

# San Tommaso in Formis



The church of **San Tommaso in Formis** is a small 13th century convent church on the Caelian Hill. Situated on the edge of Villa Celimontana and next to the Arch of Dolabella (Porta Caelimontana), a gate in the original Servian Wall, the church is dedicated to St. Thomas the Apostle. It is built into the side of the Claudian Aqueduct. [1]

## History

The gateway to the church is next to what is now called the Arco di Dolabella, which was almost certainly the Porta Caelimontana ("Caelian Hill Gate") in the original city wall, the Servian Wall. This is not to be confused with the present walls, which enclosed a much larger area. The gate here was erected in the year 10 AD, as recorded in the dedication inscription above it. This is illegible now, but used to read:

P[ublius] Cornelius P[ublili] f[ilius] Dolabella [et] C[aius] Iunius C[aii] f[ilius] Silvanus, flamen Martialis, co[n]s[ules], ex s[enatus] c[onsulto] faciundum curaverunt, idem probaverunt.

The year is given by the fact that these two were consuls then. The Emperor Nero used the gate when he built a branch aqueduct from the Aqua Claudia to the nymphaeum of his Domus Aurea, and this branch later served as the water supply for the imperial palace on the Palatine. When the aqueduct collapsed, this arch was kept because part of the convent was extended over it. The name formis is from the Latin fornix, "arch". [1]

The church is ancient probably dating to the 10<sup>th</sup> century as a Benedictine monastery. In 1209 Pope Innocent III donated the monastery to St. [John of Matha](#). He was French, and one of the founders of the Trinitarian Order for the ransoming of Christians enslaved by Muslims in Spain and North Africa. He had arrived in Rome to promote his work two years earlier. [1] [4]

The saint established the first seat of the new Order here. The church was rebuilt in 1209, and the saint also converted the monastery into a hospital or hospice. This was for poor and sick people, and also for pilgrims and penniless redeemed captives. At that time the Clivus Scauri, the street passing

under the arch, was a main road and so would have seen a lot of traffic. St John died in the convent, and was initially buried in the church in 1213. [1] [c]

According to the Franciscan sources, in 1209, St. Francis of Assisi, who came to Rome to obtain the pontifical authorization of the Rule of life, for himself and for his friars, was welcomed in the monastery by St. John de Matha, who he had seen begging outside the Lateran waiting for the Pope to receive him; the two Saints thus became friends. Subsequently, St. Francis lived several times in San Tommaso in Formis as guest of the Trinitarians. [4]

The Great Schism, which shook the Catholic Church in the years 1378-1417, cost the Trinitarians, whose leader Francesco di Mortignac had supported the antipope Clemens VII. The Trinitarians left Rome in 1380, and abandoned the complex, taking the relics of St John to Spain. At first it was administered by Cardinal Poecello Orsini, but in 1395 possession was transferred to the Chapter of St Peter's (also known as the Vatican Chapter). The buildings seem to have been left derelict, and the church was closed down. The arms of the Vatican Chapter are found over the sacristy door. [1] [3]

In 1532 the first steps towards restoration were undertaken and in 1571 Pope Pius V returned the church, hospital and monastery to the Trinitarians. In 1590, following the death of Pius V, the church reverted once again to the Vatican and, in 1663, the church was completely rebuilt to its present form by the Vatican Chapter. Little is left of the medieval furnishings and decorations apart from the famous mosaic over the hospital gateway. [1]

The Trinitarians were again granted formal possession of the church in 1898, on occasion of the 700th anniversary of the Order's foundation, with some rooms next to the gate, including the cell-chapel of St John which is actually over the arch. The Order took a while to restore the little complex, and only finished the church in 1925. Most of the monastery complex, including a 13th-century cloister, was destroyed in 1925 when the Istituto Sperimentale per la Nutrizione delle was built. All that remains of the 13th-century hospital buildings is the portal, which overlooks the Largo della Sanità Militare, surmounted by a splendid mosaic, executed by Jacopo di Cosma in the first quarter of the 13th-century. [1] [4]

The Trinitarians carried out another restoration in 2001. [1] [b]

The church is currently a subsidiary place of worship of the Parish of Santa Maria in Domnica alla Navicella. [4]

## **Exterior**

### Layout of complex

The original complex had three separate structures: church, convent and hospital. The church was all on its own in the north-west corner of the property, without any structure connecting it to the convent and on a different alignment to the hospital. This indicates that it was probably rebuilt in the 13th century on the footprint of the original church. [1]

The little convent, with a tiny cloister, was next to the arch and occupied rooms over it. Here is the chapel of the cell of St John of Matha, although it has not been regularly accessible to visitors in recent years. [1]

The hospital was very large, and consisted of two parallel wings separated by a narrow courtyard. The gateway with the mosaic gave entry to the latter. Fragments of the Trinitarian hospital remain, incorporated into the gardens. The entrance façade is partially preserved; the gable end corresponds to the frontage of the north wing of the hospital. To its right is the former garden entrance, between the hospital and the convent. [1]

The former main hospital entrance to the left has a fine arched Romanesque portal with a molded archivolt on Doric pillars, and above this is an arched aedicule with thin supporting columns. This protects a mosaic by the Cosmati family depicting Christ between Two Freed Slaves. Freeing slaves was one of the main tasks of the Trinitarians, and the mosaic depicts the Seal of the Order. One slave is white, and the other black. The work is signed by «Master Jacobus and his son Cosimatus», and dated 1218. [1]

To the right of the gate is another piece of medieval wall from the hospital building with the old Gothic arch and square windows in peperino (n. 2 in via della Navicella). A little further along the road Via San Paolo della Croce is Dolabella's Arch from the year 10 AD, this was later built into the above mentioned Nero's aqueduct, which was to lead Acqua Claudia further up to the Oppio mound. Above the arch was the cell that housed San Giovanni de Matha in 1209. You can reach the small chapel by a spiral staircase. [2] [3]

### Church layout and fabric

The church is small, basically a rectangular brick box with a pitched and tiled roof. With the exception of the façade, a stucco creation 1663, all the external walls are of reused brick. There is a little semi-circular external apse, and on the roof gable above this is a tiny campanile with one bell. Each side wall originally pierced by five, high, small, brick-arched windows; most were replaced the three large rectangular windows opened in each side during the 1663 restoration under Alexander VII. The last original window on the right side and the window on each side have been blocked with regular spolia brickwork. [1] [b]

To access the church go through the Arch of Dolabella. The doorway to the immediate left actually admits you to a pretty vicolo or path with walls and hedges on both sides, leading to the church itself. Above the portal is the symbol of the Trinitarian Order. The façade is very straightforward and lacks decoration. There is a molded door case, a raised segmental pediment, a large rectangular window above this, four blind pilasters without capitals and a crowning triangular pediment with an empty tympanum. A short dedicatory inscription is above the door lintel, and to the right of the door is a plaque bearing the symbol of the Name of Christ -IHS. [1]

If you walk past the Santa Maria in Domnica and go into the public park known as the gardens of Villa Celimontana, you will be able to see the back of the San Tommaso church, as well as Rome's smallest obelisk. It stands just 2.68 meters tall and dates back to the reign of pharaoh Ramses II (1279-1213 BCE). It was originally from Heliopolis in Egypt and was brought to Rome for decoration of the Temple of Isis, which was located in the direct vicinity of the Santa Maria sopra Minerva. The obelisk was given to the Mattei family in the 1580s. The Villa that the Mattei family built is now the office of the Società Geografica Italiana. [5]

## **Interior**

The interior is simple. Apart from a pair of altars and three windows each high up, the side walls are entirely undecorated. The coved ceiling has shallow lunettes over the windows, and in the central panel is the coat-of-arms of the Trinitarian order. This has a cross formed of a vertical red bar over a horizontal blue one, and the crowned shield is surrounded by a chain and fetters. The overall color scheme is white and grey. [1]

In the 17th century restoration, the original sanctuary was walled off to create a sacristy. Either side of the altar there is a doorway with a molded door case and a raised and slightly oversized segmental pediment on which a coat-of-arms is superimposed. Behind the pediments are internal windows helping to light the sacristy. [1]

The main altar is a large Baroque composition, with four fluted Corinthian columns in paonazzetto marble forming two pairs, the outer one set back. Over the inner pair only is a triangular pediment with modillions. [1] [a]

The altar is dedicated to St John of Matha (despite the dedication of the church), and the altarpiece shows *The Trinity with St John of Matha* (1971) oil on canvas by **Aronne Del Vecchio**. [1] [4]

On the sides of the main altar there are two doors with, above, the coat of arms of the Vatican Chapter. On the vault there is the coat of arms of the Trinitarians, with the two-colored cross, chains and fetters, alluding to the liberation of slaves.

The altar 'pro populo', installed for Mass celebrated facing the people, is on a pedestal bearing the Trinitarian cross. [1]

### Side altars

The pair of side altars are almost identical. Each has a pair of Ionic semi-columns in grey marble and with swagged capitals, and these support an arched entablature which curves over a large wreath. The frontal is revetted in red marble. [1]

The left hand altar is dedicated to St Thomas. The altarpiece depicts *The Incredulity of St Thomas*. The apostle is represented as inserting his finger in Christ's side. The oil on canvas painting is by **Carlo Ronchi** from 1663. This work was previously placed on the high altar. [4]

The right hand altar is dedicated to Our Lady. The title under which she is venerated here is Santa Maria del Buon Rimedio, which is a special devotion of the Trinitarians. The modern altarpiece (1926) by **Felice Casorati** shows *The Madonna giving a slave's ransom to St John*; the detailing is very well done, especially the vase of flowers featured. The saint is wearing the Order's distinctive white habit. In the center of the frontal of this altar is enshrined a finger bone of St John of Matha. [1] [4]

Two other paintings of interest hang in the church. The one on the left by the entrance is an oil on canvas (1575) by **Girolamo Siciolante di Sermoneta**, and shows the *Madonna and Child in Glory being venerated by SS Francis of Assisi and Boniface of Rome*, with Pope Boniface IX kneeling in the foreground. The one on the right, by **Del Vecchio**, shows the *Approval of the Order's rule by Pope Innocent III* (1971). [1] [4]

There is a wall tablet commemorating the 1797 restoration, in an interesting Baroque shape unusual for that period. [1]

To celebrate the 2000 Jubilee the Order commissioned seven stained glass windows from **Samuele Pulcini**, to commemorate holy people associated with it. Six are in the side walls, and one over the entrance. They feature: [1]

*St John of Matha*

*St Felix of Valois*, who was the other founder of the Order.

*St John Baptist of the Conception* (1561-1613), a Spanish reformer of the Order.

*Teresa Cucchiari*, the 18th century foundress of the Trinitarian nuns.

*Giuseppe Di Donna* (1901-52), a Trinitarian missionary and bishop

*Anna Maria Taigi*, a holy Trastevere housewife who is enshrined in San Crisogono as an oblate of the Order.

*Elizabeth Canori Mora*, Roman tertiary of the Order, who is enshrined at San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane

### Cella di San Giovanni di Matha

As mentioned above, the cell occupied by St John of Matha, one of the founders of the Trinitarians, is in the wing of the convent over the Arch of Dolabella. This was renovated as a presbytery for the church in 1787, and the cell seems to have been fitted (or re-fitted) as a chapel then, in a rather rich late Baroque style involving polychrome marble work. [1]

The chapel is very small. It is entered through an arched portal in a thick load-bearing wall, the arch and its supporting piers being in a yellowish-white-in-grey brecciated marble. The archivolt springs from two pairs of longitudinal Tuscan Doric pilasters, which have a thin rectangular vertical panel of grey-veined yellow Siena marble inset into each face (eight in all, two facing out, two in and four facing each other). [1]

The interior walls are revetted in the same brecciated marble. The flat ceiling is in white. The floor is in a yellow marble, with a deep red marble border. In front of the altar is a device representing the Trinity consisting of three interlaced circles in red, yellow and white marbles. The sanctuary platform, taking up much of the room, is in red marble inlaid with diaper square white tiles in a chequerboard pattern. [1]

The altar is also in the grey and white brecciated marble. A pair of huge downwardly tapering strap corbels supports the mensa. In between is a panel of onyx on which is a cross in red marble. [1]

Above the mensa is a shallow round-headed niche in vermillion red, in which a portrait in oils of the

saint is hung. [1]

### Access

This church used to be seldom open, usually only on Sunday morning for Mass. However, in recent years there seems to have been some effort to have it open for visitors during the week, too. If you are walking under the arch and see the side door open, do visit. [1]

The Cella di San Giovanni di Matha must have some sort of access, because a photo of it has turned up on a blog page (see "External links"). If you find the church open and there is a custodian available, ask. [1]

### Liturgy

Mass is celebrated at 10:30 on Sundays and Solemnities, according to the Diocese and the notice on the church gateway.

As of March 2019, there was also a notice just outside the Arch of Dolabella, issued by the parish at the nearby Basilica of Santa Maria in Domnica, indicating a 19:00 weekday Mass at San Tommaso. (This may be due to the fact that works on Metro C are interfering with the liturgical activities of Santa Maria.)

The major feast of the church is that of St Thomas, on 3 July. St John of Matha is celebrated on 8 February.

### Artist

Aronne Del Vecchio (1910-1998), Italian painter

Carlo Ronchi (17<sup>th</sup> cent.), Italian painter

[Cosmati](#) family (12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries), workers in decorative geometric mosaic

Felice [Casorati](#) (1883-1963), Italian painter, sculptor, and printmaker

Girolamo [Siciolante](#) da Sermoneta (1521-c.1580), Italian Mannerist painter

Samuele Pulcini (20<sup>th</sup> cent), Stained glass window maker

### Relics

St. John of Matha

### Location

Addr: Via di San Paolo della Croce, 10

Coord: [41° 53′ 7.5″ N, 12° 29′ 41.9″ E](#)

### Info

Open times: Saturday and Sunday am 9.15 - 12.30

Masses: Holidays 10.30

### Links and References

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)

2. [Medioeva.Roma web site](#)

3. [Anna's Guide](#) (Danish)

4. [catholic.org web site](#)

5. [Corvinus blog](#)

6. [Trinitarian web site](#)

a. Donovan, Jerrmiah; [ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS](#); 1842; Vol II,

- b. Coates-Stephens, Robert; "Dark Age Architecture in Rome"; *Papers of the British School at Rome*, Vol. 65 (1997), pp. 177-232 (jstor 40310950)
- c. Villani, Mariarosaria; "An ante litteram material relief: the complex of San Tommaso in Formis in Rome from iconography to restoration: Eikonocity"; 2017, year II, n. 2, 57-70, DOI: 10.6092 / 2499-1422 / 5281 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.6092/2499-1422/5281>)

Other links

[English Wikipedia page](#)

[Donna Roomassa blog](#)

[Info Roma](#)

[Romapedia blog](#)

[Tourist info](#)