

San Nicola in Carcere



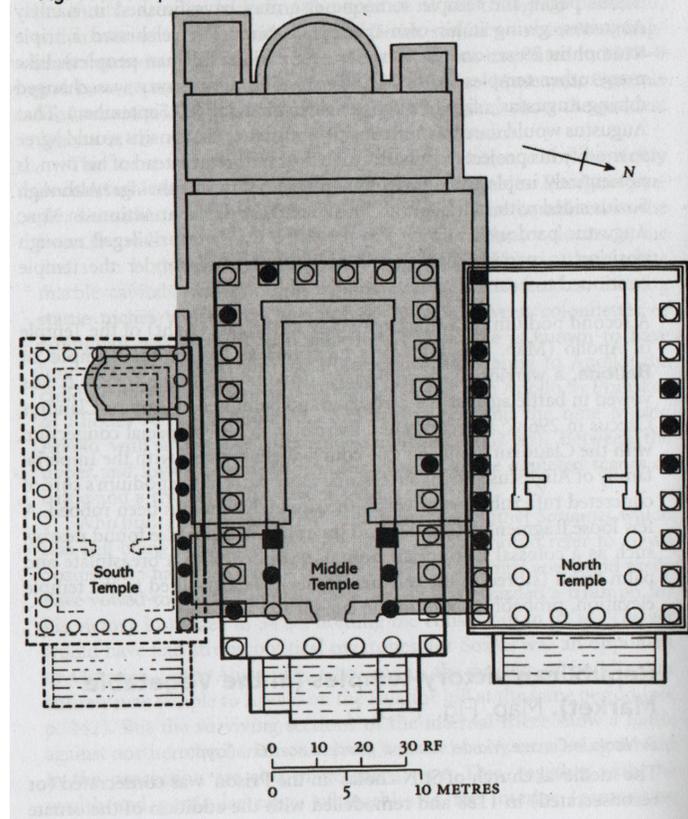
San Nicola in Carcere (St Nicholas in Prison) is a 16th century titular church and a minor basilica, and is also the regional church for those from Puglia and Lucania living in Rome. The basilica is near the Forum Boarium in rione Ripa. The church is dedicated to St [Nicholas of Myra](#), the patron saint of sailors and of children and the remote cause of the phenomenon of Santa Claus. His shrine is at Bari which is why this church is the national church for those who moved from Puglia and Lucania to Rome. [1] [4]

The reference to 'Prison' is obscure. 'In carcere' probably refers to a tradition, supported by Pliny's history of Rome, that there was once a prison here, built in the ruins of the temples. [1]

History

Perhaps the most interesting thing about the church is that it incorporates the remains of three temples of the Republican era (2nd century BC) which used to stand in a row, side by side in the ancient Forum Holitorium (a vegetable market) with their entrances facing east. How the three temples became a church is a process which is completely obscure. [1]

The northernmost was dedicated to Janus, and had two rows of six Ionic columns of *peperino* at the entrance and eight down each side. Two survive to the north, and seven to the south embedded with their architrave in the church's north wall. Well-preserved parts of the podium also survive in the crypt. The site of the middle temple is occupied by the church; it was dedicated to Juno Sospita and was in the Ionic style. Three columns survive embedded in the façade (out of six), and other remains exist in the crypt and also at the end of the left aisle. The southern, much smaller temple was dedicated to Spes (hope personified as a goddess). It was in the Doric style, with six columns at the entrance and eleven down each side. Seven columns of the north side are embedded in the south wall of the church. [1] [4]



How the church was born from the three temples is not known. Probably the middle temple was built as a church in the 6th century. It is very possible that the Greeks who lived in the area built the church. [4]

The first certain documentary reference is an epigraph from the reign of Pope Urban II (1088-99), preserved in the right hand aisle. Also in the right hand aisle is an epigraph recording the church's refitting and re-consecration on the orders of Pope Honorius II dating to 1128 (on the fluted column to the right as one enters) recalling its rebuilding and consecration. However, there is another epigraph cut into the second nave arcade column on the right. [1]

In the 13th century the church was known as San Nicola Petrus Leonis, referring to the convert Jewish Pierleoni family who rebuilt the nearby Theatre of Marcellus as a fortress. They became famous Roman patricians in the Middle Ages, and the present campanile was their responsibility. [1]

There was a restoration in 1280, involving the church's crypt which was functioning as a confessorio or place for pilgrims to venerate relics of martyrs. Under the present high altar are the relics of Mark and Marcellian, as well as Simplician, Faustinus and Viatrix. The first two featured in the 13th century fresco cycle in the crypt, as was noted in the 17th century. Also portrayed were SS Abundius and Abundantius, as well as a Flagellation and a Crucifixion. All these are lost, but a panel showing The Baptism of Christ and four tondi portraying prophets (Moses, Jeremiah, Haggai and Amos) were recovered and are now in the Pinacoteca Vaticana. [1]

In 1599, Cardinal Pietro Aldobrandini had the church rebuilt from its foundations, with **Giacomo della Porta** as the architect. The present Mannerist façade dates from this rebuilding. The ancient temple remains were conserved, as was the mediaeval tower serving as a campanile. [1] [6]

The church was restored three times in the 19th century, in 1856 when the altar was remodelled, in 1865 on the orders of Pope Pius IX and again in 1880. [1]

In the 20th century, the edifice almost succumbed to the nationalist passion for excavating and exposing the surviving architectural remains of the Roman Empire. The surrounding buildings, many of them medieval, were demolished, leaving the church isolated. When Mussolini's grandiose Via del Mare road scheme was executed, the present wide road was pushed through at a much lower level than the original street and hence the church is now only accessible in front by steps. [1]

No one has ever lived around the church so the church was not needed even as a parish church. The activities of the church ceased in 1931 and it was placed in the care of the Church of Santa Maria in Campitelli. However, the church has its own titular cardinal deacon, Cardinal Zenon Grocholewski who received the church in 2001. The church holds inaugurations, concerts and religious meetings or special ceremonies. [4]

Exterior

The plan of the basilica is based on a T, with separate pitched and tiled roofs covering the nave and the longitudinal transept which does not protrude beyond the nave aisles. The presbyterium roof is also hipped. There is a semi-circular apse with conch, a separate chapel on the left hand side with its own little dome and conched apse, and a medieval campanile to the right of the façade. [1]

Façade

The façade was designed by **Giacomo della Porta** in 1599 under the patronage of Cardinal Aldobrandini (later Pope Clement VIII), whose name is seen on the façade. The facade incorporates two stuccoed columns from the middle Temple of Juno and a third, in peperino, was exposed on the facade during the restoration in the 1930's. [1] [c]

The central vertical zone of the first storey in between the columns is brought forward slightly. The oversize door has a plain moulded doorcase, surmounted by a raised blank triangular pediment over an inscription proclaiming that the church is indulgenced. Above this pediment is a large oculus (or round window) surrounded by a ring of twelve eight-pointed stars, this ring being broken by a benefactor's inscription running underneath the cornice. This latter reads *Petrus SRE Diac[onus] Card[inalis] Aldobrandinus*, or "Peter Aldobrandini, Cardinal Deacon of the Holy Roman Church". The oculus is flanked by a pair of panels showing reliefs of saints, the one on the left being *St. Nicholas* in bishop's robes, and to the right, *St. Mark and St. Marcellus*, third-century martyrs buried in the church. Below each panel is a star and a swag, and there is another pair of stars to the left and right of the column capitals. The star was on the Aldobrandini coat of arms. [1] [7] [a]

The little upper half-storey has four Doric pilasters supporting the crowning triangular pediment, which has a blank tympanum. The central panel has stars, swags and ribbons, there are four stars with volutes on the pilasters and a pair of candlesticks in relief in between the pairs of pilasters. Two large double volutes in shallow relief flank the pediment, and the pediment itself has three ball finials. The main one has a metal cross, while the other two have metal stars. This is an arrangement that dates from at least the 18th century. [1]

Campanile

The campanile is medieval, and was not changed during the 16th century rebuilding. The bell-tower was previously a fortified tower belonging to the Pierleone family (matching the one beside their 11th century mansion across the road), but when it was abandoned it was changed into a bell-tower for the church. It has two bells which were cast in 1286. [1] [d]

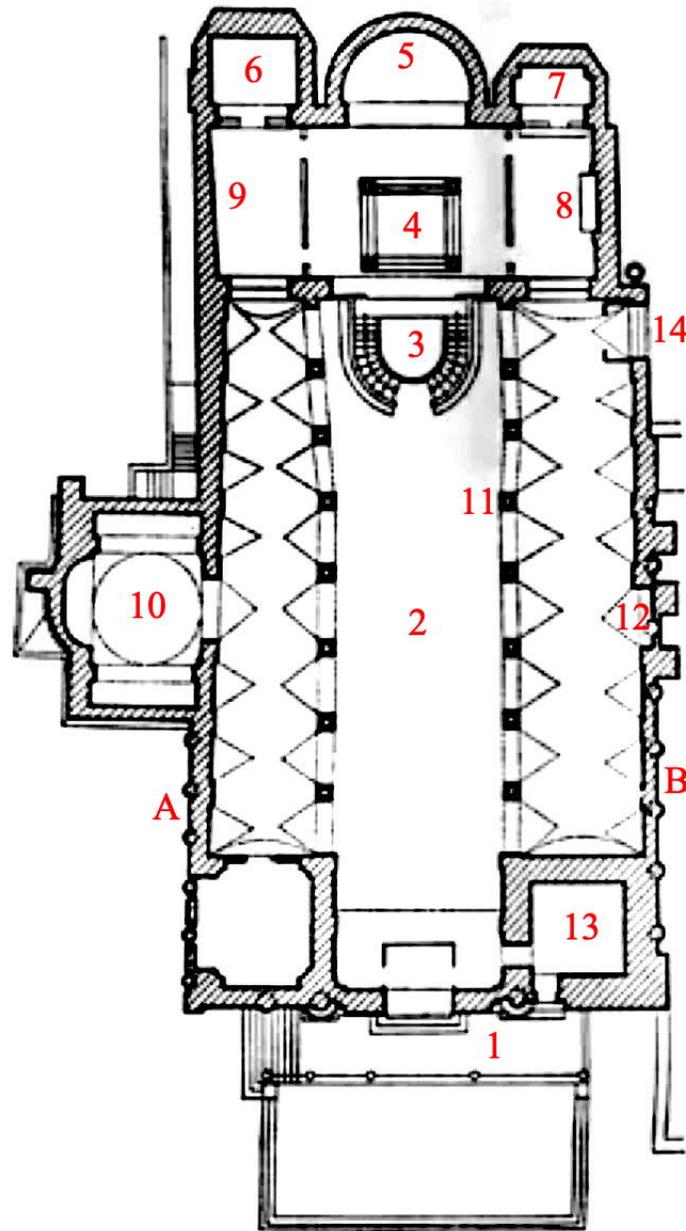
Side entrance

The right hand side entrance has a rectangular stone portal with an aperture in the shape of a Gothic arch. The spandrels have two roundels with traces of Cosmatesque decoration. This item was part of the 1280 restoration. [1]

Interior

The nave has nine bays, the first one for the entrance and then eight with arcades into the side aisles. Then comes the transept, the center of which functions as the sanctuary. Finally, there is the curved apse which now has no function. It is flanked by a pair of chapels. There is only one side chapel off the nave, on the left hand side. Overall, the decorative elements on the walls are 19th century. [1]

Plan



Nave

The nave (2) has seven ancient columns in the arcade on each side, supporting an entablature with modillions supporting its cornice. Very interestingly, the central nave wall above the arcade is thinner in the last three bays. If you look at the ceiling, you can see a gap on either side at the far end because of this. One interpretation is that the rebuilding by De Porta only involved the first five bays, and that this part of the nave has mediaeval fabric. [1]

The central nave side walls have four windows in the first five bays, separated by three 19th century figurative fresco panels. The side walls in the far three bays have two such fresco panels, flanking a blank panel where there "should" be a window. The frescoes, showing scenes from *The Life and Miracles of St Nicholas*, are by Marco Tullio Montagna. [1]

The entrance bay contains the organ gallery. Above the organ are epigraph tablets recording the more recent restorations, and the coat of arms of Pope Pius IX. Flanking the entrance at the bottom end of the aisles are two custodians' chambers, the right hand one also being the first storey

of the campanile. [1]

The flat 19th century wooden nave ceiling is coffered in large panels, and is richly decorated in blue and gold with rosettes and tendrils. It was provided in 1868, and the coat of arms of Pope Pius IX is displayed in the center. [1]

The side aisles have cross-vaults, which spring from pilasters with Renaissance "sort-of" Composite capitals and which are revetted in a dark greenish-grey marble. [1]

The confessio (3) or entrance to the crypt intrudes into the nave, and is surrounded by a U-shaped marble balustrade. [1]

Columns

The church features a wonderful variety of columns (not including the bases, which were replaced during the 19th restoration of the church): the two rows of 7 columns running down the nave contrast with, rather than mirror each other, as was the more common practice. Only the last two pairs of columns before the sanctuary adhere to this mirroring principle. On the right-hand side the first three columns are fluted, green-streaked cipollino, the fourth - also fluted - is of red portasnata and the fifth has a smooth cipollino shaft. All have Corinthian capitals (mid-third century). The last two columns before the chancel have gray granite shafts and Ionic capitals, the first of these being small and plain, the second larger and slightly more elaborate. The first five columns on the left-hand side are rather more uniform in appearance. Here, too, though, the type of stone varies: the first shaft is of grey marble, the next is red granite (a 19th century addition with a capital from Asia Minor) and the following three are of green-streaked cipollino. [c]

Another distinctive feature of the church's right side is the second column (11) in the colonnade which bears an inscription possibly dating from the 7th-8th centuries. This inscription reads "Anastasius, maiordomus [a senior church official], gives gifts to Saint Anna, Simeon and [the church of Saint] Lucia". This tells us that this column has previously been part of an older church, to which it was donated by the aforementioned Anastasius. Another inscription just above the base of the column states that someone (probably Anastasius) is buried under third column - or at least, where this column originally stood before it was moved to its present location. [c]

Near the column, on the right wall of the nave, a third inscription details the gifts made to the church by a 12th century priest, Romanus (probably under Pope Urban II, 1088-1099). [c]

Sanctuary

The 19th century ceiling of the transept is separate and higher than the ceiling in the nave, and the transept floor is also elevated over the original mediaeval crypt. [1]

The high altar (4) has a 19th century baldacchino with an ornate canopy on four red and white marble Corinthian columns. The altar itself is on an ancient green serpentine urn containing the relics of martyrs. The Romans got the stone from near Sparta, so they called it Lapis lacedaemonicus. [1] [b]

The relics in the altar are apparently part of those of SS Mark and Marcellian, who are mainly at Santi Cosma e Damiano. They were originally at Catacomba di Basileo (Basilica dei Santi Marco e Marcelliano). [1]

The apse (5) behind the altar has allegorical frescoes from the 1865 restoration, to a scheme by Vincenzo Pasqualoni. On the tribune is the *Eternal Father*, *St. Nicholas of Myra*, etc. , painted by Orazio Gentileschi. The frescoes were restored in the 19th century. [1]

The left hand side wall (9) has an *Ascension* by Lorenzo Costa. The facing wall (8) has a memorial to Cardinal Giovanni Battista Rezzonico, 1783. His tomb was sculpted by Irish artist Christopher Heweston, with his bust, emblems and the epitaph composed by Stefano Antonio Morcelli. [1] [3]

Side chapels

In the right hand aisle is a fragment of a fresco of the *Madonna and Child* by **Antoniazio Romano**. Further along is an altar dedicated to the Holy Trinity (12) and the altarpiece, *Trinity among Angels*, is attributed to **Guercino**. Then comes a 19th century picture of *St Francis receiving the Stigmata*. [1]

To the right of the apse (7) is the chapel of Our Lady of Pompei. The feast of Our Lady of Pompei, an Italian cult of Our Lady based on a shrine near the famous ruined city, is celebrated on 8 May. The altarpiece is a rather academic 19th century copy of the original icon. [1]

To the left of the apse (6) is the Blessed Sacrament chapel, which has a 14th-century crucifix on the wall above the altar. A legend says that the body on the cross moved its eyes during a Mass celebrated by St. Gaspar del Bufalo. Here there is a painting of *The Last Supper*, by **Cesare Baglioni**. [6] [7]

The large external chapel off the left hand aisle (10) is now dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe, and is a focus of devotion by Mexican expatriates. It contains a reproduction painted on silk of the famous miraculous painting, and given to the church in 1773 by the Jesuit missionaries when they were compelled to leave Mexico. [1] [a]

Crypt

The crypt can be visited on Thursdays, 10:30 a.m. to noon. The opening times used to be much more accommodating, and it is perhaps advisable to phone beforehand to check. The phone number is on the diocesan web-page. [1]

Remains of the podia of the three temples are on view there, together with the narrow alleyways between them. A puzzling feature is the row of small rooms or cells cut into the podium of the central temple. These small rooms, which at the time of their discovery fueled the legend of the ancient prison, were probably used instead as offices of money changers, operating in function of the numerous traders, habitual frequenters of the times of the Olitorio forum. [1] [5]

The crypt used to be an ossuary, and there were a lot of old bones scattered about until fairly recently (mostly human) which made for a rather macabre visit. [1]

Artists and Architects

Antoniazio [Romano](#) (1430-1510), Italian Early Renaissance painter
Cesare [Baglioni](#) (c.1525–1590), Italian painter
Christopher [Heweston](#) (c.1737-1798), Irish neoclassical sculptor of portrait busts
Giacomo [della Porta](#) (c.1533-1602), Italian sculptor and architect
Giovanni Francesco Barbieri [aka *il Guercino*] (1591-1666), Italian Baroque painter
Lorenzo [Costa](#) (1460-1535) Italian painter of the Renaissance
Marco Tullio [Montagna](#) (c.1594-1649), Italian Painter
Orazio Lomi [Gentileschi](#) (1563-1639), Italian late-Mannerist/early-Baroque painter
Stefano Antonio [Morcelli](#) (1737-1822), Italian Jesuit scholar
Vincenzo [Pasqualoni](#) (1819-1880), Italian painter

Burials

Giovanni Battista Cardinal [CONSIGLIERI](#), (1491-1559)
Buried next to the altar of *SS. Sacramento*
Giovanni Battista Cardinal [REZZONICO](#), (1740-1783)
Giuseppe Antonio Cardinal [ZACCHIA RONDININI](#), (1787-1845)
Buried in the left transept next to the altar of S. Nicola
Pietro Cardinal [MARINI](#), (1794-1863)

Access

The church is open 10:00 to 17:00 daily (tourist website 060608, January 2018)
Only worshippers are allowed in the church during Mass (see below).
The scavi are visitable 10:00 to 17:00, except Wednesdays.

Liturgy

Mass is celebrated:

Weekdays 7:30, 8:00, 18:00;

Sundays and Solemnities 12:00.

Mass in the Extraordinary Form is celebrated at 18:00 on Saturdays.

Location

On the Via del Teatro di Marcello, just south of the old theater.

Coord: [41° 53' 28" N 12° 28' 48" E](#)

Link and References

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
 2. [Info.Roma web site](#)
 3. [Cardinals of the Catholic Church database](#)
 4. [Roomassa blog](#)
 5. [RomaSotteranea blog](#)
 6. [Tesori di Roma blog](#)
 7. [Sights of Rome blog](#)
- a. Sharp, Mary; A GUIDE TO THE CHURCHES OF ROME; 1966; pg116
 - b. Donovan, Jeremiah; ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS; 1842, Vol II pg 35
 - c. Hansen, Maria Fabricius; THE SPOLIA CHURCHES OF ROME; Aarhus University Press; Pp 184-193
 - d. Claridge, Amanda, ROME: An Oxford Archaeological Guide; Oxford University Press; 20120; Pp. 279-282

Other Link

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:San_Nicola_in_Carcere_\(Rome\)](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:San_Nicola_in_Carcere_(Rome))

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dealvariis/sets/72157616415715589/>

("De Alvariis" gallery on Flickr)

<http://www.jeffbondono.com/TouristInRome/SanNicolaInCarcere.html>

<https://www.pnac.org/station-churches/week-4/saturday-san-nicola-in-carcere/>

<http://www.060608.it/en/cultura-e-svago/luoghi-di-culto-di-interesse-storico-artistico/chiese-cattoliche/chiesa-san-nicola-in-carcere.html>

<https://www.revolvy.com/page/San-Nicola-in-Carcere>

https://mcid.mcah.columbia.edu/public-search?search_api_views_fulltext=Nicola+in+Carcere