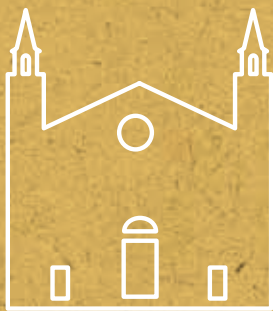


# THE CATHEDRAL OF FIDENZA

## THE MANY STORIES ON THE FAÇADE



A GUIDE TO  
ANTELAMI'S  
SCULPTURES



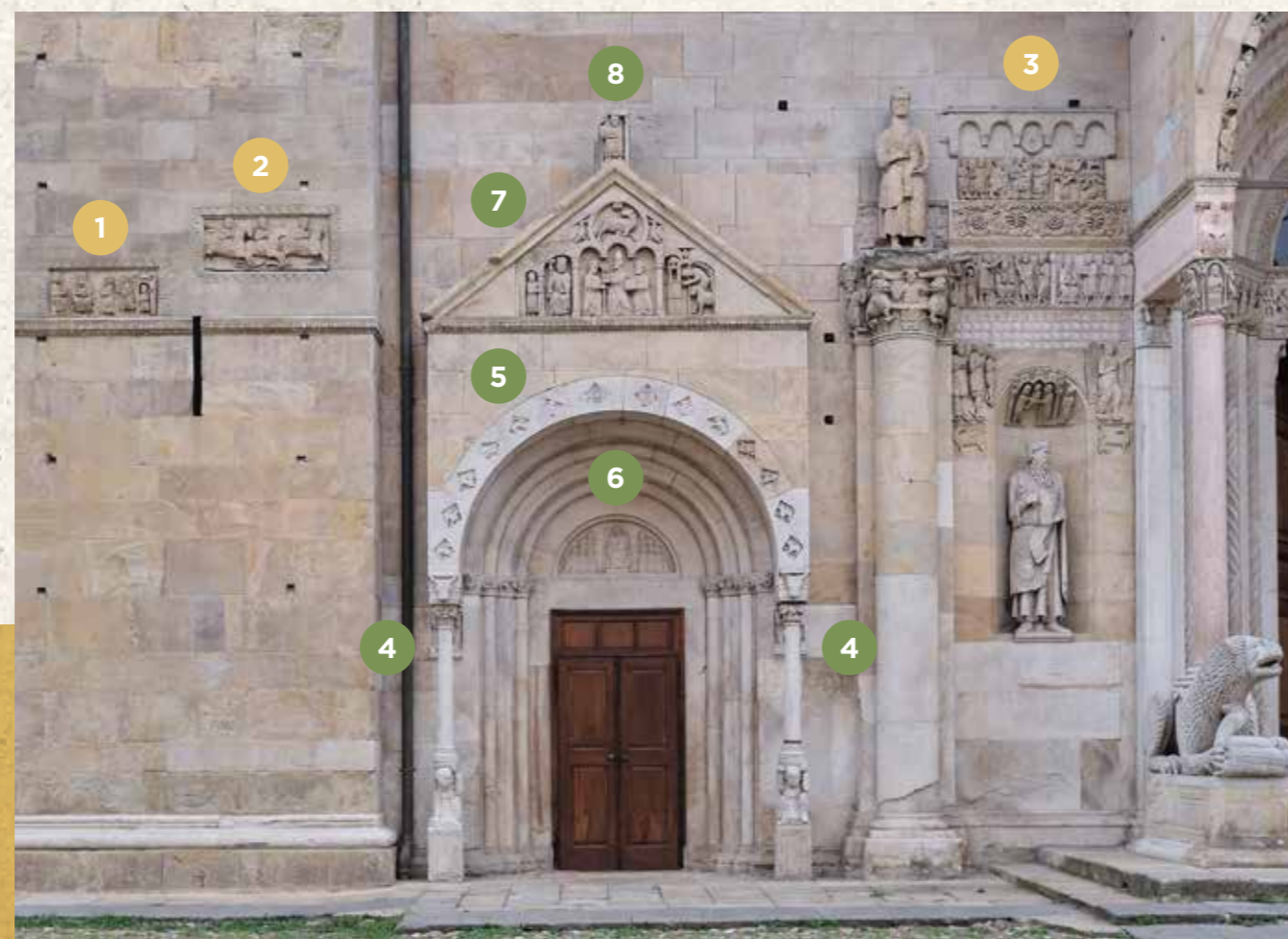
## WALKING ALONG THE FRANCIGENA ROUTE

In the XI, XII and XIII centuries there were frequent pilgrimages to Rome. Young northern populations meeting up with Latin populations favoured the formation of Christian consciousness in Europe. People walked in groups, either on foot or on horseback. Along the pilgrim routes, they passed through thriving urban centres, saw magnificent churches and came across important cultural centres as well as welcome and care centres. In Borgo San Donnino (which is now known as Fidenza), they found the cathedral and some small hospitals.

As you walk across the gangway that overlooks the remains of the Roman bridge built across the Stirone River, where in 293 the martyr Donnino was beheaded by Massimiliano's soldiers, you can admire the façade of the cathedral.

The two lateral towers and the lower part of the three portals are covered with sandstone while the upper part is built with exposed brickwork.

The reliefs on the façade are by Benedetto Antelami and his assistants.



## NORTH PORTAL (on the left)

**4** At the bottom of the portal, there are two human figures (called telamones) who are supporting white marble columns; above the capitals we can see the heads of two bulls. The ledges, are held up from behind, by two naked human figures: a man and a woman, who could represent **Adam and Eve**.

**5** Along the arch starting from the bottom, we have a series of animals, which are symmetrically disposed - we can see **a lion, a griffin, a hare, a stork, a deer, and a cockerel**; at the top, we can see a **spiral** and a **rose**. These animals have a positive connotation, and they could be seen as representing the virtues and the practice of doing good.

**6** In the lunette, **Mary** is sitting on a throne, surrounded by two groups of faithful followers, her left hand is pointing to Baby Jesus.

**7** In the pediment, there are some **scenes telling the story of the Church** of Borgo San Donnino: on the left, we have the Emperor Carlo Magno with a squire, in the centre, Pope Adriano II is giving the episcopal insignia to the provost of the Borgo, and on the right, an ill man is praying in the small church of San Donnino. Above the central scene, we have the **Lamb of God** (Jesus, he who takes away the sin of the world).

**8** Above the pediment, the figure in the middle could be the feudal lord Pallavicino (or the provost of Borgo San Donnino), next to him there are two cavaliers blowing their horns. Behind the cavalier on the left, we can see a face with a long beard, he could be the Emperor Federico Barbarossa.

## BENEDETTO ANTELEMI

He was an architect and sculptor. In 1178, in Parma, he sculpted the Deposition of Christ from the cross in the cathedral and in 1196, he started on building the Baptistry. In 1202, peace with Piacenza brought Borgo San Donnino under the jurisdiction of Parma. This period of peace gave Antelami time to work on the façade of the cathedral and the towers, and work on the renovation of the apse. Ugo Sessi, who was the provost of the cathedral at the time, probably inspired the iconographic project. In 1214, after he had been nominated as Bishop of Vercelli, Antelami followed him to work on the building of the church of Sant'Andrea.

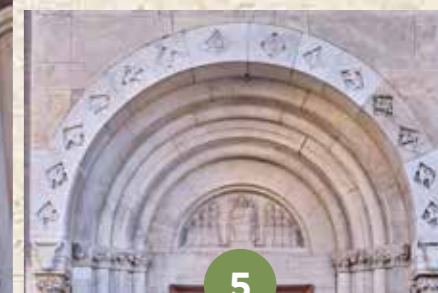
Antelami carved the statue of **Mary and baby Jesus**, which used to be in the church, and is now one of the most precious pieces on display in the Cathedral Museum.



## THE GREAT EVENT: GOD MADE FLESH

The first three scenes starting from the northern side show:

- 1** King **Herod** sitting on his throne holding a sceptre and a globe, he is protected by soldiers and courtiers. He viewed the birth of Jesus as a threat so he ordered the Massacre of the Innocents;
- 2** The **Magi** are on horseback and are determined to follow the star that will take them to see the newborn baby Jesus;
- 3** Further right, the story finishes with the arrival of the Magi in front of **Mary** and the newborn baby **Jesus**, while an angel is telling **Joseph**, in a dream, to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt where they will be safe.



## MAIN PORTAL

**9** At the top of the arch: **Christ is sitting on the throne**, with angels on either side of him, he is holding two scrolls: on the left "Israel, listen to the commandments of life" on the right "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit".

**10** In the semicircular arch on the left: there are six **prophets** and **patriarchs** wearing the typical Jewish head dress, holding six **commandments**; inside the vault there are two more prophets.

**11** In the semicircular arch, on the right: six **apostles** with a halo are holding six **Beatitudes**: inside the vault there is another apostle.

**12** At the bottom of the arch on the left, in the foreground of the ledge: **Abraham**, father of the three peoples (this is in red marble).

**13** At the bottom of the arch, on the right: **Job** is tormented by the devil (this is in white marble).

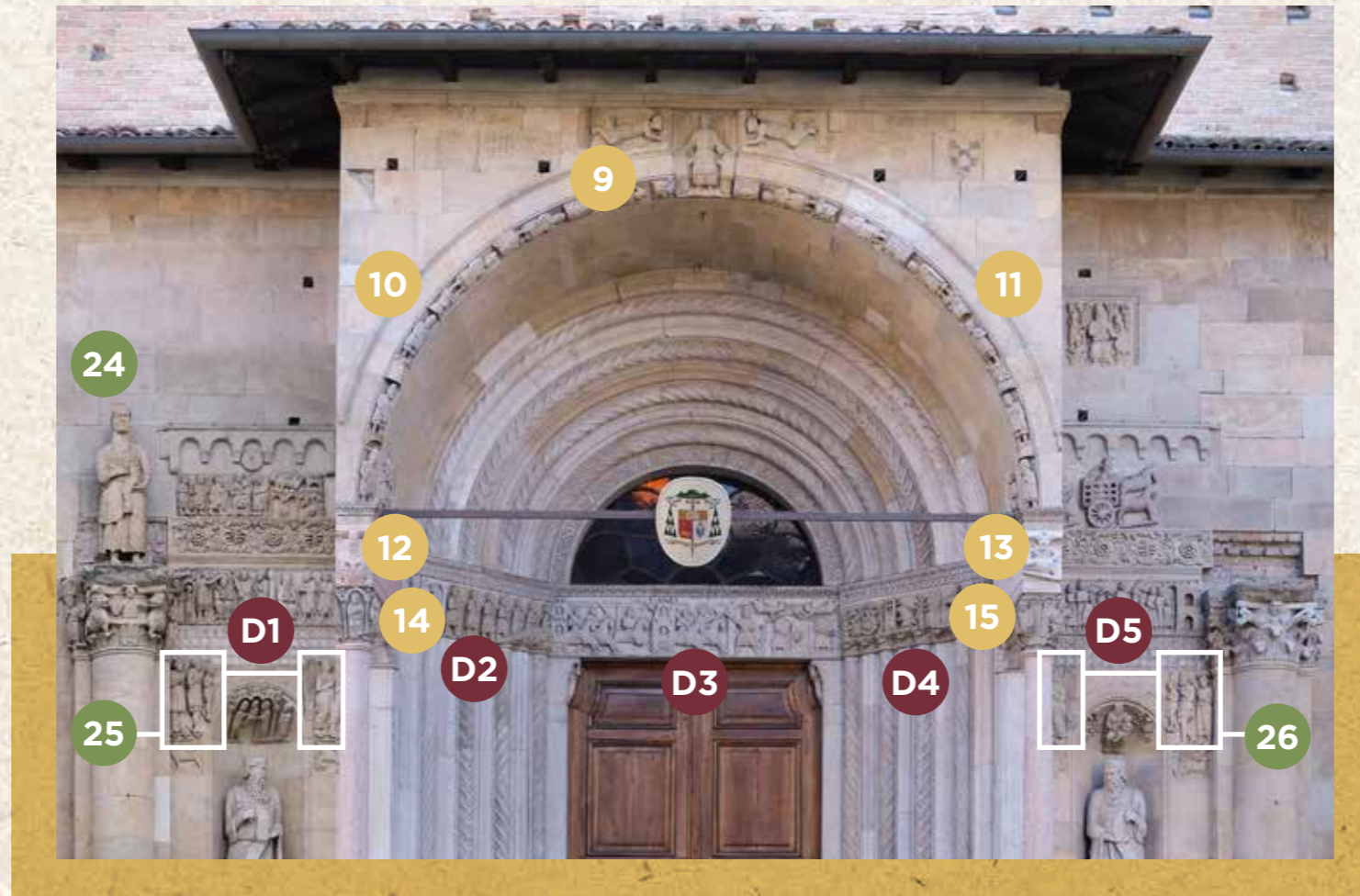
**14** The capital below Abraham, shows three scenes from **Mary's life**: the presentation of Mary as a child, in the temple, the Annunciation and Mary's visit to Elisabeth.

**15** The capital below Job, has the symbols of the four **Evangelists**: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The columns below are held up by two lions. The one on the left, is holding down a dragon which is trying to bite his neck and the one on the right, is holding down an upside down, bovine.

## An uninterrupted history which joins God and man.

*"You are no longer foreigners nor guests, you are fellow citizens of the saints and members of God's family, built on the foundations laid down by the apostles and the prophets, with Jesus Christ as your cornerstone. In him, the whole structure grows into a holy temple of the Lord: in him, you will be built together to become the home of God through the Holy Spirit".*  
(Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians 2:19-22)



### ON THE LEFT ON THE CENTRAL PORTAL

**16** **David**, the King and prophet is holding a scroll which reads: *"This is the door of the Lord through which the righteous men will enter"*. King of Israel in the X century B.C. and Joseph's ancestor, putative father of Jesus. He brought the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord to Jerusalem with a view to building the temple, which was later built by his son Solomon.

**17** In the dome above, we have: the **presentation of Jesus to the temple**, with Simon, Mary and Anne. Above the dome it says: *"The turtledove, with its gentle cooing sound, is presented as an offering. Someone welcomes the Son being offered, born from the Virgin."*

**18** Further left, on the capital of the large semi-pillar, we can see the prophet, **Daniel**. In 605 B.C. he was deported to Babylon together with his people, and because of his faith he was thrown to the lions. On the left, we can see the prophet **Abacuc** who is trying to help him by bringing him some food.

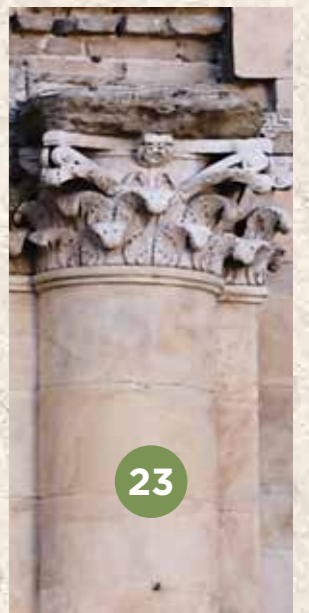
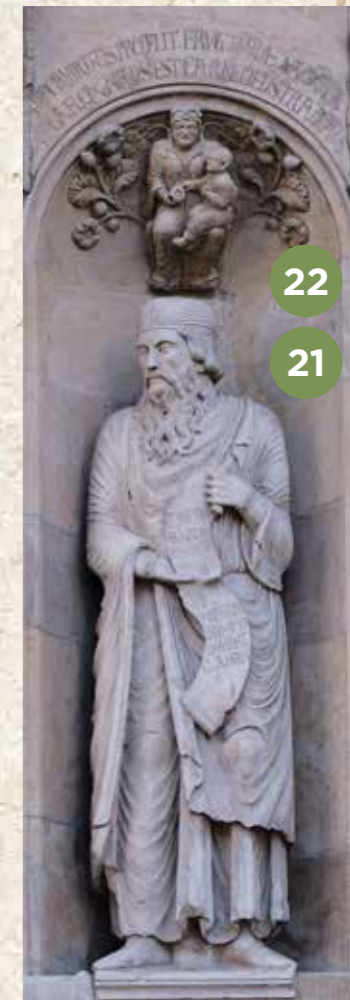
### ON THE RIGHT OF THE CENTRAL PORTAL

At the top, before the great, incomplete semi-pillar we can see the Patriarch **Enoch** **19**, sitting in a garden between two young men – just below – the prophet **Elijah**, is being taken up to heaven on a chariot of fire followed by the disciple **Elisha** **20**.

**21** The prophet, **Ezekiel**, is holding a scroll which says: *"I saw the door of the house of the Lord closed"*. In 597 B.C. he was deported to Babylon together with thousands of Israelites. Jerusalem was conquered and the temple was destroyed. Ezekiel comforted the deported people by promising them freedom and the reconstruction of the temple.

**22** In the calotte above: **Madonna with Child**, surrounded by rose branches and almond fruits. Above the calotte, it says: *"The branch of virtue produced the fruit of salvation and from the branch a flower was born, God became flesh"*.

**23** The big incomplete semi-pillar has a capital with flowers and leaves.



# THE FRANCIGENA ROUTE

In the year 900, the archbishop Sigerico, went from Canterbury to Rome to receive the Archbishop's insignia from the Pope. In his diary he describes his route and mentions Borgo San Donnino as one of the 79 places where he stopped off on his journey.



## THE PILGRIMS

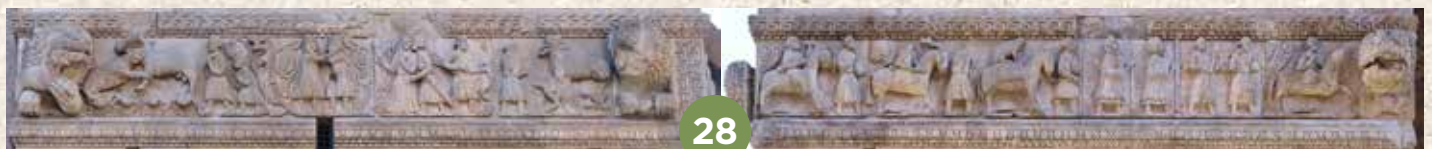
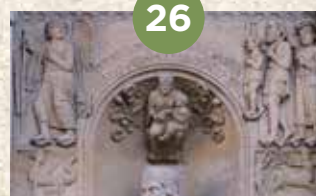
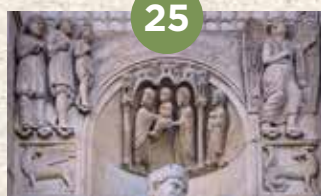
**24** On the big, semi-pillar, on the left of the central portal, **Peter, the apostle**. He encourages the pilgrims on their way to Rome. On the scroll it says: *"Saint Simon, the apostle, says this is the way to Rome"*.

**25** On either side of the shallow recess with a statue of David, an **angel** invites a **family** with a mother, father and son, wearing elegant clothes to enter the church. Below them, there is a **griffin** who is half-eagle and half-lion, this is an ambivalent symbol which could represent both the power of Christ, or the power of evil. Underneath the angel, we have another **mythical creature** which is half goat and half dragon, symbol of vice.

**26** On either side of the shallow recess with a statue of Ezekiel, another **angel** is inviting another **family** with a child, a father and mother dressed in humble clothes, to follow him towards the entrance of the church. Underneath the **family**, we can see a centaur, who is half-human and half horse and symbolises violence; under the angel there is another mythological figure, the harpy, a tall woman with the tail of a fish, she is a symbol of greed.

**27** The **pilgrimage to Rome** is once again recalled in the inscription *"You will reach Rome in three hundred miles"* which can be found behind the capital of the right column of the south facing portal, under the architrave.

**28** On the front and the side of the of the south facing tower (on the right) there are two rows of low reliefs which describe the **journey of the pilgrims**, the dangers they may encounter and the need to walk together as a group.



Numbers **24**, **25** and **26** refer to the explanation of the central portal on the previous page.  
Numbers **27** and **28** refer to the picture of the south facing portal on the next page.

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This brief overview wants to provide the visitor with an interpretation of the figures on the façade to help him better understand the essential message given by the Church at that time and today, for a good way of life for everyone.



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# THE LIFE OF SAN DONNINO

The sculptures on the horizontal frieze, which can be found between the two semi-pillars of the façade, tell the story of San Donnino's life inspired by the "Passio" of the Saint.

**Donnino**, was senior official at the court of the Roman Co-emperor Maximilian, he was in charge of the royal treasury and had the task of placing the imperial crown on the head of the Sovereign. Towards the end of the third century, Trier was the headquarter of an important military base near the border of the River Rhine. When it was discovered that many soldiers had become Christians, Maximilian ordered a violent persecution. The martyrdom of Donnino took place on the bank of the Stirone River, just a few meters away from where the Cathedral stands today.

## SOUTH PORTAL (on the right)

At the foot of the portal, two rams are holding up the columns of white marble, above the capital on the right, in the foreground of the ledge we can see the head of a wolf.

**29** Along the arch, starting from the bottom, we have a series of animals, which are symmetrically disposed; **a wild boar, a bear, a sheep and a wolf, a goat, a lion, a mule, a horse and a monkey.** At the top of the arch, there are two griffins striking a **snake**, which has the head of a devil. Some of these animals, were believed to have negative connotations: they could refer to the vices and the practice of evil.

**30** In the lunette, **Saint Michael is slaying the dragon**, (the symbol of evil). On the architrave below, **the benevolent hand of God.**

**31** In the intrados of the arch, on the left, we have the first of the labours of **Hercules**, he is striking Nemea's **lion** with a club. On the right, a **griffin** is wounding a **deer**.

**32** In the pediment, we have a statue of **the provost of Borgo San Donnino.**

**33** Above the pediment, **the humble Raimondo** wearing a monk's robe with a hood, and he is carrying a wicker basket. *Raimondo Zanfogni, from Piacenza, he was head of a family who devoted his life to helping the poor. He died in 1200 and, he was immediately considered a saint.*

**34** On the tower, we can see **Alessandro Magno**. According to the legend, he tried to go up into the sky carried by two griffins who are attracted by two flesh hooks on the end of two rods because he wanted to see how vast his empire was.

**35** At the bottom of the tower a groove represents the ancient local unit in length (m.3,27) [3,27 is the result if we put a comma after the number 3 and the product 3x3x3].

D1



The story is told in various scenes, it starts with Donnino placing the crown on the head of Maximilian. In the next scene, Donnino and some of his companions declare their Christian faith to the Emperor.

D2



Maximilian looks angry as a soldier points his sword at him in as a sign of condemnation. Donnino and his companions flee towards Rome across the Alps. Their heads are crowned with halos, which indicates that they no longer belong to the Emperor but to Christ.

D3



Donnino is on horseback and is being followed by some soldiers, he is alone and has no weapons. He is holding a cross. He travels through two cities and when he is caught by his enemies he is decapitated. Two angels hold his soul, which is represented as a young face, and they carry it up to heaven. The martyr, holding his head in his hands, crosses the river.

D4

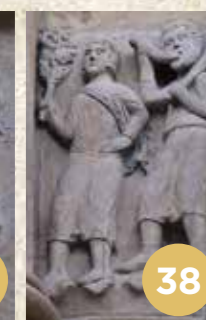


The body of the Saint is lying under some palm trees with his head on his breast. This is where a small church will be built and where an ill man goes to pray and is miraculously cured, he also finds his horse which had been stolen.

D5



The bridge over the Stirone River, collapses because of the large crowds of people who flock there following the news of the discovery of the remains of the Saint. It was a miracle that none of the followers, including a pregnant woman, got hurt.



## THE APSE

In a shallow recess on the east side of the bell tower there is a copy of Antelami's statue of Mary and Baby Jesus. The original statue can be found in the nearby Cathedral Museum.

On the exterior walls of the apse, we can see some bas-reliefs. Four of them represent the four seasons:

**36 Summer** is represented by an armed cavalier and in the upper part, a woman with two young children near a tree;

**37 Autumn**, has a female figure picking figs and grapes from a pergola;

**38 Spring** has a man playing a horn and another man carrying a branch with flowers;

**39 Winter** has a figure looking back at the year gone by and one looking at the year to come while he is in a kitchen cooking and making hams.

**40** We have a **hunting scene**: a dog with a collar is chasing a deer.