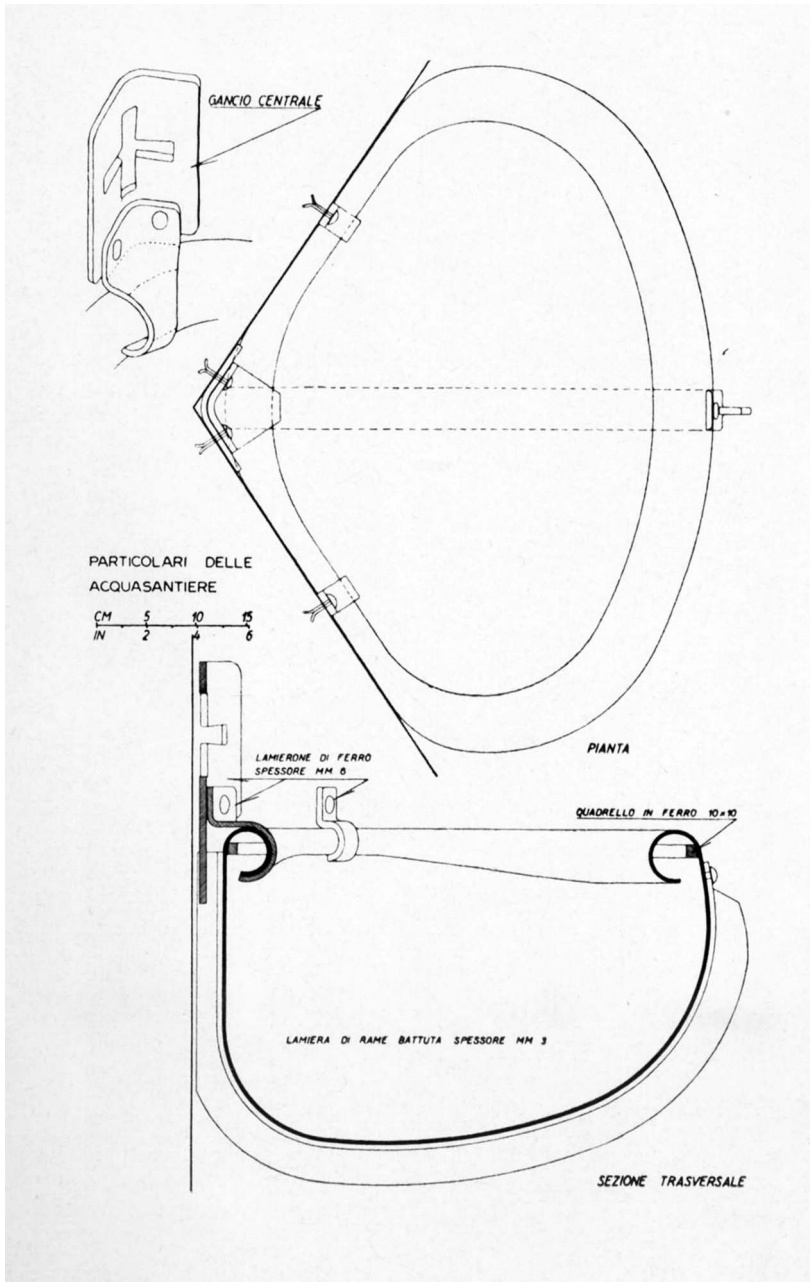

Altar balaustrade

Altar details

Bells tower details

GANCIO CENTRALE

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LAMIERONE DI FERRO
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QUADRELLO IN FERRO 10 x 10

LAMIERA DI RAME BATTUTA SPESSORE MM 3

PIANTA

SEZIONE TRASVERSALE

Font details

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