

THE SAINTS OF THE INTRADOSES



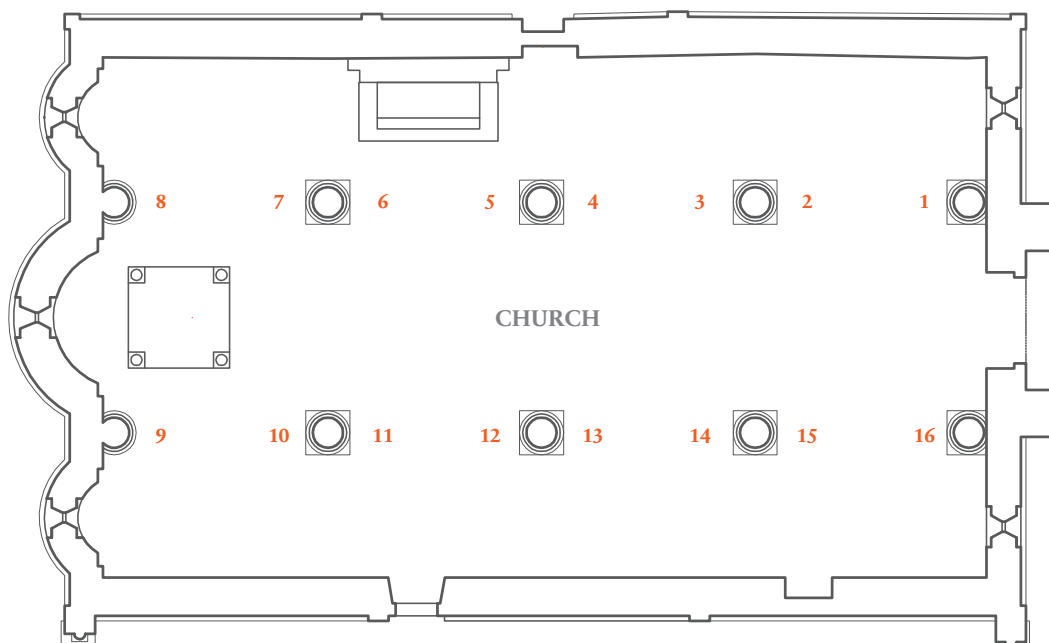
The cycle of frescoes in the Church of Santa Maria di Cerrate forms part of the Byzantine figurative culture that was widespread in southern Italy in the late 12th and 13th centuries. The iconographic scheme, the colours, the figurative formulas and the numerous inscriptions render the pictorial decoration very much an *unicum* and are indicative of the achievement of an exquisite level of artistic mastery.

What is immediately striking is the rich, variegated sanctoral of the intradoses, dating from the late 12th century: a sort of **Byzantine picture gallery of monks and hermits** accompanied by inscriptions and scrolls, with half-busts of prophets in clipei above – an expression of the monastic vocation of the site.

The decoration of the apse area revolves around the large

Ascension of Christ in the semi-dome, dating from the late 12th century, featuring pastel tones, with naturalistic figures and elements of a high pictorial quality, which make this scene one of the highest accomplishments of Byzantine painting to be found anywhere in Puglia.

The so-called **puzzle wall** is datable to the 13th century. Located in the southern nave, it was dismantled and reassembled following a collapse, perhaps between the 14th and 15th centuries, reusing the same painted stones but arranged in a random order. The well-ordered series of saints was thus broken up, leaving visitors from that time onwards to work out the correct sequence. On the northern wall, a parade of saints attributable to the early 13th century bears the traces of the **ancient mottling** technique used to ensure the adhesion of subsequent fresco decoration.



1 Unidentified

2 **Macarius of Egypt:** also known as “the Great”, he came from Upper Egypt and lived, according to the sources, in the early 4th century. As a young man he had retreated to live an ascetic life in the Scetes desert, founding there the famed Coptic monastery that still bears his name

3 **Arsenius:** known as “the Great”, he numbers amongst the most acclaimed Desert Fathers. Tutor of the children of Theodosius I until the emperor’s death in 395, he then moved to the Scetes desert, in Egypt, where he led a hermetic life until his own death circa 450

4 **Ephrem the Syrian:** considered, together with John of Damascus, to be one of the greatest hymnographers of the Virgin Mary. He was born in Nisibis in Mesopotamia (modern-day eastern Turkey) around 306. He spent most of his life there, serving as a deacon

5 **Theoktistos** (in the clipeus the prophet Isaiah)

6 **Euthymius the Great:** the most celebrated of the anchorites of Palestine. In Jerusalem at the age of just 29 he became a monk and then an anchorite, retreating to the Palestinian desert and founding numerous monasteries until his death in 473. His cult is particularly widespread in southern Italy, as evinced by a menologium in the Italo-Greek abbey of Grottaferrata (early 12th century)

7 **Onuphrius:** in the wake of Paul of Thebes, Onuphrius embraced hermeticism in the Thebaid desert, in Egypt, in the 4th and 5th century. He had a significant encounter with Paphnutius of Thebes, who mistook Onuphrius for an animal due to his long hair and beard

8 **Paul of Thebes:** known as the First Hermit, his biography was written by Saint Jerome, who composed the *Vita sancti Pauli primi eremitae* during his time in the Syrian desert of Chalcis, in the 470s. Born in Thebes, in Upper Egypt, in 229, to flee the persecutions of the emperor Decius Paul made his way to the Thebaid desert, where he sought refuge in a cave, surviving on spring water and palm fruit alone. When Paul was

approaching the end of his life, Anthony the Great visited him and, on bidding him farewell, saw the old hermit’s soul carried up to heaven by the angels (342)

9 **Anthony the Great:** an anchorite, also known as Saint Antony Abbot, he was born around the mid-3rd century to a wealthy family of Coptic Egypt; after renouncing his own possessions, he soon embraced the ascetic life, withdrawing to the desert. Written in the Coptic language, his works are rather fragmented, and are mostly incorporated in the well-known *Apophthegmata* of the Holy Desert Fathers

10 **David the Dendrite** (in the clipei: Aaron and Moses)

11 **Theodosius the Cenobiarch** (in the clipeus: David): he was born in Cappadocia around 425, and aged a little over thirty he moved to Jerusalem, where he lived first in various monasteries before withdrawing once and for all to a cave. He had several illustrious biographers, who highlighted both the saint’s long life (he died in 529 at the venerable age of 105), and his political support for the emperor Anastasius I Dicorus

12 Unidentified

13 Unidentified

14 **John of Damascus:** he was born in Damascus – hence the epithet that accompanies his name – circa 675 to an influential Arab Christian family. He received an excellent education based on the study of early classical and theological texts. He became a monk at the famed monastery of St Sabbas in Jerusalem, where he died in 749. A refined theologian and a prolific author, his works are hagiographical, exegetical and anti-heretical in nature, favouring a rigid, clear form of Christian orthodoxy

15 **Benedict**

16 **Barsanuphius of Palestine**