

## Sant'Aniceto

**Sant'Aniceto nel Palazzo Altemps** is a 17<sup>th</sup> century private chapel in the Palazzo Altemps that has the status of a church. The dedication is to Pope [St Anicetus](#), a 2<sup>nd</sup> century Bishop of Rome.

### History:

The Palazzo Altemps was built in the latter 15<sup>th</sup> century, but only obtained its present name when it was purchased in 1568 by the Austrian cardinal Marco Sittico Altemps. The cardinal had the palace rebuilt by Martino Longhi the Elder, and this is basically the building we have today. The decoration of the church, commissioned by Giovanni Angelo Altemps. (1)

In 1604, Pope Clement VIII gave Giovanni Angelo the alleged relics of the pope to be enshrined in his chapel, which was a very unusual gift. The relics were enshrined under the high altar, in an ancient basin of giallo antico marble quarried in Tunisia. This was apparently dug up somewhere in or around the Villa of Maxentius on the Appian Way. The Altemps family then promulgated the completely false story that Pope Anicetus had been beheaded as a martyr, and this falsehood was included in the Roman martyrology until its revision in 2001. (1)

Giovanni Angelo employed **Onorio Longhi**, **Flamino Ponzio** and **Girolamo Rinandi** as architects in his church project, which was finished in 1612. No expense was spared. He had the result dedicated to Our Lady of Clemency (Madonna della Clemenza) as well as to St Anicetus. The consecration took place in 1617. (1)

Between 1619 and 1622 the wall frescoes were executed by **Antonio Circignani**, nicknamed **Il Pomarancio**, which have as their theme the martyrdom of the saint and the mercy of God. He also did the friezes of putti at the bases of the vault, but there is doubt as to whether he managed to finish the vault fresco. **Polidoro Mariottini** is now considered to have completed this. (1)

From 1725 to 1732 the family leased the palace to Cardinal Melchior de Polignac, French ambassador to the Holy See, who lived here in great luxury and cultural distinction. When they got it back, they restored the church in 1753. (1)

The family kept possession until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The male line died out in 1853, and the inheritor, Lucrezia Altemps, married a French official called Jules Hardouin who then inherited when his wife died leaving a daughter Maria. She married Gabriele d'Annunzio in 1883, but the marriage collapsed in 1891 and the fallout from the scandal led to the palazzo being ceded to the Holy See. The Pontifical Spanish College was here from 1894 to 1969, when it decamped to the suburbs and left the palazzo in a very bad state. (1)

The Italian government acquired the property in 1982. Up to 1997 there was a thorough restoration, and then it was opened to the public as a branch of the Museo Nazionale Romano. This it remains. (1)

All the palazzi in Rome at the time would have had at least one private chapel somewhere on the premises. The one in the Palazzo Altemps is singular in that it contains the shrine of a saint, Pope St Anicetus. This gave it the status of a church, and the liturgy was celebrated publicly there on the saint's former feast day of April 17<sup>th</sup>. (1)

**Exterior:**

The church has no exterior presence, as it is completely within the fabric of the palazzo.

**Interior:**

The church is now officially Room 27 of the museum, in the north-east corner of the second storey of the palazzo, the piano nobile. The entrance is through a door on the right hand side of the fireplace in the old ballroom, the Salone del Camino, and its right hand wall runs along the loggia which overlooks the courtyard from the north. (1)

The plan looks rectangular, but is actually slightly trapezoidal. The two side walls diverge slightly to the triumphal arch, then become parallel in the presbyterium. The altar and shrine are in an apse which is almost a three-quarter circle; the left hand side wall of this is curved, but the right hand one is straight because of the window into the loggia. (1)

There is a roughly circular room with an entrance just by the left hand side of the steps into the apse, and another entrance just by the triumphal arch. This has fenestration looking out into the Vicolo dei Soldati, onto which the north façade of the palazzo faces. Two other rooms occupy the space between the façade and the church; a rectangular one has entrances from the above room and the nave, and a square one leads from this rectangular room to the ballroom where it exits to the left of the fireplace. The rectangular room is the sacristy, while the two others were external chapels. Behind the altar is a rectangular niche, invisible from the nave because the altar is in the way. Also, just to the right of this is a very interesting tiny triangular room which is now a broom cupboard but used to be a coretto, which is a side-chamber where someone could attend to a liturgy in a church or chapel without being seen. (1)

Below the apse is a semi-circular confessio or crypt, which is (of course) in the first storey of the palazzo and has two exits into the rooms around it. (1)

Nave

The entrance into the nave emerges under a gallery supported by four Doric columns in pink marble veined with black. These support an entablature with a dedicatory inscription, above which is a balustrade. There is a little round window high on the right hand side here. (1)

The interior is sumptuously decorated, with all surfaces either frescoed, gilded or revetted in polychrome marble. As mentioned, the nave has a cycle of frescoes by **Il Pomerancio**, with the interesting ones on the left hand side. There, two panels show the saint immediately before and after his martyrdom, with a third panel to the left showing Christ carrying his cross. These are the first historical assertions that the pope was martyred. Below and in between the fresco panels are panels of different rare coloured marbles and breccias. (1)

On the right hand side, there is only one fresco panel because there are also two large rectangular windows which look out onto the loggia. This shows the saint being arrested. (1)

The ceiling has a shallow elliptical barrel vault, and the sides of this have two charming processions of putti holding symbols of martyrdom (on the left) and of torture (on the right). The putti also frolic all over the vault itself, which is a symbolic depiction of the *Glory of St Anicetus*. (1)

Over the door into the sacristy is a marble tablet recording the foundation of the church by Pope Clement and Giovanni Angelo Altamps. Then, immediately in front of the triumphal arch, is a pair of fresco panels showing two evangelists, *SS Mark and John*. (1)

Presbyterium and apse

The triumphal arch is inserted into the vault, and because it is circular and not elliptical it has triangular sections on either side of the archivolt as infill. These are decorated with curlicues in gilded stucco. The archivolt is supported by a pair of Corinthian columns in pink and white brecciated marble with gilded capitals. (1)

The presbyterium is decorated with panels by **Il Pomerancio** showing scenes from the life of Our Lady. (1)

The apse has a half-dome rather than a conch, because there is an oculus. The decoration is in gilded stucco on white, with tondi and trapezoidal panels. There is a balustered railing limiting access to the sanctuary area. (1)

The spectacular altar is set over the ancient basin containing the relics, which is in giallo antico marble with lions' feet and which dates to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. A pair of black marble Corinthian columns support an oversized segmental pediment also in gold and white, and these flank an area panelled in red marble. On this floats a little aedicule in green and gold, which frames an icon of *Our Lady of Clemency*. This is a Spanish copy of 1915 of the original at Santa Maria in Trastevere. (1)

The best thing in the church is an exquisite strip of five small panels under the first painting on the left hand side, which show five birds (thrushes and finches) perched on twigs. These are of delicate opus sectile work in rare coloured minerals, including mother-of-pearl and lapis lazuli (blue). The presence of this work here is a small puzzle; it seems to belong to a piece of furniture rather than a church wall, and might have been part of the extensive collection of antiquities and curios accumulated by Cardinal Mark. The date is thought to be 16<sup>th</sup> century, however. There has been a rather sad attempt at a matching set in paint on the opposite wall. (1)

Confessio

The confessio below the altar has a vault in wood, into which is inlaid marquetry work depicting flowers in mother-of-pearl. There are eight panels here in oils, depicting events in the life of St Anicetus, and these are by **Ottavio Leoni**. (1)

Coretto

The coretto is usually overlooked, and is not open to visitors. There is no access from the church, but rather from a corridor running off a room which is on the other side of the door at the east end of the loggia. The decoration of this tiny space, where one person could stand and listen to a Mass being said on the altar, was intended to evoke a chamber in an ancient catacomb. This romantic feature is a witness to the excitement generated by the discovery of the catacombs of St Priscilla in 1578. There is here a fresco of a corpse in its loculus, which however is dated to the 18<sup>th</sup> century rather than to the original 17<sup>th</sup> century project. (1)

Sacristy area

The roughly circular room accessed from the left hand side of the apse was the chapel of the palazzo while the church was being fitted out in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It has a fresco on the vault showing the *Glory of the Martyrs*. (1)

The sacristy itself has a set of vestment wardrobes in walnut wood, dating back to 1614. The names of the carpenters have been preserved: Lorenzo & Giovan Petro Acciar Modesti. (1)

The last side room was a chapel dedicated to St Charles Borromeo, and has a fragment of an ornate cope of his. (1)

**Access and liturgy**

The church can only be visited by paying the entrance fee for the museum, but there are lots of interesting ancient sculptures to see here as well as the rest of the palazzo and its surviving decorative schemes. (1)

Unfortunately visitors to the church are restricted to the nave and presbyterium, and are not allowed into the apse or confessio. (1)

The church is not listed by the Diocese, but is still consecrated. Priests are known to have obtained permission to say Mass there, which would be obtainable from the Ministero dei Beni Culturali. (1)

The feast-day of St Anicetus is now 20 April, and a Mass should be celebrated here on that date. The former feast-day, before 1970, was 17 April and this is sometimes quoted in online sources. (1)

**Artists and Architects:**

Onorio [Longhi](#) (1568-1619), Italian architect

Flamino Ponzio Italian architect

Girolamo Rinandi Italian architect

Antonio [Circignani](#) aka il Pomarancio (1570-1630), Italian painter of the late-Renaissance/  
Mannerism period

Polidoro Mariottini Italian painter

**Location:**

Address: Palazzo Altemps, Piazza di Sant'Apollinare

Coord: [41° 54' 4" N 12° 28' 23.4" E](#)

**Links and References:**

1. [http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/Sant%27Aniceto\\_nel\\_Palazzo\\_Altemps](http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/Sant%27Aniceto_nel_Palazzo_Altemps)
2. [http://www.info.roma.it/monumenti\\_dettaglio.asp?ID\\_schede=3323](http://www.info.roma.it/monumenti_dettaglio.asp?ID_schede=3323)