

ROME'S UNKNOWN MUSEUM OF THE HOLY GHOST **by Milton Gendel**

Designated in papal bulls over seven centuries as Apple of Our Eye, Apostolic Hospital of Our Heart, Santo Spirito in Sassia, a vast collection of edifices and treasure in the bend of the Tiber near St. Peter's, is scarcely known to Rome's visitors except those unfortunates who wind up in its emergency ward.

Yet in a city of remarkable accumulations spanning two millennia, it stands out as a major monument of the arts as well as a grand repository of civic conscience and medical science through the ages. Its historic memory as an institution, recorded on its walls in frescoes ranging from the 15th to the 18th century goes back to the 13th. But the history of the hospital and hospitality on the site is at least five hundred years older than that, while it already had a place in the chronicles of Rome in antiquity.

Nero's grandmother, Agrippina, owned a suburban villa here on the right bank of the Tiber, and it was on this land that her son Gaius, known as Caligula, built his circus. In Nero's reign St. Peter was crucified head down in the middle of the race track, having been condemned for proselytizing the Christian religion, which was held to be an anti-state activity before the Emperor Constantine, three centuries later, was himself converted. Even before the Roman state withered away, around the martyr's tomb the basilica of St. Peter's was built and, by the basilica, pilgrims from northern Europe established their colonies. They wished to be close to the relics of the Prince of Apostles, and were required to stay outside the city limits.

In the 7th and the 8th centuries the most prominent settlement was the Anglo-Saxon, which had such distinguished members and sponsors as the kings Ina and Ceadwalla of Wessex, Conrad of Mercia and Offa of East Anglia. Franks, Frisians and Lombards also founded hospices in the neighborhood, but none left so lasting a mark as the visitors from England. Borgo, a burgh, was a more or less defensible settlement; Sassia stands for Saxony or of the Saxons. The name Borgo Sassia lives on in present-day Roman topography for the area between St. Peter's and the river is still known as Borgo, while the hospital is called Santo Spirito in Sassia, or Saxia.

Godliness has not always been closely associated with cleanliness, but health itself from the most ancient times has constantly been a function of godhead. Apollo, not to go further back, in his form of Mouse God inflicted and then alleviated the plague. His son Aesculapius, a deified general practitioner, was the patron of the temple-hospitals, dream analysis and sleep therapy. Besides pagan cures in ancient times, a number of miracles performed by Christ were medical marvels, and in fact among his other titles he is styled Christus Medicus. The Crusaders, missionizing the hard way among the Infidel, along with their slings and arrows brought to the Holy Land the largest field hospitals known till their time. Knights specialized as Hospitalers organized themselves in religious orders approved by the Papacy which became the ancestors of our modern hospital system.

In Rome the Borgo Sassia hotel-hospice-hospital declined when the Norman Conquest interrupted the flow of wealthy English pilgrims, but a large new hospital was built by the Pope in 1204. Innocent III, an activist who launched crusades and created a world temporal power, was used to the idea of crowd-handling and military logistics. He knew the value of a permanent hospital with large receptive capacity and in his reorganization of Rome's health and charitable services called in a religious order devoted to the healing arts. Subtly altering the ancient Greek adage to 'A healthy soul in a healthy body', Guy de Montpellier, very likely inspired by the crusading Hospitalers of the Holy Land, named his organization the Order of the Holy Ghost. Invited to establish himself in Rome by Innocent III, he arrived from Montpellier with six followers and took charge of the new hospital. Some three centuries later the buildings burnt down and were replaced by Sixtus IV but after nine hundred years of activity the institution still bears the name of its dedication, Ospedale di Santo Spirito, and remains one of the city's major hospitals.

Richly endowed from the beginning - Innocent III got money from his English vassal John Lackland (the King John who was obliged by his barons to honor the Magna Charta) as well as from Italy Sicily and Hungary - the hospital has been a wealthy institution all through its career. In its present aspect the oldest part is like a cathedral of Renaissance medicine, with two vast naves joining at a monumental altar beneath an octagonal cupola which is one of the landmarks of the area. The "naves," are hospital wards still a long way from the aesthetics of asepsis, for they are decorated with a frieze frescoed by anonymous Roman and Umbrian painters (though one scholar has attempted to read some still lifes of apples as the signature of Melozzo da Forli's workshop). The frescoes commemorate Innocent III and his thirty-sixth successor, Sixtus IV. The time span between the two reigns corresponds to the Age of Discovery from the 12th to the 15th century which put America on the map and completed the cartography of the globe. The medieval crusading spirit had found new objectives, and part of the moral drive went to enlarge society's inner horizons, such as its modes of dealing with the sick and the unfortunate.

Sixtus left his mark on Rome, building the bridge, the library and the chapel (whose ceiling was later decorated by Michelangelo) that bear his name, but the Sistine hospital, double the size of the Innocentine structure, is the outstanding architectural work of his reign. He was ruthless in carrying out his project, ensuring supplies of ready cash by confiscating the estates of Cardinals as they died. Its exceptional character was recognized by contemporaries, who called it the Eighth Wonder Of the World, and Botticelli represented its facade in the background of his *Purification of the Leper*, in the Sistine Chapel. Several architects had a hand in the design, the principal part with the Octagon being attributed to Giovanni Pietro de' Gherarducci of Parma.

The building's 376-foot porticoed front running from the river back towards St. Peter's, and the Great Octagon, acted out in the drama of the Roman townscape - on the scale of the ancient magnificence, not yet the grand opera of the baroque generations to come - the maternal embrace of the afflicted by Church and State, still very much a single organism. The sick and the indigent entered through one of the most elegant doorways in the city worthy of an emperor's palace - a marble portal elegantly combining fluted pilasters, classical decorative motives and the arms of Sixtus IV della Rovere - which probably came from the workshop of the Lombard master sculptor and architect, Andrea Bregno.

Beside it, for night deposits, there still is, though no longer used, a bell pull and a revolving drum. Unwanted babies were pushed through, to the care of nuns devoted to the rearing of orphans and foundlings. While the mothers could thus remain anonymous, the children had an identity as wards of the institution, which saw them into adult life. If the consigner did not care to remain unknown a

receipt was given, and in all cases the child was tattooed on the right foot with the double-armed cross of Santo Spirito.

For the sick, who lay in canopied beds in the frescoed halls, flute and later organ music was played at the Octagon, to soothe and distract. The establishment also supplied meals for the indigent, and regularly sent out handcart ambulances to collect any citizens who might have fallen by the wayside.

That Italian standards of health and welfare were among the highest is confirmed by Martin Luther, who was not uncritical in his views on Italy. In January 1511 he writes; "The hospitals are well furnished, have splendid quarters, provide excellent food and drink; the staff is diligent, the doctors most learned" (*Convivial Discourses*).

In the 16th-century the church of S. Maria in Sassia was redecorated, and between it and the Sistine hospital a palace, designed by Nanni di Bacciobigio, assistant of Antonio da Sangallo the Younger in the construction of St. Peter's, was erected (1567-71) as a residence for the head and canons of the Order of the Holy Ghost. The head was a ranking prelate of the Vatican court and rejoiced in the title of Grand Master, Preceptor General, Mitred Abbot of Monte Romano and Barone della Manziana. Subsequently he was styled Commander and finally in our day President. Appropriately splendid, the palace opens on a handsome courtyard - one of four such noble interior spaces - with a baroque fountain transported from St. Peter's square when Bernini's colonnade was put up.

Here there is an old pharmacy with a great collection of apothecary jars mixed in with office machines installed by the hospital's accounting department. This sight poses the question of the destination of Santo Spirito, since one of the results of the recent national health reform was the transfer of the medical and welfare functions of the hospital to a state Local Health Unit, while the patrimony of buildings, art works and objects passed to the city government.

The office of the director of the Local Health Unit retains the pomp and the grandeur of the old prelates who presided here. Behind a rank of telephones on the desk is a large Sieneese gold-ground panel of a *Madonna and Child*. On the walls are 16th- and 17th-century landscape paintings, tapestries and marble reliefs. A few Roman statues, perhaps from Agrippina's villa, stand around, and in the deep window embrasures are bronze mortars the size of baptismal fonts. The neighboring offices are only somewhat less grand, all having a full complement of large paintings of various periods. One, occupied by secretaries and office equipment, has walls painted with an 18th-century fantasy of a garden with ruins.

Beyond there is a magnificent hall frescoed by the Zucchi brothers at the end of the 16th-century. (Shortly before the still active Banco di Santo Spirito was founded, as a guarantee of the Order's finances.) Jacopo and Francesco Zucchi, included their own portraits in the scene of Gregory XIII investing Teseo Aldrovandi as Preceptor of Santo Spirito. On the window wall a Mannerist reminiscence of Innocent III takes us back again to the founder's legend. The Pope on his throne shows his horror and dismay by gesture and expression as Tiber fisherman hold out the bodies of infants to him. The babies are colored blue to show that they are dead. The same scene by a very different and more modest 15th-century hand is represented in the frieze of the Sistine hospital, and there an inscription explains that sinful mothers ridded themselves of their unwanted babies by throwing them into the Tiber. According to contemporary accounts, the Pope dreamed that he was fishing in the Tiber

when the first cast of the net brought up 87 murdered infants, and the second 340. When he awoke after this highly circumstantial vision, he resolved to establish a foundlings' home along with the hospital.

The rest of the floor and some rooms downstairs are the seat of the medical and general library founded in 1711 by the great roman doctor Giovanni Maria Lancisi. His donation consisted of more than 25,000 volumes, including 13th- and 14th-century manuscripts and numerous incunabula. An autograph book of subscribers to the hospital's lay confraternity includes the signatures of Torquemada, John, King of Denmark, James IV of Scotland, Charles VIII and Louis XII of France, and the Emperor Maximilian, among others more modest, such as that of Andrea Carnifex, the public executioner, in 1500.

When the library was the Commander's bedroom in the 17th century the incumbent of the time had a window opened in the wall, so as to be able to look down on the hospital wards. He held that the threat of being observed at any time of day or night kept the hospital staff on its toes.

A medical collection of some distinction belonging to the Accademia Nazionale dell'Arte Sanitaria occupies a 17th-century building in the middle of the hospital complex. Comparable to the extraordinary anatomical preparations in wax of the science museum in Florence, there are 36 figures representing stages of pregnancy by the 18th-century sculptor Giovanni Battista Manfredini. Then there are medical and surgical instruments of all periods, an 18th-century pharmacy, coins, medals, statuettes and prints, as well as the museum's own library of works on medicine and public health.