

San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane

Borromini

Quirinale Street, 23, 00187

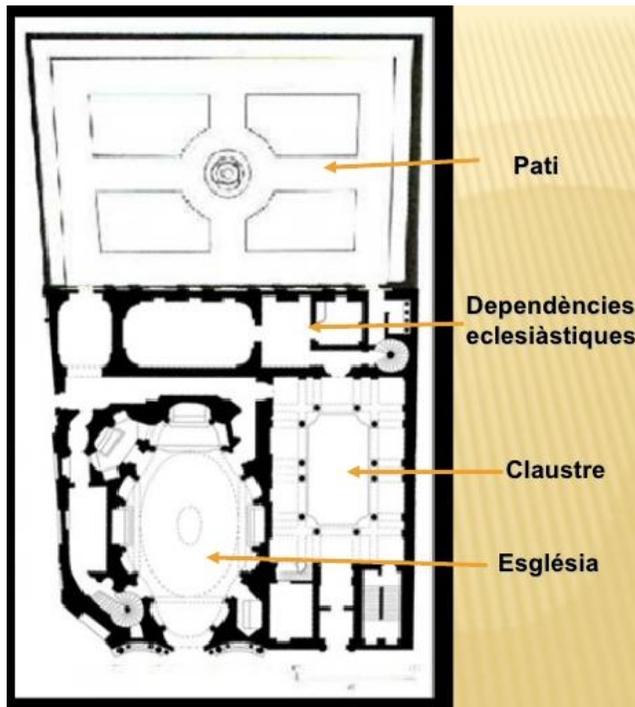
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This is one of two small **Baroque churches** close together on the ridge of the Quirinal Hill, the other being Sant'Andrea al Quirinale. Together they are now recognized as being one of the great architectural experiences of Europe. The two churches are a pair of **complementary masterpieces** by the two **titanic rivals** of the architectural world of 17th century Rome, **Francesco Borromini** and **Gian Lorenzo Bernini**. The personalities of these two geniuses are reflected in their respective churches. **Bernini was the talented son of a successful society sculptor**, brought up to be sophisticated and self-confident, and his church of Sant' Andrea is his exercise in Baroque as theatre. **Borromini had a difficult upbringing and struggled with mental illness** (he eventually committed suicide), but his neurotic reclusiveness masked a brilliant analytical mind and his church of San Carlo is his demonstration of **Baroque as mathematics**.

The church belongs to a **convent founded by Spanish Discalced Trinitarians**. The Trinitarian order of friars was founded near Paris at the end of the 12th century and its purpose was the **ransoming of Christians taken prisoner by Muslim pirates and slave-raiders** as well as during wartime. These people would otherwise have ended up as slaves, with no access to the sacraments. The emblem of the order is a Greek cross, formed by putting a vertical blue bar over a horizontal red one. This emblem influenced aspects of the church's design, as well as appearing in decorative features.

The order prospered in the context of Christian-Muslim conflict on land in Iberia, and also in the western Mediterranean where **predatory shipping from North Africa roamed even until the 19th century** when the Maghreb was conquered by France. However, it sank into some decay during the 15th century before experiencing a surge of enthusiasm for reform towards the end of the 16th. This was in **response to the Reformation**. Two main reform tendencies established themselves, in France and in Spain. The latter branch was founded by St John Baptist of the Conception, and was approved in 1599. It became known as the Discalced Trinitarians because the **friars wore sandals rather than shoes ("discalced" is from the Latin discalceatus which means "shoeless" not barefoot)**.

By this century, the nationalist hatred between the French and Spanish was such that the reformed Trinitarians in the two countries did not co-operate very well if at all. In Rome, the **Spanish Discalced founded a convent here at San Carlo** and the **French Trinitarians founded another, just down the road towards Santa Maria Maggiore**.

Foundation

The **Spanish Discalced Trinitarians** set about founding a house at Rome at the start of the 17th century, and chose a site on the summit of the Quirinal. Here they built a little temporary chapel with one altar **dedicated to St Charles Borromeo**, and opened it in 1612. This was only two years after the saint had been canonized.

However, money was a very serious problem for the friars as they tried to continue the project. They eventually found a **patron in Cardinal Francesco Barberini**, who was just starting his massive scheme to build a family palazzo nearby - Palazzo Barberini. He promised (falsely) to pay for the project, and so in 1634 (22 years after beginning) the friars commissioned the young architect **Francesco Borromini**. **It was his first major commission in Rome**, and he was to be responsible for the design of the entire complex. This was a brave move on the part of the friars, because Borromini was still an unknown despite having twenty years' experience in working for other people in the building and architectural professions. One important factor was that **Borromini volunteered to work for no fee** as long as he was allowed a free hand -he saw the project as an advertising campaign for his career.

Construction

The Trinitarians came to the Quirinal when the area had already changed from being nothing but vineyards, to ranking as a suburb. The Palazzo del Quirinale had been begun in 1583, The site of the convent was occupied by two newish houses, which the friars had bought and demolished in 1612. **This left an awkward trapezoidal plot**, since the two roads did not cross at a right angle. The crossroads angle at the convent is oblique. Further, the limited funds available meant that Borromini was not going to have access to the usual polychrome stonework and gilding options for interior decoration, which meant that the form of the internal design was paramount. This accorded with his preference, and the result was a work of genius.

Borromini began work on the main convent block immediately, and this was inhabitable by the friars in 1635. In 1638 the church was begun, and work on it continued until 1641 when it stalled. They were able to begin again only after another 22 years. **In 1665 Borromini began the façade, but committed suicide in 1667**. His **nephew**, Bernardo Castelli Borromini, continued work using his uncle's plans, firstly building a permanent campanile in 1670 and then beginning the façade in 1674. This was finished structurally in 1677.

Subsequent History

The friars were very happy with the result, which was an **immediate architectural sensation**. The superior of the brethren reported that many educated visitors to Rome tried to obtain copies of the plans. However, this adulation only lasted as long as the Baroque style remained in fashion -until the latter part of the 18th century.

Oddly, the church became neglected in the early 20th century. The situation got worse as the century progressed, when the style of the church fell completely out of fashion and "architects" and "archaeologists" were "restoring" old churches to show naked brick walls never previously seen in such a way.

Exterior - Layout

The layout of the convent is cramped and it is not possible to see the external walls of the church from the street apart from the façade and a glimpse of the dome. The fabric is in brick, rendered in stucco, except for the façade which is in travertine limestone.

The church, as expected, has a complex plan based on an **oval or quasi-ellipse** (the central dome) within a **chamfered rectangle** (the main floorspace) within an **incurved rhombus** with rounded corners. The quasi-ellipse is a complex closed curve formed by **tracing around two identical circles touching at a point and connecting them by a pair of identical tangential circular arcs**.

Over the doorway is a tondo containing a **mosaic of Christ enthroned between two liberated slaves, one black and one white**. This is protected by an omega cornice (Ω) which is splayed outwards on **two curlicue brackets - a typically Borrominian touch**. Above this is a shield supported by two angels, and displaying the Trinitarian cross mentioned above. The entrance leads via a passage through the block to the cloister.

Then comes the façade of the church and then, on the corner, the campanile over one of the four fountains. This faces diagonally into the crossroads, and Borromini had some difficulty with the design. The result is not satisfactory, as the campanile frontage clashes with the church façade.

Dome

The dome is not easily visible from the street. It has an **oval drum with four octagonal windows**, two on the minor axis and a pair on the major axis. These give the **concealed lighting to the interior dome**. On top of the drum the lantern stands like a little temple or mausoleum on three concentric steps; it is again oval, and has four pairs of Doric columns with a little narrow round-headed window flanked by each pair.

Campanile

The campanile stands over one of the Quattro Fontane on the outside, and the **spiral staircase down to the crypt** on the inside. The juxtaposition between the façade and the chamfered corner here is perhaps the **least satisfactory part of Borromini's design** and the cornice of the façade interferes with the campanile.

At ground level is the fountain basin, behind which is a large arched niche containing a **relief of a figure reclining under a tree with a wolf in attendance; this is thought to be a personification of the Tiber river**. Above in turn is a rectangular window with a little triangular pendent raises over a wreath motif, then the **Trinitarian cross again in a heart-shaped tablet embraced by the wings of an angel**, and finally the campanile itself.

Façade - Setting

The **travertine** façade was completed in 1667 by Borromini's nephew, Bernardo, to his uncle's design. It is integrated with the monastery block to the right and the campanile to the left, but as a piece of design is self-contained. It should ideally be facing a piazza, but unfortunately has to make do with a **narrow, busy street**.

Symbolism

The entrance occupies a fourth apse which is identical in plan to that containing the main altar. The altar on the right is dedicated to St Michael de Sanctis, and that on the left to St John Baptist of the Conception. Both of these were **Trinitarian reformers**, and the dedications of the altars were changed from the original ones when they were canonized. The floor was re-laid in 1898, as the attractive central device in **opus sectile** indicates. This has the **Trinitarian cross within an oval shield** reflecting the dome plan, **surrounded by a manacle and chain**

Dome

The **interior dome is the church's glory**. To achieve its position, **Borromini** raised three semi-domes over the three altar apses and embellished them with coffering containing rosettes. Over the entrance he placed a wide arch instead, with a single line of coffering on its **intrados**, and this arrangement allows light in from the large window in the façade (the only direct natural light into the body of the church). In between the arches he inserted **truncated pendentives**, and on these placed an **oval cornice**.

The **pendentives** have **tondi** with stucco reliefs illustrating scenes from the foundation of the Trinitarian order.

There is **no drum to the dome**, which rests directly on the cornice and has lighting from four octagonal windows placed just above the cornice and which pierce the dome. On the projecting cornice are **acanthus** leaf finials, alternatively large and small, and below each large one is the Trinitarian cross again. The dome itself has a complicated and **famous pattern of coffering, formed from crosses, octagons and squashed hexagons**, and the coffering shrinks in scale until it meets the large oval oculus. Around the latter is a dedicatory inscription similar to that on the façade: The **oculus** contains a Trinitarian symbol, being the **Dove** of the Holy Spirit within a triangle. The **pattern of the coffering** was not Borromini's invention, but he **borrowed it from an ancient mosaic at Santa Costanza**. In turn, it is very likely that the design inspired the famous Dutch artist **M. C. Escher**, who lived in Rome as a young man.