

## Santa Chiara



**Santa Chiara** is a 19th century seminary church on the Piazza di Santa Chiara, in the rione Pigna and just off the Via di Torre Argentina, dedicated to St Clare of Assisi, the 13th century foundress of the *Poor Clares*.

### History

The original church was founded on the initiative of St Charles Borromeo in 1562 with the support of Pope Pius IV, and was attached to a convent for *donne convertite* called the *Casa Pia*. The term *donne convertite* literally means "lady converts", but in the context of the times referred to repentant prostitutes. The community lived under a Franciscan tertiary rule.

The new church was originally built in the surviving ruins of the Baths of Agrippa. The original design was by Francesco Capriani de Volterra. Completion was in 1563.

The complex was taken over by a community of Poor Clares, patronized by Cardinal Scipione Borghese who paid for a restoration of the complex in 1627 and the erection of a new façade designed by Carlo Maderno. The dedication was changed to St Clare.

The Poor Clares were dispossessed during the French occupation, and so moved away in 1814. After the Papal government was restored in the following year, the church was entrusted to a lay confraternity that used to be at San Gregorio Taumaturgo. However, they obviously did not keep the church in proper repair. As a result, in 1855 the roof collapsed and the church was simply abandoned.

The old convent received a new lease of life when a seminary to train French priests was founded there by Père Louis-Marie Lannurien, of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (a French missionary congregation), in 1855. This initiative received Papal approval in 1859. However, the rebuilding of the church took over two decades.

The new edifice was erected on the footprint of the old (with expansion at the altar end), but only after the walls of the latter were demolished. Work was made possible by a generous donation from Marie-Antoinette Camille Panon-Desbassyns, Vicomtesse Jurien de la Gravière (1811-76), and the design was allegedly (but not obviously) based on that of the church of Notre-Dame-des-Victoires in Paris. The first Mass was celebrated in 1861, the façade was begun in 1883 and finished in 1888, and the edifice was finally re-consecrated in 1890. The architect was Luca Carimini. The dedication was altered, to "St Clare and the Immaculate Heart of Mary".

In 1902 the seminary became the *Pontificio Seminario Francese*, which it remains. The new church has always functioned, in effect, as the chapel of the seminary and has not had a public pastoral rôle. It was restored in the 1960's, and in 2004 there was a major re-ordering of the sanctuary and main altar which involved the creation of an important modern mosaic.

The church is still served by the "Congregation of the Holy Spirit".

## Exterior

Apart from the façade, the external fabric of the church is mostly concealed behind seminary buildings, but the right hand wall of the nave can be seen just down the Via di Torre Argentina with two lunette windows lighting the chapels on that side.

The campanile seems to be a cubical kiosk on the top of the domestic building abutting the church in the same street, and is very difficult to view. It has a double arched soundhole on each of three faces, with Corinthian impostes embellishing that facing the street. The corners have Corinthian pilasters, and there is a strongly projecting cornice with a tiled pyramidal cap. The fourth side is attached to the wall of the central nave, and the cap is lower than the main roof of the latter which is pitched and tiled.

To the left of the church is the site of the original Renaissance convent, which was rebuilt at the end of the 19th century to accommodate the Pontifical French Seminary. It is in a spacious and rather attractive neo-Renaissance style, and within is arranged around an arcaded cloister.

The façade was designed by Luca Carimini. Carimini's façades are unusual designs for Rome, and this one has high-quality detailing.

There are two storeys. The first one has two pairs of derivative Corinthian pilasters in very shallow relief, standing on two very high plinths. These support an entablature with a dedicatory inscription: DEO OPTIMO MAXIMO ET IN HONOREM IMMACULATI CORDIS MARIAE ET CLARAE VIRGINIS ("To God the Most Great and in honour of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and Clare the Virgin").

The single entrance has a molded doorcase, and is flanked by the unusual design feature of two narrow panels set diagonally and each embellished by a tall flower sprays issuing from a vase. These panels are in turn flanked by a pair of Corinthian columns supporting an entablature with posts over the capitals, and over this is an arch with a dished archivolt decorated with rosette coffering. The tympanum of this consists of a terracotta relief of *Our Lady as the Immaculate Conception*, set in a mandorla and being venerated by angels. On the top of the arch is an acanthus finial.

In between the pilaster pairs on each side of the portal is a pair of empty round-headed semi-circular niches, each with a raised tympanum and the same sort of flower-spray decoration down the sides as with the entrance. These niches have a pair of small round windows over them.

The second storey has an arcade containing seven arched windows. The arches are separated by Corinthian pilasters, and the windows have their own arched frames with Corinthian semi-columns. This arcade is surmounted by a row of seven busts of saints carved in high relief within tondi. At either end of the arcade and of the row of tondi are the four symbols of the Evangelists carried by winged angels carved in relief; the lion for St Mark, the ox for St Luke, the man for St Matthew and the eagle for St John. The saints in the tondi are: *St Bernard*, *St. Denis of Paris*, *St. Hilary of Poitiers*, *St. Charles Borromeo*, *St. Martin of Tours*, *St. Francis de Sales* and *St. Vincent de Paul*. The sculptor was Domenico Bartolini.

The triangular pediment crowning the façade has a dentillate cornice with modillions. In the tympanum is an odd terracotta relief of the *Madonna and Child* being entreated by sufferers, and this is also by Bartolini.

## Interior

The layout is based on a Latin cross. The short nave has two chapels on each side, in large arched niches, and then comes a transept with a false saucer dome. The presbyterium is as wide as the nave, and is apsidal. It has a conch vault in five sectors separated by simple ribs, and a pair of *cantorie* or opera-boxes for solo musical performers just behind the triumphal arch. Each sector has a shallow niche with a slightly curved top, and in the far one this is a window.

The decorative scheme in the main body of the church is very sober, being an unadorned creamy white with few decorative features except for the saucer dome, which has a fresco which looks like *The Apotheosis of St Clare*. This is by Virginio Monti.

At the start of the 20th century the high altar was described as having an altarpiece depicting the *Holy Family* by Monti. If this was true, it was later replaced by a statue of *Our Lady of Lourdes*, in a niche framed by an arch with red marble Corinthian columns and polychrome marble work. The altar frontal was of polychrome marble and alabaster. To the left of the altar was a fresco of the *Nativity*, and to the right one of the *Assumption*; these were by a painter called Porta. The presbyterium was filled with four ranks of choir stalls on each side, three of them extending under the dome.

In the later 1960's, many Roman churches began to install second main altars in front of the original ones, in order for Mass to be celebrated with the priest facing the congregation. The seminary went

further, and indulged in some destruction under the guise of "liturgical renewal". The frescoes were removed, the actual altar ripped out of its setting and placed in the middle of the sanctuary and the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes in its aedicule left hanging on the wall. Her sash used to be blue, but this was painted white together with the walls.

In 2004 the seminary managed to effect some genuine artistic patronage, and the result is worth seeing. The altar, with its polychrome marble frontal intact, was given a new setting by the firm *Pietraliturgica*, which involved a white limestone surround with steps incorporating an ambo or lectern in a simple geometric style like an inverted L. The back of the altar, once against the far wall, was revetted to match the front.

More importantly, a modern figurative mosaic on the themes of Pentecost, the Annunciation and the Crucifixion with an overall pneumatological theme was executed to flank the statue of Our Lady. The Pentecost theme focuses on the statue, and has an interesting allusion to the iconic representation of Pentecost in the Byzantine tradition. To the left of this is a depiction of the Annunciation, and to the right one of the Passion. Interestingly, the figure of Christ on the cross is not naked but clothed in alb and stole in order to evoke his priestly status in sacrificing himself in his Passion. This is an old iconographic tradition. The Dove of the Holy Spirit is above the statue of Our Lady, and figurative streams of fire in red, yellow and white stream from the window in the vault, which has been given stained glass with a flame theme. Figures of saints (evangelists?) have been placed in the other four vault niches. The artist was Marko Rupnick, and the firm responsible was Centro Aletti of whom he is a member.

### Special notes

The feast of St Clare is celebrated on 11 August.

The Church is part of the French Seminary, open to the public only on special occasions

### Artists and Architects:

Carlo [Maderno](#) (1556-1629), Swiss-Italian architect

Domenico Bartolini (1880-1960), Italian sculptor

Francesco [Capriani](#) da Volterra (1535-1594), Italian architect

Luca [Carimini](#) (1830-1890), Italian architect

Marko [Rupnick](#), S.J. (b. 1954), Slovenian mosaic artist, theologian and priest

Virginio [Monti](#)(1852-1942), Italian painter

### Location:

Piazza S. Chiara 42, 00186 Roma

Coord: [41°53'50"N 12°28'35"E](#)

### Info:

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### Links:

[http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/Santa\\_Chiera](http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/Santa_Chiera)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa\\_Chiera\\_\(church\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Chiera_(church))

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[http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=it&u=http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiesa di Santa Chiara \(Roma\)](http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=it&u=http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chiesa_di_Santa_Chiera_(Roma))

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