

## Pilgrims

# The Sanctuary of Saint Angela Merici of Brescia (formerly Church of Saint Afra)

*History, legend and tradition merge to tell the beginning of the Church in Brescia in the first centuries A.D. Medieval legends say that the first Christians used to meet in the upper-class villas on the Ronchi and testify that such a place was the birthplace of Christendom in Brescia. Some of the oldest churches were always built on the Ronchi, among them Saint Andrew, the first Brescian cathedral. In addition, in the fourth century, there arose the churches of Saint Apollonio, Concilium Sanctorum, and San Faustino ad Sanguinem where the Sanctuary of Saint Angela Merici now stands.*



Built on an old Christian cemetery outside the Cremona Gate, the church of San Faustino ad Sanguinem commemorated the place where Saints Faustino, Giovita and Afra were

martyred and buried. Patron saints of the town and the first to spread the faith there, they lived in about the middle of the second century. Historical and archaeological sources testify that this was the most ancient sacred site for Brescian Christians, marking a history which had begun in the late imperial era and extends until our own day.

The ancient church underwent restorations and reconstructions from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. The changes included not only structural alterations but also a different dedication of the church. In fact, in the Middle Ages, the arrival of the Dominicans in Brescia and their settlement at San Faustino ad Sanguinem involved a rebuilding of the church in Romanesque style and the change of its name to Saint Afra. After the Dominicans moved to the nearby monastery, the church of Saint Afra returned to being a parish church and was opened again for the townspeople's devotion.



In the sixteenth century, under Venetian dominion, Brescia was subject to an urban reorganization which brought back inside the city walls the religious orders who were living in the suburbs, among whom were the Lateran Canons of Saint Salvatore. The canons entered Saint Afra in 1519 and linked the title of the church with that of the monastery.

In 1580, under the commission of Abbot Ascanio Martinengo – a prominent figure in Brescian culture, belonging to the Accademia degli Erranti – Pietro Bagnadore, an architect and painter, had the old church pulled down in order to build another one with a structure more suitable for the style of that period.

The renovations which the old church underwent showed the importance given by Brescian devotion through the centuries to the place of the martyrdom of the patrons Saints Faustino, Giovita and Afra in the southern part of the town's heart: an area significant in the transformations and enlargements of the town between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

During the Second World War, the area, of military interest, was bombed and destroyed: the structure of the whole architectural complex was badly damaged. In the destruction of the church, the parish priest and many citizens who had taken refuge there died. Only the paintings, which had been previously put in a safe place, were saved.

The reconstruction work, under the direction of engineer Antonio Lechi, began in 1952 and was finished on April 10, 1954. The church was consecrated on January 27, 1956, with a new dedication to Saint Angela Merici, while the parish of Saint Afra was transferred to the neighboring church of Saint Eufemia.

