Sant'Ambrogio della Massima

Sant'Ambrogio della Massima is a 17th century monastic church in in the rione Sant'Angelo.. The dedication to St Ambrose, the 4th century Archbishop of Milan and Doctor of the Church. The church is not far from Piazza Mattei, which is well-known for the Fontana delle Tartarughe (Fountain of the Tortoises). The church proper is very hard to detect, as it is almost concealed by the buildings, which surround it. However, it is possible to catch a glimpse of the façade and the courtyard of the monastery through an iron gate. [1] [2]

History

The church is on the site of an ancient temple of Hercules and the Muses, mentioned by Strabo as having been built in 187 BC and rebuilt in 179 BC by one Marcus Fulvius Nobilior. In 28 BC the area was further adorned with an extensive porch in front of the temple. Archeological research has discovered parts of the temple and porch beneath the current Sant'Ambrogio buildings. This edifice was part of the imperial triumphal processional route which was in use until the late 5th century. [1] [3]

According to tradition, the monastery and church had their origins in a house occupied by, the older sister of St Ambrose, which was transformed by her into a convent in 353. Soon a little chapel was added to the convent. This constituted what is now considered the most ancient house of religious in the city of Rome. According to the same foundation legend, after the Council of Ephesus in 432 the convent church was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary in response to her being declared "Mother of God" at that assembly. [1] [3]

The first documentary reference is in the Liber Pontificalis of 803, which mentions a donation to the Monasterium Sanctae Mariae, nomine Ambrosii or "The monastery of St Mary, called 'of Ambrose'". The oldest parts of the monastery fabric are about a century later than this, being the remnants of a tower which looks as if it is of the end of the 9th century. In the church itself, the south transept wall has recently been found to include ancient Roman fabric which was probably part of the temple. The cella of the temple has been located beneath the church. [1] [2] [3]

Almost all the churches and monasteries of Rome were destroyed at the end of the 11th century,

either by the invading Normans under the leadership of Robert Guiscard in 1084 or by an extensive earthquake in 1091. However, they were reconstructed at the beginning of the following century, and one may assume, that the chapel of Saint Mary was also rebuilt. [2] [3]

An extant document from 1192 refers to the monastery with the name "Sant'Ambrogio della Massima," a title that is still used today. The title "della Massima," comes from a discovery a hundred years ago of the nearby "Porticus Maxima," (literally, "huge porch"), a covered walkway from about 330 AD, after the Edict of Milan. The Porticus Maxima was part of a larger passageway for pilgrims to reach the tomb of Saint Peter at the Vatican, not too far away. [3]

The nuns here were certainly Benedictine by the start of the 13th century, and ruled themselves under an abbess. The Catalogue of Turin of 1320 lists a Monasterium Sanctae Mariae de Maxima, which is almost certainly this convent. [1]

At the end of the 14th century, there are references to Sancta Maria de Maxima or Sancta Maria in Formosa, and also to Santo Stefano de Maxima. It is unclear whether these were two churches, or one with two altars. If the former, the two were united around 1500 and rededicated to St Ambrose. The convent and church has had his name since then. In support of the latter theory is the recording of an inscription on an altar to St Stephen in the convent church, which read: [1] [2]

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Ad laudem Sancti Stephani Domina Lucia de Mancinis
Sancti Ambrosii Abatissa fieri fecit MCDXI die prima
                    Decembris.

("To the glory of St Stephen, Donna Lucy de Mancinis,
 Abbess of St Ambrose, made [this] to be done on the
            first day of December 1411").
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The 16th century saw the rebuilding of the monastery and then the church. Firstly, the northern range of the convent, containing the monumental entrance hall, was rebuilt by Giacomo della Porta in 1578. Then the western range (the one to the right as you face the monastery entrance) was rebuilt in 1606, to specifications by Donna Beatrice de Torres who was a nun here. The work was paid for by her brother, Cardinal Ludovico de Torres. The present church, in which remains of the older church are incorporated, was built between 1606 and 1634 by Orazio Torriani and Carlo Maderno. The latter provided the design. [1]

The Benedictine sisters were expelled by the French in 1810, and never returned. The convent remained empty for a few years. The premises were then assigned to a new community of reformed Franciscan regular tertiary nuns. In 1859 the order was suppressed by a papal court for corruption and fraud, and the convent was closed again. [1] [4]

However, in 1861 Pope Pius IX granted the premises to Abbot Pietro Casaretto, at the time the superior of the abbey of Santa Scolastica in Subiaco, who wished to set up a Missionary College at which Benedictine monks would be trained as overseas missionaries. Casaretto was in the process of attempting to reform the Cassinese Congregation, comprising several Italian Benedictine monasteries mostly of ancient foundation. His efforts were resisted, and as a result those monasteries accepting his reform split away in 1867 under the title of Cassinese Congregation of the Primitive Observance. This was the beginning of the Subiaco Cassinese Congregation of Benedictine (the name was changed in 1959). [1]

Maderno's façade collapsed in 1862 and was rebuilt to a design by Giacomo Monaldi. In 1863 he oversaw a major re-ordering of the church, changing the nuns' choir into a sacristy and providing a gallery over the present entrance. The monastery was built to a design by Giovanni Battista Mola, 1637. [1] [a]

In 1873 the property of the monastery was sequestered by the Italian government, which remains in possession of the freehold. However, in 1946 the Congregation was able to lease back part of the main monastery as its Curia, which it remains. [1]

There was a major restoration of the church at the start of the 1960's, after water penetration damaged the interior frescoes. The damage is still evident in places, and the frescoes of the dome were lost. [1]

Plan
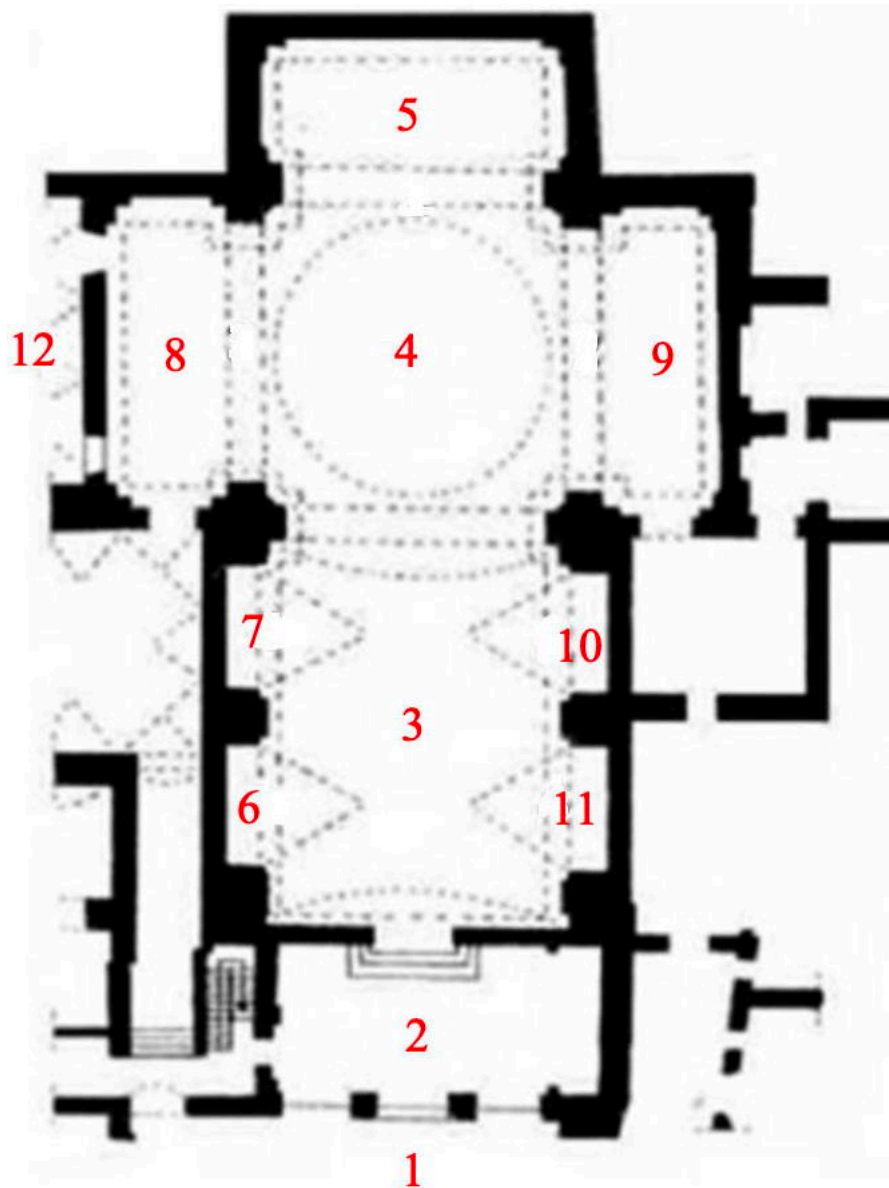
Exterior

Main gateway

The entrance to the church is through a Baroque gateway from Via di S. Ambrogio. This is a large rectangular portal set into a white rectangular wall, with the convent on the left and a domestic building on the right. The surrounding marble doorframe has its central portion sunk on all three sides, and the top is stepped in order to accommodate a dedicatory inscription. This is protected by a horizontal protruding cornice. The inscription reads: [1]

>   Moniales hujus ecclesiae B[eatae] Virgini Mariae ac S[ancto]
>   Ambrosio de Maxima dicatae Ordinis S[ancti] Benedicti
>   liberalitate Olympiae de Torres Abbatissae erexerunt An[no]
>   Dom[ini] MDCXXII
>
>   ("The nuns of the Order of St Benedict of this church,
>   dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Ambrose of
>   Massima by the liberality of Olympia de Torres, the Abbess,

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                erected [this] in the year of [Our] Lord 1622").
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Going through this gateway, on the left wall is another gateway with modern iron gates. Through the gate is a small, narrow courtyard (1). The courtyard onto which the church façade faces is entirely secluded. It contains a very interesting 17th century fountain, built in the form of a Classic nymphaeum which is now rather crumbly. The basin of the fountain is an ancient Roman marble sarcophagus with rounded corners and panelled decoration. [1]

Apart from the façade, the church fabric is otherwise almost entirely invisible from the ground. The church has a Latin cross plan, with a short nave, rectangular apse, two transepts and a low central dome. This dome is octagonal, with a windowless drum, a tiled roof in eight triangular pitches and a proportionately large lantern. This last is in the form of a circular temple, with eight arched windows and a little lead cupola. [1]

The stump of the medieval tower attached to the church at its bottom left hand corner was altered by **Maderno** to form a campanile. He added a storey in white marble for the bells, which has a large arched soundhole on each face and is crowned by a dentillate cornice. On top of this storey is a rebus or visual pun on the name of the de Torres family; a little square tower in two storeys, the upper narrower than the lower. Torres means "towers". [1]

Façade (1)

The 17th century façade of the church was the work of **Maderno**. In 1862 it unexpectedly collapsed, and it was replaced the following year by the present one. The simple façade, which faces a small courtyard with a 17th century fountain, presents a portico (2) with three arches. Above them there are three windows, of which the middle one is blind. The façade is crowned by a triangular pediment with a blank tympanum. [2]

Embedded in the wall of the portico is a grave stone, dated 1622, which originally was in the floor of one of the side chapel. The inscription is translated as: [b]

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"In memory of Herminia Ruberti De Riccia, a daughter of
Hortense Cinciae and a Roman, wife of Fabrizio De Fabiis died
in the year of salvation 1622, aged 62. In her will she left
a perpetual obligation, three Masses a week for the dead of
her house. Dames Portia and Maria Virginia De Fabiis, of this
sacred monastery, nieces and heirs, placed this"
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Interior

The interior has four nave side chapels, two on each side, which occupy large arched niches. There are no aisles. There is an altar in each of the transepts, and another one in the sacristy which is entered through the left transept on the far side of the altar there. Here also is the vestibule leading to the monastery, entered through a doorway on the near side. [1]

The chapel arches are separated by gigantic Ionic pilasters with swagged capitals, which are rendered in white. They support an entablature which looks as if it is in colored marble, with the architrave and dentillate cornice in grey-veined stone either side of the frieze in pink breccia. Above this is the ceiling, barrel-vaulted with lunette windows and rendered in white, without decoration. [1]

The dome (4) is now undecorated. It was built by **Torriani,** and the pendentives were painted in 1635 by **Francesco Cozza** with allegories of the *Four Cardinal Virtues:* [1] [a]

- *Justice* (with a sword) conquers Envy,
- *Prudence* (with a mirror) conquers Chance,
- *Temperance* (with a bow) conquers Sensuality and
- *Fortitude* (with a column) conquers Fear.

There is a 19th century gallery at the west end of the nave, which was added by Casaretto and was intended as the choir for the college students. It has three open arches, separated by Doric columns

and a balustrade. [1]

High altar (5)

The high altar was designed in 1630 by **G. P. Morandi**, and has four black marble Ionic columns with sumptuously embellished capitals, and a tabernacle in gilt wood. The coats of arms on the sides of the altar refer to the abbess Beatrice de Torres, who promoted the 17th-century arrangement of the church and the apse. The altar frontal itself, of alabaster and rare yellow and green marbles (giallo antico and verde antico) has a recess in its center which displays what looks like a fragment of mediaeval Cosmatesque work. However, examination has shown that it is 19th century work. [1] [2] [5] [a]

Beneath the altar are the relics of St Polycarp, a very early Eastern martyr, and the inscription in Greek and Latin proclaiming this can be seen on the right side of the altar. It is thought that the relics came to Rome with the expatriate Byzantine community of nuns which settled at Santa Maria della Concezione in Campo Marzio in the 8th century. On the other hand, there is a suspicion that this martyr may be another Polycarp, one associated with St Sebastian. [1]

This altar originally had an altarpiece by Ciro Ferri, depicting St Ambrose Healing an Infirm Man. However this also "went missing" at the start of the 19th century, and was replaced by a donation by Pope Pius VII which purported to show St Ambrose. However, Pope Paul VI visited the church in 1974, and the painting was cleaned in anticipation. It was discovered that it actually depicted Pope Pius V, and was painted by a Sicilian Capuchin, Fra Fedele Tirrito da San Biagio in 1765. The subject made the painting unsuitable for the high altar of this church, so the pope himself asked the Olivetan monk **Ambrogio Fumagalli** to paint another one, *St Ambrose Reviving the Daughter of a Poor Man*. This is now the altarpiece, and its modern style clashes somewhat with the Baroque ambience of most of the artworks of the church. Tirrito's work was moved to the adjacent monastery. [1] [2]

Above the main altarpiece is a smaller painting, an anonymous 16th century depiction of the *Holy Family*. It is not known who the fourth person in the composition is. The altar was re-consecrated after the Casaretto restoration by Rosendo Salvado, missionary bishop and first abbot of the abbey of New Norcia in Australia. [1]

Side chapels

The transept was rearranged from 1863 during the works promoted by the abbot Casaretto. For the decoration of the side altars he used rich frontals in committed marbles, of Genoese manufacture, sent to Rome from Liguria, where churches belonging to the same order were dismantled. [5]

The side chapels will be described clockwise, from the back left:

Chapel of St. Joseph (6)

The first chapel to the left was built for the chaplain of the convent, Santo de Santis. The frontal of the altar shows an elegant marble inlay with floral and vegetable motifs, with a central rayed cross. The altarpiece represents *St. Joseph with the Infant Jesus surrounded by St. Clare and St. Ambrose*, before 1861 by an unknown artist. The wall paintings are inserted in the seventeenth-century frames in white and gold stucco, decorated with leaves, rosettes, pearls, bees, flowered racemes, angelic heads and shells. The fresco decoration, dating back to the works promoted in the 17th century by the abbess Beatrice de Torres, was largely repainted during the 19th-century works. The chapel has frescoes depicting *St. Gregory the Great* (left), *St. Dominic of Sora* (right) and in the vault is *St Joseph* (right) and *St John the Baptist* (left). Above the chapel arch is *Visit of St. Benedict to his sister St. Scholastica*. All of the frescoes are by an unknown artist. The splendid marble decoration of the chapel dates from 1634 and has the bees of the coat of arms of the Barberini family, who employed Sanctus de Sanctis, the donor of the altar of the chapel. [2] [5] [a]

Chapel of Bl. Virgin Mary (7)

The second chapel on the left was built in 1631-32 for Sisters Gismonda Veriti and Pulcheria Cesi, on the occasion of their entry into the convent, as evidenced by the inscription on the pediment. The altar has two columns of a rare type of marble from the Tivoli area, north of Rome. The altar frontal of mottled marble and a central rayed cross, was in fact dedicated in that year and the entire decoration of the chapel is to be referred to the same date. The altar is a work by **Giacomo della**

Porta and has a medieval icon of the Virgin, which was discovered in 1846 below ground level in the church of San Benedetto in Piscinula in Trastevere. The monks acquired the icon and added the Infant Jesus. The frescoes of the chapel depict scenes from the life of the blessed Virgin, and they are the work in 1632 of **Cavalier d'Arpino** (**Giuseppe Cesare**), e.g.

- the *Nativity of the Virgin*,
- the *Presentation in the Temple*,
- the *Visit of St. Elisabeth*, the *Birth of Jesus* and the *Visit of the Shepherds*,
- the *Adoration of the Magi*, the *Prophecy of Simeon*, and
- *Mary at the foot of the Cross*.

There are also depictions of the *Assumption* and the *Crowning of the Virgin in Heaven*. Above the arch of the chapel there is a fresco showing the *Annunciation*. [2] [5] [a]

Left Transept / Altar of St. Mauro (8)
The wall of the left transept was originally opened by a grate, which allowed communication between the church and the nuns' choir. The altarpiece, *St. Maurus healing a paralysed man*, has been attributed to Ciro Ferri, or his school.   The frontal of the altar, of exquisite workmanship, is in marble commesso with floral motifs, with the monogram of Christ in the central oval. The present altar, and the one in the right transept, is from Genoa and both were installed in 1863. [2] [5] [a]

Right Transept / Altar of the Crucifixion (9)
The altarpiece of the right transept is a notable copy with variations of the painting of the *Crucifixion* by **Francesco Trevisani,** the original to be found in the Timotei Salvetti chapel in San Silvestro in Capite. The altarpiece is flanked by a pair of black marble Composite columns. The aedicule is a florid Baroque with putti sitting on two halves of a broken segmental pediment. [1] [2] [5]

The original altar was built to a design by **Gian Lorenzo Bernini**. The altar was donated by Prince Colonna in memory of the Abbess Pudenzia Colonna. In the 19th century the altar was dismantled; parts of it were used to build the first right hand altar which still bears the Colonna coat of arms; the remaining parts went to make up the sacristy altar. [a]

Chapel of St. Benedict (10)
The second chapel was built from a bequest made by the Abbess Silvia de Fabij to a design by **Giovanni Battista Mola** (1635-40). The simple altar frontal, in different marbles, has a radiated cross in the center; on the sides are two rampant stucco lions. Above the altar is a statue of *St. Benedict*, signed by **Orfeo Boselli** after a model by Flemish sculptor **François Duquesnoy**. The altarpiece is flanked by Corinthian columns in yellow marble and the altar frontal in red jasper. Above the arch of the chapel is a fresco representing *St. Peter ordains St. Stephen and his six companions to be deacons* by an unknown artist. The chapel was re-ordering by Casaretto in 1863, and the fresco work dates from this time. [1] [2] [5] [a]

Chapel of St. Marcellina (11)
This chapel was created by Casaretto, as before his restoration there was a side entrance from the street here. The polychrome stonework here has come from various sources. The Corinthian altar columns are in red jasper on either side of the altarpiece in a verde antico frame. The altar frontal is of simple manufacture with an oval opening in the center shielded by a metal grating in the shape of a radiated cross. On the sides of the frontal is a noble coat of arms: a shield with a tower, surmounted by a crown and framed by ribbons. The altarpiece itself is 19th century, and depicts *St Marcellina Teaching Satyrus and Ambrose to Read*. Satyrus was Ambrose's brother. The polychrome marble altar frontal was taken from the abbey at Subiaco. Above the arch is a 17th century work depicting *The Holy Family Resting during the Flight to Egypt*. [1] [5]

Sacristy (12)
The large room used as a sacristy is of recent construction, dating back to the 19th century; it is decorated with tempera paint in yellow and blue. The decoration is inspired by Renaissance models with old-fashioned motifs such as monochrome grotesques, plant and floral racemes, coats of arms. In the center of the ceiling the dove of the Holy Spirit is depicted in a blue sky. The side walls are totally decorated with trompe l'oeil motifs, green and red marbles and two large windows that frame

fake statues depicting *Saint Benedict* on the right and *Saint Ambrose* on the left. Above the altar there is a 17th century *Crucifixion* attributed to **Giovanni Francesco Romanelli**. In the tympanum above there remains a *God the Father* by **Pietro da Cortona**. [2] [5]

In the refectory of the monastery one may see the painting *Death of Saint Benedict* by **Baccio Ciarpi**. This painting was originally in a little church dedicated to St. Benedict, called San Benedetto in Clausura ai Catinari. It was situated opposite the church of Santi Biagio e Carlo ai Catinari in the present Piazza Benedetto Cairoli, but it was demolished in the second part of the 17th century. [2]

Special notes

The monastery may be visited by appointment. It has a 12th century crucifix, and Ferri's altarpiece. There is also a room in the ancient part of the building in which it is said that St Ambrose once stayed.

Below the church, the temple of Hercules and the Portico of Philip has been excavated. There are also remains of houses from the 6th and 7th centuries.

Liturgy

The church is normally open only for Mass on Sundays and on 7 December, the anniversary of the episcopal ordination of St Ambrose in 374. At other times, the church and monastery may be visited by appointment.

Relics
St. Polycarp (69-155 A.D.)

Artists and Architects
Ambrogio Fumagalli (1915-1998), Italian painter and Benedictine monk
Baccio Ciarpi (1574-1654), Italian painter of the late-Mannerism and early-Baroque style
Carlo Maderno (1556-1629), Swiss-Italian architect [also see here]
Ciro Ferri (1634-1689), Italian Baroque painter and sculptor
Francesco Cozza (1605-1682), Italian painter of the Baroque period
Francesco Trevisani (1656-1746), Italian painter of the early Rococo or late Baroque
G. P. Morandi (17th cent), Italian architect
François Duquesnoy (1597-1643). Flemish baroque sculptor
Giacomo della Porta (c.1533-1602), Italian sculptor and architect
Giacomo Monaldi (1819-1905), Italian architect
Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), Italian Baroque sculptor and architect [also see here]
Giovanni Battista Mola (1586-1665), Italian architect
Giovanni Francesco Romanelli (1610-1662), Italian Baroque painter from Viterbo
Giuseppe Cesari [aka *Cavaliere d'Arpino*] (1568-1640), Italian Mannerist painter
Orazio Torriani (or Torrigiani) (1602-1657), Italian architect and sculptor
Orfeo Boselli (1597-1667), Italian sculptor, restorer
Pietro da Cortona (1597-1669), Italian Baroque painter and architect

Location:
Address:Via di Sant'Ambrogio 3, 00186 Roma
Coordinates: 41°53'35"N   12°28'41"E

Links and References:

1. Roman Churches Wiki

2. "Hidden Churches of Rome" web-page

3. Impressions of Rome: Sant'Ambrogio della Massima

4. Commonweal Magazine article

5. Poloromano.beneculturali web-page. (no longer online)

a. Erwee, Michael; **THE CHURCHES OF ROME 1527-1870**; Pindar Press; 2013; pp. 24-26

b. Personal communication with Dom Basil Watkins, O. S.B.