

The Congregation of Holy Cross and Santa Brigida Church in Rome
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While building our library's collection on Roman churches I learned that one of them, Santa Brigida in the Piazza Farnese, was occupied by the Congregation of Holy Cross for a 37-year period during the nineteenth century. This is not widely known, and I decided to investigate the history and circumstances.

Little has been written about the church of Santa Brigida, and most is not in English. What is available often is a small pamphlet or a few pages within a more general publication. The one substantial work is Maria Antonietta De Angelis' *Santa Brigida* (Istituto Nazionale di Studi Romani, Fratelli Palombi Editori, 1991) which has three pages devoted to its occupancy by the Congregation. Many helpful primary sources are available, however, among the Holy Cross materials held at the University of Notre Dame's Archives. The Archivio Storico of the Uffici del Vicariato of the Diocesi di Roma also holds a number of relevant documents, which I have consulted only superficially so far.

The real goldmine comes from the archive at the church of Santa Brigida itself. *Dalla Cronaca dei Padri della Santa Croce* constitutes 25 pages of unpublished typescript, probably transcribed from a handwritten document. It is undated, but covers the period 1853-1868. *Dalla Cronaca* is not signed, but is filled with anecdotal details that could have been known only by the Rev. Victor Drouelle (1812-1875).

Drouelle was the Holy Cross Procurator in Rome between 1850 and 1863. He appears to have kept a journal, since an 1889 letter sent to the Very Rev. Edward Sorin (1814-1893) by Rev. Peter J. Franciscus (1850-1917), then procurator at Santa Brigida, refers to Drouelle's "diary found and bearing the date 1868." I surmise that *Dalla Cronaca* was based on that journal.

The building discussed in this presentation, the church of Santa Brigida, was named after the Swedish saint who founded the Order of the Most Holy Savior (the "Brigittines") in 1346. Saint Bridget (1303-1373) moved to Rome in 1349 and lived on the Piazza Farnese, in the building adjacent to the current church. The rule of her congregation was confirmed in 1370. When she died in Rome in 1373, the rooms in which she had lived were preserved.

Saint Bridget is best known for her *Revelations*, which became widely available around 1492, after the introduction of the printing press. Today's church

of Santa Brigida was erected in the early 1500's by Peder Månson (Petrus Magni), who later became Bishop of Västerås in Sweden. The building assumed its current exterior façade during restoration in the early 1700's, and changed hands several times over the centuries. In 1828 Pope Leo XII (1760-1829) gave the church to the Chapter of Santa Maria in Trastevere.

During the 1850's Blessed Basile-Antoine-Marie Moreau (1799-1873) was spending time in Rome, lobbying the curia for approval of the Holy Cross constitutions. He met with Pope Pius IX (1792-1878) on a number of occasions, and in 1853 resolved to open a house of studies in the city. Drouelle, who was well-connected in Rome, heard of an opportunity to move into the church of Santa Brigida. It was expensive, but a chance meeting between Drouelle and the Countess de Jurien in August 1853 offered a source of funds. After lunch at the Hotel d'Inghilterra, the wealthy French Countess pledged 10,000 francs toward the Congregation's costs of acquiring the church.

The canons of Santa Maria in Trastevere owned Santa Brigida, but the buildings had been neglected, and were being made available for a perpetual lease. The terms were an annual rent of 620 scudi, secured with a deposit of 2,000 scudi. A significant requirement of the lease was the requirement to spend an additional 4,000 scudi in building repairs over the course of its first two years.

Moreau hesitated to make such a large financial commitment, but saw the advantages of holding a property situated close to an embassy on this prominent Roman piazza. After receiving encouraging correspondence from the benefactress Countess de Jurien, he finally gave Drouelle permission to proceed with the lease on February 25, 1855.

Ready cash was in short supply, however, and Duke Marino Torlonia (1795-1865) was approached to act as guarantor for the Congregation. The Torlonia family had French origins and had helped the Holy Cross in the past. In June 1855 the Duke agreed to host a meeting at the Villa Torlonia where the lease would be signed. Canon Crociani of the Chapter of Santa Maria in Trastevere expressed reservations about the financing, however, thus offending the Duke who abruptly terminated the meeting. The lease finally was endorsed a few days later at the Vatican apartments of the Bishop Frédéric de Mérode (1820-1874).

Dalla Cronaca relates a number of anecdotes regarding people who had been living at the Santa Brigida property, which included the church itself and the adjacent buildings on each side. Some of the "tenants" had paid little or no rent, and were quite difficult to dislodge.

The most troublesome of these was a Sicilian art dealer who occupied a small shop facing the piazza and who had been accustomed to paying his rent with

paintings. When he learned of the Congregation's plans for the buildings, he offered to partially fund the needed repairs. He explained that past business dealings were weighing on his conscience, so he was willing to supply 4,600 francs toward the Holy Cross' labor costs. When that bill fell due, however, he could not pay it with cash. Instead, he offered a crate of "Old Master" paintings that Sorin could sell in America. The Sicilian did ship the crate to New York, but while it was in transit he telegraphed his business agent there with instructions not to turn it over to Sorin. The Congregation ended up with neither the promised money nor the paintings, and instead found it had assumed a large debt.

Moreau continued to envision ambitious prospects for the buildings. In his Circular Letter of May 25, 1856, written in Rome, he stated "I have decided that our house at Santa Brigida would not be a novitiate but a house of studies, and that we would send our most brilliant subjects that they take here their degrees ..."

The Congregation used Santa Brigida as a highly visible base from which to continue lobbying for the approval of its Constitutions. After the building repairs had been made, a solemn Triduum of masses and Eucharistic benedictions was held around the Saint's feast day in the fall of 1856. These events, which included an extravagant feast costing 400 francs, attracted many church dignitaries. The Constitutions won approval the following spring.

The Santa Brigida church and its two adjacent buildings had been in urgent need of repair ("everything was most wretched ... a discouraging spectacle" according to *Dalla Cronaca*). The necessary work was undertaken with a combination of hired labor and help from Vigna Pia, which was an orphanage and agricultural school given to Moreau by Pius IX in 1851. The three Holy Cross Brothers Ignace, Simeon and George supervised the Vigna Pia boys who had been drafted to help with the work.

Louis Ponnet, a French civil engineer, was living in Rome at the time, employed with the construction of iron bridges over the Tiber. He agreed to evaluate the Santa Brigida buildings and to draw up repair plans in exchange for free housing for himself and his family. Major structural work was executed on the façade and interior walls.

Decorative improvements in the church included a new rose window, obtained from the Carmelites in Le Mans, which depicted Saint Bridget receiving her Order's constitutions. The two oval windows above the high altar were fitted with the Brigittine coat of arms and the seal of the Holy Cross.

Finances continued to be a major concern, however. Early in 1856 Drouelle wrote to his compatriot Father Dubourg:

I am not in a position to honor your drafts ... I pray that you make known to the Council a deficit of 5000 fr. from the work of St. Bridget ... I do not know when I can receive from the good Countess de Jurien the 7,000 francs.

Moreau was well aware of these difficulties. In a letter of June 22, 1856 he wrote to Drouelle: "The Countess de Jurien lets me know nothing at all about the money she promised you: she complains of not having a good crop this year, but I shall pursue with her your pressing needs." In further correspondence of October 17, 1856 he wrote to Drouelle:

You would like me to help you pay for your new works; but that is impossible for me, having no money; besides I am not in your debt, as you owe me 4,000 fr. Finally, I had given orders that debts be cleared before making further repairs. I must infer that you have found resources in the Countess.

Moreau was, however, committed to improving the rooms in which Saint Bridget had lived and died. He obtained authorization from the Cardinal Vicar to solicit donations for this purpose, and collected 120 scudi. This sum was put toward the cost of laying marble flooring in the Saint's rooms.

About this time a young French painter named Jacques Émile Édouard Brandon (1831-1897) was recently arrived in Rome. He had studied art in Paris under highly-regarded masters, and at age 25 came to Italy to further perfect his craft. In September 1856 the chaplain of Rome's French garrison brought Brandon to Santa Brigida to introduce him to Moreau. The young painter asked permission to decorate the rooms of Saint Bridget with historical frescoes portraying events in her life.

Moreau made it clear that he could not pay for such work, and Brandon offered to do it for only the cost of paint. Moreau agreed on that condition, but after receiving an initial bill of 400 francs he directed Brandon to stop. The artist was fully committed to the project by then and asked to continue, covering all expenses himself.

At that point he revealed to Moreau that he personally was wealthy, and also was Jewish. (*Dalla Cronaca* states that he was "Christian at heart," however.) The city of Rome had maintained the last Jewish ghetto in Western Europe, with restrictions continuing into the 1850's, so it is understandable that Brandon had not mentioned his religion in earlier conversations. Moreau and Brandon reached a cordial agreement for the continuation of the work, after which "the room acquired its rich Baroque appearance, yet lost its ancient character of austerity and simplicity."

Brandon decorated the rooms with all manner of artworks. Most were paintings, but he sculpted a bas-relief for the front of the altar and also designed a stained glass window. Every surface was decorated, with paintings reaching up to and including the ceiling. Wall spaces between the figurative artworks were adorned with a variety of ornament, including the Brigittine coat of arms.

When preparing these works for the Saint's rooms, Brandon also painted a number of similar canvases that were intended to be taken elsewhere. Among these were *The Last Mass of Saint Bridget*, *The Death of Saint Bridget*, and *The Canonization of Saint Bridget*. He exhibited a number of these during the 1860's at the Salons in Paris, where he won a medal in 1865.

Brandon finished his work at Santa Brigida in 1863, after which he returned to Paris permanently. His later artwork focused mostly on Jewish themes. In 1874 he was one of thirty painters featured in the first Impressionist exhibition. Some of his fellow artists at that show, such as Claude Monet and Edgar Degas, subsequently became famous, but Brandon did not. He died in Paris in 1897.

Although the decorative work in the rooms of the Saint had been completed at minimal cost to the Congregation, the property was loaded with debt and ran an annual deficit. Drouelle was called to the General Council in 1860 to account for this, and eventually was recalled permanently to France where he was assigned as provincial. In 1865 Moreau tried to mortgage Santa Brigida, and a year later he was seeking an ecclesiastical purchaser at a price of 100,000 francs. In 1868 the Congregation was able to rent out some of the rooms to derive income. A number of important events in Holy Cross history, including the General Chapters of 1866 and 1868, occurred at the property.

After Sorin became superior of the order he considered various plans for the use of Santa Brigida. In 1871 he spoke of moving the Motherhouse there; a year later, he was thinking of establishing an American School of Fine Arts, along with a guest house for wealthy American women tourists. Developing such an establishment would, however, have cost at least 50,000 francs, which was a prohibitive expense.

In 1878 Sorin returned to Moreau's idea of opening a school of Higher Ecclesiastical Studies for the Congregation. This was still his plan almost a decade later when, in his Circular Letter No. 13 of June 6, 1887 Sorin spoke of a decree of 1886's General Chapter stating that "The House of Saint Bridget shall be retained, and made a House of Studies" for which "Each Province shall pay annually ... a sum of 2,000 francs." The Vatican viewed this plan favorably. John Cardinal Siméoni, Prefect, wrote that "After a careful examination of the decrees ... his Holiness has deigned to approve them ... the decision regarding the House of Sta Birgitta, in Rome, has been found worthy of special commendation."

Sorin was, by this time, closely examining the expenses of the property. A note at the bottom of an 1888 financial report states

From these figures it will be seen that 'Sta Brigida' would hardly be any profit to the Congr. To repair it would be impossible as it would require 100.000 fr. at least and then we could not be called owners of it.

Sorin asked Franciscus, who was the current procurator in Rome, to examine the precise wording of the lease. In 1889 Franciscus wrote that "The deed requires us to keep the furnishings in statu quo ... the deed reads that we have no claim whatever for the improvements made or money spent whilst residing at Santa Brigida."

After this bleak assessment the Holy Cross decided to relinquish the property. It was ceded to the Polish Carmelite sisters on October 31, 1889. A few years later, on November 15, 1892, they formally transferred the lease at a price of 72,000 lira (which one commentator called "a handsome profit over their expenses"). The Congregation had been affiliated with the property for a total of 37 years, from 1855 to 1892. The buildings changed hands again in 1931, when the "Brigittine Sisters retrieved this family patrimony." They remain there today, under the leadership of Mother Tekla Famiglietti.

The Polish Carmelite Sisters to whom the lease had been transferred remained on cordial terms with Sorin. They sent him a replica of the Madonna of Czestochowa "as a sign of perpetual friendship" which was "accepted with a grateful heart" according to its plaque. This work is on display in Notre Dame's Basilica of the Sacred Heart.

At Santa Brigida today, the marble flooring installed by the Holy Cross remains in place. The circular rose window in the façade and the two oval windows above the high altar have been replaced, however, so the Congregation's seal can no longer be discerned.

Saint Bridget is visible at Notre Dame, however. Her image is displayed in the Basilica, as one of the 114 life-sized saints portrayed in the stained glass windows obtained from the glassworks in Le Mans. Work on the Basilica commenced in 1870, just after the improvements were completed at Santa Brigida. Three Holy Cross religious were responsible for its design: Brother Charles Borromeo (Patrick Harding), the Rev. Alexis Granger, and Sorin.

During this period Sorin was collecting many items in Europe to be forwarded to Notre Dame. One prominent example is the Basilica's baroque altar, which dates to 1720. An art gallery in the Main Building is mentioned as early as 1853. One

estimable painting, called *The Madonna and Child with Saints*, was brought from Santa Brigida to Indiana, probably to display in one of those locations.

The date of *The Madonna and Child with Saints* is unknown. Some suggest it may be as old as 1385-1392; others date it to 1465; still others, after 1482. The canvas is just over two feet in height and more than five feet wide, with central figures of the Madonna and Child flanked by two female saints on the left and two male saints on the right. The female saints wear the Brigittine habit, and are identified as Saint Bridget and her daughter Saint Catherine. The two male saints appear to be princes, but their identities are a matter of speculation; they might be Saint Erik of Sweden and Saint Olof of Norway.

The Madonna and Child with Saints was at Santa Brigida in 1862, when it was seen by the Danish professor Martin Hammerich (1811-1881). At that time it was hung in a "badly lighted place" above the altar in the room of Saint Bridget, and was described as being "rather damaged." In 1868 the scholar Count Paul Édouard Didier Riant (1836-1888) could find the painting nowhere in Rome. He conducted extensive research as to its whereabouts, and in 1882 wrote in the *Bulletin de la Société nationale des antiquaires de France* that the canvas had been forwarded to Indiana where it "adorned a Catholic university." It presumably had been replaced by a new Edward Brandon artwork in 1862 or 1863.

The Madonna and Child with Saints was later discussed by Carl Bildt (1850-1931), a Swedish diplomat and member of the Swedish Academy. Bildt, who was posted in Rome during 1898-99 and 1906-20, spent considerable time researching Swedish topics in Roman archives. His book *Svenska Minnen och Märken i Rom* was first published in 1900, with a second (posthumous) edition in 1932.

Bildt wrote that the Holy Cross carried out the necessary building repairs at Santa Brigida, but then spoke disparagingly of the Congregation's later treatment of the buildings as commercial property. He did admire Edward Brandon's artworks in the rooms of the Saint, praising them as "full of earnestness and grace, serving admirably to arouse an atmosphere of respect" despite comments that some of the figures looked more Semitic than Nordic.

Regarding *The Madonna and Child with Saints*, Bildt took the Holy Cross severely to task. He declared that the painting had been "abducted" which was illegal on two grounds. First, according to the lease, the furnishings were to remain in place; and second, approval should have been requested from Italian authorities to remove the painting from the country. Bildt wrote that the painting was carried off to Chicago, which he called a "skyscrapande pig slaughtering city" where it was put on display "among sausages." He stated, however, that the Holy Cross Fathers had acknowledged their error and promised to return the painting.

The Madonna and Child with Saints was still at Notre Dame in 1934, when it was described in the "Catalog of the Wightman Memorial Art Gallery in the University Library" (*Bulletin of the University of Notre Dame*, Volume XXIX, Number 4, December 1934). Its entry notes that in the relocation from Rome to Indiana

The picture unfortunately suffered during the transportation, and was restored by an artist in Chicago: and if this restoration was to an advantage in rendering the lower part of the painting more intelligible, which was before completely indistinct, on the other hand it was evidently changed considerably in the upper part, which contains the heads of other personages ... The painting was hung in the house of St. Bridget in Rome (now a chapel), where the saint died, July 23, 1373. Pope Pius IX gave this house to the Congregation of Holy Cross, and the picture was brought to America after the founding of the University of Notre Dame.

In 1961 Rev. Léandre-M. Fréchet, the C.S.C. archivist at the Curia Generalizia in Rome, was contacted by a Mr. Oskar Eklund on behalf of the Brigidines. Fréchet subsequently wrote to Rev. Anthony J. Lauck, director of the art gallery at Notre Dame, to inquire about the painting. Lauck's reply to Fréchet on July 19, 1961 observed

I understand that the Bridgetine Sisters in Rome have requested that this painting be given to them. Apparently it once belonged to a house called Casa di Sancta Brigida in Rome. The house was given to Holy Cross years ago and I think the painting went with the house. ... I have recommended that we recommend the painting to the Bridgetine sisters soon. I am writing to Father Hesburgh about this matter today.

In his letter to Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame, Lauck writes "In the light of this urgent request from the Sisters, I would prefer to see it return to Rome." A few months later Lauck was able to inform Fréchet: "Father Hesburgh, President of the University, has manifested a willingness to give this painting to the Sisters if they should request it." Today *The Madonna and Child with Saints* hangs in the central hall of the Guest House of the Convent of Saint Birgitta at Vikingsborg, Darien, Connecticut.

A different object that came from Santa Brigida to Notre Dame is a decorative wooden screen, approximately four feet tall and three feet wide. It is richly ornamented with painted designs in blue and gold. The text of its identifying plaque reads

This golden screen is from the sanctuary of the church of St. Bridget in Rome. Through this screen, St. Bridget of Sweden used to hear mass. The church was under the care of the Congregation of Holy Cross until 1870 when

the Papal States were seized by the Kingdom of Italy. At that time Father Sorin, C.S.C. transferred this and various other treasures to Notre Dame.

That was a period of marked political unrest in Rome. Napoleon III had recalled the French garrison because of the Franco-Prussian War, leaving the Papal States unprotected. Troops from the recently-established Kingdom of Italy entered Rome on September 20, 1870. The new regime confiscated much church property, and Sorin was alarmed that Santa Brigida might suffer that fate. He brought Saint Bridget's screen to America for safekeeping, and it remains in the Basilica today.

I am intrigued by the plaque's reference to "various other treasures" and will see if I can identify additional artworks brought to Notre Dame by Sorin. Some may have stories that could help to illuminate other little-known parts of the history of the Congregation of Holy Cross.