

## San Cosimato in Trastevere



**San Cosimato in Trastevere** is a 15th century former convent church in the rione Trastevere. The old convent is part of the Ospedale Nuovo Regina Margherita, (the hospital's main entrance is at Via Emilio Morosini 30, and the former convent entrance is on the Piazza San Cosimato). The church is dedicated to SS Cosmas and Damian, although the latter saint is now not remembered in the name. Fairly early on in its history, the monastic complex was nicknamed San Cosimato or "Little St Cosmas" to distinguish it from the basilica of Santi Cosma e Damiano in the Forum. Hence, there is no such saint as St Cosimatus.

### History:

The opinion was that anciently the site was occupied by the Naumachia of Augustus, which was a special flooded amphitheatre where sea battles could be re-enacted. This was abandoned at the end of the 1st century, and the area built over with a fairly high-status neighbourhood. A revisionist opinion is now that the naumachia was just inside the ancient Porta Portense, where the Piazza Ippolito Nievo is now. A more substantial hint of ancient times is the monumental bath-tub carved out of solid grey granite, now part of the fountain in the courtyard outside the church. This possibly came from a bath complex known to have been near the site, called the Balneum Ampelidis.

The cultus of SS Cosmas and Damian as patrons of sick people originated in Syria, and their original shrine was in the city of Cyrrhus. However a personal devotion on the part of the emperor Justinian I led to the transfer of their relics to a large pilgrimage basilica at Constantinople in the mid 6th century, and this was popular among sick people seeking a cure. The foundation of their basilica in the Roman Forum was part of this aspect of their popularity.

Some relics of SS Cosmas and Damian were allegedly brought back to Rome by Pope Gregory the Great at the end of the same century before his election as pope, when he was the Roman church's ambassador at Constantinople. If this event is historical, it might have been the motivation for the foundation of a pilgrimage center dedicated to the saints in Trastevere.

The direct documentary evidence for such an early foundation of the church is lacking, but archaeological discoveries on the site suggest that there was a pilgrimage and funerary complex here in the early Dark Ages, and there is a possible reference in the Einsiedeln Itinerary. On the north wall of the south cloister are affixed fragments of marble plutei of the 8th or 9th centuries (a pluteus is a stone slab stood on end to form part of a low screen) as well as epigraphs, and these are good evidence for a church of the same date on the site.

When the convent emerged into history it had the odd suffix Mica Aurea, which literally means "Golden Crumb". This has been understood as being perhaps a reference either to the yellow sands of the Janiculum hill nearby, or to the discovery of the remains of an ancient goldsmith's shop. The name is further thought to have been the origin of the mysterious word malva in the name of San Giovanni della Malva in Trastevere.

However, an odd documentary reference in Eusebius to a Mica Aurea built by the emperor Domitian at the end of the 1st century has survived. This has led to the alternative hypothesis that the term referred to some sort of building at an unknown location. The further surmise based on this is that mica meant something different from "crumb" and was an architectural term perhaps meaning "small, insignificant edifice".

#### Benedictine monastery

The first church certainly known to have been here was built between 936 and 949 for a Benedictine abbey called Santi Cosma e Damiano a Mica Aurea. This was founded by Benedict, Count of Campagna, and was part of a major reform of Benedictine monasticism at the time focused on the abbey of Cluny. The new monastery was not just a little convent, but was a major institution with large land-holdings in Trastevere as well as in nearby cities by the start of the next century, as witnessed to by a bull of Pope John XVIII in 1005.

A new church was built on the orders of Pope Alexander II and Abbot Odimund, and consecrated in 1069. It was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary and SS Cosmas, Damian and (for some reason) Emerentiana. The epigraph recording the consecration was discovered in 1892, and is preserved. In 1157 Pope Adrian IV placed the abbey under papal protection, and confirmed its landholdings. The surviving gatehouse was built at about this time.

The monastery fell into serious decay in the 13th century, together with the other Benedictine convents in the city. According to the surviving documentation, the monks in Rome had, by and large, lost a religious charism and were openly living as secular nobility, even keeping mistresses. The reaction of the Church was firstly to attempt a reform, and this particular abbey was annexed to the Camaldolese reformed monastic order in 1230. Part of the deal was that a church called San Biagio nearby, owned by the abbey, was given to the nascent Franciscan order, and re-built as San Francesco d'Assisi a Ripa Grande.

#### Poor Clares

The takeover by the Camaldolese was apparently a disaster, and the complex was forcibly granted to the Poor Clares in 1234, making it one of their earliest nunneries anywhere. In fact, their foundress St Clare was still alive so they were not called Poor Clares then but Recluse di San Damiano.

In 1246 Abbess Iacopa Cenci oversaw the restoration of the entire nunnery, presumably using her family's wealth to do so.

There was a reform in 1451, overseen by the Poor Clare abbey of Santa Lucia in Foligno. For this reason the nuns were later referred to as Osservante. The community was able to rebuild and enlarge their convent substantially from 1475, the date of the present church, because Pope Sixtus IV had a sister there and paid for the work. Her name was Franchetta. Interestingly, the convent buildings that resulted were substantial but the rebuilt church was tiny. A second cloister was added, to the east of the church, and the chapter house, refectory (dining hall) and guest house were also rebuilt.

The first restoration after this was in 1604.

In 1607 Orsola Formicini, who was the abbess, published a surviving Chronicle of the monastery's history for which she used documentary evidence since lost.

The convent formed a pair with that of the Franciscan friars nearby at San Francesco a Ripa, who provided the sisters with chaplains. It remained the major convent of Poor Clares in Rome for over half a millennium from its foundation.

There was a restoration of the church courtyard in 1731, and the fountain there now which incorporates the ancient bath-tub was set up. Further work was done on the complex in 1756, including the addition of a large building on the north side of the church. This building had the campanile inserted into its south-east corner, which looks very odd.

The convent was suppressed by the French Napoleonic occupiers in 1810, but re-opened in 1815. It suffered some damage during the suppression of the Roman Republic by French forces in 1849. The nuns attached a tablet with an epigraph to a cloister wall after the French bombardment of the city in that year. A cannonball had smashed through the roof of the choir while the sisters were singing the Divine Office, but none of them had come to harm and the tablet commemorates this.

A restoration of the the church was undertaken in the mid 19th century and completed in 1871, just in time to see the convent closed down.

### Hospital

The convent's property was nationalized by the sequestration of all the property of vowed religious communities in Rome by the Italian government in 1873. The community was ejected in 1892. However the sisters refused to become extinct and, after much trouble, founded another monastery at San Cosimato in Ostiense, preserving the ancient nickname.

The buildings were leased to the municipality, which turned them into an almshouse for poor old people. This survived until 1970, when the premises were incorporated into a new hospital called the Ospedale Nuovo Regina Margherita. The result was unfortunate; inappropriate additions and alterations were made to the structures, and the buildings were not suitable for the uses to which they were put. Further, repairs and maintenance were not properly kept up.

In 2007 the Consorzio Unisan and the Cooperativa Sociale Infermieri Riuniti took over the complex under the continued aegis of the Ospedale Nuovo Regina Margherita, and converted it into a hospice for the care of the terminally ill. The Hospice Santa Francesca Romana in Trastevere opened in 2008.

Part of the deal seems to be that the two firms responsible will maintain the complex in good repair. This is a tall order, as there are several serious problems. However, a start has been made. So far, the old gateway, the bath fountain and some of the more derelict cloister columns have been restored.

### Associazione Mica Aurea

As a result of concern among private individuals, an association called the Associazione Mica Aurea was founded in 2010 in order to promote the restoration and future care of the complex. This group held concerts in the church in 2012 in order to raise funds, and is working to raise the profile of the site.

Present status of church

The Diocese of Rome does not list the church, which is circumstantial evidence that it has been deconsecrated. The Ospedale and the Hospice are listed as chaplaincies under the parish church of San Francesco a Ripa instead.

A restoration of the roof is now finally in progress.

Monastery

Despite the vicissitudes of the past two centuries, the plan of the original Benedictine monastery is still partly discernible although the 15th century Poor Clare additions have introduced some ambiguity.

The surviving complex is based around two large cloisters, one to the south of the church and one to its east. The former is basically the old Benedictine abbey cloister, reconstructed in 1246. The Poor Clares had their main gatehouse (which survives) to the west of the church, with a rectangular courtyard or curia in between.

There is a fair certainty that the Benedictine abbey had its church elsewhere. Abbess Orsola, writing in the 17th century, asserted that the Poor Clare church was built on the site of the monks' refectory. This is a useful clue, because the refectory or dining-hall was next to the kitchen. In mediaeval Benedictine monasteries, the kitchen was usually placed on the other side of the cloister from the church, because of the danger of fire (until late in the period, it was the only place in a monastery apart from the infirmary where a fire was lit). Hence, the monks' church was possibly somewhere to the south of the cloister, with a separate gatehouse entrance off the lane leading south of the present Piazza di San Cosimato. The later nuns' gatehouse would then originally have been the kitchen or services' gatehouse.

However, the location of the campanile to the east of the church (and detached from it) hints that the church might have been on the site of the south range of the north cloister instead. What is known is that it was basilical in layout, with a central nave and side aisles.

Layout of nunnery

As well as their little church, the nuns built this second, north cloister in the 15th century. At the south-east corner of it they had the pre-existing Romanesque campanile embellished. The church is so small that there must have been a large choir chapel in the main set of buildings, with the church itself outside the nuns' enclosure.

There was a wing of the convent on either side of the gatehouse, and another on the south side of the church courtyard. The church stood alone, and was not attached to another building. The south cloister had wings on its west, south and east sides, but not on its north except where it abutted onto the north cloister at its north-east corner. The north cloister had a large building on its west side, east of the church, and a long wing on its south side which ran beyond the limits of the cloister to the east. The north and east walks of the cloister then had no buildings.

**Exterior:**Gatehouse

The original 12th century gatehouse is on a triangular piece of land which is now the south part of the Piazza di San Cosimato. This started as a mustering-ground for the 10th century monastery, and quickly became a market which endured through the centuries. From here, tracks led through open country to Trastevere, the complex remained on the edge of the built-up area until 1870.

The gatehouse consists of a solid stone-arched doorway with a rough relieving arch in Roman tiles above it, and a gabled porch with an archway supported by a pair of ancient Composite marble columns. Above the

porch gable is a chamber with a pyramidal roof, and the portarius or gatekeeper had his cell in here. (The roof design is not original, as in the 18th century there was a double pitch with a decorative brick cornice creating a pediment.) At an early stage a brick buttress was added to support the structure to the side of the right hand column.

Before the recent restoration, the gatehouse was below the street level outside and was protected by iron railings. These have been removed, and the street surface lowered. The low ranges to the left and right of the gatehouse belonged to the original nunnery, and are not very impressive. The arched fenestration of the right hand range is modern. The left hand range once had a second storey over its right half, next to the gatehouse, and this was probably where the extern sisters had their base (extern sisters were members of the Poor Clare community who were not bound to choir duties, and so could do tasks outside the enclosure. All choir nuns used to be enclosed.)

Going through this gateway (not possible now for visitors), one entered the monastery's narrow rectangular outer courtyard or curia, formerly outside the enclosure and where the monks and (later) extern nuns would deal with craftsmen, vendors and other seculars on business. At the east end of this is the façade of the little church, with a rather overpowering three-storey 18th century building to its left.

In the center of the yard is an 18th century fountain incorporating an impressive ancient grey granite bathtub, which has apparently always been here. This fountain has recently been restored.

The original main entrance to the south cloister is a doorway in the range to the right of the church.

#### Present entrance

If you manage to get past the staff on duty at the hospice entrance at Via Roma Libre 76, to the right of the gatehouse, you will find yourself in an ugly, narrow modern courtyard which curves round to the right. At the top end of this is the outside frontage of the west range of the south cloister, and you get into this via a passage through the building.

#### Mediaeval cloister

To the south of the church is the large mediaeval cloister, the present aspect of which dates from 1240 or just after the nuns took possession.

The original monks' cloister had large arches on squat Doric pilasters, all in brick and with seven on each side. The arches in the corners are smaller. The 13th century work involved inserting arcades supported by double marble columns with conical capitals, three arcade arches inside the larger arches and two in the smaller. The central arches were left open for access to the garth, but you can see on the west front where a very narrow portal was widened at the expense of one of the neighbouring arches.

The cloister used to have two storeys, but the second storey galleries were replaced by walls in the Renaissance re-ordering in order to create more accommodation for the nuns.

The north walk of the cloister contains many fragments of inscriptions, columns, sarcophagi and other carved stonework from the old church which repay inspection. (There has been concern about the state of preservation of these items). The cloister garth (the garden in the middle) has bits of stonework edging the paths.

#### Renaissance cloister

The Renaissance cloister added by the nuns after 1475 is to the east of the church, with its south-west corner abutting on the north-east corner of the mediaeval cloister. There is a set of stairs linking the two.

The limestone arcade pillars of this cloister are octagonal, and their capitals are exceptionally well carved with plant motifs.

In the center of the garth is an odd little kiosk or aedicule, in limestone with arched openings on three sides. This was provided in the 1871 restoration, and looks like a shrine for a statue. If so, the convent was closed down before one was provided.

### Campanile

The campanile is incorporated into the south-east corner of the large 18th century building to the north of the church, and overlooks the north cloister. It is itself usually overlooked by visitors.

It used to be a typical free-standing tower campanile in brick, in the Romanesque style, but now only the tiled pyramidal cap is free of the embrace of the three-storey building. The top two storeys of the campanile have an arcade of three soundholes on each of the two free faces, the arches being separated by little marble columns with imposts. The edifice was restored in the 15th century building project, but is obviously older.

The campanile used to have a bell dated 1238 and inscribed with the maker's name of Bartolomeo Pisano. Hence, it seems that the campanile was built by the sisters immediately they took possession of the complex. This bell, and some others, are now in the vestibule of the former chapter house off the east walk of the south cloister.

### Exterior of the Church

The Classical façade is attributed to the school of Andrea Bregno (the architect is thought to have been Baccio Pontelli), and was badly remodelled in the 19th century restoration when the nave of the church was substantially rebuilt.

The original doorcase is decorated with delicately carved swags and fountain motifs, and the wooden door has carvings of scenes connected to the Franciscans. There is a triangular pediment above the lintel. Above the doorway is a round window, with a large arched window on each side (there used to be just two rectangular windows before the 19th century). A pair of Corinthian pilasters occupies the outer corners of the façade.

There is no proper pediment; a string course above the windows supports a pair of stumpy pilasters at the outer corners which run up to the gabled roofline, which is dentillated.

### **Interior of the Church**

The ceiling vault of the interior was frescoed in the late 16th century by Cesare Torelli, to the right, and Francesco da Castello, to the left. The nave walls were frescoed by the latter, together with Giovanni Canini. The frescoes there now are 19th century, and the artists are given as Andrea Fiorani and Bonaventura Loffredo.

The main altar is from the 18th century restoration, with black marble pillars framing a modern icon of Our Lady in Byzantine style displayed on a red marble background. This is in place of a 13th century icon which was taken away for restoration and not returned because of worries about the security of the church.

To the left of the sanctuary is a Renaissance altar with the relics of several martyrs.

The tabernacle was allegedly moved here from the Cybo Chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo. Lorenzo Cybo is buried here, which might have something to do with it. His tomb is in a side chapel dedicated to St Severa, a 7th century French nun.

The most important artwork in the church is a fragment of the original 15th century fresco cycle by Antonio del Massaro showing Our Lady between St Francis and St Clare. This is framed and displayed to the left of the main altar. The debt that the artist owed to Pinturicchio is obvious.

**Access**

The main gateway on Piazza di San Cosimato has not been used as an entrance for some time. The entrance to the hospice is at the other end of the building to the right.

As a working hospice, the security arrangements of the complex are necessarily more rigorous nowadays and casual visitors may not be able to gain entry. Those with a serious interest will find contact details for the hospice on the CIR website (see "External links", below).

**Info:**

Location:

Coord: [41° 53' 12"N 12° 28' 12.7"E](#)

Address: Piazza di San Cosimato

**Masses:**

Weekdays 7.00am

Holidays 8.00am

**Exterior links**

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[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Nolli map](#) (look for 1136)

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