



## The Lerici Churches Masterpiece

### Artistic itinerary

#### Lerici - Church of San Francesco

The Church of San Francesco, opened to the public since 1636, but officially consecrated in 1689, was built in the 1630s to replace a smaller, fourteenth century church erected in an open countryside location, far from the sea and the medieval hamlet. The column that is still visible in the parvis of today's parish church is attributed to the original building.

The current building, which in the seventeenth century was located along the route of the new Lerici-Sarzana road, features a single nave, with several side chapels, characterised by an intense use of polychrome marbles. Altars, columns, inlays of clear seventeenth-eighteenth century style, frame works of art of great value, which we are going to discover starting from our left.

**1. Saint Augustine hesitates between the blood of Christ and the milk of the Virgin**, by Domenico Fiasella (mid-17th century).

We immediately encounter one of the most valuable works, attributed to Fiasella, known as Sarzana. According to some art historians, the painting technique used in the figure of the Virgin Mary refers to Giovan Battista Casoni from Lerici, who was a student of Fiasella and married his sister. The work illustrates a passage from St. Augustine's meditations, undecided which fountain to drink from, a theme dear during the Counter-Reformation and in environments characterised by a strong Augustinian devotion. The painting, in fact, seems to have come from the ancient convent of Augustinian friars on the promontory of Maralunga. The coat of arms of Lerici is visible at the bottom.

**2. Madonna and Child with Saints Louis, Anthony Abbot, Anthony of Padua, Francis and Purgatory Souls**, by an unknown author (circle of Fiasella) (17th century).

The painting features a pyramidal structure: the purging souls in the flame are clearly recognisable at the bottom, while among the Saints, note the presence of Saint Louis, king of France, honoured as co-patron of the Third Order of St. Francis.

**3. Visitation of Mary to St Elizabeth**, by Giovanni Bernardo Carbone (17th century)

Despite representing a theme in keeping with tradition, the work stands out not only for its stylistic refinement, but also for the psychological depth and the spontaneity of the characters, distinguished by human and naturalistic accents. The setting is intimate and domestic, as highlighted by the cute little dog that seems to seek Mary's attention.

**4. Sanctuary of the Madonna of Maralunga**, author unknown (15th century)

An object of centuries-old devotion, this valuable tablet, according to tradition, was miraculously found in the spring of 1480 by three fishermen near the Maralunga cliff. The iconography is unique: two images of the Madonna with Baby Jesus, framed by a mullioned window and divided by a slender column dominated by the Dove of the Holy Spirit. The Virgin Mary on the right is surrounded by angels. The one on the left is holding a rose, while Baby Jesus holds a scroll that reads, "Mother of mine, I am happy, as long as the sinner repents". A convent of Augustinian friars was founded near the place of its discovery, suppressed then by the French government at the end of the eighteenth century. During the nineteenth century, the precious icon was definitively placed in the Church of San Francesco. Patron saint of Lerici, the Madonna di Maralunga is solemnly celebrated on March 25<sup>th</sup>.

**5. Wooden crucifix** (15th century)

This is one of the oldest works present in the Church, although it has been restored and repainted several times. It was originally thought to date back to the fourteenth century, while today it tends to be dated to the fifteenth century. It was undoubtedly already present in the building during the pastoral visit in 1584. According to some sources, it belonged to one of Lerici's first places of worship, the Church of St. Marta, located in the old village, which was destroyed.

**6. The Assumption of the Virgin**, by Jean Miel (1657)

A Flemish painter, student of Guido Reni, Miel was a prestigious artist, very active in Rome, where he produced the painting in 1657, as indicated by an inscription on the work itself. Such a prestigious commission, involving an artist active at the papal court, is a remarkable fact for Lerici. It seems that the work was purchased and donated to the Church by the prestigious Botti family from Lerici, who routinely visited Rome. At first, the painting was placed by the family altar. Then, during the nineteenth century, it was moved to the apse. To adapt it to its new location, the work underwent repainting by Camillo Pucci, from Sarzana, especially in the lower part, where there are figures from the Old Testament, such as Moses, King David and Solomon.

**7. The Immaculate Conception with Saints Bonaventure, Francis and Clare**, by Giovanni Domenico Cappellino (1617)

The large painting depicts the Virgin Mary ascending to heaven. In the lower area are represented the main saints of the Franciscan cult, in adoration of Mary, while in the upper part there are the angels and the Holy Father, blessing her. On the background is a coastal landscape, possibly inspired by the Gulf of Lerici. The painter's signature and year of execution are present on the painting.

**8. Statue of St Francis and wooden choir**

The apse of the church is characterised by a wooden choir dating back to the end of the eighteenth century, which has two rows of backbenches – an upper and a lower one. The large statue of St. Francis, above the central part of the choir, made of white Carrara marble, dates back to the eighteenth century.

#### 9. **St. John the Baptist, by Domenico Bocciardo (18th century)**

An eighteenth-century work depicting Saint John in the act of baptising a young man immersed in the river. This painting, like others present in San Francesco, is the work of a Ligurian artist (born in Finale Ligure in 1686) and stands out for the chromatic liveliness and the elegance of the figures, both in their faces and in the movements. Even the Baptist is not represented in the traditional iconography of a tough and stern man, but rather, wearing a red cloak of Flemish taste.

#### 10. **The Presentation of Mary in the Temple, by Camillo Pucci (19th century)**

A work influenced by the purism of the Nazarenes, it was painted by Camillo Pucci from Sarzana, a leading figure in the nineteenth century Ligurian painting, who frequented the Roman circles in which this Romantic movement of German origin spread.

#### 11. **Rosary Chapel**

Outside the chapel, there is a pulpit with polychrome marbles - dated 1706 - of probable Carrara manufacture. Inside the chapel, there is an octagonal baptismal font, made of white marble, on which the date 1448 in Roman numbers is inscribed. It belonged to the first church or, more probably, to the nearby oratory of San Bernardino.

We then find a tomb dominated by two elegant allegorical figures, inspired by Michelangelo, representing Time – recognisable by the hourglass – and Life or Truth – bearing a sun (17<sup>th</sup> century). In the centre is the Madonna of the Rosary, in painted and gilded wood (19<sup>th</sup> century), to the right of which is the refined eighteenth century statue of St. Anna.

#### 12. **Saints Lucy, Cecilia, Catherine, author unknown (16th century)**

We are here in front of one of the finest works preserved in San Francesco, with a distinct Renaissance style. Each female Saint holds, in addition to the palm of martyrdom, its own iconographic symbol: the eyes for Saint Lucy, the spiked wheel for Saint Catherine and an organ for Saint Cecilia, patron saint of musicians. At the bottom, the small figure of a donor is depicted, suggesting a secular commission of the work. The brightly coloured painting is probably attributable to the Tuscan school and dates back to the sixteenth century: it therefore belonged to the original church of may have come from the Church of Maralunga.

#### 13. **Madonna and Child with Saints Erasmus, Leonard, Nicholas of Tolentino and Clare of Montefalco, attributed to Paolo Gerolamo Piola (late 17th-early 18th century)**

The painting is closely linked to the devotional tradition of Lerici, particularly for the presence of St. Erasmus, patron saint of sailors, depicted in bishop's robes. Below is the promontory of Maralunga, where the church and some boats are clearly visible.

#### 14. **Madonna and Child with Saints Bernardine and Francis, by Domenico Fiasella (1659)**

Characterised by a rigid geometric composition and a strong chromatic liveliness, the canvas is considered one of the masterpieces of Fiasella, an eclectic painter originally from Sarzana, but trained in Rome, and very active in the Genoa area, although he was highly esteemed beyond the Ligurian borders. The author's signature and date of execution are marked on the painting. The iconography is closely linked to the Franciscan devotion: in fact, there is Saint Francis, humbly genuflected at the feet of Mary, and Saint Bernardino, in the act of giving the Virgin Mary a tablet bearing his symbol (the Chrismon). Next to it, there are the three mitres which symbolise the three bishoprics he refused. The work comes from the nearby Oratory of San Bernardino.

#### 15. **Deposition with Saints, painter unknown (17th century)**

The Virgin Mary holds Christ seated on the sepulchre. Magdalene and St. Jerome appear to the right of the Virgin Mary, while St. Rocco, invoked against plagues, is depicted on the left.

#### 16. **Ceiling and Organ**

At the end of our visit, let us pause to observe the precious Agati pipe organ (1841).

The ceiling was painted by Luigi Agretti in 1932. The three rectangular frescoes, set in stucco frames, depict the central themes of Lerici's devotion: at the centre is the Glorification of San Francesco, after whom the church is named, while at the sides are the miraculous finding of the Madonna of Maralunga with the Castle of Lerici in the background, and St. Erasmus calming the storm. The cult of St. Erasmus, patron saint of fishermen, is very much felt in Lerici: it is celebrated with a solemn festivity on the first weekend of July.

Sacristy (can be visited upon request)

#### 17. **Gar marble triptych**

Coming from the Oratory of San Bernardino, this stunning bas-relief is one of the masterpieces of the sculptor of Lorraine origins, who moved to Carrara, Domenico Gar. It dates back to 1529. It depicts San Francesco with the crucifix, Bernardino with the round and flaming Chrismon, and Leonardo with the handcuffs and the book. The saints wear the Franciscan habit tied at the waist by a rope with three knots that symbolise the three Franciscan virtues: poverty, charity and obedience. The hooded brothers of the Confraternity of Saint Bernardino are represented in the predella. In the upper lunette, the Virgin Mary with Baby Jesus is together with the saints invoked against plagues: Saint Rocco and Saint Sebastiano.

## Lerici - Oratory of San Rocco

Dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the building was originally dedicated to Saints Martino and Cristoforo. In 1524, after a terrible plague, the oratory was dedicated to Saint Rocco, protector against the disease: in the lunette above the entrance, there is a statue that represents him. The French saint, originally from Montpellier, a pilgrim and thaumaturge, is depicted here according to traditional iconography, with a wide-brimmed hat and travelling staff, in the act of showing a wound on his leg which was relieved by a miraculous little dog. Having fallen ill himself, Rocco obtained from God the gift of interceding for plague victims who invoked his name. Friend of the needy and the sick, he is therefore a protector against plagues.

Several tombstones stand out on the church steeple. The oldest one, in Gothic lettering, dates back to 1287 and commemorates the construction of the building by Massaro Palmerino in honour of God and of Saints Martino and Cristoforo. Above, two inscriptions recall sixteenth century operations on the bell tower. Higher up, some bas-reliefs: two winged figures holding a coat of arms bearing the holm oak, symbol of Lerici, the traditional Saint George slaying the dragon and the Virgin Mary and Child.

In 1649, the Confraternity "Mortis et Orationis" was established here, whose purpose was the suffrage of the dead and the bestowal of dignified burial to the corpses of the poor, pilgrims, travellers and the drowned.

The interior features five altars.

1. Upon entering on the left, we find a first painting depicting the Madonna with Baby Jesus and the Saints (18<sup>th</sup> century), including St. Francis and St. Anthony of Padua.
2. The second altar features an oil painting on slate, the black stone of Lavagna, representing the Virgin with Child between St. Andrea and St. Rocco (16<sup>th</sup> century). Two angels hold up a scroll reading "Salus Infirmorum", hence the work is called "Madonna of Health".
3. The main altar is decorated by a table that is a true masterpiece of the sixteenth century. In the centre are the saints for whom the building was originally named, Cristoforo and Martino with St. Sebastiano and St. Rocco at the sides, invoked against plagues. Looking closely at the painting, it is clear that the table was resized to fit its current location. Several art historians have commented on the possible attribution of this refined painting, which dates back to the 1620s. The commission would be contextual to the renaming of the oratory after the plague, which is why the four saints are depicted here. Recently, art historian Nicola Barattini recognised the hand of the painter Zacchia da Vezzano. Zacchia, who was originally from Vezzano Ligure but trained in Florence, was a very refined active artist, above all in Tuscany. The Lucca area boasts his main masterpieces. The presence of a work by Zacchia in the province of La Spezia, his area of origin, is at present, an exception and a unique example of undeniable value.
4. On the sides of the main altar, two eighteenth-century paintings depict, respectively, the Virgin and Child with Purgatory souls and the

Madonna del Carmine with devotees and a shipwreck in the background. The latter work is signed by a painter who identifies himself as "Luchese", confirming the fact that several Tuscan craftsmen worked in Lerici, leaving tangible signs. The depiction of the stormy sea in the background is curious: the Virgin is invoked in Lerici as the protector of sailors.

5. The Holy Family with Saints Eligio and Antonio Abate (2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century), is a work initially attributed to Domenico Fiasella, known as "Il Sarzana". Currently, however, there is a tendency to attribute it to Fiasella's brother-in-law and student of Fiasella, Giovan Battista Casoni from Lerici. The choice of Saints Eligio and Antonio Abate would not be accidental: St. Antonio is invoked against plagues, while both are protectors of carters. The oratory, in fact, was located right on the new Lerici-Sarzana carriageway, today's Via Cavour, built in the seventeenth century.

