

Sant'Atanasio a Via del Babuino **Sant'Atanasio dei Greci**



Sant'Atanasio a Via del Babuino is the Greek national church, a 16th century collegiate foundation which is titular. It is in the rione Campo Marzio. The dedication is to St Athanasius. The church is also known as Sant'Atanasio dei Greci, although the Diocese prefers the simple Sant'Atanasio which is also the cardinalate title. This can lead to confusion with Sant'Atanasio in Via Tiburtina.

The church is associated with the Greek Byzantine Catholic Church, which is one of the Eastern Catholic Churches in full communion with the Roman Catholic church. Mass is celebrated according to the Byzantine Rite.

However the college does not belong to the Greek Church, but is an older institution. At present the ultimate responsibility for it lies with the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, but (oddly) it belongs to the Order of St Benedict. This is because it is administered by the Abbey of Chevetogne, which is Benedictine but uses both the Byzantine and Latin rites. Canonically, the church is a dependency of the parish church of San Giacomo in Augusta.

Back in the 16th century, the Byzantine rite was known in Rome as the "Greek" rite regardless of the language used, and this explains why the various Eastern Catholic Churches of the Byzantine rite often have "Greek" in their titles. National distinctions came later, but the college has never been purely Greek in its alumni and the present spiritual director is a Melkite. Arguably, it should nowadays be called the "Byzantine College".

History

Foundation

The church and the college attached to it, the Pontificio Collegio Greco Sant'Atanasio, were founded by Pope Gregory XIII (1572–1585) in 1577. The original intention behind the project was to provide an education or seminary training for any young man of the Byzantine rite reconciled to the Catholic church, and hence Ukrainians, Melkites and other non-Greek nationalities have attended.

The college established itself on its present site in the year of its foundation, but had to wait six years for its church. This was designed by Giacomo della Porta. Cardinal Giulio Antonio Santorio laid the first stone on November 23 1580, and the building was finished in early 1583. It was consecrated on May 2, 1583, the feast day of St Athanasius. The cardinal was one of the prime movers of the project.

The church was unusual in Rome for having been built according to the liturgical needs of an Eastern rite, instead of having been converted from a Latin rite building. Most notably, it was provided with an iconostasis. However, the exterior conformed to contemporary architectural fashion in Rome -also, the edifice contains four side chapels, which are exclusively a feature of the Latin rite.

Decoration

Francesco Trabaldese was responsible for the original artworks. The first chapel on the left has a frescoed Christ Among the Elders; the right-hand chapel, an Annunciation. These two are the only artworks of Trabaldese's commission to survive. Lost are twelve tondi containing heads of the apostles, a standing Madonna and Child, a standing John the Baptist, two Greek Doctors of the Church (Athanasius and Basil) and a portrait of Gregory XIII. Trabaldese was paid for these works in 1583.

Interior decoration continued until at least 1591, when the Cavalier d'Arpino was paid for frescoes. It is thought that the exterior was originally coated with stucco, as the irregular nature of the present exterior surfaces is not satisfactory. Also, it had coloured glass windows (later lost).

Problems of identity

The college has had historical problems with its identity. Pope Gregory originally intended the college to be a cultural and educational centre for Byzantine Christians recently conquered by the Ottoman Empire. However the Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople quickly came to an arrangement with the Turkish government, and was implacably opposed to the project or to any reconciliation with the pope. Hence, historically the college's intake has been from the so-called

Uniates, meaning those Byzantine-rite Christians who had to reject the authority of their local Orthodox hierarchies in order to be reconciled to Rome.

Another major problem from the start was that the administrators of the college were of the Latin rite. This is witnessed by the side chapels in the church. What this led to was the accusation that the celebration of the Byzantine liturgy was just play-acting, and (much more seriously) to the temptation to neglect or abandon it in favour of the Latin rite. This actually happened more than once, and the celebration of the Byzantine rite had to be re-established by direct intervention of the pope.

Different administrators

At first, the college was administered by local Roman secular clergy. This was apparently a disaster, and in 1591 it was entrusted to the Jesuits. They remained in charge of the college and church until 1604, when they passed to the Somaschi. That did not work either, and in 1609 the Dominicans took over. Finally, the Jesuits returned in 1621 and the college was able to develop under their administration after a frightful few decades of initial uncertainty.

The church and college are not together, but are separated by the Via dei Greci. Originally there was an elevated corridor and bridge at the mouth of the street, leading to the left hand side of the church façade. In 1770 a replacement bridge with a linking corridor was built over the street further down, accessing the church by its left hand transept.

Modern times, and revival

Initially, the church stood in a garden which was bordered by streets on three sides. Part of this was used as a cemetery. The temptation to develop the streetfronts led to land being disposed of in the 18th century both to either side of the façade, and along the side streets.

The suppression of the Jesuits in 1773 was a further disaster. The college was put under the authority of Propaganda Fidei (which further offended the Orthodox), and administered by secular clergy again.

When the French occupied Rome, the church was looted by soldiers in 1798 and its coloured glass windows smashed. The college was closed in 1803, and how little it was then regarded is shown by the fact that it stayed shut until 1845. The revival of the college as a credible institution began in the mid 19th century. From 1872 to 1876, Andrea Busiri Vici oversaw a complete restoration of the interior of the church on the instructions of Pope Pius IX. The rationale behind the restoration was for the church to be reserved entirely to the Byzantine rite, with the Latin rite appurtenances such as side altars being removed. The original wooden iconostasis was replaced by a brick and stucco one, with new icons. In 1885 the former brick floor was relaid in marble, with the unfortunate result that many old tombstones were lost.

In 1886 the complex was entrusted to the Resurrectionists, and in 1890 to the Jesuits for a third time. In 1897 the Order of St Benedict as a whole, at its central curia at Sant'Anselmo all'Aventino, took over responsibility but several of the Benedictine congregations objected. So, in 1919 the Benedictine Congregation of the Annunciation accepted responsibility for the institution and, finally and serendipitously, in 1956 the abbey of Chevetogne was put in charge.

Meanwhile, the church was almost demolished and rebuilt in 1907 because of long-running structural problems. These were finally addressed in a restoration that was finished in 1930. However the colour scheme used in the repainting of the interior in the process, on the suggestion of the architectural historian Muñoz, was unfortunate. This was put back a

Exterior

Layout and fabric

The plan is based on a rectangle with three external apses, into which a Latin cross is inserted.

There is a single nave with apsidal transepts, and a shallow apsidal presbyterium. The main roof, which is pitched and tiled, runs in one sweep from façade to the back elevation, and the transept roofs (also pitched and tiled) are butted against this. Their ridgelines do not touch the main roof, which gives the overall roofing an awkward appearance. The external apses have their exterior semi-domes in lead.

The fabric is in pink brick, with a few (not many) architectural details in limestone.

On either side of the nave façade is a campanile. Between each of these and the transept on that side is a rectangular external chapel. Flanking the presbyterium are two sacristies; the right hand one used to be that of the Latin rite, and was taken out of use in the 19th century restoration. The left hand one leads to an interesting elliptical staircase which in turns leads to the elevated corridor to the college; this staircase also has an entrance from the left transept, which was again created in the 19th century restoration.

Façade

The façade may have been designed by Martino Longhi the Elder, and has some early Baroque features. There is a strong resemblance to Santissima Trinità dei Monti.

There are two storeys, and three vertical zones. The main, central one is the front end of the nave, while the two side zones are stepped back and comprise the campanili. Unfortunately, the street is narrow and a good view cannot be obtained.

Atanasio dei Greci

The pink brick fabric may have been covered in stucco when the church was built. The first storey has four Doric pilasters in brick with stone capitals, and the outer pair are tripletted round the corner. They support an entablature with a dedicatory inscription, and this entablature is continued across the campanili. The inscription reads: Gregorius XIII Pont[ifex] Max[imus] a fundamentis extruxit, pontificatus sui anno X ("Gregory XIII, chief priest, built [it] from the foundations in the tenth year of his pontificate"). In between the pilasters is a pair of large empty round-headed niches, and above these is a pair of blank trapezoidal stone tablets with cornices.

The doorcase is molded, and has a raised triangular pediment resting on a pair of corbels decorated with triglyphs. Note the stepping in the vertical sides of the doorcase - a Baroque feature.

Under the niches are two stone tablets which have been attached with iron clamps. The left hand one is in Italian - Sant'Atanasio, chiesa cattolica in rito greco. The right hand one is in Greek - ΙΕΡΟΝ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΟΝ ΝΑΟΝ ΑΓΙΟΥ ΑΘΑΝΑΣΙΟΥ. Interestingly this does not mean the same thing, but translates as "Sacred Byzantine temple of holy Athanasius". Note that the inscription uses C for Σ (sigma).

The second storey has four corresponding Ionic pilasters supporting a crowning dentilled pediment containing a small oculus in its tympanum. There are little masks in between the volutes of the pilaster capitals. The large central round-headed window in this second storey has an ornate frame heading towards the Baroque, with a triangular pediment. Note the curlicues affixed to the sides. In the spandrels above the curve of the window are two little dragons, symbols of the Boncompagni family to which Pope Gregory belonged.

Dedicatory inscriptions

In between the pilasters of this storey is a pair of large rectangular marble tablets, again in an early Baroque style with stepped corners, a relief decoration featuring swags, ribbons and a bishop's mitre above and a putto's head below.

The left hand one is in Latin, and reads: Ad honorem Dei, et memoriam Sancti Athanasii episcopi Alexandr[iae]. Collegio Graecor[um], anno a nat[ivitate] Domini MDLXXXI. ("To the glory of God, and the memory of St Athanasius the bishop of Alexandria, belonging to the college of the Greeks".) Graecorum is mis-spelt.

The right hand one is Greek, and reads: ΕΙΣ ΤΙΜΗΝ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ, ΚΑΙ ΜΝΗΜΗΝ ΤΟΥ ΑΓΙΟΥ ΑΘΑΝΑΣΙΟΥ ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΥ Α ΑΕΞΑΝΔΡΕΙΑΣ ΤΩΝ ΓΡΑΙΚΩΝΤΩ ΠΑΙΔΕΥΤΗΡΙΩ. This means the same; the carver of the epigraph also had problems here, since ΑΕΞΑΝΔΡΕΙΑΣ should be ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΕΙΑΣ.

The tablets seem to date from the end of the 18th century.

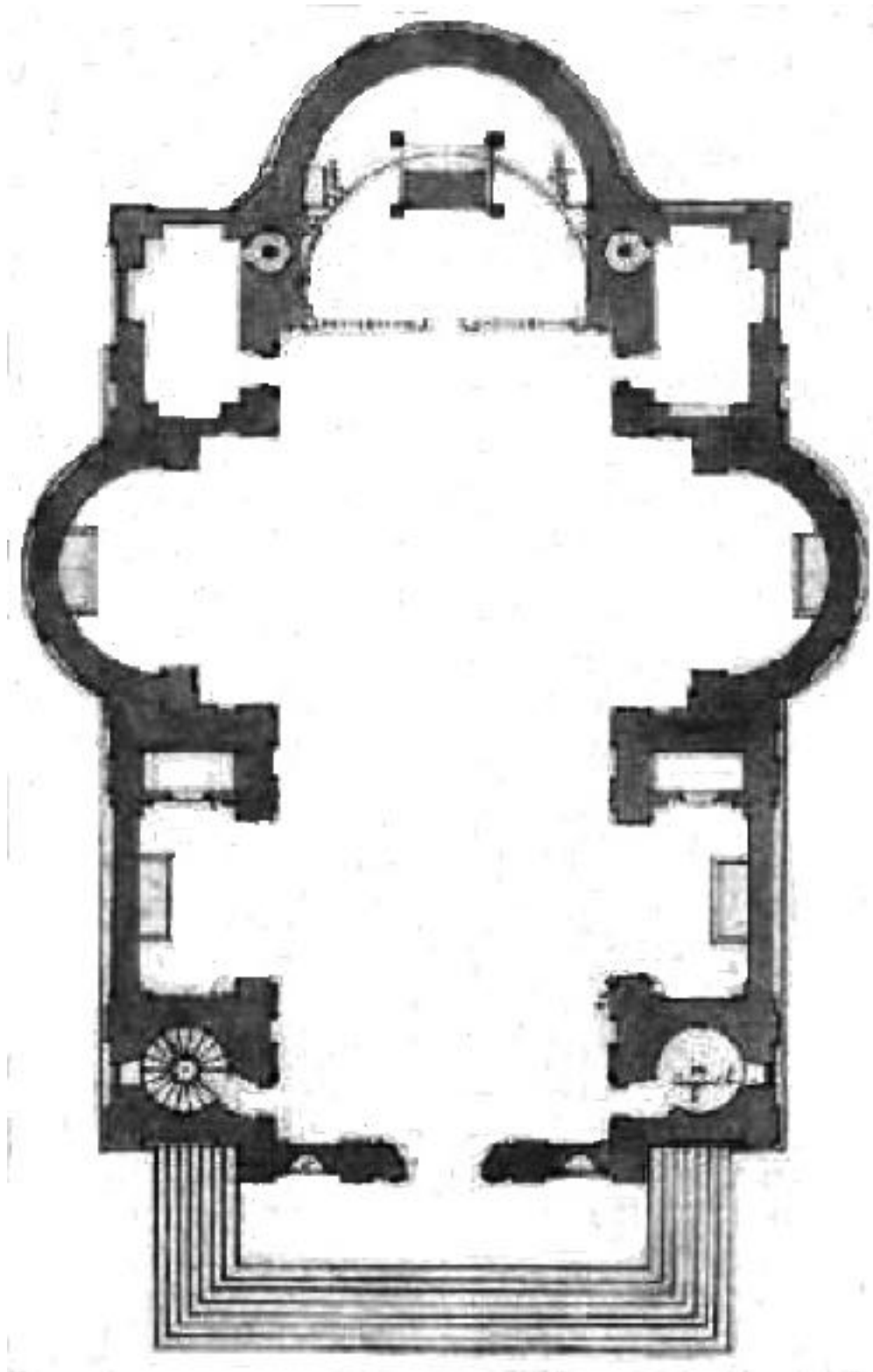
Campanili

As mentioned, the campanili are part of the design of the façade even though they are set back slightly.

They are identical, and each has three storeys. The first two match the central façade, with doubletted Doric pilasters at the corners of the first storey, and doubletted Ionic ones at those of the second. These two storeys are separated by a continuation of the entablature of the central façade. The second storey has a dentillated cornice, matching that of the central pediment. The third storey is an open kiosk with a large arch on each face, and doubletted Corinthian pilasters at the corners and a little dentillate pediment on each side. Then comes a small octagonal drum crowned by an ogee cupola in lead.

The left hand campanile has a very interesting church clock on its second storey, which does not face the street but the college. It has only one hand, and that hand is in the form of another Boncompagni dragon. The puff of fire from its mouth is pointing out the time.

Plan



Interior

Layout

There is a short nave of basically one bay, ending in a transeptal crossing. Two large rectangular spaces open to the left and right of the nave, which used to be chapels. The transept arms end in apses which were also used as chapels before the 19th century restoration. These former side and transept chapels have their frescoed altarpieces preserved in situ. The presbyterium, which is screened off by the iconostasis, is of one shallow bay ending in an apse.

Proskinitarion

In the Byzantine rite, when you enter a church you don't bless yourself with holy water but, instead, you venerate an icon enshrined just inside the entrance. The shrine is called, in Greek, the proskinitarion which means "place of prostration". Here it is very elaborate, and is in the form of a model domed kiosk or tempietto with a pedimented prothyrium on each of its four sides. The icon presented for veneration is of St Athanasius. The prescribed veneration in the Byzantine rite is to cross oneself, right shoulder to left shoulder, touch the ground, kiss the icon and repeat the sign of the cross. You may light a genuine candle, too. Eastern Christians do not accept that lighting a little electric light bulb can make do as a candle -they think that this is seriously stupid.

The icon is by Michel Berger, 1868, and is described as being in the Italo-Greek style.

Nave

The nave has a barrel vault. The former nave chapels are entered through large archways, flanked by paired ribbed Corinthian pilasters which support an entablature which runs all round the interior of the church. The cornice of this projects strongly, and has modillions. Above the paired pilasters spring paired transverse ribs which cross the vault. There is another pair of pilasters flanking the entrance, and another one tucked into the corners by the entrances to the campanili. Above the chapel archways is a pair of side windows.

In between the pilaster pairs are four icons by Christine Groseil, a nun, painted in 1972. They depict SS George, Michael the Archangel, John the Baptist and Theodore Studites.

In front of the iconostasis two Greek icons of Christ and Our Lady, dated to the beginning of the 20th century, are enthroned for veneration by the faithful. You do not cause offence in a Byzantine-rite church if you venerate the icons during the liturgy -unlike looking at pictures during Mass in a Latin rite church. There is often another icon enthroned halfway down the nave, and this would relate to the feast-day or season at the time.

You will probably find the nave occupied by chairs for the congregation. This makes the Orthodox snigger, since only the ill and infirm sit in church in the Byzantine tradition -and then only on benches along the walls.

The decorative scheme is very sober. The overall background colour is a pale ochre, with the vaulting ribs and frieze of the entablature picked out in dark grey. The bottom third of the pilasters is black, and the rest of the height red; the ribs are picked out in gold, and the capitals are in limestone.

Stavrosis

The former chapel on the left now contains the Stavrosis, which is Greek for "Crucifixion". It is in the form of a Calvary, with Christ crucified accompanied by Our Lady and St John, and is by Groseil again of 1975. The work is in the form of cut-out icons; it is not true that the Eastern Churches reject sculptural depictions, but statues are not common in their places of worship.

Behind the Stavrosis is the surviving altarpiece by Trabaldese, 1584, showing The Boy Christ Teaching in the Temple. The altar, as mentioned, has been removed. Above the altarpiece is a lunette window.

On the left hand wall is a 17th century icon of St Spiridon, and on the right hand one a copy of a 13th century Serbian icon executed by Pimen Sofronov in 1940. Enthroned for veneration is an early 20th century icon of St John the Baptist.

Kolinvitra

The former chapel on the right now contains the Kolinvitra, which is the baptismal font. Here is Trabaldese's altarpiece showing the Annunciation. Note that Our Lady is holding a book, which is the Latin tradition; she has been reading the prophecy in Isaiah: "A virgin shall conceive". In the Eastern iconic tradition, she is holding a spindle and the legend is that she was helping to weave the veil of the Temple that tore in two during the Crucifixion. No altar here now, either. The intricate stucco frame is by Benedetto da Romena.

On the left hand wall is another Greek icon of about 1900, this one showing Christ in the Tomb. On the right hand wall is Christ with his Executioners, of the school of Dürer.

Left transept

Here there is a former altarpiece of the Crucifixion by Giuseppe Cesari, the Cavalier d'Arpino. The patron of this, and the altarpiece in the opposite transept, was Cardinal Santori, and they were likely painted around 1590 as the artist was paid for them in the following year.

On the right hand wall is an icon of St Basil of the 17th century Cretan school, and below it is the exit to the college. The left hand wall has an icon of St John Chrysostom by Giorgio Bogdanopoulos, 1977.

Here there is the wooden ambo or pulpit. In the Byzantine tradition, the homily or sermon is not given during the Eucharist but after it.

Right transept

Here there is a former altarpiece of the Assumption of Our Lady, also by the Cavalier d'Arpino. On the right hand wall is an icon of St Cyril of Alexandria by Bogdanopoulos again, and the left hand wall has an icon of St Athanasius of the Cretan school.

Just outside the transept, to the right of the iconostasis, is the so-called "external throne" which is in wood. When there is no bishop to sit in it, it is occupied by a little icon of Christ the Great High Priest by Berger again. This is a reminder of the one whom the bishop represents in his teaching office. When a bishop has celebrated the liturgy here, he sits in this throne to deliver his homily.

Iconostasis

The Busiri Vici iconostasis dominates the church. It is in brick and stucco, painted in greyish green and white (the original design was much more polychrome). There are four Corinthian pilasters and two central columns, which look as if they are of yellow Siena marble. The iconic layout is traditional, with Our Lady to the left, Christ to the right, four Doctors in the second storey and a series of saints along the top. The Crucifixion occupies the crowning position.

Some of the icons from the original wooden iconostasis are preserved in the college.

Sanctuary

Visitors are not allowed beyond the iconostasis without special invitation. By tradition, no woman is allowed here either -ever, unless she is an empress.

The main altar, in Greek bima which just means "table", stands under a 19th century baldacchino with grey marble Corinthian columns. This has a gabled canopy in white with gold highlights, and a cross in each gable.

The apse is decorated in grey geometric designs on white, vaguely reminiscent of Cosmatesque work. In the curve of the apse is a white marble throne, the "interior throne", for a bishop; a throne in the same location can be found in ancient churches in Rome such as Santa Maria in Trastevere. Above the throne hangs a small icon of the Holy Face, and above that is a large icon of St Athanasius which dates from the 1876 restoration.

Byzantine-rite sanctuaries have two side-tables, where the elements for the Eucharist are prepared beforehand and disposed of afterwards. These may look like altars, but are not. The one to the left is called the *protesi* in Modern Greek (prothesis in the older language), and the one on the right is called the *diakonikon*. Here, each has a painting above it. The *protesi* depicts the Deposition from the Cross, and the *diakonikon* depicts the Sacrifice of Abraham. These are part of the 1876 restoration, too.

Access and liturgy

The church is open for Vespers (*esperinos* in Greek) at 19:00 on Saturdays, and on the day before some major feast days.

The Liturgy (which is what Mass is called in the Byzantine rite) takes place here at 10:30 on Sundays and on some major feast days.

The Byzantine-rite Eucharist takes a long time to celebrate properly, and you should find the church open on Sundays until lunchtime. Unlike when Mass is said in Latin rite churches, there is no offence taken if you wander about and venerate the icons during the celebration -as long as you don't talk or take photos.

The church will not normally be open at weekdays, except on special feasts. For details of these, see the notice in the church entrance.

The liturgy is occasionally celebrated here in Albanian.

Burials:

Gabriel Acacius Cardinal [COUSSA](#), O.S.B.M.A, (1897-1962)

Links

[Rome Churches Wiki](#)

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Church's website](#)

[History on church web site](#)

[Church's leaflet for 2011](#) (PDF)

[College's blog](#)

[Nolli map](#) (look for 409)

[Info.roma web-page](#)

["De Alvariis" gallery on Flickr](#)

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One of Rome's most famous talking statues, the Babuino, is to be found.

Chiesa di Sant'Atanasio

Jurisdiction: ROMA

Sector: Central

Prefecture: I

Diocesan Code: 922

Type:  Cardinal Title, Rectory church, National church of Greece, Greek rite

Address: Via del Babuino 149, 00187 Roma

Telephone: 06-36.00.12.60