

Santa Caterina dei Funari



Santa Caterina dei Funari is a 16th century confraternity and former convent church located in the rione Sant'Angelo. The dedication is to St Catherine of Alexandria, martyr of the fourth century, decapitated after resisting to starvation and the crushing with a toothed wheel. [1] [3]

History

The church occupies the middle of the southern ambulatory of what was, in ancient times, a colonnaded quadriporticus attached to a small theatre founded by one Lucius Cornelius Balbus the Younger in 13 BC. This was excavated in the 1980's and is now in the basement of a branch of the National Museum of Rome, the Crypta Balbi. [1]

The earliest reference to a church on the site is in a papal bull of Celestine III of 1192, which gives a useful outline of its history. According to this, a group of nobles named Gratian, Gregory, Lady Rose (Domina Rosa) and Imilla had founded a nunnery here at the start of the 11th century. A quotation is given from a lost bull of John XIX (1024-33) granting the monastery some property on the Via Portuense. [1] [5]

The modern name Funari literally means "ropemakers", and it is easy to conclude that the locality accommodated these in the Middle Ages. However, there is some doubt that this is the origin of the name; it might have belonged to a landowning family instead. It replaced the former Santa Catharina Domne Rosae of the 12th century, which, in turn, had replaced a three-aisled basilica, Santa Maria de Donna Rosa in Castro Aureo. [1] [3]

The nunnery had failed by the 16th century. Pope Paul III granted the complex to St Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, in 1536. The saint wished to open a shelter here for poor maidens, who were described as the still virgin daughters of prostitutes. The institution here was a sort of

boarding school, where the girls would learn a trade and so be able to support themselves without recourse to offering sex in exchange for cash. Given the expectations of contemporary society, the ultimate hope would have been marriage or entry into a convent. [1] [5]

The helpers of St Ignatius in the conservatorio here were organized into a confraternity early on, at an uncertain date because they were not at first granted a charter. The year was 1536 or 1549. This was the Confraternita delle Vergini Miserabili di Santa Caterina della Rosa. The Virgini Miserabili were the prostitutes' daughters they were setting out to "rescue". Pope Pius IV approved their constitutions in 1560, at which time they were given the medieval church of S. Maria Dominae Rosae together with the foundation of an adjacent nunnery. This Conservatorio Santa Caterina della Rosa survives to the present day, as a public charity interested in disadvantaged young people, and it is still in charge of the church. [1] [b]

The original nunnery buildings cannot have been satisfactory, for in 1560 a complete rebuilding of the complex was undertaken. The cost was underwritten by Cardinal Federico Cesi, the confraternity's first Cardinal Protector, and the architect was **Guidetto Guidetti**, one of Michelangelo's apprentices. The work was completed in 1564, resulting in an attractive late Renaissance (tardo rinascimento) church with hints of the future Baroque style. The new church was consecrated on Sunday 18 November 1565 and that Pius IV granted numerous indulgences on that occasion. [1] [4]

There have been few serious additions or restorations to the church since its construction, which makes it a valuable example of the style and artistic ambience of its period. It retains its original coloring and decorative layout, apart from the repainting of the main altarpiece, flanking paintings and lunette above in the 18th century. The attached Augustinian nunnery was suppressed after 1870, and was demolished by the Fascist government. The site was then left derelict until the archaeological campaign in the 1980's which uncovered the Crypta Balbi. Some restoration and conservation work has been done in the church recently (2013). However, in 2015 the confraternity seems to have fallen into serious problems and the church was closed to casual visitors. Visits are now (2017) to be pre-booked. The prebooking form is available on Ref. 5 web site. [1] [5]

Exterior

The fabric is pink brick, but the façade is travertine limestone which has preserved very well. The brick is visible up the side street to the left, where you can see three large blind arches separated by Corinthian pilasters. Above, you can see that the central nave walls are clad in travertine. The roofs of the nave and presbyterium are separate, the latter being lower than the former, and both are pitched and tiled. [1]

Façade

The façade is an attractive and effective two-storey composition, the gable corresponds with the roof behind instead of protruding above it as some in some Roman church façades. [1]

The first storey has six Corinthian pilasters in shallow relief, and in between these are four empty round-headed niches with molded surrounds. Above and below each niche is a framed sunken horizontal rectangular niche, almost square, and each niche contains a blank tablet in shallow relief with the sides away from the corners indented. This design feature has an effect reminiscent of the future Baroque. [1]

In between the inner pilasters is the large single entrance, in the form of a prothyrium in pavonazetto marble with a pair of ribbed Corinthian columns supporting an entablature and a dentillated triangular pediment with a blank tympanum. The frieze of the entablature has a simple dedicatory inscription: [1]

Divae Catharinae, virg[ini] et mart[yri].

In between the capitals of the pilasters are swags of fruit embellished with ribbons, and above the ones at the side are roses recalling the old name of the church, and Catherine wheels (the instrument of torture, not the firework). The double swag over the doorway has crossed swords and palm branches instead, and in the middle an oval curlicued tablet with another simple dedicatory inscription:

The pilasters support an entablature with a molded architrave, dentillated cornice and a frieze with an inscription commemorating the Cardinal Cesi who paid for the church:

Federic Caesius Epis[copus] Cardinalis Portuen[sis] fecit, MDLXIII.

He was the suburbican bishop of Porto. [1]

The second storey corresponds with the central nave frontage. It has four pilasters in the same style, supporting an entablature with a blank frieze and a dentillated triangular pediment with a blank tympanum. In the center is a gigantic oculus or round window, with a molded and dished surround. This is placed within a square panel in shallow relief, with relief edges, a rosette in each corner and inset sides containing thin double curlicues. Above is a vertical oval tablet set at an angle, itself containing an oval shield within a curlicued frame from which hang a pair of swags. Two ribbons in shallow relief billow out from the sides. The shield used to contain the Cesi arms, six stylized mountains with a tree on top, but these have weathered away. [1]

In between each pair of pilasters is a round-headed niche like those in the first storey, above which is a sunken and framed tablet device which is not quite the same as those in that storey. The observant may notice that this pair of tablets has arc-chamfered corners instead of indented sides. [1]

In between the pilaster capitals is a pair of blank convex oval tablets with very ornate surrounds, curlicued and scrolled, and each tablet is embellished with a bead necklace in two swoops at its top. A further pair of these tablets is over the Cesi arms. [1]

There are four candlestick finials on top of the pediment, but the central finial up there is the Cesi crest again. [1]

Campanile

The bell tower is located at the far right hand corner of the nave, and is not easy to see from the street. It is in a different style from the rest of the church, and indeed from any in Rome, since it was built using the remains of a medieval tower. There are five storeys, rendered in a creamy white. [1] [5]

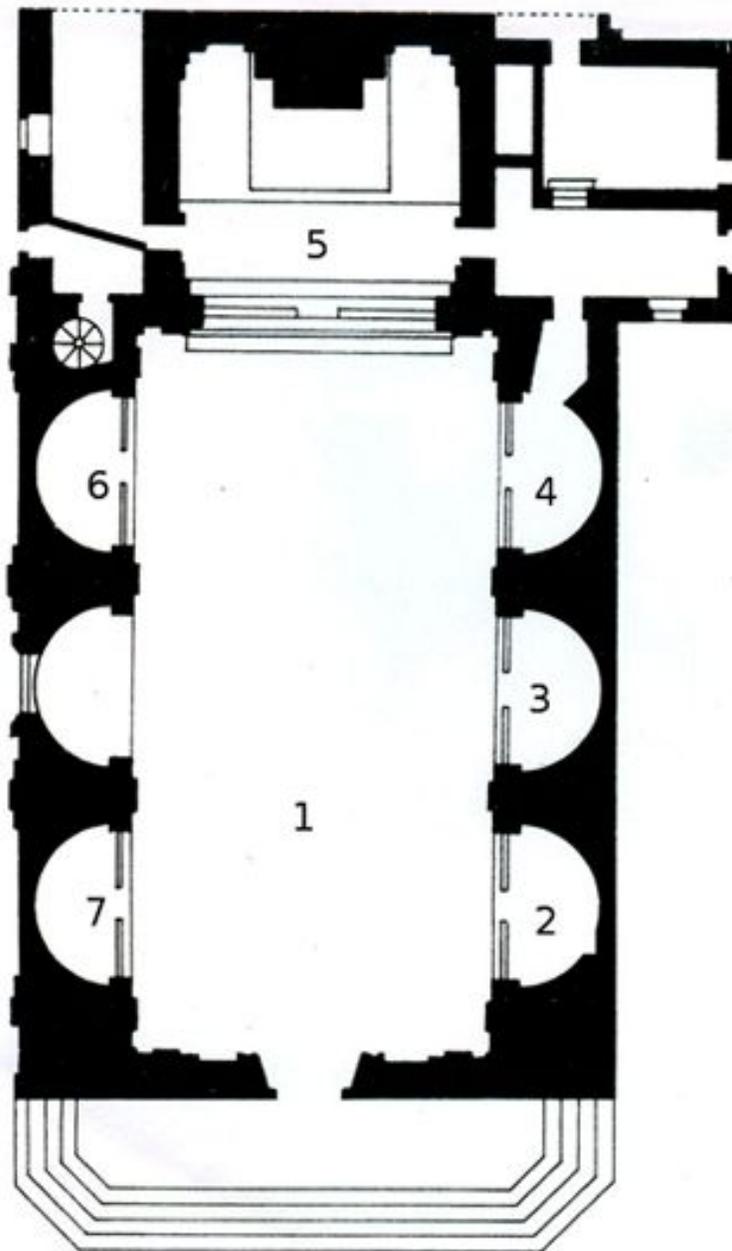
On top of the stump of the mediaeval tower, which doesn't reach the gutter of the nave roof, is the second storey in the shape of an inverted pyramid with three very long arched niches on each face reminiscent of machicolations. The third storey is in the form of a kiosk, and contains the bells. It has a triangular pediment on each side, over a rusticated Doric arch within a rectangular frame. Above the pediments the storey continues as an attic in the form of a chamfered square, with eight squat finials in the form of column bases. [1]

The fourth and fifth storeys are octagonal. The fourth has a narrow recessed round-headed on each face, while the fifth has a small rectangular opening between Doric pilasters on the corners. Finally, there is a hemispherical stone cupola with a finial in the form of the crest of the Cesi family, similar to that of the Chigi family which is a set of stylized mountains. [1]

The campanile houses bells brought from Germany by St Ignatius. [1]

Plan and Layout

The interior is a single nave [1] with a large rectangular apse as a presbyterium. Off each side of the nave are three identical large arched alcoves; the ones on the right are chapels, but the middle one on the left leads out to the Via Michelangelo Caetani. The side chapels are in the form of apses with conchs, and are architecturally identical although differently decorated. [1] [5]



Interior

In between each pair of side arches is a Corinthian pilaster in shallow relief, and these support an entablature which runs round the entire church including the presbyterium. The architrave of this is molded and the cornice dentillated, which echoes a design feature of the façade. Above the entablature on each side are three blind lunettes containing a small round-headed window each, and then comes the cross-vaulted ceiling which has no ribs or decoration of any kind. [1]

The cross vault ceiling is undecorated and painted a light cream color. The triumphal arch of the presbyterium is supported by a pair of doubletted Corinthian pilasters, and its archivolt is placed above the entablature thus echoing the side wall lunettes. In the center of the triumphal arch is the coat-of-arms of the Confraternity. [1]

Apart from the presbyterium and chapels, which are frescoed and have polychrome marbelling, the paintwork in the church is very restrained and is in white, cream and light grey. The main door on the interior has an architectural surround crowned by a broken pediment. Into the break is inserted a rectangular tablet on which is a painted scene of *St. Catherine before the Empress* by **Federico Zuccari** (1571-72). In the nave pavement is the marble tomb slab of Jacopo Bossi (d. 1731). [1] [3] [b] [c]

The decoration of the chapels began in 1564, and continued until 1614. Five noble families sponsored them, while the presbyterium was paid for by the Cesi family. The balustrades in front of

the chapels bear the crests of the families concerned. [1]

Sanctuary (3)

The decoration here was paid for by Cardinal [Federico Cesi](#), hence his crest occurs on the balustrade together with that of the Conservatory. Some of the pictures were repainted in the 18th century. The architect was **Guidetti**, and the low balustraded marble screen at the sanctuary steps is part of his design. [1] [2]

The altar has an odd design. Two Corinthian columns in verde antico marble support a pair of plinths on which angels sit, and these plinths are decoratively part of an entablature which runs across the back of the apse and which has a verde antico frieze. In between the angels is a large grated horizontal rectangular window looking into the second storey of the former convent behind, and over this is a triangular pediment. [1]

The altarpiece shows *The Apotheosis of Saint Catherine*, and according to the Conservatorio was painted by **Giovanni Sorbi** in 1760 to replace an original altarpiece by **Livio Agresti da Forlì**. Many published descriptions seem to be unaware of this. The lunette above the altar was also originally by **Agresti**, and was also repainted. It now shows *The Assumption of St Catherine*, and is by a Neapolitan painter called **Alessandro d'Elia** who finished it in 1772. [1]

The two paintings on either side of the altar are also by **d'Elia**. They depict *St Augustine of Hippo* and *St Monica*, and recall the community of Augustinian nuns here. The grated window over the altar is another reminder, and presumably looked onto the nuns' choir. Since the nuns had an enclosure, they did not normally enter the church so heard Mass by this means. Near the altar is a hatch through which they could receive Communion during Mass. [1]

The monochrome panels of putti above these two side paintings are original, and are by **Raffaellino Motta da Reggio**. He also executed *SS Saturninus and Sisinnius with Putti* in the same style on the right hand side wall, and *SS Romanus and Augustine with Putti* on the left hand side wall. [1]

The frescoes higher up on the side walls are by **Federico Zuccari**. The left hand one depicts *St Catherine Arguing with the Philosophers at Alexandria*, a charming work although slightly decayed with age. The right hand one shows *The Martyrdom of St Catherine*. [1]

Side Chapels

The chapels are described below starting from the left side rear near the entrance, and proceeding clockwise.

Cappella Canuto (4)

The first chapel on the left is dedicated to the Annunciation to Our Lady. The patron was Andrea Canuto, bishop of Oppido Mamertina who died in 1610. His tomb-slab is in the floor, and his coat-of-arms is on either side of the altar. [1]

The altar has a pair of Corinthian columns in a veined dark green marble (not verde antico, as this is brecciated. Compare the stone here with that in the next chapel, which is the real thing.) The altarpiece is a copy of a work by **Marcello Venusti**; to the left is depicted *St Augustine*, and to the right *St Andrew* in memory of the bishop. His portrait is in the little tondo above. [1]

The other paintings here depicting scenes from the life of Our Lady are by **Girolamo Nanni**. In the superbly decorated vault they are: *Coronation*, *Birth*, *Visitation* and *Annunciation*. On the archivolt are *Marriage to Joseph* (with a figure of *Moses*) and *Assumption* (with *King David*), with *God the Father* at the top. [1]

Side Entrance (5)

Between the two chapels is the vestibule of a side entrance. Here there was originally a chancel. On the right wall "Roman Funerary Tombstone". [3]

Cappella De Torres (6)

The second chapel on the left is dedicated to St John the Baptist, and was the funerary chapel of

the de Torres family. The original patron was Cardinal Ludovico de Torres, whose tomb-slab is in the floor together with those of two relatives. The architect was **Tiberio Calcagni**. [1]

The stucco decoration in this chapel is especially rich. The altar has a pair of derivative Ionic columns in verde antico with swagged capitals, and the altarpiece is framed in an arch made from a flesh-pink marble. The triangular pediment above is coved (concave) with a pair of allegorical figures sitting on it, and contains a segmental pediment with a winged head in the tympanum. [1]

The oil on slate altarpiece of *Saint John the Baptist* is by **Marcello Venusti**, who also executed the frescoes. To the left is *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*, and to the right *The Baptism of Christ*. In the vault there are depictions of the *Birth* and *Preaching of the Saint*, as well as of the *Visitation*, and above these towards the apex of the conch are panels showing prophets. [1]

On either side of the pediment is a tondo with a portrait, the right hand one being Ludovico and the left hand one his father, also called Ludovico. [1] [3]

Cappella Solano della Vetera (7)

The third altar on the right is dedicated to the Assumption of Our Lady. The chapel was ceded to Juan Solano della Vetera on 30th January 1583 who commissioned the chapel's decoration but he died before they were completed. The design is attributed to **Ottaviano Mascarino** on the basis of a document in the archives of the Accademia di San Luca. [1] [b]

The altar has a pair of Corinthian columns in a dark grey pavonazetto type marble with violet hints. The altarpiece depicts the *Assumption* by **Scipione Pulzone**, and was apparently unfinished when he died young. The painting was completed by **Cristoforo Roncalli** in 1603. The work depicts the apostles looking into an empty sarcophagus, while Our Lady ascends into heaven accompanied by angels playing a lute and cello. [1] [b]

To the left of the altar is *St Catherine of Alexandria Transported to Mount Sinai*, and to the right *St Luke*, both by an unknown artist. The vault is frescoed by **Giovanni Zanna**, who also did the stucco work. It shows *The Coronation of Our Lady* in the middle, the *Immaculate Conception* to the left and *Pentecost* to the right. On the archivolt of the arch are putti with a mirror and a gate, symbols of Our Lady, and on the pilasters are prophets and two more Marian symbols: a well and a fountain. [1] [b] [c]

Cappella Ruiz (8)

The second chapel on the right is the Cappella Ruiz, and is dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows. The design is attributed to **Vignola** on stylistic grounds (documentary evidence seems to be lacking), and most of the pictures were painted by **Girolamo Muziano**. The patron was Filippo Ruiz who was a Spanish abbot from Valencia. He paid for the decoration in exchange for a Mass foundation. In nave pavement in front of the chapel is the marble tomb stones of Filippo Ruiz and Vittoria Frangipani, 1605. [1] [b]

In contrast to the previous chapel, the decoration here is rich and includes a pair of gilded stucco angels in the arch spandrels. [1]

The altar has a pair of Corinthian columns supporting a triangular pediment, and the columns and frieze are in what is described as giallo antico marble. The altarpiece shows *The Deposition of Christ*, and **Muziano** obviously enjoyed using a varied palette of colors for the various items of clothing depicted. The two side paintings by him show *The Healing of the Blind Man* and *The Healing of the Centurion's Servant*. He also painted *St Matthew* and *St John the Evangelist* above these, scenes from the life of Christ in the lower vault, three prophets in the upper vault and *St Francis*, *St Jerome* and *God the Father* on the arch archivolt. However, the paintings on blackboard on the pilasters are by **Zuccari** (1571). They are: *St Mark*, *St Luke*, "Ecce Homo" and *Christ Carrying the Cross*. [1] [3]

Cappella Bombasi (9)

The first chapel on the right is dedicated to St Margaret of Antioch, and was patronized by **Gabriele Bombasi** who was a famous author and art collector who died in 1602. The altarpiece of the saint is by **Annibale Carracci** (1599), and is arguably the most important artwork in the church. [1] [3]

The small altar is in the form of an entirely gilded aedicule, with a pair of Ionic columns. The triangular pediment has a dropped cornice, and in the enlarged tympanum thus created is a little painting of *The Coronation of Our Lady*, designed by Carracci but completed by one of this students. Otherwise the decoration here is in white and very simple, which contrasts with that of the other chapels. [1] [2] [3]

The large tablet on the right hand side of the altar detail a Mass foundation set up for Bombasi by the Confraternita; he was not buried here, but left a large sum of money as a legacy to pay for Masses to be said here for his soul. The shield displays his coat-of-arms. The corresponding left hand tablet mentions his connection with the Farnese family. [1]

Access

Until recently the church was not easy to find open, and seems now to be permanently shut on Sundays. According to the Conservatorio, it is open on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays for liturgical activities from 11:00 to 17:00 (a closure for lunch is not mentioned, but can be presumed). The Conservatorio website offers the opportunity to apply for permission to visit. [1]

Apparently the routine administration of the church is in the hands of a group called the Cooperativa Società Artisti Moderni Onlus, the Internet profile of which is poor. Presumably the works of art to been seen displayed for sale outside the church come from members of this group. [1]

However, in 2013 the church was being found open in the late afternoon on weekdays (after 16:00), with a custodian present and guide leaflets available. [1]

Artists and Architects:

Alessandro d'Elia (18th cent), Italian painter from Naples

Annibale [Carracci](#) (1560-1609), Italian painter of the Baroque from Bologna

Federico [Zuccari](#) (1541-1609), Italian Mannerist **painter** and architect

Giacomo (Jacopo) [Barozzi da Vignola](#) (1507-1573), one of the great Italian architects of 16th century Mannerism

Giovanni Sorbi (18th cent), Italian painter

Giovanni Zanna [aka *Pizzica*] (17th cent?), Italian painter, sculptor

Girolamo [Muziano](#) (1532-1592), Italian painter, active in a late-Renaissance or Mannerism style.

Girolamo [Nanni](#) [aka *il Poco e Buono*] (17th cent), Italian painter of the Baroque period

Guidetto [Guidetti](#) († 1564), Italian architect

Livio [Agresti](#) aka *Ritius* or *Ricciutello* (1508-1580), Italian painter of the late Renaissance or Mannerist period

Lucio [Massari](#) (1569-1633), Italian painter of the Mannerist and early-Baroque period from Bologna

Marcello [Venusti](#) (1515-1579), Italian Mannerist painter from Como

Ottaviano [Nonni](#), aka *Il Mascherino* (1536-1606), Italian architect, sculptor, and painter from Bologna

Raffaellino [Motta](#) da Reggio (1550–1578), Italian painter from Emilia, active in a Mannerist style

Scipione [Pulzone](#) of Gaeta, aka *il Gaetano* (1550-1598), Italian late Renaissance-Mannerist painter

Tiberio [Calcagni](#) (1532–1565), Italian **architect** and sculptor

Burials:

Andrea Canuto († 1610)

<Bishop of Oppido Mamertina>

Location:

Address: Via dei Funari

Coord: [41° 53' 38" N, 12° 28' 43" E](#)

Info:

Contacts

Telephone: +39 06 6785883

Opening times

Sunday 10:00am-01:00pm

Mass schedule:

Holidays: 11:00 (Language Kerala-India)

During the celebration of the Holy Mass is not possible to visit the church.

Links and Refewrences:

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
 2. [Info Roma web site](#)
 3. [Romapedia blog](#)
 4. Confraternity web site (no longer online)
 5. I.R. ASP web site (no longer online)
 - a. Lewine, Milton; THE ROMAN CHURCH INTERIOR, 1527-1580; 1963; pg. 178
 - b. Erwee, Michael; THE CHURCHES OF ROME, 1527-1870; *Pindar Press* (Oct. 31st, 2013), pp. 103-105
 - c. Lewine, Milton J.; THE ROMAN CHURCH INTERIOR, 1527-1580; UniversityMicrofilms International; 1960; pp. 178-191
- Sharp. Mary; A GUIDE TO THE CHURCHES OF ROME; 1966; pg. 63
- Donovan, Jeremiah; ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS; 1842; pg. V2:186

[Wiki Commons catalogue](#)

[Tourist information](#)