

San Nicola dei Lorenesi



The 17th century church of **St. Nicholas Lorenesi** is located in Rome near Piazza Navona diagonally opposite Santa Maria dell'Anima, in the rione Parione. After the annexation of the Duchy of Lorraine to France in 1766, the building was integrated into Pieux Etablissements de la France et à Rome Lorette. (1)

History

During the Renaissance, the French and Lorenesi formed the *Congrégation de Saint-Louis* who gave hand in building the church of San Luigi dei Francesi in 1588. Part of this church was paid by Duke Charles III of Lorraine to represent the state of Lorraine at the Vatican. (1)

In 1587, the Lorenesi created a new confraternity independent from France under the name *Confraternité de Saint-Nicolas et de Sainte-Catherine de la Nation de Lorraine et de Barrois* (Confraternity of SS Nicholas and Catherine of the nation of Lorraine and Bar), who was authorized to possess a chapel inside the San Luigi dei Francesi and with the goal of building a church in Rome own. (1)

In 1622, Pope Gregory XV granted the Confraternity an old church dedicated to St. Nicholas in Agone, near Piazza Navona, which was first mentions in 1186 as a subsidiary of S. Lorenzo in Damaso. (1)

Thanks to the financial contribution of the sculptor Lorraine Nicolas Cordier and land sold by Gregory XV in 1622, the Duchy of Lorraine decided in 1635 to rebuild completely the St. Nicolas church. The work was completed a year later as reported on the plaque of the entrance of the church wall. The church was designed by architect **François du Jardin**, and constructed by **Francesco Giardini**. During a major removation started in 1730, the ceiling and interior of the

dome were painted by **Corrado Giaquinto** in 1733. (1) (4) (5)

On the occasion of the Jubilee 1750 **Corrado Giaquinto** was recalled for the decoration of two altarpieces. The architect **Pietro Mariotti** took the opportunity to add stucco bas-reliefs above the four doors, doors beautify white marble, take sixteen pilasters mottled Sicilian marble and yellow Siena. (4)

In 1766 the Duchy of Lorraine was annexed to France. A few years later, in 1793, the church was incorporated with the newly created Pious Schools of France in Rome and Loreto. The church was restored in 2005, under an agreement with the Ministry of Culture and has beautiful elements of decorative art involving many artists of the time Lorraine and Italians. The financial support provided by the Regional Council of Lorraine as well as the Friends of Saint Nicolas of Lorraine, which launched public subscriptions for this purpose, provided valuable assistance in the implementation of restoration work. (4)

When Napoleon's troops arrived in 1797, the Brotherhood of Lorraine was dissolved. The treasures of the church were melted and sent to France. Many original paintings disappeared from the sacristy at that time. (4)

It fell into serious disrepair in the late 20th century, but was thoroughly restored in 2006. It is now used by the Community of St John, a new French religious institute founded in 1975. It continues to be counted as a national church of France, together with San Luigi, Santissima Trinità dei Monti and Sant'Ivo dei Bretoni, and the French government owns the property. (1) (3)

The interior is now visible to visitors at the usual hours through a metal grille behind the front door. Actual access seems only to be for liturgical events.

Exterior

This is one of the smallest churches in Rome with its own dome, although this is invisible from the ground. (1)

The façade is simple, made from travertine limestone probably taken from the nearby ruins of Stadium of Domitian, and completed in 1636. It has two storeys, and the first storey has four Doric pilasters supporting an entablature, the frieze of which has a dedicatory inscription “*In honorem S. Nicolai natio Lotharingorum*” (in honor of St Nicholas, the nation of Lorraine), recalling the proud Lorraine origin of the church. The entrance doorway has an oversized raised triangular pediment, and is flanked by a pair of round-headed niches. The second storey has four Ionic pilasters with swagged capitals, identical niches and a large central window with a Baroque frame and a raised segmental pediment. Unusually, the triangular façade pediment contains a little square window. (1) (4)

A secondary building was later added along the left wall between 1751 and 1759 at the site of the former home of the Marquis de Cavalieri acquired in 1729. (1)

Interior

Nave

The plan is a single nave with two shallow side chapels, and a very short square-ended presbyterium beyond the dome. (1)

The 18th century decoration, in verde, antique and Sicilian jasper, stucco (much of it gilded) and fresco work is lusciously ornate. The pilasters that decorate its walls are of Sicilian jasper, with gilt capitals. Two large lunette windows at the top of the nave side walls (the left hand one is actually false) squeeze the ceiling fresco into an attractive fiddleback shape. (1) (b)

The internal coating made of polychrome marbles was carried out by **Giovanni Andrea Volponi** and **Giuseppe Maria Bay** (1748). The ceiling vault and interior of the dome were painted by **Corrado Giaquinto** in 1733: *San Nicola causing a miraculous spring of water to flow from a rock, four cardinal*

Four stucco bas-reliefs in the niches over the side doors depicting the episode of the life of St. Nicholas, attributed to **Giovanni Battista Grossi**, were constructed (1749). The balustrade of the choir was designed by **Giovanni Francesco Fiori** (1761). (2) (a) (b)

The two stucco reliefs on either side before reaching the dome are arguably among the few examples of the rococo style in Rome. (1)

Side chapels

The side chapels are two arched niches facing each other, containing identical aedicules with a pair of Corinthian columns supporting a triangular pediment on posts. The columns must have been painted to resemble red and white marbelling, because the pairs of columns have identical patterns.

The right hand chapel is dedicated to St Peter Fourier, and the altarpiece shows him having a vision of the Madonna and Child. It is ascribed to Francesco Antonozzi.

Over the lateral altar to the right is a painting, representing *Saint [Pierre Fourier](#) before the Virgin and Child*, by **Francesco Antonozzi**; and the *Saint Catharine martyr*, over the opposite altar, is by **Nicholas de Bar** of Lorraine. (b)

The marble altar comes from the ancient church of S. Maria della Purificazione detta delle Quattro Nazioni in Banchi, demolished in 1889. (a)

The left hand chapel is dedicated to St Catherine of Alexandria. The altarpiece seems to show her with St Nicholas, as the two patrons of the confraternity that built the church. The older guidebooks name the artist as Nicola Lorenese or "Nicholas from Lorraine".

Transept

The dome was frescoed by Giaquinto and depicts *Heaven*. The pendentives show the *Cardinal Virtues*. (1)

For the Jubilee of 1750 **Giaquinto** also painted two paintings on either side of the main altar which feature episodes in the legend of St Nicholas. On the left is *St. Nicholas and officers of Constantine*, and on the right is *St. Nicholas quells the storm*. Apparently the latter is a copy of a lost original. (1) (a)

Sanctuary

The altarpiece is a work of **Nicholas de Bar**: *Saint Nicolas, the Three Children and a prisoner, the Mystical Wedding of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*. Above the altarpiece is a striking trompe-l'oeil effect behind the altar, as the flat wall is painted so as to give the impression of an aedicule with a covered pediment. The sanctuary vault has a little elliptical fresco by **Giaquinto**, showing allegories of the three Theological Virtues. (1) (4) (a)

Burials:

Charles [Mellin](#) (1597-1647)
<French painter from Lorraine>

Artists and Architects:

Corrado [Giaquinto](#) (1703-1765), Italian painter of the Rococo period (also see [here](#))
Francesco [Antonozzi](#) (1685-1741), Italian painter
Francesco Giardini (17th cent), Italian architect
François Desjardin (1623-1636), French architect
François Nicolas [de Bar](#) aka Nicolò Lorenese (1632-1695), French painter from Lorraine
Giovanni Andrea Volponi (17th cent),
Giovanni Battista Grossi (18th cent), Italian sculptor
Giovanni Francesco [Fiori](#) (1709-1784), Italian architect from Rome

Giuseppe Maria Bay (17th cent),
Giuseppe Silvestri (18th cent), Italian painter
Pietro Mariotti (18th cent), Italian architect

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Links and References:

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)

2. [Info.Roma web page](#)

3. [Art-in-Rome web page](#)

4. [La France au Vatican web page](#)
(includes excellent photos)

5. [English Wikipedia page](#)

6. [Tourist info on 060608.it web site](#)

[“de Alvaris” photo album on flickr.com](#)

French article on the reopening of the restored church in 2006
(no longer online)

[Rome Art Love web page](#)

a. Descriptive plaque from the church

b. Donovan, Jeremiah; ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS; 1842; Pg. V2:241

65. Morrissey, Jake; THE GENIUS IN THE DESIGN: Bernini, Borromini, and the Rivalry that Transformed Rome; 2005; Pg. 94