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# The Basilica of Aquileia

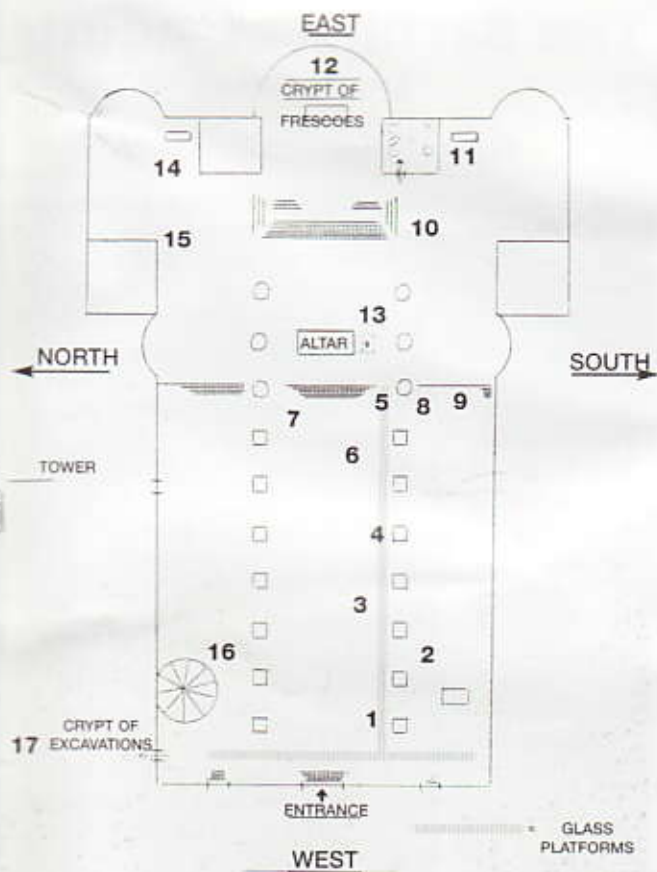
## Short Guide

by Gabriella Brumat Dellasorte  
English translation: Rebecca Sandrigo



The architectural development of the Basilica of Aquileia, dedicated to the Virgin Mary and the Saints Hermagora and Fortunatus, started in the years immediately after 313 AD. In that period the Edict of Milan put an end to religious persecution and the Christian community was legally able to build its first place of public worship. In the following centuries, after the destruction of this first church, seat of a bishopric, the inhabitants of Aquileia built it up again other four times, using each time the structures of the previous buildings: Theodorian Hall, first half of the 4th century; Post-Theodorian North, middle of the 4th century; Post-Theodorian South, end of the 4th century or after the middle of the 5th century; hall of Maxentius, 9th century; Poppo's church, first half of the 11th century; rebuilding of the upper part of the church by Markward von Randeck, from the pointed arches to the roof, 14th-15th century.

The Basilica, as it is today, is in Romanesque-Gothic style. The inside is majestic and solemn and pervades us with a deep spirituality, which has grown along with the centuries. The entire floor is a wonderful coloured mosaic of the 4th century, brought to light in the years 1909-



912. The elegant hull-shaped timber roof dates back to the 15th century. This means that between floor and ceiling there are more than one thousand years of historical and artistic development.

With its 760 square metres the floor is the largest Paleo-Christian mosaic of the western world. It alone would be enough to satisfy the traveller coming here to visit the Ecclesia Mater, which has become part of the world heritage. The mosaic was partly damaged due to the construction of the columns flanking the right side at the end of the 4th century according to some scholars and after the middle of the 5th century according to others. It is also possible to see the foundations of the columns because at the beginning of the 20th century the medieval white and red tiled floor made under Patriarch Poppo (1031) was removed in order to uncover the precious Paleo-Christian mosaic. The glass platforms are situated at the level of the medieval floor.

Entering the Basilica we can see the mosaic floor belonging to the Theodorian South Hall, one of the three main rooms constituting the bishop's seat during the Empire of Constantine. Theodore, whom the inscription

on the floor in the Fishing scene refers to, had built a complex of worship perfectly corresponding to the liturgical needs of that time. He bought an urban area, demolished the warehouses situated in it and built a complex with the shape of a horseshoe. Two rectangular parallel halls (South and North Hall), connected by a rectangular transversal hall. Between the two parallel halls to the east of the transversal hall there were the baptistery, some ancillary rooms and the entrance to the whole complex.

Of this first complex are visible today: in the Basilica, the mosaic of the South Hall, part of the cocciopesto floor of the transversal hall, part of the mosaic floor of the entry; in the Crypt of Excavations, remains of the mosaics of the North Hall, remains of the cocciopesto of the transversal room and the floors of the ancillary rooms; the remains of the old baptistery with circular baptismal font are not visible instead. According to some scholars the South Hall was used by catechumens preparing for baptism, while the North Hall was used for the Holy Mass. Other scholars instead are convinced of the contrary. The connecting room was used both as a dressing room before the baptism following the rite of immersion and for the celebration of the confirmation.

The mosaic floor is divided into panels bordered by vegetal motives (acanthus shoots). There are ten "carpets", each representing different highly symbolical scenes, some of which are considered particularly important.

Walking along the platform we can admire the first scene: the Battle between Cock and Tortoise (**No. 1 on the plan**). The cock is the symbol of the light of a new day, thus representing Christ, the "light of the world". The tortoise, whose Greek name means "dweller of the darkness", is instead the symbol of the Evil. On the column drum we can see the reward for the winner: a bag of money. Unfortunately the mosaic is damaged, so the symbolic number TCCC cannot be read. This scene, deriving from the pagan iconography of Mithra's cult is something unique in the Paleo-Christian arts, inviting the believers to constantly fight their sins to gain eternal life.

Passing on to the right we can see the scene of the Good Shepherd with the Mystic Flock (**No. 2 on the plan**). Christ is portrayed as a beardless young man bearing the lost lamb upon his shoulders. In one hand he holds the syrinx (the shepherds' flute), symbol of the gentleness he takes care of his flock with. He is surrounded by land, sky and sea animals, because his flock is composed of all men "of good will", of whatever race and culture.

On the left side there is one of the most beautiful "carpets", made by the Portrait Master (**No. 3 on the plan**). In the clipeus we see several portraits of benefactors (a man wearing a toga, a veiled woman and girls). In

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the other round frames there are the images of the seasons (Summer and Autumn; Winter and Spring have been destroyed by the foundations of the columns) and of the acrostic fish ICHTYS ("ichtys" is the Greek name for "fish"; each single letter is the initial letter of the words "Iesus Christos Theu Yös Sotër", meaning "Jesus Christ Son of God the Saviour"). The birds on the branches full of flowers or fruits refer to the Blessed in the Paradise. These scenes suggest the believer to live all his life, from Spring to Autumn, in the faith of Christ (ichtys) and gain the Paradise as a reward (the birds in the garden).

Close to the carpet with the portraits we can see the images of the donors and of the **Christian Victory (No. 4 on the plan)**. The classic winged Victory bearing a laurel crown and the palm branch for the winner has been transformed into the Christian Victory donating the Eucharist to the believer winning the battle against the sins. The Eucharist is characterised by two baskets, one containing grapes, the other bread. The breadbasket was damaged by the building of the altar positioned on this scene when the Theodorian South Hall was transformed into a hall for the cult of martyrs around the middle of the 4th century. We can see the variety of gifts offered by young people (grapes, buns, flowers, and so on), symbols of charity towards needy brothers.

Walking further we find the inscription of Bishop Theodore surmounted by the Greek monogram of Christ (X and P superimposed). This inscription enabled the dating of the mosaic because Theodore's signature was found on a document dated 314 (council acts of Arles). It means: "Happy are you, Theodore, who, with the aid of the Almighty God and the flock he has entrusted to you has enabled you to build this church and triumphantly to consecrate it to God" (**No. 5 on the plan**).

The magnificent Fishing scene is a work of the Sea Master (**No. 6 on the plan**) and describes the preaching of the Apostles ("Follow me and I will make you fishers of men": Matthew 4,19). The fishes represent the people listening to the good news, the boat is the symbol of the church, the net (but also the fishing-line) represents the kingdom of heaven ("The kingdom of heaven is like a big net that was cast into the sea...": Matthew 13,47). In the great fishing scene we can admire the three episodes concerning Jonas and representing the allegorical announcement of death, resurrection and ascent to heaven of Christ: Jonas swallowed by the sea monster, Jonas thrown up by the monster, Jonas resting under the pumpkin tree (**No. 7,8,9 on the plan**).

On the right side of the presbytery we find the entry to the Crypt (the so called "Crypt of Frescoes" in order to distinguish it from the "Crypt of Excavations"): (**No. 10 on the plan**). The architectonic structure dates back to the 9th century, while the beautiful frescoes were painted in the second half of the 12th century. On the vault there are 19 scenes narrating the History of Hermagora

and the origins of Christianity in Aquileia. According to a (legendary) tradition, St. Peter sent St. Mark to preach the Gospel in Aquileia, the capital of the Tenth Augustan Region, the Venetia et Histria. In the cosmopolitan city Mark could convert many people, among which Hermagora, who followed the Evangelist in Rome to be nominated bishop by Peter. Back in Aquileia, Hermagora continued the work of evangelisation but was denounced to the Imperial authorities. He was imprisoned together with his deacon Fortunatus. In jail he converted his prison warder Pontianus, Gregorius' family and the blind matron Alexandra he had previously healed. After many miracles, among which the healing of an obsessed, he was condemned to death by decapitation together with Fortunatus. The last scene represents the burial of the two Saints in the presence of Alexandra, Pontianus and Gregorius. In the four lunettes there are displayed the scenes of the Passion of Christ and the Death of Mary; the pendentives bear images of Saints and the central vault the Enthroned Madonna with the Child between the symbols of the Evangelists and the Enthroned Christ between the Angels (the fresco with Christ's face has been removed and positioned in the showcase with the shrines).

Going out of the Crypt, on the left there is the shrine-sarcophagus of the Four Virgins of Aquileia, dating back to the 14th century (**No. 11 on the plan**). In the central panel there are St. Hermagora baptising Euphemia, Dorothea, Tecla and Erasma.

Close to it we can admire the early medieval pluteus (9th century) that in the past surrounded the presbytery; they are an extraordinary example of the so called "barbarian" art, characterised by the horror vacui.

If we move to the left transept, from the middle of the presbytery we can admire the apsidal frescoes dating back to the first half of the 11th century (**No. 12 on the plan**). On the sides of the Enthroned Mary portrayed inside the mandorla there are the martyrs of the Aquileian tradition: on the right Hermagora, Fortunatus and Euphemia, representing the group of the Four Virgins of Aquileia, and on the left Mark the Evangelist, Hilary and Tatianus. The smaller figures represent on the left the Emperor Conrad, the Empress Giselle and Prince Henry. On the right Patriarch Poppo, (portrayed with the model of the restructured church and with the rectangular halo, as at that time he was still alive) and Albert of Carinthia.

Impressive is also the great tribune, decorated with fine bas-reliefs made by Bernardino da Bissone at end of the 15th century. The opening near the modern altar (**No. 13 on the plan**) enables us to see part of the mosaic floor of the Post-Theodorian South, erected on the Theodorian South at the end of the 4th century (or after the middle of the 5th, according to other scholars).

In the left transept we can see the panel of the Saints Canziani (probably an altarpiece) dating back to the 14th

century (**No. 14 on the plan**). Inside the small arches there are Christ adored by the donors of the work, on the sides the brothers Cantius, Cantianus and Cantianilla with their teacher Protus, martyred together on the 31st May 304 at Aquae Gradae, now San Canzian d'Isonzo. The three brothers are the only martyrs of Aquileia, whose relics have been certainly found and are now treasured in the parish church at San Canziano. On the column on the corner (**No. 15 on the plan**) there is the bust of the Christ of the Trenches, impressive and moving sculpture made by Edmondo Furlan, a sculptor who was also a soldier during the First World War.

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