

## San Salvatore ai Monti



**San Salvatore ai Monti** is a 17th century former parish church at Via della Madonna dei Monti 39, just west of Santa Maria ai Monti in the rione Monti. The dedication is to Jesus Christ the Saviour. Because of its diminutive size, the church has the nickname San Salvatorello.

### History

In ancient times the neighbourhood was the slum district of Suburra, dominated by insulae or apartment blocks inhabited by poor people. The area was well-known for its prostitutes back then, and has kept the distinction all the way through history to the present day (although, to be fair, they do now tend to look for business elsewhere in the city). In the early Middle Ages it was on the eastern edge of the built-up district, and because it is in the upper part of the valley that forms the Roman Forum it was a definitely unhealthy place to live because of malaria.

San Salvatore used to be the parish church of the area in the Middle Ages. It can be surmised that it was founded in the Dark Ages, perhaps in the 10th century along with many other small parish churches in the Centro Storico. In common with almost all of these, no record exists of the foundation of this one. Middle ages

The first mention derives from an epigraph on an altar step, dating to 1046 and reading:

Temporibus D[omi]ni Clementis Secundi Pape Mense December (sic) die iiii, indict[i]one decima, dedicatio istius Ecclesiae ad honorem Sancti Andree, reliquiam oleum et lapidem sanctum sepulchrum Domini Sanctique Stephani, P[a]p[arum] Urbani, Dionisis, Sophie et aliorum sanctorum. ("In the time of the Lord Pope Clement II, on the fourth day of December in the tenth indiction, the dedication of this church in honour of St Andrew, [with] relics of oil and a holy stone of the tombs of the Lord and Saint Stephen, the popes Urban and Dionysius, Sophia and other saints".)

The dedication to St Andrew was changed to Christ the Saviour early on. In 1289 it is referred to as San Salvatore de' Suburra, and another name was San Salvatore de Secura which is also given as Scura or Torre Secura. This was one of the fortified tower houses that were a feature of Rome in the high Middle Ages.

It should be noted here that it is not certain that the church of St Andrew was on the site of the present church, two separate churches might have been involved.

The first certain evidence that San Salvatore was a parish church dates from 1500, when there was a restoration. However, the church was desecrated and burnt out in the Sack of Rome in 1527. It was patched up in the second half of that century.

A proper reconstruction took place in 1625 under Pope Urban VIII, and shortly afterwards in 1634 the church was attached to the Collegio dei Neofiti. This institution had been founded in 1543 for the education in the Christian way of life of converts from Judaism and Islam -the so-called "Neophytes"- but was moved to a purpose-built complex between this church and Santa Maria dei Monti in 1634. This functioned as originally intended until 1713, which in retrospect is surprising since converts from these two faiths to Christianity have always been uncommon.

The architect of the rebuilding is given as Gaspare de' Vecchis. A description made in 1727 indicates that he provided three altars, with the main one having an altarpiece of Christ Carrying the Cross. The left hand side altar was dedicated to "St Anthony" (of Padua?), and the right hand one apparently had an altarpiece featuring the odd combination of St Anne the mother of Our Lady, St Matthew and other saints.

The College owned Santa Maria ai Monti also, as well as the nearby oratory of Santa Maria Addolorata dei Neofiti. The three churches occupy three corners of a city block. Between 1634 and 1713 the male converts used San Salvatore, and the female ones Santa Maria Addolorata while Santa Maria was the main college church. From the latter year, the original aim of the college was given up and it, with its three churches, was given over to a confraternity called Pia Opera dei Catacumene e dei Neofiti with a remit for general works of practical charity.

The church was allegedly rebuilt on the orders of Pope Clement XIV in 1762, because the epigraph over the door describes the work as done a fundamentis or "from the foundations". It seems that the façade only was actually rebuilt, and that the interior was re-fitted. The inscription reads:

Antiqua paroecialis aedes SS Salvatoris e S Pantaleonis ab Urbano VIII P[ontifice Maximo] hospitio catechumenorum concessa vetustate fatiscens a fundamentis renovata et in elegantio rem formam redacta a[nno] MDCCLXII. ("The ancient parochial place of worship of the Holy Saviour and St Panteleimon was granted to the hospice of the catechumens by Pope Urban VIII and, being cracked by age, was renewed from the foundations and given a more elegant form in the year 1762").

The S Pantaleonis refers to Santa Maria del Buon Consiglio ai Monti nearby, which was another small old parish church at the time. The two parishes were formally consolidated in 1772.

The painter Lorenzo Massucci, whose more famous father is buried in the church, was commissioned to provide two new side altarpieces, one of the Immaculate Conception and the other of St Pantaleon.

After this restoration, the church and the adjacent college building were in the charge of the Pii Operai, who had their Roman headquarters at San Giuseppe alla Lungara. They remained here until the late 19th century.

Modern times

There was some sort of restoration in 1803, when a new campanile was provided. Perhaps the old one was causing concern, however, it is still there.

In 1824 there was a massive shake-up of the parish churches of the Centro Storico, with many small parishes being suppressed. Here, it was decided that having a tiny parish church right next to a large devotional one made no sense. So this church was deprived of its parochial status, which was transferred to Santa Maria ai Monti. The latter edifice has been the local parish church ever since.

However, there was a problem with burial rights. Since Santa Maria was a new foundation in the 16th century, it only had private rights of sepulture. The deceased residents of the parish continued to be buried under the floor of the little church, and it transpired that a body-pit had simply been dug and the corpses dropped into it. This grossly unsanitary arrangement continued until a serious cholera outbreak which killed many locals in 1837 led to the opening of the Campo Verano cemetery.

The complex became a convent of a teaching sisterhood called the Maestre Pie dell'Addolorata when the Pii Operai left. There was a restoration in 1904 under Pope St Pius X, which entailed the removal of the side altars and the replacement of the 17th century altarpiece of the high altar with a statue niche containing (apparently) a statue of Our Lady.

There was another restoration in 1950, when the pit full of skeletons was found under the floor and cleared out.

The sisters left after closing the convent and school in 1984. The process of gentrification of the historical parts of old European cities formerly occupied by the lower classes was later in Rome than elsewhere, but was well on the way by the 1970's. This converted the neighbourhood from a rough working-class area teeming with children, to a rather Bohemian one with very few. The sisters were no longer needed. Since then, the church has been no more than an oratory used by the parish. Its state of repair is not good and the exterior is now becoming shabby, with stucco having fallen off the façade in 2012 as well as large patches off the side wall to the left.

The main parish group using the church is the Centro Sociale Monticiano "San Benedetto Giuseppe Labre", a group of young people under the aegis of the Legion of Mary. They now have a stone plaque attached to the façade.

## Exterior

The church is very small and the plan is simple, being merely a rectangle with a tiny square apse.

Despite the pedimented façade, the roof has only one pitch which slopes down from right to left and there is no gable behind the pediment. The left hand side wall (with its decaying stucco) is very straightforward with two rectangular windows below the roofline, and fronts onto the Via dei Neofiti.

Unusually, there are two small campaniles. The one behind the right hand side of the façade was built in 1803, and is attached to the tall college building next door. It has two arched bell-openings, one above the other, and has a gabled top. The other is considerably older, and is over the far end of the left hand side wall. It is a simple bellcote with a space for one bell and a little triangular pediment.

### Façade

The façade is a very simple design, reminiscent of stripped-down neo-Baroque church frontages of the second quarter of the 20th century.

The marble Baroque doorcase is from the 16th century, sheltered by a floating cornice with a wide strip of incurved molding above it. Between the lintel and the cornice is a short dedicatory inscription: Templ[um] S[ancti] Salvatoris ad Montes. Above the cornice is the 18th century epigraph (quoted above) on a slightly sunken rectangular marble tablet, and above that in turn is a horizontally elliptical tondo with a dished and molded frame. Pictorial evidence given by a Pinelli watercolour of 1834 indicates that this once contained three coats-of-arms, and that above it was a fresco of Our Lady in a smaller, vertically elliptical tondo.

The façade has four blind pilasters without capitals, and these support an entablature that has an architrave (with which the pilasters blend) and a blank frieze but no cornice. Above this is placed a triangular pediment with the entablature design replicated along its gable, which looks quite odd. Another oddity in the design is the existence of an additional corner pilaster on the left hand side, which breaks the symmetry. This pilaster is on a limestone plinth, which protects the corner of the edifice from damage by traffic. Finally, a vertical rectangular window is placed high up in between each pair of pilasters. There is no other decoration.

### **Interior**

#### Nave

The simple little interior is rectangular, with two rectangular windows in the left hand wall and two matching but slightly smaller apertures looking out from a corridor in the college building to the right. The side walls are blank, and are painted in an off-white. What decoration there is, dates from 1904. The 17th century frescoes and paintings mentioned in published descriptions have been removed.

Over the entrance is the organ gallery, which is corbelled out. Its solid balustrade is painted in white and two shades of brown, with understated stencilled grotesque tendril decoration focusing on a central monogram of Christ (IHS). The organ case survives, but the organ has also been removed.

The flat ceiling is painted to resemble coffering in octagons and squares, with central rosettes.

In the near left hand corner is a damaged marble wall tablet commemorating a visit made by King Carlo Emanuele IV of Sardinia on the 16 February 1805. He had abdicated his throne in 1802, and lived in Rome until he died on 6 October 1819 which date is also given on the tablet.

On the right hand nave side wall is a memorial to the painter Agostino Masucci 1758, which consists merely of the epitaph and an attractive little tondo portrait set directly into the plaster above. One suspects that these were scavenged from a destroyed Baroque monument. On the other hand, the burial was allowed free of charge because Agostino had died penniless -so perhaps the plaque and tondo was all that the family could afford. The latter was painted by his son Lorenzo Masucci, who also had altarpiece paintings in the church. These have vanished, but a list of surviving works by him in Rome is here.

On the left hand side wall is the 1046 epigraph quoted above in the history section. Above this is a little tondo relief of the face of the suffering Christ.

Moveable devotional objects include a good terracotta statue of St Benedict Joseph Labre, and a free copy of the venerated icon of Our Lady of Pompei which looks as if it was provided in the early 20th century restoration. It has been damaged.

Sanctuary

The sanctuary is a round-headed niche, flanked by a pair of matching sacristy doors with Baroque doorcases having undersized segmental pediments. The triumphal arch is flanked by a pair of Doric pilasters which reach the ceiling and which each have a sunken panel in golden yellow occupying most of the surface area.

The back wall of the sanctuary contains a round-headed statue niche in gilded mosaic, now empty. It is surrounded by decorative elements matching the ceiling and organ gallery, with rosettes and tendrils. In the apse tympanum above the niche is an early 20th century fresco of Christ blessing two neophytes (one male and one female), and in the archivolt above is the Dove of the Holy Spirit.

Apparently, the statue niche sometimes has a statue put in it as appropriate for events being held in the church.

### Status and Access

This little church has been described as deconsecrated. However, the website of the diocese still (2015) has a page for it as a Chiesa Annessa dependent on the parish church of Santa Maria ai Monti. The altar pro popolo (for Mass celebrated facing the congregation) is still in place, and the church is furnished for worship.

On the other hand, no Masses or other public liturgical events seem to be regularly celebrated here and the edifice seems now to be functioning primarily as a meeting-hall for the parish and a place for occasional liturgical events.

The church is not regularly open to the public. If you spot the door open, some sort of function is taking place which is liable to be private.

However, it is reported that a public celebration in honor of St Vincent Pallotti is held on 22 January. The saint had opened a centre for charitable activities in a house nearby in the early 19th century.

Location:

Coord: [41°53'39"N 12°29'24"E](#)

Address:

Via Madonna dei Monti 38  
00184 Roma

Phone:

06 48 83 962

### **External links**

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

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["Annazelli" web-page](#)

Info.roma web-page

"Romeartlover" web-page

Annas Rom guide (in Danish)