

Sant'Onofrio al Gianicolo



Sant'Onofrio al Gianicolo is a 15th century monastic and titular church in Trastevere, on the Janiculum. The dedication is to St Onuphrius, a 4th century Egyptian hermit or Desert Father. He was popular in the Middle Ages, and an iconographic representation of him as a naked man with a long beard preserving his modesty can still be found in churches in Europe.

History

The monastery is not an ancient foundation. What was here before the 15th century was a holm-oak wood on the northern end of the Janiculum ridge, in which Blessed Nicholas of Forca Palena (1349-1449) founded a small hermitage in 1419.

He had been born in a mountain hamlet called Forca near Chieti, and worked as a diocesan priest of Sulmona at Palena before migrating to Rome around the year 1404. There he joined an informal group of penitents who had gathered around one Rinaldo di Piedimonte at the church of San Salvatore in Thermis (now demolished). Nicholas took over as priest in charge of the church and leader of the group, and thus began a new religious congregation which became known as *Heremitae Sancti Hieronimi*. (The patron was St Jerome.) He founded a community in Naples in 1417, Santa Maria delle Grazie a Caponapoli, and then this hermitage in Rome with the help of Gabriele Cardinal Condulmer, who became Pope Eugene IV in 1431. He had made friends with Blessed Peter Gambacorta, a hermit at Montebello near Urbino who (according to the legend) converted a band of robbers and so founded the *Fratres Pauperes Sancti Hieronimi* in 1380. The two new congregations were so close in charism that the founders decided to unite them as the *Pauperes Heremitae Sancti Hieronimi* or the "Poor Hermits of St Jerome" (*Poveri Eremiti di San Girolamo*). Because of his seniority in time, Peter is often regarded as the founder of the consolidated congregation.

The pope was a great supporter, and in 1437 confirmed Nicholas's work and gave him two convents in Florence from which degenerate Benedictine nuns had been ejected. These were Santa Maria a

Ricorboli and Santa Cristina in Alpi. Peter died in that year, and the pope confirmed the union of the two congregations in 1446. The resultant order has often been referred to as Hieronymites, which leads to confusion with a Spanish monastic order of the same name as well as with other groups in Italy.

Meanwhile, the hut in the wood was replaced by a proper monastery with a church. This was apparently begun in 1439 and finished in 1444. In that year Nicholas moved back to Rome, resigned as the priest-in-charge of San Salvatore and settled here finally in 1448 just before his death aged one hundred in 1449.

The new monastery was not easy to get to. There was a donkey track along the ridge of the hill west of the complex, which ran to the Porta San Pancrazio (this was soon to be blocked by villa development). Then there was a very steep footpath (the present Via di Sant'Onofrio) which plunged down the hill to the river, and then continued along the riverbank to the hamlet of Settignano around the old church now called San Giacomo alla Lungara. (The Via della Lungara was only built at the end of the 15th century). So, the brethren constructed a rather rough, steep and dangerous driveway to their monastery in 1446 which is the present Salita di Sant'Onofrio.

The proximity of the new monastery to the Vatican ensured that it received much attention and patronage. This resulted in donations for improvements, and visits from famous people. A major reason of the fame was that the community was fervent about the monastic and contemplative life at a period when such fervor was not very common.

A program of interior decoration of the church and monastery was in progress by 1513 (the earliest surviving work dates from this year).

In 1517, Pope Leo X made the church titular with a cardinal deacon, and in 1588 the cardinalate was made presbyteral. In the same year the interior of the church was finally finished.

Meanwhile, in 1568 Pope St Pius V gave the order new constitutions, and required the members to take solemn vows and adhere to the Rule of St Augustine.

Torquato Tasso

On 25 April 1595, the epic poet Torquato Tasso died while staying in the monastery as a guest. He had come to Rome to be crowned with laurels on the Capitol at the invitation of Pope Clement VIII, but died on the day before the ceremony. He had been physically and mentally ill for years. The monks kept the room in which he died as a visitor attraction.

Much was to be made of the monastery's connection with the poet in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but interest in him has waned since.

17th and 18th centuries

1600 was a Jubilee year, and for it the road up to the monastery was finally paved. Also, an important set of lunette frescoes was painted in the cloister.

In 1620, part of the church's loggia was walled off to create a funerary chapel for the Vaini family. (They built the Casino Giraud on the hill, which is now the Spanish Embassy.) About a hundred years later, an increase in the number of monks led to the arcaded gallery over the portico being converted into more cells.

In 1712, the relics of Bl Nicholas were transferred to below the high altar. However the brethren were unsuccessful in attempts to have him canonized, and his cult as a beatus was only approved for Rome (locally) and Sulmona in 1771. His veneration was very popular among Romans in the 18th century, but tailed off and now most visitors to the church don't realize that he is here or know who he was.

Famous visitors following the Tasso trail in the 18th century included Goethe, who while in Italy wrote a play about Tasso's life. There is a tablet recording his visit round the corner at the end of the short arm of the loggia.

19th century

Stendhal visited the cloister while in Rome about 1815, and declared it to be the most beautiful place to die.

The Janiculum was the major location of hostilities when the French army suppressed the Roman Republic in 1849 as a favor to the papacy. Giuseppe Garibaldi led the resistance, but allowed himself to be persuaded by the superior of the monastery not to use the campanile as a gun emplacement, because of his admiration for Tasso. A rather grandiose monument to Tasso was provided in 1857.

The monastery was expropriated by the Italian government in 1873, and used as a children's hospital called the Ospedale Pediatrico Bambino Gesù. However, the buildings were grossly unsuitable for such a purpose.

Between 1883 and 1896, a new road called the Passeggiata dei Gianicolo was built in front of the monastery and along the crest of the hill. Respect for Tasso again helped preserve the complex, as the road was squeezed past the garden terrace opening off the entrance loggia.

A few Hieronymite monks were allowed to retain possession of the church, but the order was in terminal decline.

20th century

In 1924 the entrance garden was given a fountain and two stone benches in memory of Tasso. The former was assembled from architectural salvage collected by the municipality, but it was noticed that some of it came from a famous fountain that was in the Piazza Giudia until 1880. In 1930 this fountain was re-created as the Fontana di Piazza della Cinque Scole, and the one at the monastery was given modern bits to replace those taken back (including the basin).

The Church got the monastery back in 1929, as part of the Lateran pacts. However, in 1933 the Hieronymite order was finally suppressed as being incapable of attracting or forming vocations.

In 1939, a museum about Tasso was opened in the monastery. This is the Museo Tassiano, which is still there although not regularly open. It was based on the room in which he died, which the monks had kept as a visitor attraction.

In 1945, the property was put in the care of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre. However this gave the tenancy to the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement, founded in the USA. They are still in charge.

The children's hospital is now in modern buildings next to the monastery on the west, on land which is part of the extraterritorial area administered by the Holy See. Part of the monastic complex has been demolished to accommodate it.

Exterior

The church has no external identity separate from the monastery. Structurally it is a small single nave of three bays, with an external segmental apse (not quite semi-circular) which is polygonal on the inside. There are three large external chapels on the left hand side, and two on the right. The floor area of these is greater than the church itself.

The church is oriented north to south. The main cloister of the monastery is to the west, and is a rectangle arcaded on all four sides with the major axis parallel to that of the church. There used to be two further cloisters, both with arcades on the west sides only. One was north of the main cloister, and the other to the east. Both of these have had their north and west ranges demolished for hospital buildings.

The church frontage is occupied by the short arm of an L-shaped loggia, the long arm of which runs besides the east range of the north cloister.

The nave has a tiled roof which is pitched and hipped, while the chapels and apse have their own tiled roofs which are slightly lower.

Approach

The present Salita di Sant'Onofrio was constructed as a paved street by the monks in 1600, and was the only way that wheeled vehicles could get to the monastery until the late 19th century. It is dead straight, and used to end in a reception yard where the main road now is. On the other side of the main road, there is now a staircase in two flights leading to the entrance loggia. Before the road was built, there used to be a wide ramp but the construction of the road at the end of the 19th century required a revetment wall for the terrace and a lowering of the ground level. The hospital entrance is to the right.

The terrace in front of the loggia is a famous viewpoint. It was laid out in memory of Torquato Tasso in 1924, and now has a fountain and two old stone garden benches. The two holm oaks are a reminder of the wood that was here before the monastery; the trees look as if it were planted in the later 19th century -and mutilated by some idiot pretending to be a tree surgeon more recently.

A tradition grew up in the 18th century concerning another old holm-oak at the far end of the monastery vineyard, south of the monastery itself. It was said, probably initially by monks giving tours to visitors interested in Tasso, that the poet used to sit under the tree and cogitate just before he died. The tradition is feasible, since early 19th century illustrations show a tree that could have been over 200 years old. Unfortunately, a storm in 1842 broke off all its branches except one. The decrepit but still impressive tree was preserved when the road was built in the late 19th century, and was given a brick buttress and ironwork to support it. It died in the 20th, quite possibly as a result of the preservation work causing damage to its root system. Its dead remains is by a footpath called the Rampa di Quercia, straight on where the road bends to the right behind the monastery. (There is an open-air theatre here as well.)

Loggia

The L-shaped loggia is original, 16th century. The architect is unknown. There are four arches in the short end containing the church entrance, and nine in the long end which contains the monastery entrance. However, in 1620 the last two arches in the long end were walled up to create the Chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary. At the start of the 18th century, the two arches in the left hand side of the short end were similarly walled up to create a custodian's chamber for the church. In the same restoration, an arcaded second-storey gallery over the long end was also walled up and converted into further cells. The rectangular windows in the second storey, alternating with relief panels having incurved corners, belong to this intervention.

The arcades contain eight Doric columns, which are obviously ancient spolia or architectural salvage because they are different sizes and colours. There are five in grey granite, one in grey marble and two in marmo imezio which is a creamy-white marble from Mount Hymettus near Athens. The ceilings are cross-vaulted, the vaults being undecorated.

The long arm of the loggia contains three lunette frescoes by Domenichino, painted in 1605 as part of the improvements to the monastery in celebration of the Jubilee of 1600. They depict scenes from the life of St Jerome: (left to right) Baptism, Vision, Temptation. The vision involved Christ telling an angel to give him a good beating for being over-fond of reading Cicero.

The church entrance has a marble doorcase with a short dedicatory inscription on its lintel. Above is a lunette with a fresco of the Madonna and Child by Claudio Ridolfi, part of a composition involving two flanking lunettes by an artist given as S. Strada. These latter are unfortunately in a bad condition. They show saints venerating Our Lady, with their names usefully given underneath; St Jerome leads the group on the left, and St Augustine with St Onuphrius that on the right. St Augustine features because the monks kept his Rule.

The original tomb slab of the founder, Blessed Nicholas of Forca Palena, is on the wall to the right of the church entrance. It dates from 1448.

Chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary

There is a little chapel, the Cappella Vaini, at the near end of the long arm of the loggia. This is easy to overlook. It was fitted out in 1620 for Guido Vaini the prince of Cantalupo, after two arcade arches were walled up.

The pretty little Baroque façade is unusual in having no arched bits, but instead features a series of floating cornices with curlicues and vine-scrolls. There is a central shield showing the family's emblem of a lion rampant. The lunette above depicts two sibyls, and is by Agostino Tassi who was obviously influenced by Michelangelo's sibyls in the Sistine Chapel.

The interior was decorated by Agostino Tassi, but the altarpiece is a Nativity by Francesco Bassano the Younger.

Campanile

The brick campanile stands over the bottom left hand corner of the nave. It has two storeys above the roofline, in naked red brick. The first storey has a round-headed bell aperture facing the entrance loggia, and is separated from the second storey by a projecting brick cornice. This second storey has a similar bell aperture on each face, and itself is topped by a cornice. This is all 15th century, but the lead cupola looks 18th century and has a low incurve from a pinched square base which ends in a ball finial.

Interior

Nave

The small interior is dominated by the side chapels and the sanctuary apse. The nave has three bays, with a simply decorated cross-vaulted ceiling. The floor was not re-laid in the 19th century, as many were in other Roman churches, and so many interesting tomb-slabs have survived. (However, the wall memorials seem to have been moved around -online descriptions of their placing are inaccurate.) The counterfaçade has an arched gallery looking into a room over the entrance loggia. The solid balustrade of this is occupied by a memorial to one L. Vitruvi, a Venetian nobleman, which has a bust and is flanked by two angels in fresco.

Flanking the entrance are wall memorials to Alberto Magno Massari, 1613 with a bust to the right, and Torquato Tasso 1595 with a painted portrait to the left. This was the original memorial to the poet.

Sanctuary

The sanctuary is a three-sided polygonal apse with conch, which is decorated with heavily retouched Scenes from the Life of Mary. The three panels on the apse wall are attributed to Baldassarre Peruzzi early on in his career. They are: The Nativity, The Madonna and Child with Saints (the donor of the work is kneeling to the right) and The Escape to Egypt. The apse conch frescoes are possibly by Pinturicchio, and show the Coronation of Our Lady in Heaven in the central panel. The side panels show apostles, saints and sibyls, and the smaller panels above have angels playing musical instruments.

The high altar, which is dedicated to Blessed Nicholas of Forca Palena the founder of the monastery, is against the apse wall and has no aedicule. However, it is decorated in very impressive polychrome marble work involving yellow Siena marble around verde antico in the form of an ancient sarcophagus. The relics of the beatus are enshrined here, behind a grille flanked with two flower stems in white marble.

The side chapels are described anticlockwise, beginning to the right of the entrance.

Chapel of St Onuphrius

The first chapel on the right is dedicated to St Onuphrius, since Blessed Nicholas occupies the main altar. It is a large rib-vaulted room which actually extends beyond the counterfaçade into the range adjoining the long arm of the loggia.

The vault springs from two low Doric columns flanking the altar, creating a Gothic arch enclosing the altarpiece which is a statue of the saint. The triangular vault panels flanking the arch display a pair of frescoes forming an Annunciation by Antoniazzo Romano. The tondo above containing God the Father is by Baldassarre Peruzzi.

There are three anonymous 16th century lunette frescoes, in poor condition, showing scenes from

the life of the saint.

Chapel of Our Lady of Loreto

The second chapel on the right is dedicated to Our Lady of Loreto. This is the Cappella Madruzzo, and the side walls have two monuments to Cardinal Cristoforo Madruzzo and Lorenzo Madruzzo. They are richly decorated with polychrome marbles.

The altar aedicule has a pair of Corinthian columns in red and white marble, supporting a triangular pediment into which a tablet with its own segmental pediment is inserted. The altarpiece is *The Holy House of Loreto Being Carried by Angels*, and is by Agostino Carracci. This is the only work by this artist in a church in Rome (although the attribution is not entirely certain). The legend of Loreto alleges that the house in which the Holy Family lived at Nazareth was picked up and taken by angels to Loreto, hence the picture shows it in mid-air with Our Lady sitting on the roof and holding the Christ-Child. A very odd detail is that the Child is emptying a pot of water.

The lunette frescoes above the memorials show *The Birth of Our Lady* and *The Annunciation*, and are by Giovanni Battista Ricci. He was also probably responsible for the vault frescoes, although the *Coronation of Our Lady* has also been attributed to the school of Carracci.

Sacco monument

The next arcade arch on the right hand side does not have a chapel, but a doorway which leads into the sacristy. Here is the impressive memorial to Archbishop Giovanni Sacco, 1505 of the school of Andrea Bregno. It is inserted into an arched niche within the larger arch, and in the lunette is a charming fresco of *St Anne Teaching Our Lady to Read*. This has been attributed to Pinturicchio, which may be doubted.

Sacristy

The vault of the sacristy is frescoed with allegorical *Virtues* by Girolamo Pesci (1684-1759).

Chapel of the Crucifix

The third chapel on the left is dedicated to the Crucifix.

Here is a monument in grey marble to Cardinal Giuseppe Caspar Mezzofanti, 1849. He was a famed polyglot. The memorial dates to 1885, and its cameo portrait and bas-relief are by Francesco Bonola (1838-1901). It used to be in the neighbouring chapel, but was moved here when the latter was refitted in the 20th century. In the process it displaced a memorial to Giuseppe Rondinini, which is now in the monastery vestibule.

Opposite is a memorial to Cardinal Filippo Sega, 1596 with a portrait by Domenichino.

Chapel of St Pius X

The second chapel on the left used to be dedicated to Blessed Peter Gambacorta, but was re-dedicated to Pope St Pius X when he was canonized in 1954. The modern altarpiece is of him. More interesting is the altar frontal, which is superb pietra dura work using alabaster, verde antico and Siena yellow marble.

The cupola vault fresco of the Trinity, with putti in the pendentives, is by Francesco Trevisani, but the frescoes by him in the lunettes, which depicted scenes from the life of Blessed Peter, are now covered over.

Here is now a wall memorial with bust to Cardinal Nicola Canali, 1969. It is in a neo-Classical style, unusual for the time.

Chapel of St Jerome

The first chapel on the left is dedicated to St Jerome. It is twice the depth of the two other chapels on this side, with two cupolas in its vaulting, and was fitted out by Carlo Piccoli in 1857. This was to accommodate the large and controversial second memorial to Torquato Tasso, on the right. The work was ordered by Pope Pius IX, as a commemorative wall tablet makes clear.

The altarpiece showing the saint and his lion is by Filippo Balbi, who also frescoed the two cupolas.

The one nearer the entrance shows God the Father (and has unfortunately been damaged by the rain getting in). The one over the altar is in red, white and gold scrollwork panelling, with the oculus showing a fresco depicting The Apotheosis of St Jerome. The heraldry in the pendentives is of Pope Pius IX.

There are two bronze busts on the side walls, one of the painter Bernardo Celentano 1863 and the other of the sculptor Giuseppe De Fabris 1860.

The latter was responsible for the large white marble monument to Tasso. This is in the form of an arched niche containing a statue of the poet, in a rather contorted leaning pose looking up towards a representation of Our Lady with putti in the tympanum. The sculptor suffered some savage criticism from 19th century art-critics over this work, but it is actually technically accomplished -although the face of Our Lady really is poor.

The lunette opposite the monument depicts Tasso on his deathbed, and has also been damaged by damp.

Monastery

Cloister vestibule

You get to the monastery cloister from the entrance loggia via a vestibule, which contains memorials removed from the church during the 20th century. Here is a fine neo-Baroque monument to Giuseppe Rondinini 1801, featuring a skeleton in a shroud. Also here is a memorial to the dramatist and lyric poet Alessandro Guidi, 1712.

Cloister

The mid 15th century cloister is small, rectangular and cobbled with lots of pot plants. There are arcades on all four sides, made up of ancient columns with 15th century capitals. The stones used are: eight in cipollino marble, three in grey granite, two in marmo tasio (a white marble from the Greek island of Thasos), two in grey marble, one in red granite from Aswan in Egypt and four in marmo imezio which is white with dark grey inclusions and came from near the Sea of Marmara in Turkey.

Each side also has a gallery, with a horizontal entablature supported by octagonal brick columns.

To celebrate the 1600 Jubilee, a series of lunette frescoes was painted with scenes from the life of St Onuphrius. From the entrance doorway to the right, the first four are attributed to the Cavalier d'Arpino and the rest to Sebastiano Strada and Claudio Ridolfi who were of his school. These were retouched in 1682. Each scene has a caption in Latin, and an Italian translation is helpfully given. "Leonardo"

In an upper corridor is a lunette fresco of The Madonna and Child, which also features a depiction of the donor (whose name has been lost). This work is in a glazed terracotta frame by Luca Della Robbia.

In previous centuries, the monks used to impress visitors to Tasso's room by claiming that this work was by Leonardo. It is now ascribed to Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, although an alternative attribution to Cesare da Sesto is also made. The fresco has been much retouched.

Museo Tassiano

The Museo Tassiano is housed in the monastery, near the above painting. It is based on the room in which the poet died, which the monks had kept as a visitor attraction through the centuries. The main exhibit was his death-mask, which the brethren affixed to an ancient torso of a bust which had lost its head. The museum as such was assembled in 1939. It has manuscripts and ions of his work, as well as personal items such as a crucifix and a container that held his ashes.

The Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre is in charge. Visits are by appointment only, and the (unofficial) contact details are: Phone 06 6877341 -347, between 16:00 and 18:00 on Tuesdays only.

Burials:

Cristoforo Cardinal MADRUZZO, (1512-1578)

Buried in his family's chapel in the church

Filippo Cardinal SEGA, (1537-1596)

Buried on the left side of the chapel *del Crocifisso*

Ludovico Cardinal MADRUZZO, (1532-1600)

Buried in the Madruzzo Chapel

Carlo Gaudenzio Cardinal MADRUZZO, (1562-1629)

Buried in his family's chapel

Giovanni Battista Cardinal ZAULI, (1743-1819)

Luigi FREZZA, (1783-1837)

Giuseppe Gasparo Cardinal MEZZOFANTI, (1774-1849)

It is said that he spoke perfectly thirty-eight languages; thirty other languages, less perfectly; plus fifty dialects.

Nicola Cardinal CANALI, (1874-1961)

He was the last cardinal who was never a bishop

Giovani Sacco

Torquato Tasso (1544-1595)

<Italian Poet>

Access

The church is open, EXCEPT SATURDAYS, from 9:00 to 13:00. There is no afternoon opening.

The church is closed during August.

Only those attending Mass are permitted in the church while Mass is being celebrated.

Liturgy

Mass is celebrated (unofficial source):

Sundays 10:00 and 12:00.

The feast-day of the founder of the monastery, Bl Nicholas of Forca Palena, is on the 29 September. St Onuphrius is celebrated on the 12 June.

Location:

Address: 2 Piazza Sant'Onofrio, Roma

Coord: [41°53'50.1"N 12°27'40.2"E](#)

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