

## Santa Maria della Neve al Colosseo



**St Mary of the Snow at the Colosseum** is an early 18th century late Baroque (tardobarocco) church at Via del Colosseo 18, just north-west of the Colosseo metro station. It is subsidiary to the parish church of Santa Maria ai Monti. The dedication is to the Blessed Virgin Mary, under her title of Our Lady of the Snows. The name Santa Maria ad Nives is also found, which is an Italian-Latin mix.

### History

The church is first unambiguously recorded in the 15th century, when it was a small parish church with the name of Sant'Andrea in Portogallo (St Andrew in "Portugal" or "Gate of the Cock"). By then, it was apparently in the care of San Pietro in Vincoli nearby.

It would be expected that the church was a much earlier foundation than this. The neighbourhood was densely populated in the Middle Ages, with a concentration of industry in the old Imperial Fora engaged in recycling architectural elements. Several small churches were provided in the Dark Ages, around the 10th century, and this could have been one of them.

Unfortunately the documentary evidence for before the Renaissance is seriously muddled, and there is no consensus as to which recorded name belongs to which church. This one has been identified with Sancti Andree de Arcu Aureo and with Sancti Andree de Tabernula, both of which are listed in mediaeval catalogues. (The former was allegedly named after a decorated gateway into the Forum of Nerva.) Further there is an old etymology giving the origin of Portogallo as the name of an ancient locality called Busta Gallica, but this is fanciful.

Like several of the many small parishes in the city, this one failed in the 16th century. In 1607 the edifice became the church of the guild of junk dealers (Università dei Rigattieri), who seem to have been satisfied with the old building for almost a hundred years. However, at the start of the 18th century they decided to rebuild and the new church was finished in 1705. The architect is uncertain. Francesco Fontana seems to be the consensus, but his father Carlo Fontana and Giuseppe Sardi have also been suggested. It seems that the new church's footprint did not match that of the old one.

The dedication was to SS Andrew and Bernardine, the latter being the patron of the guild. Hence, you will find the name Santi Andrea e Bernardino dei Rigattieri in the sources.

After the French occupation of the city in 1798, the guild was suppressed. The church was abandoned, and after the restoration of the Papal government in 1815 was passed on to the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament and Holy Mary of the Snow (Arciconfraternita del Santissimo Sacramento e Maria Santissima della Neve). This was devoted to the veneration of the Blessed Sacrament and to Marian piety, especially as expressed by the famous miracle associated with Santa Maria Maggiore (the miraculous fall of snow in August). They had lost their church north of the Quirinal Palace during the occupation (Santa Maria dei Foglianti, also known as “della Neve”), and so re-dedicated this one when they obtained it.

There was a restoration in 1837, ordered by Pope Gregory XVI.

At present, the church is still in the possession of the Confraternity. However, it is being used by the Community of Sant'Egidio as a place of prayer and charitable outreach to poor and homeless people. This work seems to have no online profile, but the Community is known for its reticence concerning publicity.

Despite being a chiesa annessa (that is, a church without a formally incardinated priest), the Diocese lists it as being in charge of a priest of the Terni-Narni-Amelia diocese called Don Philippe Zongo, from the Ivory Coast.

## **Exterior**

This is a very small church, with a single nave and a square sanctuary of the same width. There are no external side chapels.

The right hand side wall is blank, except for a round window in the far top corner. If you look up at this window, you will see a tiny campanile with a round-headed soundhole which is perched on top of the sanctuary side wall. The nave roof is pitched and tiled, but the slightly lower sanctuary roof behind this campanile is flat.

To the left of the church, and abutting on its left hand wall, are the offices built for itself by the original guild of junk-dealers. The premises look like a small convent, although the church has not had any religious in charge in its known history.

## **Façade**

The church has a small but pretty bowed (convex) façade, in poor condition. The inspiration is obviously Borromini, and the curvaceous plan is one reason for suggesting Sardi as the architect. There are three

vertical zones within the overall bowing, the central one being slightly bowed and the two side ones being slightly coved but facing out diagonally.

Each of these side zones is occupied by a pair of Siamese-twin pilasters, standing on shared plinths and joined at the top beneath a stretched Doric capital. The capitals support lengths of entablature, which are not joined across the central zone. The outer twin on each side is doubletled along its outer edge, the corner of the façade.

The central zone is slightly recessed. The door is accessed via a flight of rectangular steps, indicating that the church has a crypt. The slightly bowed doorcase is thinly molded, and is flanked by a pair of diagonally set pilasters with floating posts at the top supporting a cornice which runs across the top of the lintel. Above this is a trapezoidal blank tablet with convex sides, and above this in turn is a bowed floating cornice with the central section recessed. The tablet looks as if it once displayed something.

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Above the doorway is a very large rectangular window with a molded frame and a keystone, which occupies almost all of the central part of the façade above the door and which separates the two entablatures of the side zones.

The crowning tympanum is basically triangular, but has slightly inswept sides as well as being bowed. The central section is set back, and contains a stucco relief in the form of a curling parchment. This must have borne a fresco once. The gable of the pediment is not the roofline, which is formed by a low attic plinth above it. This follows the angles and curves of the pediment, and has posts.

The paintwork has substantially peeled off, but used to have the architectural details in yellow ochre on a brick-red background. This was a traditional colour scheme for Roman churches which is not favoured in restorations, so this is one of the few examples left.

## Interior

The interior has a single nave, with two side altars. The early 18th century altarpiece paintings are anonymous, and were commissioned by the guild of junk-dealers for their new church. They look as if they are by the same artist.

The high altar has The Assumption of Our Lady, in an odd design with Our Lady peeping out of an enveloping cloud swarming with putti. God the Father and Christ are waiting for her above, and SS Andrew and Bernardine are looking on below.

The left hand altar features SS Francis and Clare venerating an icon of the Madonna and Child being held by putti.

The right hand altar has a Baptism of Christ.

Location

Coord: [41°53′33.4″N 12°29′24.5″E](#)

Address:

Via del Colosseo 18

## External links

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[Confraternity web-page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

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

[Annazelli web-page](#)