

# A surprising response

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to Mary 'Mother of God' beautiful again.



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*To Emilio Zandonella, a focolarino  
from Comelico, Belluno - man of the peaks,  
with the mountains in his heart,  
passionate about beauty and the arts.  
One of the architects of the reconstruction  
of the roof of the shrine of the Theotokos,  
he left suddenly for Heaven on 12 April 2024,  
while this text was being completed  
and close to being revised.*

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Back cover watercolour: Franca Danni

This booklet can also be downloaded, free of charge, from the Loppiano website

([www.loppiano.it](http://www.loppiano.it)). It is available in Italian and English.

People's generosity. The media always place particular emphasis - and thank goodness - on the generosity of so many people, especially the generosity that manifests itself, immediately and magnanimously, after natural disasters, extreme weather catastrophes, earthquakes or tsunamis. At the centre of the donors' concern are the people, who suddenly find themselves in a state of serious and enduring need because they have often lost much or all, of the fruits of lifelong works. Disaster-stricken homes, ruined buildings, damaged infrastructure, on the other hand, remain in the background, because they are not a priority in the hearts of those who send money.

However, this story is 'only' related to a severely damaged roof, albeit a vast and imposing one, of a place of religious worship. And that is why this little story is unprecedented, given the scale of the effects produced and their significance.

For if it had been a high-precision mechanism, perfectly tested, with properly oiled gears and ready to go into action within a thousandth of a second, it could not have worked so well, as we have seen, to our amazement.

What happened was that only a couple of hours after the roof disaster at the Loppiano shrine, on that morning of 18 August 2022, the first phone calls and messages had reached people in the 'little town' - including those in charge of the finances - asking where they could send an offering, a contribution, a bank transfer to help out.

The power of images! Indeed, the photos of the torn roof left Loppiano immediately after the whirlwind with the intention of sharing such a devastating event and experiencing such pain together. Through messaging apps and social networks, the news had literally spread halfway around the world, cau-

sing dismay and sadness, and had returned to the inhabitants of the 'little town' transformed into magnanimous offerings.

This had been amplified by the publication on the website of Loppiano ([loppiano.it](http://loppiano.it)), in the early afternoon of 18 August, of a report on what had happened. The text explained, in great detail, the consequences of the disastrous event.

### The heavily damaged Theotokos



So, let's rewind the tape to tell the story from the beginning. "Also Loppiano," the communication office announced, "was hit by the devastating bad weather that affected the Valdarno area and Tuscany in general this morning, 18 August. Around 11.00 a.m., a whirlwind of considerable power hit the 'little town', causing serious damage above all to the shrine dedicated to Mary Theotokos."

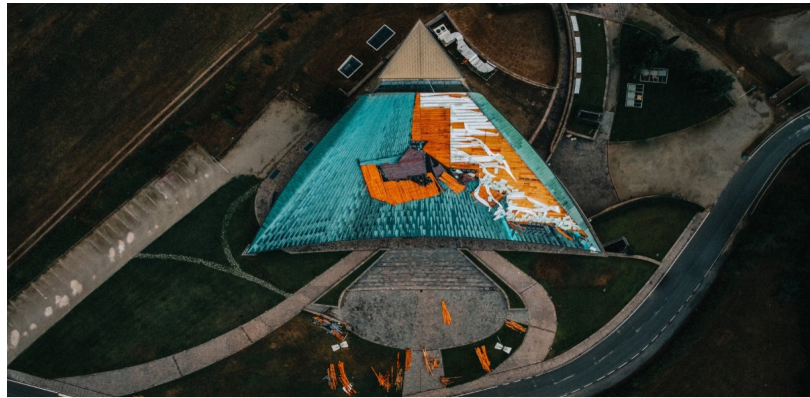
The text goes on to report the details of the incident: "More than half the roof of the church was ripped off and swept away. The force of the wind blew away not only the



copper roofing, but also the underlying layers of the roof and the insulation. The wind also hit the large windows on the right side of the building. Two of the six stained glass windows (weighing 800 kilos each), dedicated to the life of Mary, were torn away and shattered'.

Finally, an initial analysis stated that: "Everything happened in a very short time and what remains is a bleak picture, destined to worsen as the expected rain in the coming days will fall inside the building. It will take about ten days - these are the initial estimates of the technicians - to make the church safe, after removing the debris on what is left of the roof"





## A terrible blow for the inhabitants



"Oh my God! Not again?" the inhabitants remarked spontaneously, as soon as they heard the news of the ripped-off roof. The expression on their lips expressed a pain that shattered the belief that the roof had been made safe once and for all after its reconstruction. Eleven months earlier, in fact, a similar whirlwind had torn off the copper roofing on the right side of the roof over an area of 340 square metres, while all around the worst affected part the copper sheets had been bent or damaged.

It was the afternoon of Sunday, 26 September 2021, and the 5.00 p.m. mass, the children's mass, was being celebrated in the shrine. "We saw a big storm and felt a very strong wind blowing against the windows on the right, like a blizzard," recounted one of the mothers present, "and then a lot

of water started to pour down from the roof into the church.” Firms specialised in roof repairs, coordinated by the technical office of Loppiano, had immediately secured the interior of the shrine to prevent the rain from entering and allowing the church to be accessible. The repair work lasted three months, and on Christmas Eve itself, just before the Midnight Mass, the scaffolding placed on the right side of the Theotokos was dismantled.

### The effects of the next day

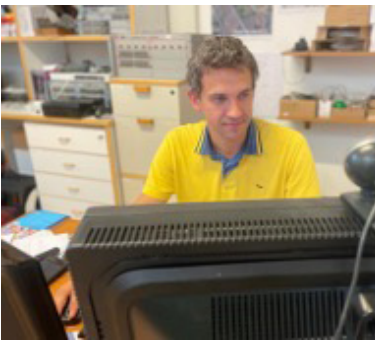
The event that had just taken place plunged everyone back into even deeper bewilderment than the mood of September the year before. But on the morning of 19 August, very encouraging and unexpected signs arrived. The first gestures of generosity arrived in the Loppiano bank account. S.-T. is the surname of the first donor, with a sum of €100. G.G. is the second, with a payment of the same amount, and then G. O., who contributes €50. Thirteen others follow, with a minimum donation of €30 euros and a maximum of €2,000, for a total, on the first day, of €4,280.

An amazingly prompt reaction to this painful news! Evidently, when the heart is moved, it activates an immediate reaction and sets the wallet in motion. Those first 16 benefactors were an eloquent and tangible response. In fact, the communiqué recalled that “with immediacy the news and, above all, the images of the severely damaged shrine spread, provoking an immediate and formidable wave of messages of dismay, solidarity and participation. The inhabitants of the little town give heartfelt thanks for such an outpouring of affection, further proof of how much Loppiano is in the hearts of so many people”.

## Two eyewitnesses

To see the roofing of the Marian shrine torn off so badly was a blow to those who know Loppiano. Imagine what it was like for those who live or were born there. All the more so if they had actually seen the approaching fury of the wind. "From my office I heard the sound of a strong wind that seemed to announce a storm. I went outside, even though it was pouring with rain, and the gusts of wind increased in intensity," says Gianpaolo Filisetti, of the Loppiano's IT office, which is based in the auditorium next to the shrine. "I saw that the clouds above the church started to turn in on themselves, the wind and rain increased in intensity, so I went back inside. After a while we heard a loud roar, like a door slamming extremely violently. I went out again and saw the shrine with part of the roof ripped off. The whole thing lasted no more than 15 minutes."

One of those who were in the church at the worst time was Lorenzo Starace, who does various jobs in the building. "I was at the door of the sacristy when I heard the growing noise of the wind. The force increased and seemed to push the church from the right side. Suddenly there was a very strong



wind and a huge roar." Two stained glass windows of the series dedicated to Mary had fallen. The wind came inside and spun everything around. I did not know what was going to happen. I looked out into the churchyard and saw shreds of the roof flying. It's a good thing no one was walking past the church! I was petrified, shocked to see the stained glass windows shattered and in pieces." Catching his breath, Lorenzo continued the story, reliving it. "I thought I would be hit by the roof. I feared the worst, but I said to myself, 'What better place can I be in than here?' and I stood next to the painting of Mary. It must have been about ten minutes from the collapse of the stained glass windows to the end of the storm, but it seemed endless. Meanwhile the rain was lashing down. I shook myself and went to get the hoover. Immediately some people arrived to help me. Then more and more arrived. Inhabitants, but also guests, who helped both inside the church and in the large churchyard to remove the scattered shreds of the roof.

### The generosity on the first weekend

Between Saturday 20 and Monday 22, the bank account registered no less than 40 transfers and the audience became international, even intercontinental. From China, €2,850.28 arrived, while Chinese young people from Shanghai sent €475.83. In Singapore, the children and young people of the Focolare - the so-called gen 4 and gen 3 - first credited €377.97 and then €708.78. From Italy came the smallest donation of those three days (€25) and the largest (€8,000).

The money that arrived from Singapore is particularly significant. It was really moving to see the readiness and generosity of the gen 4 and gen 3 of the island situated between Asia and Oceania. Gab and Iggy and their friends can play violin

and cello, piano, ukulele and drums. So they organised small music concerts, inviting family and friends, after explaining the purpose. The audience was large and supportive.

### Spared homes near the church

Dangerous bits of roofing and copper sheets were thrown a few dozen metres away. They could have hit passing cars and people on foot at that dramatic juncture with disastrous consequences. But fortunately, no one was in the area. Even the buildings next to the church, inhabited by private citizens, were neither hit nor lapped by the fury of the wind. Pure chance or stroke of luck, one might say. But, at the same time, one might think that Mary wanted to take all the devastating power on her own house, in order to spare the neighbours' houses.

### Creativity in action

Those who are far away want to be close and participate in a practical way. And they wish to help support the immediate action needed to repair the damage. There were all sorts of initiatives. "Seeing the shrine in Loppiano devastated made us suffer. How many unforgettable moments we have experienced, how many resolutions have blossomed there!" With this state of mind, Noemi, Cristina and Franca, living in Parma, Emilia-Romagna, turned into pastry chefs. They got other people involved and so flour, butter, sugar and fresh eggs arrived free of charge. On Sunday 21 August, they went to the shrine at Fontanellato to offer the faithful their 30 cakes. By 10.00 a.m., there was no trace of the cakes. Proceeds: €650 for the Maria Theotokos church.

## Broken and shattered windows

The shattered stained glass windows were part of the cycle on the life of Mary. In particular, the one depicting "Mary, Living Word" and the last in the series, with the image of the Assumption. Chiara Lubich described Mary, all clothed in the Word, as follows: "White background, immense, almost a chasm that contains the Word that is Christ and in it she sinks, light in light; this very high silence... of the eternal song of Paradise".



And then, 'The Assumption', Mary reaching her final stage in Heaven: the pure and joyful shaded colours from dark (bottom) to light (top) reproduce the 'Glory of Mary'.

Dina Figueredo, a Portuguese artist and creator of the stained glass windows, was in sunny Paris that morning of 18 August. Her mobile phone lit up. She received photos of the 'open' shrine, with details of the stained glass windows on the ground and shattered.





'Her' stained glass windows, the ones she created, flooding the church with light, reflecting in a rainbow of colours. Tamara Pastorelli, head of Loppiano's communication office rang her. "At that moment," says Dina, "everything stopped. I was devastated. As if something huge inside me had collapsed. My legs wanted to go to Loppiano... But then, in that stillness, a great peace invaded me. My thoughts went to what we have built with the Ave Art Centre, with the inhabitants of Loppiano: Jesus in the midst is worth more than all the works of art!".

### A bishop at San Benedetto Hall

With the church unfit for use, a quick and practical solution was adopted to celebrate Mass. The San Benedetto Hall, a place for offices, meeting spaces and a gymnasium, became a temporary venue for religious celebrations, with the stable presence of Jesus in the tabernacle. On Friday and Saturday, the work of transformation took place, with the removal of everything necessary. So, on Sunday 21 August, mass was celebrated St Benedict's Hall, for the first time for many years. The visit to Loppiano by Bishop Marco Prastaro of Asti, toge-

ther with about fifty young people, had been planned for some time for that weekend.

It was going to be a sort of 'inauguration' of the hall, but not without sadness. Instead, the presence of a bishop to celebrate Sunday mass made everything different. "We inaugurate this space for Eucharistic celebrations," he said very simply. A beginning blessed by a successor of the apostles is a very significant sign. As if to say, the Church is close to this church, it shares the pain of this community, it participates in this time of trial, it supports with common prayer the efforts to cope with the damage and to rebuild, it encourages the inhabitants to accept from the loving (and mysterious) hands of the Father this action of the forces of nature.

The presence of a bishop was particularly welcome. 'As if Jesus,' some of the residents confided, 'wanted to emphasise that the sanctuary of stones is uninhabitable, but the living shrine, which is the little town with its inhabitants, is standing and continues to attract many people.' For the inhabitants, the certainty is that the real shrine does not close. Far from it. Because it is first and foremost made up of 'living stones', of people whose faith has been put to the test, but who are sure that the storm they have endured urges them to open up more to the breath of the Spirit in order to be a Gospel town.

It is no coincidence that the shrine was only built in 2004, 40 years after the foundation of Loppiano. It could have been, in fact, the first building to be erected in a place of Gospel witness. Instead, Chiara Lubich indicated without hesitation: "Let us build, not with stones but with people, a shrine to Mary. Let us all walk to become a little Mary, so that those who come here breathe her air, like pilgrims who go in search of her and do not find her in the stones, in the walls, but in the people."

## The map showing the damage

As if the devastating wind on the morning of 18 August was not enough, the destructive work in Loppiano continued into the night with a further rainstorm and a hailstorm with hailstones the size of golf balls. Homes and workplaces, communal facilities and various rooms were damaged. The map reveals that the bad weather hit almost all areas of the little town.

In the workshops, skylights and tensile structures were damaged, resulting in water penetrating the premises. The roofs of several houses were affected, with tiles broken or carried away and water seeping in. Solar panels were cracked, plastic canopies and shelters blown away. Numerous trees were blown down by the wind, many others were damaged.

Water and lightning knocked out or burnt out electrical installations, street lighting sections, power supplies and household appliances. The exceptional hailstorm also produced its visible effects on dozens of cars.

Theotokos secured

The first job involved salvaging and cleaning both the roof and the surroundings of the church of all the shreds and debris from the roof. Then the work of securing the building was completed with the insertion of a special sheath, as a temporary waterproof protection, in the uncovered part of the roof, equal to one third of the total area. These jobs were essential so as to prevent any further damage to the interior of the building.

Concurrently, work was done to make a plan for the reconstruction of the church, based on an assessment of what happened. Indeed, the main job was to rebuild the new roof based on current regulations, which have changed substantially over the 20 years since the church was built. Indeed, the destructive

effects of climate change in recent years must be taken into account, as well as incorporating the results of the continuous evolution of building techniques.



The stained glass windows on the right hand side of the sanctuary were also being studied for a project to strengthen the supporting frames. A team of engineers is working on the basis of calculations and simulations derived from the thrusts produced by violent gusts of wind.

### Donations – the flow increases

On Tuesday, August 23, the bank account registered a record number of donors, as many as 76. Contributions also come from various European countries, from Germany to Poland, from Luxembourg to Hungary. The smallest contribution was €20 euros, the largest €3,000. The most common amount was €100, but offers of 200, 300 and 400 euros were also numerous. The total sum amount of €26,141.62 was largest in the first five days and remains the peak of donations in a single day.

On August 24, 33 transfers arrived at the bank, from various countries. They range from €10 to €5,000, totalling €11,661.15. On the 25th, there were 30 donors, with the largest donation being €5,000. The total amount on the day was €9,930. The 26th signals a particular feature: the number of donors is smaller (25) but the numbers of credits go up, three of €500, four of €1,000, one of €1,900 and one of €3,000. The total came to €12,300.

The report of transfers that arrived in the bank account on Monday, August 29, also included donations on Saturday and Sunday. There were 32 credits, coming not only from Italy but also from South Korea, Mexico and various European countries. One offering of €10,000 stands out, but there were also three of €1,000, one of €1,760, and one of €1,800. The total came to €20,972.19.

The desire to help raise funds for Theotokos unleashed the imagination of many local communities of the Focolare Movement. Such is the sharing that they sent news to the little town. Here is what is reported in the fortnightly newsletter Loppiano Notizie. "In Mugello, north of Florence, the Focolare community asked, 'What can be done?'" The answer was very practical. On Sunday, August 28, a stall was set up with a variety of items, all offered by generous people. Around 3.00 p.m. a big storm was coming. Everything should have been dismantled, but the bad weather stopped a few kilometres short of the town square. The "sale" continued and, between purchases and offerings, €760 were raised for Loppiano. The "Empoli Mugello" vacation group, returning from a trip to the mountains, also contributed, delivering €110 euros, the result of a collection among themselves."

## The first dressing of the wounds

The very long telescopic arm from the lorry towered over the torn roof of the sanctuary like a giant lightning rod. The enormous wounded man is undergoing a major operation. Technicians who carried out the inspections agreed on the hypothesis that the roof had been lifted by suction, with a force that was very unusual for Tuscany.



Also specialists from the two leading companies in Italy in the field of reconstruction came to inspect the roof to determine what the best remedial action would be.



## The mood of the residents

Never has there been such a strong desire for sunny days as in those days here in Loppiano. The weather forecast was followed constantly. If it threatened to rain, the blood pressure of the whole town rose. If it rained, the people were very worried, because water entering the church could then seep into the auditorium, causing further extensive damage. Therefore, the church was at the centre of everyone's thoughts, conversations, and hopes. They kept a check on the various types of work being done. Those passing by often slowed down or stopped to take note of the progress of the work, take photos or ask for information.

"I thought that in this wounded roof," writes Luigino, a resident, "in a closed and cordoned off church, in this pain there was also a message. In that sloping plane of blue, aged copper, in the wood beneath it, the brown of humanity, now showing its wounds, of the dust of the path, of the scourge of the abandoned and desolate." Alessandra and Luke add, "While the church as a building may suffer the ravages of time and weather,

let us never forget that the true Church is us and not our buildings." From the permanent residents to the students of Sophia there was immediate and generous willingness to set up teams of at least ten people to take turns going into action whenever it rained, including at night, to collect water with special vacuum cleaners and prevent further flooding of the shrine.

### The extraordinary generosity continues

It was 12 days since news of the disaster spread, but the wave of generosity was still high on August 30. There were 34 donors, including some from Eastern European countries. The small amounts were the most numerous and the most significant, because they revealed the desire to contribute even by those with modest family budgets. The offering of €50 has the same noble dignity as the three of €1,000, the one of €1,200, and the highest of €2,000. The total amount for the day amounted to €17,605. Far more comes the next day, the last day of August. There were 21 donations and they came from European countries as well, and the offering, from Italy, of €15,000, the largest donation for Theotokos, stands out. Day 31 saw a total of €20,425.

As August came to an end, the desire to give, thanks for the generosity of so many people towards the little town grew. We don't have any details of these donations because there were no mobile phone numbers or e-mail addresses for residents to send their heartfelt thanks. This means that the only way to express gratitude to the benefactors, was through prayer and remembrance at the daily mass. Who could have imagined that from August 19 to 31 donations would have arrived from 325 private citizens, families, organizations, communities, parishes? Who could have predicted that the unexpected total of €141,796.3



would be reached? When this is divided by the number of transfers, it indicates a formidable average generosity of €436.50 per donor. An astounding result, an expression of unreserved love for the shrine and for the international town - truly international also because of the geography of the origins of the contributions.

### Echoes in the media

In August, there were no reports of churches or places of worship being hit by bad weather. The story of Theotokos, therefore, spread and appeared on the online sites of the Tuscan media, on the pages of daily and weekly newspapers and on social networks. The Valdarno media covered it, as well as the daily newspaper *La Nazione* and the weekly of the region's dioceses, *Toscana Oggi*.

### An unusual two-tone cover

It looks like a very original two-tone roof if you look at it from afar. But if you get closer to the shrine, it becomes appa-



rent that the black part on the right half of the roof constitutes a gigantic patch of over 400 square metres on the wound. The protective waterproof sheathing placed on the roof served to secure the building and prevent rain from flooding the building. The numerous downpours that followed stressed the protection, so much so that seepage into the church occurred in some places.

### The meteorologist's opinion

The weather on 18 August had been truly extraordinary. This was confirmed by the expert, interviewed by Tamara Pastorelli for the Loppiano website. "It was exceptional because it was no longer a single thunderstorm, but a system of several storms, a hundred square kilometres wide, that started to move quickly, all at once, from Corsica in the same direction, involving the Tuscan coast and inland areas, with winds even exceeding 100-120 kilometres per hour," explained Tommaso Torrigiani Malaspina, researcher and meteorological forecaster at the LaMMA Consortium, an environmental monitoring laboratory founded by the Tuscany Region.

"These types of thunderstorm systems are not so common over the Mediterranean," the researcher clarified. "They were probably possible this year as a result of a summer with much higher than normal temperatures. This allowed much more energy to accumulate than in other years. The Mediterranean is one of the areas recognised as the hottest and most critical, where climate change is having the clearest impact. So, for the future, we expect, among many other consequences, an increase in droughts and extreme events." Torrigiani Malaspina also pointed out that "the orographic conformation of the land can certainly have a great influence. Perhaps Loppiano is located

in an environment of hills that channel the wind and favour the occurrence of these extreme phenomena. Two weather events in one year are probably still not proof, but they offer clear indications.”

### The flow of donations in September

Ten donors open the month of September and donations continued to arrive from abroad. The amount on 1 September reached €3,206.72, the following day it rose to €16,355.50, thanks to the contribution of 22 donors and an individual donation of €10,000. On the following days, the amounts range from €450 to €2,000, from €3,275 to €8,377, to €8,209. On the 15th, contributions particularly from Hungary totalled €8,600, while on 16 September, the highest single transfer of all donations for the roof renovation arrived from Switzerland, i.e., at the euro exchange rate, €16,418.68.

On the 19th, one month after the first contributions arrived, an outstanding balance sheet can be drawn up: there were 472 donors and the amount paid in was €219,329.21, with an average amount per donation of €464.70. The month of September recorded a total of 196 donations for a total paid out of €97,515.40, or an average of €497.57 per donation, which is even higher than in August, when an average of €436.50 was recorded. The generosity was not at all affected by the passage of time since the news had broken.

### A lot of professional expertise at hand

There was certainly no lack of generosity. Professional skills too were made available to help the shrine. Various types

of specialists phoned and wrote: from engineers to architects, from experts with various qualifications to building material experts. All were willing to collaborate, also remotely. All were ready to go to Loppiano for an initial inspection. All of them made clear that any work they did would be completely free of charge.

As if this were not enough, a mixed group of professionals from Campania, moved by their love for the shrine, arrived at Loppiano in a minibus to see for themselves what had happened and to understand on the spot how they could help. All these people were listened to by the members of the technical office of Loppiano, who drew up an accurate list and then made a selection in order to form the team of experts with all the competencies and skills needed to help the people of the area.

### The crisis unit

In the meantime, those in charge of Loppiano informed the focolares in Italy and the 'friends of Loppiano' on 2 September of the need to find a special type of expert, namely engineers with specific skills in glulam structures, with which the roof of the sanctuary was built. The idea was born to set up a group with the aim of establishing priorities in terms of work to be done, coordinating the various operations, and acting as support to the technical office of Loppiano. Usually, these teams are known as 'crisis units'. But this definition, while fully expressing the real situation, did not fully manifest the spirit with which the inhabitants were experiencing the situation. So, partly jokingly, partly not, the group called itself 'Unity in Crisis', consisting of those responsible for Loppiano and representatives of the technical, economic and communication aspects.

A detailed survey of the damage suffered in every part of Loppiano - from the workshops to the Sophia University Institute buildings - had already been started in order to have a detailed and complete picture. At the same time, the degree of urgency of the work to be done to ensure maximum safety was also defined. Finally, the effectiveness of all the computer networks connecting Loppiano internally and with the outside world was also ascertained.

"Unity in Crisis" also took on board some doubts and perplexities, which had reached the group's members, concerning the technical and construction solutions related to the reconstruction of part of the roof that had taken place a few months earlier. Every hesitation had to be dispelled in the most evident and transparent way. Otherwise, a shadow would have been cast over the new operation, the esteem in which Loppiano is held would have suffered, and donor confidence would have been compromised.

In other words, experts from outside the design team of Loppiano were needed. Examination of the individual profiles received led to the selection of the engineers, Maurizio Orlando, professor of civil, building and environmental engineering construction techniques, and Marco Pio Lauriola, specialist in glulam structures, both from the University of Florence. They were entrusted with the mandate to validate 'externally' both the causes and reasons for the damage and the work that needed to be done. Above all, they would have to validate the reconstruction project and, in the end, the final result of the work.

A team of engineers at the bedside of the sick person

Thus, the team of engineers and technicians, together with the technical office of Loppiano, met to carry out a thorough inspection of the shrine on 28 September. The characteristics of the existing structure were checked and calculations were made regarding the increased wind stress on the building compared to the past.

These steps were necessary to complete the work on the design of the so-called 'roofing package', which would ensure that the roof would be absolutely strong enough to cope with extreme weather, with fixings and anchorages adapted to the increased wind force. The project also included measures to considerably increase thermal insulation, so as to also promote the greatest possible energy savings.

### No weddings

Among the side effects of the disaster - and not insignificant for those affected - were the weddings that had been planned to take place. The choice of the shrine for the celebration of weddings responds to spiritual, emotional, environmental, and aesthetic needs, such as those of the three couples who were to be married in September and October in Theotokos. Among them, two weddings involved a boy and a girl born and raised in Loppiano, children of families from the little town. They were able and willing to adapt in order not to leave Loppiano, finding their solution in the parish church of San Vito (the parish of Loppiano) and in the courtyard of Villa Eletto, an elegant building in the little town.

## Mass media

*On 27 September, SIR, the national religious information agency published an accurate report on the situation of the roof of the church, with the headline "Bad weather: Loppiano, part of the roof of the shrine of Maria Theotokos torn off. 300 square metres of roof literally sucked away by the wind"<sup>1</sup>.*

## The October grape harvest

Attention and participation in the story of the Marian shrine did not wane in the month of the traditional grape harvest. Weeks had passed since the roof had been uprooted, but the drive to contribute to the reconstruction had not waned. The donations number 56 and the amounts show, as always, a variety of economic conditions, with the most precious sums being the smallest and the altruism of the five who contributed €1,000, one with €1,500, two with €2,000, one with €4,500, one with €5,000. The total amount reached in October was €33,253.60, with a daily average of €1,072.70, while the average value per donation was €593.80.

## The Vatican's attention

News of the roof flying off also reached the small state where Pope Francis resides. Evidence of this is the article published on 19 October in Vatican News, by journalist Adriana Masotti, with the title "Work in progress in Loppiano to re-

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.agensir.it/quotidiano/2021/9/27/maltempo-loppiano-divelto-parte-del-tetto-del-santuario-maria-theotokos-300-mq-di-copertura-letteralmente-risucchiati-dal-vento/>

store beauty and safety to Theotokos". The article accurately explains what has happened in the previous two months and reports the extensive interview with Mariateresa Fumi Maffoni, co-responsible for Loppiano<sup>2</sup>.

### Generosity in November

The flow of donations arriving from those who have the love and memory of Loppiano in their hearts continued uninterrupted. There were 26 donors, including from Thailand (€13,300). The total sum was €27,870.10. They were also the fruit of collections in the local Focolare communities or the result of initiatives with 'sales' of food, sweets and objects. At least this is what we have been told through reports sent to Loppiano to inform them of the creativity behind a sum sent.

Take, for example, what they wrote from Milan. "What better time, if not Christmas, to encourage the generosity of so many," asked those of the Focolare community in the South Milan area, thinking of the serious damage suffered by Theotokos. "The church is part of our family. We had to help," was the impulse of the heart upon hearing the news of the storm damage. And the young people had been the driving force from September. And here is the title (Together for Loppiano), the music group of the show (I Meridiana), the place (Oratorio di Rozzano), the date (3 December 2023).

"In just a few days, the poster, the programme to book online, and the program of the show were ready. Covid also arrived, which created some problems for the organisation of the 'aperitif.' On 3 December, there was heavy rain, many

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.vaticannews.va/it/chiesa/news/2022-10/loppiano-santuariomaria-theotokos-focolari-nubifragio-italia.html>



people had Covid, the drummer injured a hand, but nothing stopped them. The show began with a connection from Loppiano. Two Gen talked about the experience in Sophia and the life of the Gospel. They spoke about about the situation at Theotokos and the work in progress. Then there was the music and a tasty aperitif, with the joy of many meeting each other again after two years. "So much work and tiredness, but in the end so much contentment. The fruit is also a nice little sum of euros, sent for the work on the shrine."

13 December 2022, the start of the artistic renaissance

A huge patch had been placed on the roof, with the application of a kind of black waterproof sheath to protect the interior of the church from the rain. Then something else happened which restored hope.

On 13 December, the two stained glass windows on the life of Mary, once again created by Portuguese artist Dina Figueiredo, were installed. The thunderous and destructive wind that had ripped them apart and shattered them in August was countered in December, four months later, by the light breeze of Beauty, which returned to take up residence there, on the right side of the church, with Mary - the authentic and effective mistress of the house, where, with a more robust supporting framework, the final stained-glass window depicting the Assumption lifted up towards Paradise returned to indicate to all travellers the goal of Heaven, which can also be reached with the body.



### The long-awaited news

Then there was the most beautiful Christmas present for the inhabitants of Loppiano and for those in the surrounding area and from further afield who have a spiritual reference point in the Marian shrine - the reopening of the church

on Christmas Eve! "The church can be safely reopened," explained engineer Gaetano Parisi, of Loppiano's technical office, "because all the unsafe parts have been removed and the checks of the load-bearing structure, that is, the large beams, visible from inside the church, and also the secondary beams and purlins, have been completed. We ascertained that the entire structure underneath the roof that had been destroyed by the wind was not damaged." It took a long time, because all the verification operations were conducted by an engineering firm specialising in the field and under the supervision of two experts (professors from the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Florence) from outside Loppiano's technical office.

They returned to the church for Christmas, even though it was only a temporary reopening and the right-hand sector of the church could not be used. But the church was reopening, and the placement of the two refurbished stained glass windows was a decisive junction. "We can thus guarantee the use of the church until the end of March 2023," said architect Elena Di Taranto of the Loppiano technical office, "because next April we would like to start work on rebuilding the roof. The timing will also depend on the weather, which may not allow the intervention of specialists for a particularly accurate work on such a vast and steeply sloping surface". "We foresee four months of work," specified the industrial expert Emilio Zandonella, of the Loppiano technical office. "The roof, with its copper sheets that will be partly recovered, should be finished by the end of July."

## First visit of the new bishop, but the shrine is still closed

There is no doubt that Bishop Stefano Manetti of Fiesole, in whose diocese the Mariapolis is located, already felt at home in Loppiano. He had been to Loppiano several times in recent months, both for meetings and to celebrate masses for various groups - from the Neocatechumenate to Communion and Liberation, from Scouts to a conference of priests from Tuscany. He was also present at the inauguration of the academic year of the Sophia University Institute. On these occasions he was able to see the progress of the work on the roof structure and the new windows. But this was his first real meeting with the inhabitants of the little town, which, significantly, took place in Advent, on 16 December.

"I place on the altar my gratitude to the Lord for the gift that is this reality for the diocese of Fiesole," said the bishop at the beginning of the Eucharistic celebration, held in the auditorium. In his homily, Bishop Manetti spoke on the theme of light, taking his cue from the Gospel in which Jesus speaks of John the Baptist. "He is an excellent witness. Jesus speaks of his witnesses who opened his way in the hearts of men." And immediately he made a precise reference: "These words in this place cannot but revive in all of us the memory and gratitude for the special gift of God for our time that was Chiara Lubich. She was a special witness of God. She is a lamp that burns and allowed the Lord to love through her heart." He added: "Renata Borlone is also another witness. The bishop had visited her tomb of the Servant of God, who was co-responsible for Loppiano until her death in 1990, before the mass.

Referring to Loppiano, he commented: "This reality, which the Lord has raised up, continues to burn and shine to help us on our way, sometimes difficult as in this present



time, but which has on its side the creativity, strength, gentleness, tenderness, mercy and loving power of the Holy Spirit.” An hour-long presentation of Loppiano and its history followed the mass. Then, Bishop Manetti's concluding greeting, referring to Chiara Lubich's intuition about Loppiano: “I was struck by the fact that the inspiration behind this first little town was St Benedict. Benedictine monasteries were islands, well-circumscribed microcosms. Loppiano has no walls. It is a powerhouse of energy, of God's grace. Just as Benedict made culture for Europe, so too this reality, as I have heard, produces culture, by the grace of God. It was a nice surprise.”

### The end-of-year sprint

The pre-Christmas period had not distracted minds, nor concentrated them solely on buying gifts for family, relatives, and friends. And indeed, there was a rush of selfless goodness in December to close out the year 2022. There were 31 donors from many destinations, including Beijing and Taiwan, with transfers of up to €3,500 and €4,670. The total for December reached €22,068.

A quick survey of such a current of generosity allows us to summarise that, from 19 August to 31 December 2022, the donors - also collective entities, such as groups, communities, parishes, etc. - were 636 and paid in a total of €322,503.41, with an average of €507.10 per transfer. Truly, an astonishing response!

### 1 January 2023 extensive press coverage

The first day of the year is World Peace Day, established by Pope Paul VI in 1968. On the same date, a memorial dedicated to Our Lady was already celebrated in the 7th century, but with the liturgical reform of the Roman rite in 1969, the feast of Mary Mother of God (Theotokos) was moved to 1 January, becoming a solemnity. So, for Loppiano it is a special moment because of this double significance. The moment also accompanied by the publication of an in-depth article with numerous photos on the misadventures of the roof of the Theotokos in "Maria con te" (Edizioni San Paolo), the first weekly magazine dedicated to Our Lady. The article is also enriched by a significant two-page interview with the theologian Piero Coda.

### The project is completed

In February, the project was complete in all its details. Thus, three types of intervention were planned, as the members of the technical office of Loppiano explain. First operation, "the complete removal of the remaining external part of the roof, the stability of which appears to be compromised, because the strong gusts of wind have damaged the entire

roof, lifting and bending the copper sheets and jeopardising the underlying structure. This will be followed by the revision and repair of all the elements that make up the finishing package, including the portion of roofing remaining." Finally, the "complete reconstruction of the ventilation package with the subsequent covering in copper sheets" will be carried out.

In the Certified Notice of Commencement of Activities of 14 April 2023 (SCIA Prot. no. 16.354), communicated to the Council of Figline and Incisa Valdarno, news is conveyed of the imminent start of the "restoration and conservative renovation of the Maria Theotokos shrine in Loppiano". The designer and director of works for the architectural works is architect Elena Di Taranto, while the designers of the structural works are engineers Alessandro Bondi and Andrea Tellini. The direction of the structural works is entrusted to engineer Gaetano Parisi, who also provides safety coordination during both the design and execution phases. The site manager for the client - Loppiano - will be industrial expert Emilio Zandonella. There are two firms carrying out the work: 'Vivere il legno' and 'Idroflorence'. Finally, as stated at the time, the supervision of the structural project is carried out by two external experts, Prof. Ing. Maurizio Orlando and Prof. Ing. Marco Pio Lauriola, professors in the Faculty of Engineering in Florence.

17 April 2023, roof reconstruction begins

What a surprise! During the Easter Vigil Mass, just before the offertory, Mariateresa Maffoni, one of the three people in charge of Loppiano, stood at the ambo of Theotokos. In front of her was a church packed with faithful and others (who

knows how many) connected via live streaming. "I inform you with joy that in a few days the restoration work on the roof of the church will begin". It was the announcement of the dawn of resurrection for this building as well.

On Monday 17 April, workers closed access to the church during the working day. You could only enter for the 7.30 a.m. and 6.30 p.m. Masses. "It was necessary to wait until mid-April for two reasons," reported architect Elena Di Taranto. "First, because it was better to start with good weather. The second, to allow the executive project to be completed in all details by a specialist engineering firm."

"The work on the wooden part," commented surveyor Emilio Zandonella, "should be completed by the end of May. Regarding the copper sheets, it will still be two months before they arrive. Then, the time for the installation of the sheets on the roof must be considered. We hope to finish by mid-September. Of course, a lot will depend on the weather. Work on the roof has begun on the right half of the roof, the one most affected and most visible because of the huge black patch."

### Donations continue in 2023

A further confirmation. The geography of those who carry Loppiano in their hearts has no borders. From Slovakia to Spain, from South Korea to Great Britain, donations arrived, as well as from Italy. In the new year, the flow of donations diminished. In January, there were 14 donors with a total of €10,543, in February 6 with a total of €1,371, but one highly significant credit should be highlighted. The motivation is touching. It concerns a young man who died in a car accident, at whose funeral part of the sum collected for charitable initiatives was donated to the roof of Theotokos.



In March, 10 contributions arrived for a total of €7,567.30 and in April there were 2, with €270.00. May records 2 credits, but one, significantly, from Burkina Faso, for a total of €3,460. In June, there were 3 transfers totalling €350. Lastly, an artist donated a watercolour depicting the shrine with the roof fully restored.

### 16 October 2023, roof renovation completed

What a joy to see the big sick man fully restored to health and returned to his refined elegance against the backdrop of the enchanting landscape of the Tuscan hills. There was no shortage of emotion on Monday, 16 October, as the work of laying the copper sheets on the roof of the church was completed. Within a few days, the last visible sign was also removed, namely the scaffolding that still caged part of the façade.

It took patience, work and prayer over a period of 14 months. But now the new roof is looking good and reassuring for the future. The strengthened wooden structure is able - so the experts say - to better withstand the extreme weather that has now become common. The work was supposed to be completed in mid-September, but delays in the supply of copper sheets caused the completion to be delayed by a month.

### Donations in the second half of 2023

One year after the disaster, there were still many who wanted to contribute. A very admirable fact, beyond the number of donors and the size of the amounts. In July, there were 2 transfers for €139, in August 2 more, with 1 of €100 and 1 of €5,000. In October, a donation of €10, in November

the only donor gave €500, and in December there was still a credit of €50. Over the whole of 2023, there were 44 donations worth €29,360.30, with an average of €667.30. This figure was higher than the average per transfer in 2022.

### A balance sheet overflowing with gratitude

If, finally, we take a look at the event from the point of view of all the donations received, the result is far-reaching and of profound significance. A global summary allows us to record that, from 19 August 2022 to 31 December 2023, €351,863.71 arrived for the repair of the shrine complex from 679 donors, with an average value of €518.20.

On the damage suffered by the shrine, the initial estimate was €1.2 million. The amount was then reduced thanks to savings during negotiations with the reconstruction companies, so that the actual cost was covered by the intervention of Cattolica insurance for €750,000 and by donations received. Not only that, to date, a surplus of about €150,000 remains, which will make it possible to start a series of urgent jobs that the complex needs, starting with some areas where the stone cladding is most exposed to the weather.

The donors therefore deserve even deeper gratitude from the inhabitants of Loppiano. They would also like to express it personally to each benefactor, but are prevented from doing so by the fact that they have neither postal addresses, nor e-mail addresses, nor telephone numbers of the generous benefactors. This publication would like to make up for this to some extent in order to reach them and everyone, so as to express our gratitude and joy. The little town that tries to bear witness to "May they all be one", Maria Theotokos awaits you, as only it knows how - to say its THANK YOU.

## THE SHRINE OF MARY THEOTOKOS

*Mary also has a home here. She is venerated with the title "Mother of God" (in Greek Theotókos), as decreed by the Council of Ephesus in 431, when it was specified that the child given birth by Our Lady was the Son of God made man, fully God and fully man. The shrine is dedicated to Mary, because Loppiano looks to Our Lady as a model for individuals and the community. For this reason, the little town is called 'Mariapolis', or city of Mary.*

Inaugurated 1 November 2004

*The sacred building was created at the wish of Chiara Lubich, who already in 1986 had envisioned a church for the inhabitants of Loppiano and its many visitors. A building conceived "as a seal, as a culminating point of the little town, or rather as a symbol of what we try to live in it," Chiara said on 15 May 2003, when the foundation stone was laid. On 1 November 2004, the Solemnity of All Saints, the bishop of the diocese of Fiesole, Luciano Giovannetti, inaugurated the church and proclaimed it a diocesan Marian Shrine, with a spiritual bond of affinity with the papal Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, the first temple in the West dedicated to the Mother of God and 'mother' of all shrines. The feast of the church in Loppiano is celebrated on 13 May.*

## The roof like a celestial inclined plane

*Completed in 2008, the building blends into the surrounding typical Tuscan landscape, distinguished by its large green roof of weathered copper and the rough surface of the exposed stone. Characteristic is the roof, which, touching the ground at the front ends, rises upwards. It is a reference to Mary, who, like a celestial inclined plane, descends from the vertiginous height of the heavens to the infinite littleness of creatures. At the apex of the construction, the small gilded triangular roof of the bell tower is an explicit reference to the Trinity. On the first level of the bell tower is an ecumenical chapel, symbolising the communion with the different Christian churches.*

## Five artists at work

*The Maria Theotókos church is the work of the architecture, sculpture and painting studio 'Centro Ave Arte'. Five artists created it: the sculptor Ave Cerquetti, who is also its creator; the architects Elena Di Taranto and Patrizia Taranto, the sculptor Erika Ivacson and the painter Dina Figueiredo, coordinated by Vita Zanolini. Works and sculptures in the sanctuary are the result of collaboration between artists from various backgrounds: Italy, Portugal, Argentina, India, South Korea and, Romania - artistic voices that express the dialogue characteristic of the little town of Loppiano.*

## The central stained-glass window

*A large stained-glass window in blue tones characterises the space around the altar. It is inspired by the same Marian theme and is the work of Portuguese painter Dina Figueiredo. "Mary,*

*Mother of God... as great as the sky that contains the sun, so great as to contain within herself her Son" (Chiara Lubich). The stained glass window reveals the tabernacle, located in the chapel behind.*

### The Blessed Sacrament Chapel

*The central part of the stained-glass window slides open, allowing access to the tabernacle. The large gilded bronze sculptural element containing the tabernacle is the work of Ave Cerquetti, on the side facing the sacred hall, and of Fiamma Han, from South Korea, on the side of the Blessed Sacrament chapel. The latter is characterised by a room with glass walls and ceiling, which separates it from the rest of the building, like a gap that distances and unites at the same time.*

### The Servant of God Renata Borlone

*The chapel houses the tomb of Renata Borlone, focolarina, Servant of God, who was born in Aurelia, near Civitavecchia (Rome), on 30 May 1930 and died in Loppiano on 27 February 1990, after being co-responsible for Loppiano for 23 years. On 27 February 2011, the diocesan phase of the beatification process was closed.*

### Jesus Forsaken

*In the symbolic representation of the space is a reminder of the most significant reality of Christianity, namely the paschal mystery, Jesus Crucified and Forsaken, who redeemed us by bringing us from darkness to the total light of God. Even at*

*night, this space, illuminated by the presence of the tabernacle, is the brightest point of the Church. In this space, we also find the 'First Stone' of the building, placed in the ceremony of 15 May 2003.*

### The altar and the precious relics

*The altar is made of a single block of Trani stone based on a sketch by Erika Ivacson, a sculptor from Romania. The solemnity of the form reflects that of the altar, with the sloping cuts harmonising with the architecture, and is intended to signify the Place of Sacrifice. The altar contains precious relics of St Romulus and St John Gualbert, patrons of the place, and of St Clare of Assisi*

### The Hindu painting of Mary

*On the right hand side of the entrance, a large wall houses a large and precious painting by the Indian artist Kalaichelvan of the Hindu religion, depicting Mary with Child, a gift from Dr. Shri B. K. Krishnaraj Vanavarayar and family, to Chiara Lubich. Its presence in the shrine is a tangible sign of the love of the brothers and sisters of other religions, who adhere to the Focolare Movement. This painting was blessed by Pope Saint John Paul II on 26 September 2004 at Castel Gandolfo.*

### The stained glass windows and the entrance portal

*The large side windows are by the painter Dina Figueiredo. On the left side, the stained glass window illustrates the Passion*

*of Jesus. On the right side, the stained-glass window marks the main stages of the Via Mariae (Way of Mary). The bronze portal at the central entrance, by Argentine sculptor Maria Cristina Criscola, depicts 'Mary, Gate of Heaven'.*

A sudden whirlwind hit the Maria Theotokos shrine in Loppiano, international town of the Focolare Movement. More than half of the roof was ripped off, sucked upwards and dangerous shreds thrown far away. Everything happened quickly around 11 a.m. on 18 August 2022.

No one was injured and there was no damage to nearby houses. It was as if Mary had wanted to concentrate all the devastating force of the wind on her 'home'.

Thus began a complex journey to rebuild the roof, which ended on 16 October 2023 and was supported from the first moment by an unexpected outpouring of affection, prayer and generosity from people from many countries around the world. This booklet tells the story of its reconstruction and also expresses the deep gratitude of the citizens of Loppiano.

