

The **ABBEY**, a relevant religious and cultural center of Medieval Europe, masterpiece of Emilian Romanesque architecture, is an extraordinary testimony of 1300 years of faith, history, and art. Formerly a Benedictine and later a Cistercian monastery, founded in 752 by Saint Anselm, brother-in-law of the Lombard king Aistulf, it is dedicated to Pope Saint Silvester I and preserves his relics. The splendid Basilica, with its magnificent portal carved by Wiligelmo and his school, and the forest of columns that supports the crypt, is today the co-cathedral Church of the Archdiocese of Modena-Nonantola.

Do not miss a visit to the **Benedictine and Diocesan Museum**, where the **Sacred Treasure** of the Abbey is exhibited, with its precious objects and reliquaries, extraordinary fabrics, parchments, and illuminated manuscripts of the ancient monastic **scriptorium**, with the outstanding **Gospel** of Matilda of Canossa, and rare imperial documents, including those with the monogram of Charlemagne and other Medieval kings and emperors.

A place of historical importance

When the Lombards settled in the area of Modena in 752, King Aistulf allocated the land defined as the *locum Nonantulae* to his brother-in-law Anselm, who built a Benedictine monastery here, which became one of the most renowned monasteries in Europe. The cenobium was a royal abbey built on what until the year before had been the border between the Kingdom of the Lombards and the Byzantine Exarchate, and was meant to unify and organise the territory. In the structure of the Holy Roman Empire, Nonantola was part of the network of imperial monasteries built or reorganised as part of the reform called for by Emperor Charlemagne. Until the year 1000, the Abbey was run by abbots appointed by sovereign rulers, who turned it into one of the main centres of power and of cultural dissemination.

Today, this ancient past has left a unique and extremely valuable legacy: more than 4,500 parchments from the Abbey Archives, 131 of which date back to before the year 1000. The most famous ones, bearing the “signatures” of Charlemagne, Matilda of Canossa, Frederick Barbarossa and of other key figures in European history, can be seen in the rooms of the Benedictine and Diocesan Museum. The Archive itself is rather unique: it was established when the monastery was founded and the documents preserved here have never left its premises.

A place to develop and exchange knowledge, as well as a point of contact between different cultures

Since the 8th century, the monks, following the precepts of the Rule of Saint Benedict, focused on culture and knowledge, taking care of their library – whose main original nucleus was brought to Nonantola by Anselm after he was exiled to Montecassino – and by documenting, over the centuries, the volumes through inventories that have been preserved to this day. Next to the library, a *scriptorium* was set up, where hundreds of manuscripts were produced: not only religious codices but also texts with transcriptions by Latin authors, which have been handed down to us thanks to this form of mediation.

In a world where few were able to read and write, monasteries became cultural islands where a new type of calligraphy, i.e. the Carolingian minuscule, was created in order to overcome the fragmentation of the different forms of handwriting used. In the Diocesan Museum, three illuminated manuscripts about monastic activity in the *scriptorium* can be admired: the *Gospels* of Matilda of Canossa (11th-12th centuries), the *Gradual* or *Cantatorium*, an ancient musical

manuscript containing Gregorian melodies (11th-12th centuries), and the *Acta Sanctorum* (11th-13th centuries), which bears witness to the worship of the saints in the Abbey.

Nonantola was also a place where experiences and distant and near cultures were exchanged and merged, in both artistic and religious spheres. This is still evident today in the works of the Sacred Treasure, which show Byzantine and Oriental stylistic influences, and in the so-called “prayer fellowships” with other great Benedictine monasteries in the Germanic area.

A place of art. The Sacred Treasure of the Abbey

The Abbey houses a precious Treasure, now on display in the Benedictine and Diocesan Museum: in the Middle Ages its functions were – and still are today – the *ministerium* and the *ornamentum*: the precious artefacts were used for liturgical celebrations and to embellish the basilica, which became a pilgrimage site and an intermediate stop on the way to the main centres of Christianity such as Rome, the Holy Land and Santiago de Compostela. The most valuable piece of the Treasure is the stauro-case (10th century) containing a famous relic of the wood of the Holy Cross, which is one of the most important fragments recognised by Christianity; today, it is still used in the basilica for the liturgy of Good Friday and on 14 September, the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. The abbey’s Treasure also includes the reliquary arm of Pope Saint Sylvester I (1372), two reliquary crosses, a double cross (11th-12th century) and a Greek cross (12th century), the coffer with the relics of the martyrs Senesius and Theopompus (12th century) and the Byzantine samites: the latter, which are extraordinary for their time, fine workmanship and size, date back to the 9th century and are a rare and fascinating example of Early Medieval textile art. Made in Constantinople in the imperial factories, they reached Nonantola thanks to the close cultural, political and administrative contacts that the abbots of the monastery maintained with the Eastern Roman Empire on behalf of the Carolingian rulers.

Prayer fellowships among Benedictine monasteries

In the early 9th century, the monastery of Nonantola became part of a “prayer fellowship”, which brought together dozens of cenobia scattered throughout Central and Northern Europe. It was a spiritual pact whereby the monasteries undertook to exchange lists of monks for whom to pray, which were copied into the *Liber vitae*. Belonging to a fellowship was a significant step in the relations between the various religious centres, with exchanges in cultural, linguistic, liturgical, musical, artistic and economic areas. Nonantola rightfully became part of the framework of contacts between Europe’s great monasteries: in the 9th century, it was one of the most prestigious abbeys in Europe and the number of brothers grew along with its importance. Thanks to the lists that are still kept in the Abbeys of Reichenau and Saint Gall, we know that in the 9th century – during the rule of Abbot Peter, Anselm’s successor – there were as many as 851 monks in Nonantola.

A place of pilgrimage and hospitality

In the Middle Ages, free Benedictine hospitality was a complex phenomenon since, in addition to involving the fundamental religious aspect, it was extended to other areas, such as the control of

the road network and the territory: in fact, political authorities used abbeys and hospitals for this purpose, especially in border areas. In other words, the abbeys were centres of religious irradiation, normally located on main roads or in strategically important areas.

The sacredness of hospitality, preached by Saint Benedict in his Rule, went back to the words of Jesus in the Gospel "I was a stranger and you invited me in" (Matthew 25:35) in which the guest is identified with Christ himself. The monks therefore felt a great responsibility in welcoming him and, among those who came to the Abbey, special attention was paid to the poor and the pilgrims. The monastery therefore had several areas, including the guest quarters where anyone could rest, take refreshment, find shelter for the night, and then continue their journey.

The Abbey became a place of pilgrimage and a stopping place: in fact, it was located along the "Via Romea Nonantolana", an itinerary that went from Germany to Italy through the Brenner Pass and, by passing through the territories of Verona and Mantua, arrived at Nonantola and then continued towards the Apennines, reaching Tuscany and connecting with the Via Francigena before arriving in Rome.

A place that contributed to social and economic development

Since their settlement in the mid-8th century, the Benedictines were responsible for the orderly management of land and water, building river banks and water drainage canals, and draining floodplains to cultivate crops. By tending to the land and establishing relationships with the local population, the monks actively helped shape the foundations of the future community.

An important phase in this fruitful relationship between the Abbey and the local area dates back to 870-887, when Abbot Theodoric had the Pieve di San Michele Arcangelo (Parish Church of Saint Michael the Archangel) built not far from the monastery, providing the inhabitants with a place of worship separate from the Abbey.

Gotescalco, who was an abbot between 1053 and 1059, was instead responsible for the origin of the Partecipanza Agraria: on 4 January 1058 he granted all the families who lived in the village at the time (and who would have lived there in the future) not only basic rights relating to the individual, which they did not have yet, but also the perpetual use of farmland, within certain borders described in detail, and the common exploitation of forests, swamps, and pastures. In exchange, the people of Nonantola pledged to build three parts of the walls around the village and the Abbey, whereas the monks would have taken care of the fourth part. This is how the Partecipanza Agraria was established, now an independent moral institution, which today, by following rules that have remained almost unchanged over time, periodically distributes collective land among the descendants of the original families (there are 22 surnames that identify those that still benefit from this right).

There are seven saints resting in the Abbey Church: Anselm, founder and first abbot of the monastery, the martyrs Senesius and Theopompus, the two virgins Fosca and Anseride and two canonised popes, Saint Sylvester I and Saint Adrian III.

The worship of Saint Sylvester began in 756, when part of his relics arrived in Nonantola, probably taken from the Santa Priscilla catacombs during the Lombard siege of Rome. A Roman priest, Sylvester was elected Pope in January 314, a few months after the Edict of Milan, that had granted religious freedom and put an end to the harsh persecution of Christians. Pope Sylvester is the pontiff of the free Church, to which the Emperor Constantine granted protection, wealth and power, donated beautiful basilicas and precious treasures. It is therefore no coincidence that Aistulf wanted to seize the relics of Pope Sylvester, clearly comparing the figure of the patron saint with the role of the abbot of Nonantola, thereby establishing a close link between the monastery and the regal/imperial power.

Anselm is one of the few Lombard saints of whom we have reliable information. Born around 720 in Cividale del Friuli, he was a duke for some time; in 749 he embraced religion and became a Benedictine monk. In 751 his brother-in-law Aistulf gave him the land of Fanano, in the Modena Apennines, where he founded a cenobium and a hospice for pilgrims. The following year, he moved to Nonantola to build the monastery that he ran for more than 50 years. He died on 3 March 804 (803 in the *ab Incarnatione Domini*).

Very little is known about the life of Saint Adrian III. In the *Liber Pontificalis* it is said that he was Roman and ruled the Church for just one year, from 884 to 885. That year, while travelling to Germany to meet the Emperor Charles the Fat, he died in a place owned by the Abbey and was immediately moved here and solemnly buried.

In 911, the relics of Saints Senesius and Theopompus, who were martyred in the 4th century in present-day Turkey during Diocletian's persecutions, were brought to the Abbey from Treviso. When they arrived in Nonantola, a number of miracles occurred: collective healings or atmospheric miracles took place when carrying the holy bodies in procession.

There is very little information on the life and worship of saints Fosca and Anseride.

Fosca was martyred at the time of the persecution of Emperor Decius (3rd century). A small relic of the saint is venerated in Nonantola. Her body rests in Torcello, Venice.

Anseride's presence is closely linked to the translation of the remains of Saints Senesius and Theopompus from Treviso: in fact, she was responsible for the preservation of the relics, hiding them during the Hungarian invasions and accompanying them to Nonantola, where she devoted herself to a life of prayer and contemplation.

A place whose name is linked to historical figures

Throughout its millenary history, the Abbey had contacts with well-known figures: Emperor Charlemagne, who generously donated land and rights to the cenobium. Three of his diplomas are kept in the Abbey Archives: that of 780, with which Charlemagne grants Anselm two churches with their appurtenances in the Modena area, is the oldest original document preserved. The diploma of 797, with which Charlesmagne donates properties to Anselm in the areas of Verona and Vicenza, bears his monogram. The placitum of 801, which resolved a dispute over land and property near Lizzano in the area of Bologna, cites Charlesmagne as the *imperator*.

Lothair I stayed in the monastery as evidenced by the parchment with his seal dated 837; Charles the Fat and Pope Marino met here in 883; Pope Gregory VII celebrated the rites of Easter here in 1077; Matilda of Canossa donated many properties to the monks and was a guest at the monastery; Cardinal Giuliano Della Rovere was its commendatory abbot before becoming pope with the name of Julius II; Saint Charles Borromeo, commendatory abbot from 1560 to 1566, founded, immediately after the Council of Trent, the Seminary, one of the first in Italy and active until 1972.

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