

Transito di Santa Caterina da Siena



Transito di Santa Caterina da Siena is a 17th century devotional chapel made out of the room where St Catherine of Siena died in 1380, in a house opposite the church of Santa Chiara now called the Palazzo Santa Chiara. The address is Piazza Santa Chiara 14, in the rione Pigna.

History

Death of the saint

St Catherine was a native of Siena, but established a base in Rome with a few of her female disciples in 1378 at the invitation of Pope Urban VI. He needed her help in dealing with the Great Schism which had just started. The first house that they occupied was somewhere in the rione Colonna, but they moved to one on the present site at a later, unknown date. Back then, the Piazza Santa Chiara did not exist and the street was called the Via Papae because it was part of the route between the Vatican and the Lateran.

The saint died here in 1380 of a stroke induced by anorexia, and her body taken to Santa Maria sopra Minerva where she is now enshrined. Her disciples formed themselves into a convent of Dominican tertiaries, and remained in residence.

Convent

The extent and size of the house are now unknown, but it must have been fairly spacious because it accommodated St Catherine, about twenty disciples and also functioned as a hospice for pilgrims from Siena. It had its own chapel somewhere, dedicated to St Catherine of Alexandria.

The community that the saint left behind remained in residence for almost two hundred years. This was possible because the sisters remained without enclosure until 1566, and so could go out and about. In that year, however, Pope St Pius V imposed papal enclosure on them. This made further residence unhealthy, and so they moved out to a new purpose-built convent at Santa Caterina a Magnanapoli in 1574.

It seems that they had converted the room where St Catherine died into an oratory, and had frescoed the walls with scenes from her life. These frescoes they took with them, and re-applied them to the walls of an oratory next to their new church. Remnants survive, although the oratory there does not.

A documentary reference exists indicating that the nuns took most of the fittings of the death-bed room with them as well.

College

The property had been sold in 1573 to one Stefano Cerasi, who bequeathed it to Tiberio Cerasi. He disposed of it in turn in 1578 to the Camera Apostolica, which incorporated it with three other properties into premises for 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". However, it was moved to a purpose-built complex next to San Salvatore ai Monti in 1634.

Confraternity

In 1637 the empty building was purchased by the Arciconfraternita della Santissima Annunziata, a secular institution which was founded in 1464 to provide poor brides with dowries. It converted the premises into its headquarters, which explains why the portal is decorated with a barely visible painting representing the Annunciation.

Foundation of chapel

The old building had structural problems, and the confraternity rebuilt it in a piecemeal fashion. At the start of this work, Cardinal Antonio Barberini relocated some of the fabric of the walls and the floor of the room in which the saint had died to the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva. There, he used it to erect a small oratory which is to be found off the north-west corner of the church behind the sacristy.

A new chapel was built in the void of the room in 1638, which is the present edifice. A contract was signed in June of that year with Giuseppe Cesari, Il Cavaliere d'Arpino, to provide paintings for it.

Teatro Rossini

Although retaining ownership, the confraternity sold the property on lease in the mid 19th century. Part was converted into a theatre in 1874, by Virginio Vespignani. This, the Teatro Rossini, alternated high opera (hence the name) with variety acts, and from 1879 became noted for performances in the Roman dialect. The part overlooking the piazza became a hotel, the Albergo Santa Chiara.

At the end of the century the confraternity converted into a secular charity under the patronage of the municipality.

Unfortunately, the thespian enterprise failed financially and the theatre was dark by 1886. The lease reverted to the charity, which used the premises firstly for a library (the Libreria Desclè) and then as a store for its archives.

The theatre was revived in 1950, on the personal initiative of Checco Durante who had the interior remodelled and downsized to seat two hundred. He was an actor and poet in the Roman dialect, and so wished to continue the theatre's former speciality. Unfortunately, in his layout, the drinks bar in the theatre foyer was put in the entrance loggia of the chapel.

The theatre functioned until 2008, lately under the name Teatro Rascel in memory of Renato Rascel.

Nowadays

From the 1970's, a Dominican priest called Jerome Caggiano obtained permission to celebrate Mass in the chapel on the last Wednesday of each month. This continued until 1989, when bodged building work on the hotel adjacent caused the chapel to be flooded out. This damage, and a roof failure in 1990, required restoration which lasted ten years until 2000. In the process, the bar was moved to elsewhere in the lobby.

In 1999, the city put up a plaque to the right of the theatre's entrance, with an inscription advertising the existence of the chapel. This was at the initiative of what is now the Centro Internazionale di Studi Cateriniani, which itself moved into the second storey of what used to be the hotel in 2003. The two institutions share the same postal address.

The theatre finally closed down in 2008, and was radically restored as a new conference center called the Palazzo Santa Chiara. This is now looking after the chapel, although the study center seems to be in charge.

The property is now owned by the municipality, as the charity which used to be the confraternity has been closed down. The chapel is now fully consecrated.

Exterior

The chapel has no external identity.

The main entrance to the complex has a faded fresco in a rectangular panel over the door, flanked by volutes. This shows The Annunciation to Our Lady, and looks 17th century.

Access

The Palazzo Santa Chiara allows visits to the chapel during their opening hours, except perhaps during ticketed functions.

Once through the front door, you go along a passage and emerge into the main foyer. A reception desk is in the top right hand corner. Straight ahead is an arcade, and the lobby behind that has the entrance to the chapel in its left hand end.

Interior

Layout

Before the theatre was established here, the present main foyer was an open courtyard. The arcaded lobby was a loggia. You can see this on the Nolli map of 1748, link below. The chapel itself is a simple rectangular room.

Loggia

The former entrance loggia is slightly trapezoidal, and has an arcade of three arches springing from thick Doric piers with notched corners. The ceiling is barrel-vaulted, with three lunette curves on each side. There is a central panel with a stucco relief of The Apotheosis of St Catherine, and the frame of this is held by stucco putti. The rest of the vault has been whitewashed.

Nave

The chapel has Baroque polychrome marble fittings and stucco decorations. The paintings are by the school of the Cavalier d'Arpino, the master supervising.

The side walls have a pair of large arched niches containing what look like side altars. On these are two identical pink and white veined stone boxes in the form of sarcophagi with curlicued tops, flanked by a pair of stucco putti. The right hand setup has a bronze winged putto's head on the altar frontal, and a relief carving of the Madonna and Child above the box, accompanied by putti. The left hand altar frontal has an inscription, and above is a little gilded metal high relief icon of the Madonna and Child again.

Flanking these niches are four round-headed paintings showing St Catherine's visions, except for the top left hand one where she is giving a crucifix to a poor man.

The ceiling is 14th century, and has recently been restored. It is simple and undecorated, with horizontal beams and planks. It bears an epigraph *Solarium cubiculi S[anctae] Catherinae virg[inis] Sen[ensis]*.

Sanctuary

The main altar is inserted into another arched niche. The altarpiece shows the saint receiving the stigmata. The frontal has a grilled aperture containing a reliquary.

Address:

Piazza di Santa Chiara

Liturgy

The chapel is used for prayer meetings and liturgical events under the aegis of the study center, but these are not being advertised. Contact details are on their website.

The feast day of St Catherine is 29 April, when Mass is very likely here.

External links

Roman Churches Wiki

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

Nolli map (look for 841)

<http://nolli.uoregon.edu/map/index.html?xurl=36.827&yurl=63.204&surl=2000>

Palazzo Santa Chiara website

<http://www.palazzosantachiara.it/>

Chapel's web-page on Palazzo website

<http://www.palazzosantachiara.it/cappella-del-transito-di-santa-caterina-da-siena/>

Website of study center

<http://www.centrostudicateriniani.it/en/1/1.html>

Church and the house of S. Caterina "Romeartlover's" web-page

[http://www.romeartlover.it/Vasi156.htm#House of S. Caterina](http://www.romeartlover.it/Vasi156.htm#House%20of%20S.%20Caterina)