



# St. Martin's Church and Square

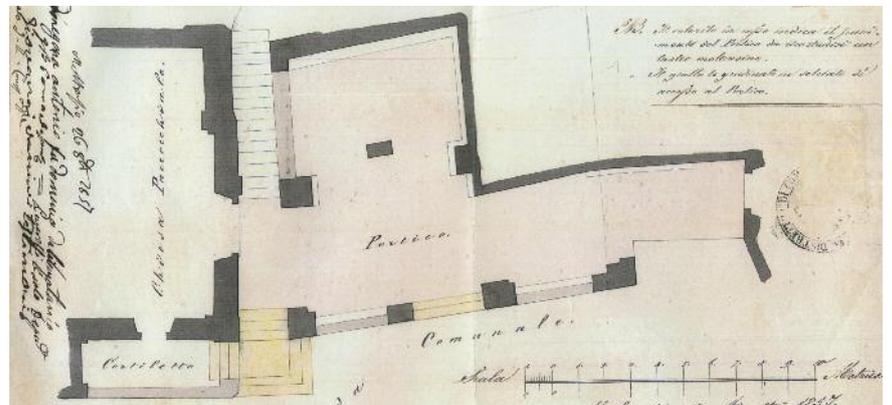
The Moltrasio's parish church and its square are deeply connected not only because of their adjacent position and the same name, but because their current appearance is the result of the reciprocal transformations undergone on both the church and the square.

A 1207 notarial deed proves the construction already existed in that year, even if there is no evidence about the exact date of the initial construction of the church. There are 18<sup>th</sup> century records that illustrate how the town hall was connected to the church through a *cuert* – meaning portico in the local dialect – and, until 1923, the two buildings together were considered as one unit. Both buildings watched for the common good of the community, in terms of religion and civil services.

The church is dedicated to St. Martin and St.

Agatha and became a parish church between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There is little documentation to show how was the church at the moment of its edification; the only precious information about it was provided by bishop Ninguarda during his pastoral visit in 1589, following which began an important series of transformations. According to his description, it is reasonable to think that, as was practice in the middle ages, the main altar was located on the east side; nowadays it corresponds with the side altar dedicated to the Virgin of the Rosary. There remains on the west side of the church a trace of the primary entrance, that opened onto Raschi Street and was closed in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. In the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, the northern part of the building was extended, destroying the portico, and opening the current main entrance.

*On the side, the plan of the municipal building and the church, once connected as can be seen in the photo below*





The architectonic and decorative transformations, subsequent to the pastoral visit, respected the rules dictated by Counter Reformation and were finished in about 1647, date on which was completed the decoration by **Recchi** brothers.

The main altar was embellished with sacred images, indispensable to draw worships' attention to it. The attention was indeed facilitated also by the structure of the church presenting a unique nave, as determined by the Council of Trent.

Side chapels with altars were constructed and completed: one on the right side of the major altar dedicated to the Virgin of the Rosary and another in front of it, where the primary entrance used to be, dedicated to the Crucifix. In fact, was placed a crucifix painting by **Fiamminghino**. Here, the Holy Thorn, that today gives the name to the altar, is also being kept. It was donated to the community in 1721 by the ecclesiastic Giuseppe Antonio Durini.

In St. Martin's presbytery are located the most significant works: the frescos on the sides of the altar, painted by Recchi brothers, depicting the stories of the patron Saints, Saint Martin and Saint Agatha, and the altar table representing the Virgin Mary with Child and patron Saints, attributable to **Giovan Mauro della Rovere** (Fiamminghino).

Moreover, the church was embellished with stuccoes in baroque style. The more rele-

vant are the ones from 1606 realized by plasterer **Giuseppe Bianchi**, adorning the side altar dedicated to the Virgin of the Rosary. The artist also worked in Como Cathedral construction site.

The church treasured various works of art, including a 1520 crucifix tempera painting by **De Magistri** and a 1507 large altar table by **Alvise De Donati**.





During the following three centuries, the church wasn't affected by structural modifications. It only was enhanced with marbles, frescoes and furnishing.

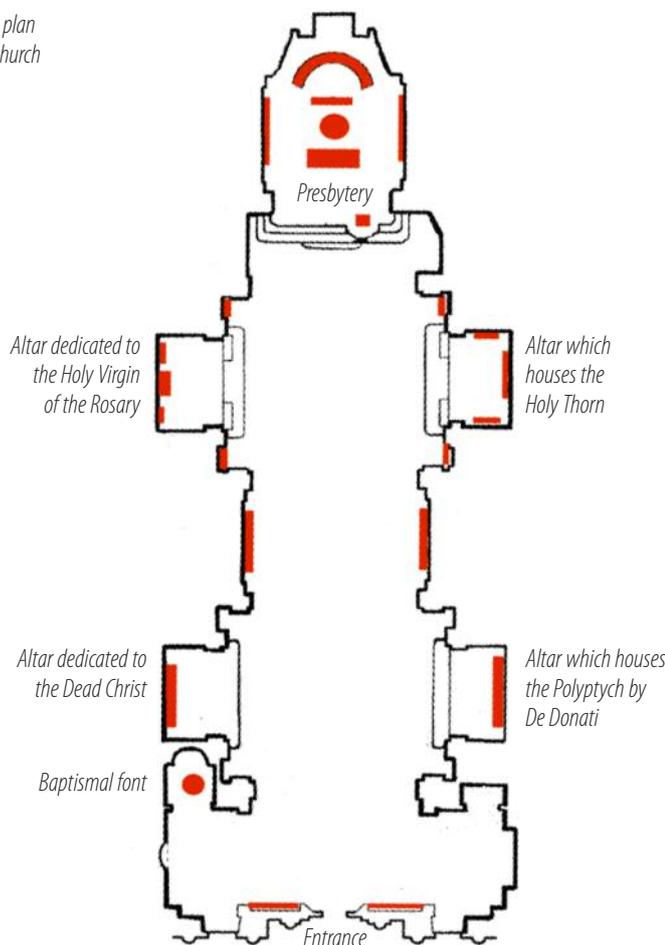
In 1882 painter **Borri Leopoldo** of Milano decorated the remaining part of the church that had no decoration but the frescoes by Recchi brothers.

In 1885 the pavement in slabs made of stone of Moltrasio was replaced with the current octagon tiles of black Varenna marble and white Carrara marble, except on the presbytery where were positioned tiles of Marseille.

In 1928 the church was once again embellished with paintings and stuccoes, according to the project by painter **Comazzi Celeste**. Were realized the paintings on walls representing Christ the King, the Virgin of the Rosary and the donation of the Holy Thorn, works of painter **Mario Chiodo Grandi** of Milan.

The vaults and the "lesene" were adorned in stucco with gildings in fine gold. The cornice was mopped, painted and gilded, as well as all the stuccoes. Moreover, the artificial marble bases were realized, while were restored the side altars, especially the altar containing the Holy Thorn that appeared damaged.

*Current plan of the church*





Until 1935, the only changes undergone were the raising of the bell tower, the replacement of the pavement and the new stuccoes and paintings added between 1853 and 1928. From 1935, the church and the municipality joined forces once again to cover the needs of the population.

In the past, St. Martin's Square did not exist. Instead, there were two bridges and an unpaved road which was not accessible for cars. The first change is documented in an undated document found in the archives, that certifies the occupation of a building by the municipality in order to demolish it and organize the area in front of the town hall for public use.

On March 1935, with an administrative measure of the podestà:

*"Given the necessity to amplify St. Martin's Square due to the increasing traffic, to improve the decorum in the centre of the village as well as to cooperate to reduce unemployment, and considering the project by the engineer Francesco Ferrario, dated 23.3.1935, which includes the destruction of the municipal portico called "Cuert", the administration seat near St. Martin's parish Church, and also the stream's covering in the part bet-*

ween the two bridges and the destruction of a part of the rustic property of the 'Workers' Friendly Society' – and part of the properties of the Porro and the Baserga families – *it is approved the start of constructions",* that will transform the face of the village.

At the same time, the Vicar Mario Villa demanded to the Municipal Administration to enlarge the church because of the increasing population, that had reached nearly 1500 inhabitants.

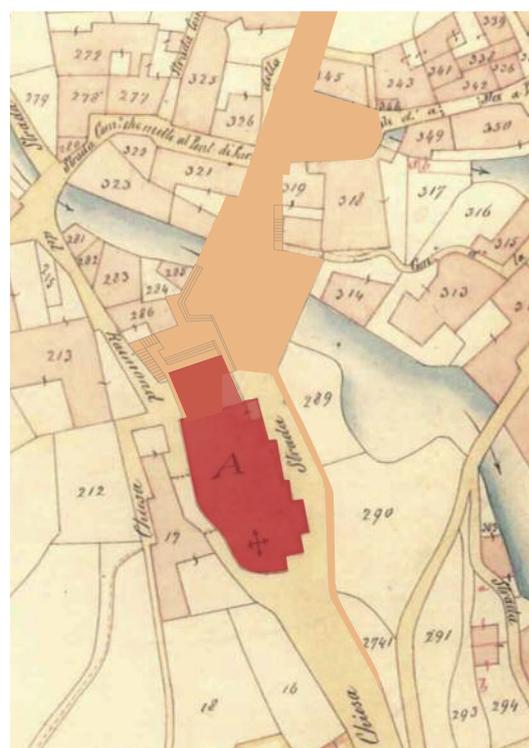
The constructions to enlarge the square, entrusted to the company "Porro Oreste" of Moltrasio, took place in May 1935 and were concluded in November 1936. They laid the foundation for the project of the current Roma Street and for the inclusion of the "Workers' house" in the municipal property. This building today is the Municipal Library, recently entirely restored.

The structure of the then "Caffè Savoia" (today's "Bar Al Centrale"), positioned on the side of the municipal portico, did not undergo major changes because of the constructions. In fact, still today, it is possible to see the pillar and the arch to the left as they were in a 1932 photography.

On the side, a map from the land registry with the church marked in red (A) and the municipal building (B)



On the right side, the same map showing the enlargement of the church and the stream's covering in order to create the square





*Photo taken during the demolition of the municipal building in order to enlarge the church and build the new façade*

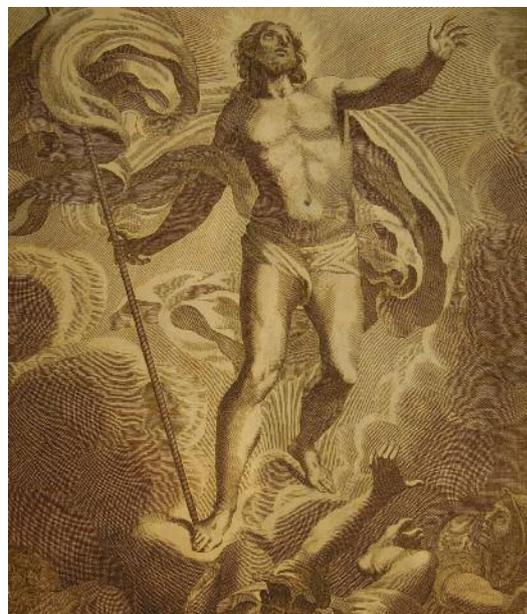


The enlargement of the church, at the same way, was done in a year. The new façade made of exposed stone of Moltrasio took the place of the preexisting wall, part of the altar of the Confraternity, decorated with a fresco representing the protector Saint Sebastian. Inside, in the new part added were built two side altars: the one on the right dedicated to the Dead Christ, the one on the left with the 1507 large altar table by Alvise De Donati, worthy of its own space. Once work was completed, the parish

church, was consecrated on 12th September 1936 by bishop Macchi. In the façade is walled a remembrance parchment in a lead cylinder that also contains the series of coins minted in the same year by the State Mint.

Various ornaments dated from different times are now reunited and displayed in the museum in the ex-oratory of the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament (visits on request).

*Displays containing copes and woodblock print part of the museum of sacred ornaments*



### Side altar dedicated to the Holy Virgin of the Rosary

The altar dedicated to the Virgin of the Rosary was consecrated in 1571 by Antonio Volpi, bishop of Como and Count.

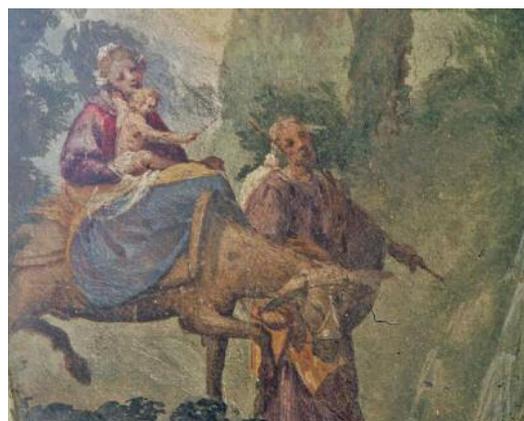
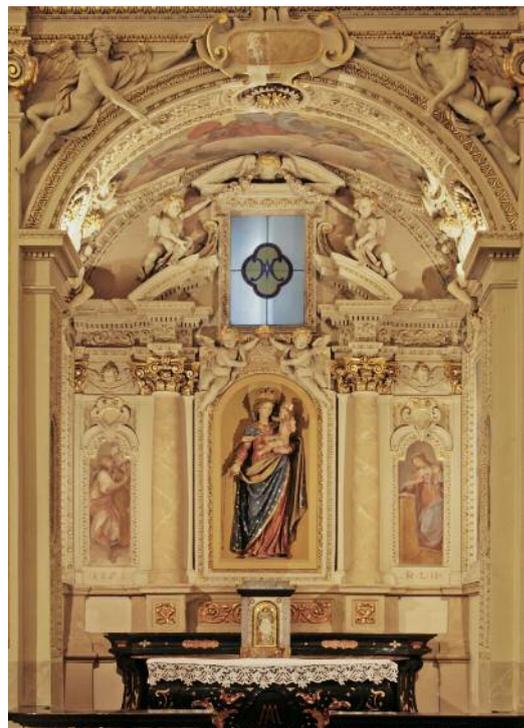
The statue and the decorative scheme composed by splendid stuccoes were made in 1626 by the skilled hands of the well-known plasterer **Giuseppe Bianchi**. He also worked in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century in Como and Tirano Cathedrals construction sites.

The frescoes on the sides of the statue of the Virgin Mary, representing the Annunciation, were probably painted by **Giovan Paolo Recchi** or a 1600s painter with a style influenced by Morazzone.

The "lesene" on the soffit of the arch leading to the altar are embellished with stuccoes that frame two 17<sup>th</sup> century frescoed ovals. The one on the left depicts the Flight into Egypt, the one on the right, the Adoration of the Magi. The suggestive landscapes and the luminous effects are characteristically Morazzonian (referred to painter Morazzone) but of unknown authorship.

The vault of the chapel dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century was probably realized by the same artist who painted the Annunciation; it can be deduced by comparing the works. It is evident that the draperies and the faces depicted are of the same workmanship.

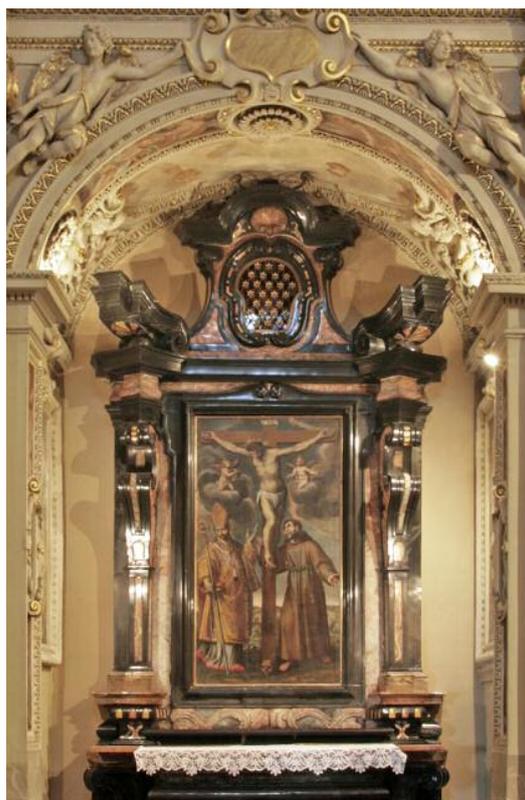
The frescoes on the external sides of the altar represent the kings of Israel David and Solomon. The author is unknown but could have taken inspiration from Della Rovere brothers in the stylistic handling of the characters.



### Side altar which houses the Holy Thorn

The altar table representing the Crucifixion, made with the technique of oil of canvas, dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was painted by the well-known painter **Giovan Mauro Della Rovere** (Fiamminghino). It depicts, besides the main scene of the crucifixion, the images of St. Charles and St. Francis to the sides of the cross. Painting of good workmanship, it is possible to admire especially the great ability of the artist to depict the feelings of devotion expressed by the saints and the face of Christ. The frescoes on the internal sides of the altar, done by Francesco Carpano around 17<sup>th</sup> century, depict St. Francis receiving the stigmata and St. Charles visiting plague victims.

In the ovals on the "lesene" you can see, on the left, The attempted murder of St. Charles, and, on the right, St. Francis renounces his father's goods. Under these ovals, there are another two saints of popular devotion: on the right, St. Lucy and, on the left, St. Anthony Abbot. Some angels painted both on the lesene and on the soffit of the arch divide the scenes and held in their hands insignias



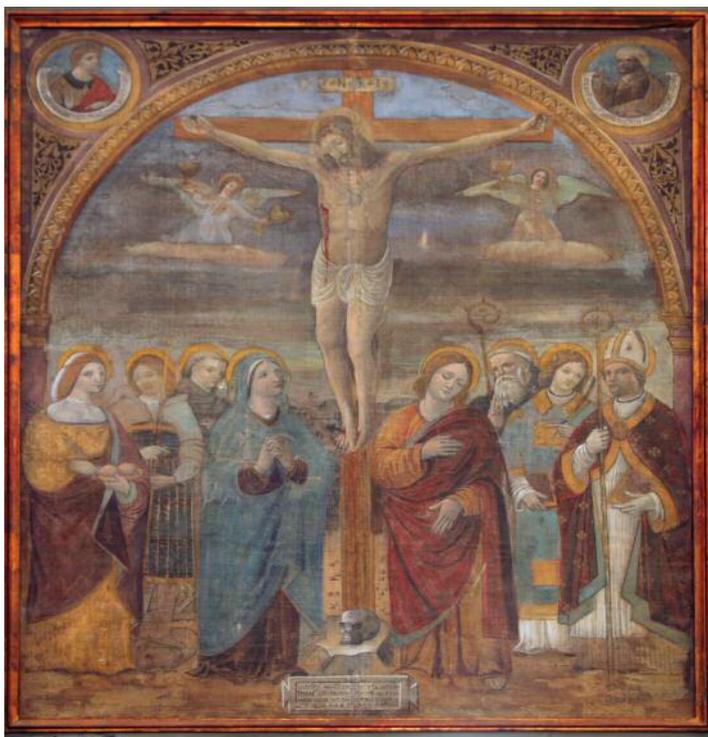
and symbols of the depicted saints: the bells for St. Anthony, the platter with the eyes for St. Lucy and the pliers for St. Apollonia, represented coupled with St. Martha on the exterior of the altar.

The fresco on the vault of the altar, depicting a sky with cherubs, is attributed to Recchi brothers. In 1882 was added, in the center of the painting, the representation of the Holy Thorn realized by painter **Giacomo Mantegazza**. The frescoes to the sides of the altar depict St. Martha with the dragon's head between her feet. In fact, according to the apocryphal legends, the Saint put to flight the dragon from the wood of Tarascona, sprinkling holy water. Can be seen, indeed, the bucket and the aspergillum.

The altar was later completed in 1721 by placing the relic of the Holy Thorn – devotional object donated by the ecclesiastic Giuseppe Antonio Durini – in the upper part of it, above the painting.

### Standard of the Confraternity of the Rosary of the Blessed Sacrament

This standard realized by **Giovan Mauro della Rovere** (Fiamminghino) was painted in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is painted on both sides and shows, on one side, the Virgin of the Rosary and, on the other, Saint Martin and Saint Agatha in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Once, this standard was used in processions and was the symbol of the parish. It was commissioned to an able painter as Fiamminghino because was as significant as an altar table.



### Crucifixion by De Magistri

It is easy to find out at what time period dates this painting: the Renaissance style transpires from the well-balanced compositional structure. In the center, can be seen the Crucifix and, beneath the cross, the Virgin Mary and Saint John. Behind them, there are six saints surmounted by two angels which collect the blood flowed from Christ's hands. Under the cross there is a skull, symbol of vanity which alludes to the fragility of earthly existence, and a cartouche with a Latin inscription. Translated, it reads: *"Whoever would be tempted by the bite of the devil, turn his gaze to the Christ on the cross. He will be healed. Year of our Lord 1520"*. The depiction is completed with two medallions on the arch with the prophets Isaiah and Daniel. The draw is somewhat rigid and clumsy but, together with the altar table by De Donati, is an example of the painting style that characterized the artists of Lombardy active at that time.



### Side altar which houses the Polyptych Native and Saints by Alvise De Donati, 1507

The altar table signed by **Alvise De Donati** is the most precious work of art preserved in the parish church in Moltrasio. It is supposed that the artist was influenced by Foppa and Luini, artists of Lombardy active at that time.

The work is characterized by a perfect balance in form, austerity in colour, a rigid drawn, sober realism and perspective views. The polyptych is composed of two sections, divided in three parts. The central scene de-

picts the Nativity enriched with a splendid perspective view and a cartouche that reads the name of the author and the date of realization. At the sides of the central scene, also framed by an arch structure, can be seen St. Martin and St. Agatha.

Above these two figures, in the upper section, there are, on the right, the sisters Marta and Mary Magdalene and, on the left, St. Peter and St. Paul. The nativity is surmounted by two medallions with the images of St. Roch and St. Sebastian.

In the cusp's lunette, which completes the upper section of the altarpiece, the Most Holy trinity is enclosed in a semicircular space.

At the bottom, the predella has thirteen small-scale arches with Jesus Christ and the twelve Apostles. All characters are well recognizable by a thorough interpretation of the iconographic elements that the artist meticulously described.





## St. Martin's Church and Square

### Atrium

In the atrium are located two niches: if you are looking at them front the door, the one on the right side contains a wooden baptismal font, aforementioned by Ninguarda, the one on the left side, a devotional 18<sup>th</sup> century image representing St. Anthony of Padua. Each of the two sides of the main portal bears an oil on canvas. The one on the right depicts The Resurrection and the one on the left, Christ carrying the cross to the Calvary.



### Side altar dedicated to the Dead Christ

The existence in St. Martin's Church of this gilded wooden altar was noticed for the first time in the presbytery by bishop Torriani during his pastoral visit in 1671. It remained in this church until 1820, when was replaced with the current marble altar and located in St. Agatha's church. In 1936 it went back to the parish church, subsequent to the enlargement which enables the construction of the chapel dedicated to the Dead Christ.

It is composed of a Renaissance architectonic structure with small wooden statues representing holy protectors in niches, musician angels and the Dead Christ on the top.

In the central part there are scenes in relief carved in wood and painted depicting the Crowned Virgin and the Dead Christ.

