

Santa Maria in Domnica



This church is called **Santa Maria in Domnica** in the Italian Wikipedia, as well as in most guidebooks. Historically it has also been known as **Santa Maria alla Navicella**, and the official diocesan web-page and the parish web-site now combine these two names as **Santa Maria in Domnica alla Navicella**. It is dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and is a parish church as well as a minor basilica holding a cardinalate title. Its postal address is Via della Navicella 10 in the rione Celio.

History:

The church is believed to have originated in the third century as a meeting-place for some of the first Christians of Rome and as an institution for aiding the poor, possibly located in the home of a Greek lady named Cyriaca. This is because the Greek *Kuriaka*, meaning 'belonging to the Lord', translates into Latin as *dominica*, which could be why the church has its name. Alternatively, *domnica* could be a corruption of *dominicum*, a common Latin word for 'church', but the actual meaning of Domnica isn't clear. The church was built near the site of a Roman barracks. By tradition, Cyriaca's family catacomb cemetery was where the basilica San Lorenzo fuori le Mura now stands and it was she who arranged the burial of St Lawrence, deacon and martyr. The passion of St Lawrence described him as handing out alms to the poor here.

The first documentation of the church is in 499, when Pope Leo III (795-816) is recorded as establishing the cardinalate title and also giving tapestries and altar decoration to the church. By 817 the church had fallen into great disrepair, so Pope Paschal I had it rebuilt in the early Christian

revival style of the Carolingian Renaissance. Like its cousin church, Santa Pressede, the architecture Santa Maria in Domnica was meant to hark back to the early days of the Christian church in the form of the classic basilica developed in Old St. Peter's.

In 1340 a small monastery of the Olivetan Benedictines was established here. Back then, few people lived on the Caelian Hill apart from monastics, but the main road from St John Lateran to the Tiber quays passed by here before running down the Clivo di Scauro. As a result, the church saw a steady flow of pilgrims. (Via Claudia was only built after 1870.)

The only major additions added to the church were by patron Giovanni Cardinal de Medici, who later became Pope Leo X (1513-1521). The most noticeable of this patronage is the creation of a portico on the exterior of the church, the carved ceiling, and the replacing of the ancient stone statue of a boat, or *navicella*, that was located in the front of the church. It is this statue that lends its name to not only the street and plaza the church located on, but also to the alternative name of the church itself, Santa Maria alla Navicella, or "St. Mary by the Boat."

Over the next 500 years the church has received restorations and patronage at a steady pace.

1686	Unknown restorations
1700-1721	Clement XI decorates the portico and restores the apse mosaic
1881	Renovations of alters and the portico
1935	Restoration of the apse mosaic
1957	Construction of a new crypt
1997-1998	Restoration of stone sculpture, architectural elements, and church furnishing for the Jubilee of 2000

The monastery was suppressed in 1873, and the property seized by the Italian government. As an ancient building the church was lucky to escape the ideologically motivated 'restorers' of the next fifty years, unlike Santa Maria in Cosmedin for example, and so has kept its late Renaissance façade. In 1932 it was made into a parish church for the Caelian, and so has responsibility for all the other historical churches on the hill including San Clemente. At present, the rather small parish community is trying to offset the cost of maintaining the building by making it available to the weekend 'centro storico' church marriage industry, which means that trying to visit on a Saturday is often not a good idea

Among the church's titulars were Popes Stephen IX, Gregory VII, Clement VII, Tommaso and Giovanni Battista of the Orsini family, Innocenzo Cardinal Cybo, Federico Borromeo sen. (died 1589) and Tommaso Riario Sforza.

The parish is administered by the Priestly Fraternity of the Missionaries of St Charles Borromeo (FSCB).

Exterior:

The exterior walls are rendered in a pale yellowish grey, and the roofs are pitched and tiled. There is no campanile, but a small marble belfry is perched on the near end of the right hand aisle and this has a triangular pediment. It contains one bell, with an inscription giving the year of manufacture as 1288.

The flat-roofed external portico was added by Sansovino in 1513. Inspired by the work of Bramante, it has often been attributed to Raphael, but in actuality it was Andrea Sansovino who designed it. It has a sober and dignified row of five identical arches with two more on the sides, and these have Doric imposts. In between the arches and on the portico's corners are six Doric pilasters which support an entablature, and arch piers and pilasters are in travertine. Above the entablature the roof sits on an additional plinth. Behind the portico, the gabled nave façade rises to a triangular pediment. It has a row of three windows, the central one being circular in a dished frame and with geometric fenestration involving a circle and two squares. The other two windows are vertical rectangles with stone frames, and identical windows are provided in the aisle and upper nave walls. The frieze below the pediment bears a dedicatory inscription, and the pediment itself contains the coat-of-arms of Pope Innocent VIII in the middle and those of Cardinals Giovanni de Medici (the future Pope Leo X) and Ferdinand de Medici to each side.

To the right of the church is the small original Olivetan monastery, which contains a mediaeval brick tower.

Interior:

The plan of the church is very straightforward, being a rectangular basilica with aisles and a wide external segmental main apse with conch. The aisles have apses as well. The triple apse is in the Eastern style, the central one being proportionally rather wide. The nave arcades have eighteen ancient grey granite columns, all with matching ancient white marble Corinthian capitals, most of which are roman spolia. The main apse is flanked by a pair of porphyry columns with Ionic capitals which support the triumphal arch. These, with the arcade columns, are probably from the first church, and were reused in the 9th century rebuilding.

The apse mosaics are from the 9th century, commissioned by Pope Paschal I (817-824). In the vault of the central apse the Pope is shown kneeling at the feet of the Blessed Virgin with the Christ child on her lap, surrounded by angles, and this is one of the earliest examples of a mosaic where the Madonna is in the centre of the composition. The choice of motif should be seen as a protest against iconoclasm, which was still rampant in the East at the time, and both the Byzantine style of the mosaics and the Eastern elements in the architecture indicates the Greek exiles were involved when the church was built and decorated. Notice that the Holy Father has a square halo, which tells us that he was still alive when the mosaic was made.

Above the apse is a mosaic frieze with Christ sitting on a rainbow in a mandorla, and the 12 Apostles approaching from the sides. Flanking the conch of the apse are two figures thought to be *Moses* and *Elijah*. The identification of the latter two is difficult, and on a notice outside the church they are said to be Sts Peter and Paul. This is very unlikely, as they do not resemble the Apostles above. One alternative is that they are meant to be Sts John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, who are depicted in the fresco below. Beneath is the following inscription, also in mosaic:

ISTA DOMVS PRIDEM FVERAT CONFRACTA RVINIS
NVNC BVNILAT JVG1TER VARIIS DECORATA METALLIS
ET DEVS ECCE SVVS SPLENDET CEV PHOEBVS IN ORBE
QVI POST FVRVA FVGANS TETRAE VELAMINA NOCTIS
VIRGO MARIA TIBI PASCHALIS PRAESVL HONESTVS
CONDIDIT HANC AVLAM LAETVS PER SAECLA MANENDAM.

"This house, once reduced to ruins,
 now gleams perennially decorated with various minerals,
 and its glory resplends, as Phoebus in the sky,
 having fled the dark shadows of the gloomy night.
 O Virgin Mary, to you Pascal the virtuous happy bishop
 has founded this regal hall, to remain through the centuries."

The lower part of the tribune is painted in fresco by Lazzaro Baldi, who has represented, in the first compartment to the right, *Saint John the Evangelist*; in the second, *Charity*; in the third, behind the chair, *Christ washing the feet of the Apostles*; in the fourth, *Saint Cyriaca cured of violent pain in the head by S. Laurence*; and in the fifth, *Saint John the Baptist*.

The coffered, carved and painted flat wooden ceiling was provided by Cardinal Ferdinand de Medici in 1566, during the Pontificate of Sixtus V. The artist was Pierino del Baga, and took the design from Giulio Romano. Among the carvings that adorn it are a tabernacle with the form of the *B/. Sacrament*; the *Ark of Noah* with the dove, and the motto, *Extra non est salus*; and four small barks with the symbols of the four Evangelists. It was repainted in the 19th century.

High up on the nave walls is a painted frieze in the Renaissance style made by Pierino del Vaga to a design by Giulio Romano, a student of Raphael.

Five steps lead up to the sanctuary, where stands the great altar, in the small chapel beneath which are the bodies of Saint Balbina and Saint Theodora, enclosed in two small shrines under the altar; in that of S. Balbina were found three glass vases containing her bones; and in that of S. Theodora were found a vase and a vial of blood, all bearing the seal of the then reigning Pontiff.

At the end of the right aisle is the tomb of Princess Antonia of Luxembourg (died 1954), last crown princess of Bavaria. The tomb is marked by a marble tablet with an inscription and the arms of the Royal House of Bavaria (which she married into) and the Grand Ducal House of Luxembourg (of which she was a princess). The monument was sculpted by Theodor Georgii.

In the baptistery are modern paintings, and in the crypt are ancient Roman sarcophagi, fragments of 9th century plutei (reading desks) and a 17th century altar.

Artists and Architects:

Andrea [Sansovino](#) (1467-1529), Italian sculptor and architect of the High Renaissance
 Giovanni [Prini](#) (1877-1958), Italian sculptor
 Giulio [Romano](#) (1499-1546) Italian painter and architect
 Lazzaro [Baldi](#) (1624-1703), Italian painter of the Baroque period
 Piero Bonaccorsi aka Perin [del Vaga](#) (1501-1547), Italian painter of the Late Renaissance/Mannerism
 Theodor [Georgii](#) (1882-1963), a Swabian-born sculptor

Burials:

[Antonia of Luxembourg](#) (1899-1954)

Location:

Piazza della Navicella, 12.

Coord: [41° 53' 4.8" N, 12° 29' 44.1" E](#)

Info:

OPEN 09:00am-12:00pm 03:30pm-06:00pm

Telephone: 0039 06 77202685

Links:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Maria_in_Domnica

<http://www.pnac.org/station-churches/week-2/sunday-santa-maria-in-domnica/>

<http://www.060608.it/en/cultura-e-svago/luoghi-di-culto-di-interesse-storico-artistico/chiese-cattoliche/santa-maria-in-domnica-alla-navicella.html>

http://www.info.roma.it/monumenti_dettaglio.asp?ID_schede=414

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/Places/Europe/Italy/Lazio/Roma/Rome/churches/S.Maria_in_Domnica/home.html

http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/Santa_Maria_in_Domnica

<http://www.jacobite.ca/gazetteer/Rome/SMariaDomnica.htm>

Ref:

- 1) Donovan, Jeremiah; ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS; 1842
- 2) Goodson, Caroline J.; THE ROME OF POPE PASCHAL I; 2010