

Basilica di San Clemente

Via di San Giovanni in Laterano / Piazza San Clemente (00184)

Metro: Colosseo, line B.

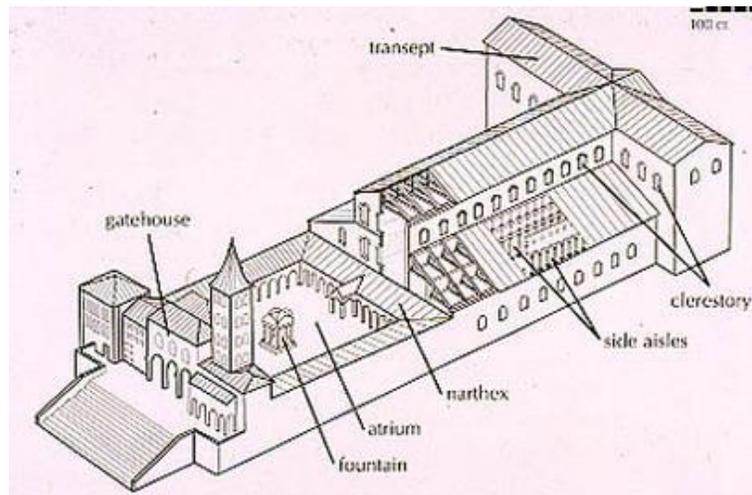
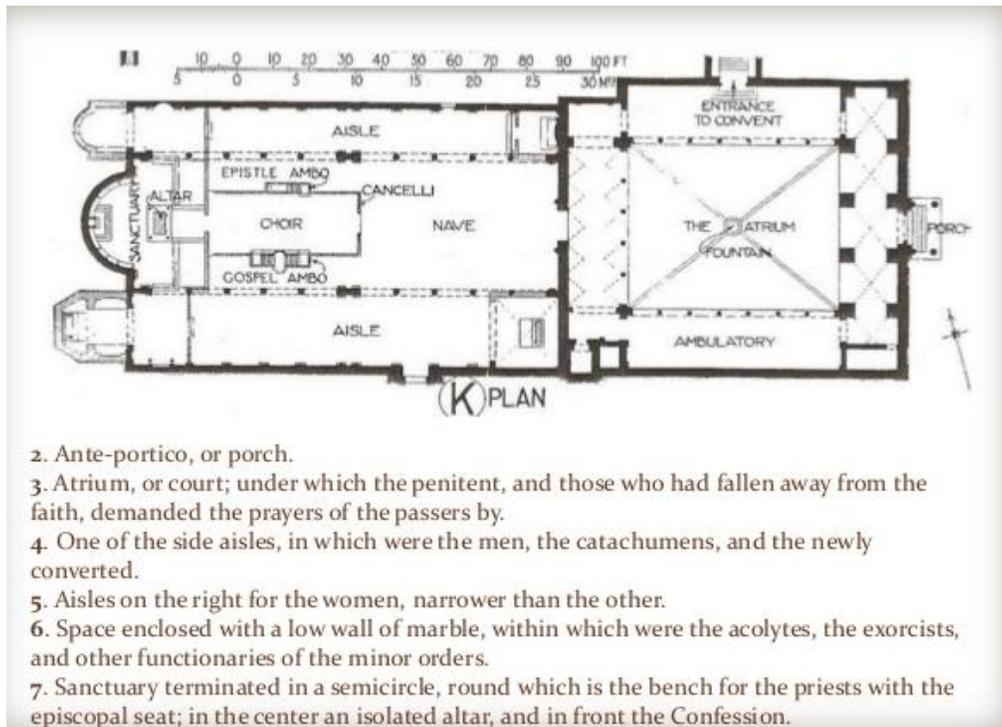
Bus: 85, 87, 117, 186, 810 y 8

9 AM – 12:30 PM (Mon - Sat)

3 PM – 6 PM (Mon - Sat)

12:30 PM – 6 PM (Sun)

10 € Excavations



The Basilica of Saint Clement is a Roman Catholic minor basilica dedicated to Pope Clement I located in Rome, Italy. Archaeologically speaking, the structure is a **three-tiered complex of buildings**: the present basilica built just before the year **1100 during the height of the Middle Ages**; beneath the present basilica is a **4th-century basilica** that had been converted out of the home of a Roman nobleman, part of which had in the 1st century briefly served as an early church, and the basement of which had in the **2nd century** briefly served as a **mithraeum**; the home of the Roman nobleman had been built on the foundations of republican era villa and warehouse that had been destroyed in the Great Fire of 64 AD.

The Basilica di San Clemente is an **early Christian basilica** in Rome dedicated to Pope St. Clement (d. 99 AD). The church is especially notable for its **three historical layers**. The 12th-century basilica is built on top of a well-preserved 4th-century church (with many frescoes), which was built next to a 3rd-century Mithraic Temple. For an admission fee, it is possible to explore the excavations of the lower two levels, which is a fascinating journey into the history of Rome.

History of San Clemente

This ancient church was transformed over the centuries from a private home and site of clandestine Christian worship in the first century to a grand public basilica by the 6th century. In the early 3rd century, the inner courtyard of the insula was made into a **Mithraeum, or Temple of Mithras**. **Mithras was a sun god of Persian origin whose cult was for men only and involved secret initiation rituals** in small, cave-like structures. Some years later, a large hall was built over the inner courtyard and ground floor rooms of the adjoining mansion. It may have been built with the express purpose of housing the Christian community. Not long after Christian persecution ended under Constantine (313 AD) and Christianity became the official religion of the empire (380s AD), the hall became a full-fledged church. This is the lower church that can still be visited today.

The church was badly damaged during the **Norman sack of Rome in 1084**. Even before the Normans arrived, though, it was located 5 meters below street level and not structurally safe. It was therefore abandoned and Pope Paschal II (1099-1118) built a new church above it in **1108**. This is the **upper church** that has survived **largely unchanged** to today. The upper church of San Clemente was given to the **Irish Dominicans**, who were expelled from Britain, in 1677.

What to See at San Clemente

The main, upper church of San Clemente is one of the **most richly decorated churches in Rome**. The vast majority of its architecture and art dates from its construction in the early 12th century. The entrance is on the left aisle. The most striking sight is the **12th-century apse mosaic**, in a golden-bronze color and featuring a large crucifix in the center. Growing from and around the crucifix are vines, associating the cross with the Tree of Life. In the center of the apse is a throne, whose back is part of a martyr's tomb. Under a **baldacchino**, the high altar contains **the relics of St. Clement of Rome and St. Ignatius of Antioch**.

Entrance to the lower church is via the sacristy, off the right aisle. At the foot of the steps descending from the upper church is the **narthex of the lower church**, whose **colonnades were bricked up in the 9th century**. The columns are still visible in the wall. The atrium lies directly under that of the upper church, and has not yet been excavated. Its portico can be seen from the outside, in a depression in the street to the east of the upper church.

Faded frescoes decorate many of the walls, and date from the 6th to 11th centuries. They depict New Testament scenes and lives of several saints.

At the end of the left aisle of the lower church, a **4th-century staircase** leads down to the 1st-century **insula (Roman apartment complex)**, much of which still remains unexcavated.

The **3rd-century Temple of Mithras**, down a narrow corridor to the left, was deliberately destroyed when the church was built, but one room has survived. It is a small artificial cave with stars on the ceiling, long side benches, and a stone altar with a relief of Mithras slaying the bull.

The sound of rushing water can be heard throughout this area. It comes from a lost spring or maybe a 1st-century aqueduct running towards the Tiber via the **Cloaca Maxima, the main sewer of ancient Rome**.

The three layers of archaeology beneath the present church has led to the rather silly nickname of "Lasagne Church".

The Saint History and legend

The revised Roman **martyrology** (2004) states that St Clement **was the third pope of Rome after St Peter**, that he wrote an extant genuine letter to the church at Corinth (known as the First Epistle of St Clement), and that he was martyred about the year 100. The letter is the oldest Christian document that we possess after the New Testament.

The **legend of his life and martyrdom is now regarded as fictional**, although it obviously **influenced the artworks** of his church. According to it, he was a **high-status Roman who helped St Peter in his ministry at Rome** and was exiled by the government to what is now the Crimea (then known as Chersonnesus). There he was martyred by **being tied to an anchor and thrown into the sea**, which miraculously receded so that his body could be recovered. An ancient anchor was a trapezoidal stone with a hole at the narrower end, but **his symbol is now the more familiar ship anchor**. His **alleged relics** were brought to Rome by SS Cyril and Methodius in the 9th century, and **enshrined here**.

The state of the Christian church in Rome at his death in the **year 100** is one of the most obscure in its history, but vitally important because it was evolving away from being an **unrespectable and heterodox Messianic Jewish sect** (one of several) which expected Christ to return in the very near future. **The Roman authorities under Nero could distinguish Christianity and mainstream Judaism by the year 64**, because the emperor was able to launch a pogrom and treat Christians as vermin (something he could not have done to Jews). Forty years later, the Christian population historically would have been of low or no status, and was probably being administered and sponsored by Greek-speaking people who would have made their money in the mercantile and manufacturing trades.

First basilica

Proper churches began to be built in Rome after the Edict of Milan was passed in 313, allowing Christians to practise their religion openly. However, the official Christian cult as prompted by the Imperial authorities was not regarded with favour by the old elite of the city

The basilica was restored in the 8th and 9th centuries, probably the result of a series of strong **earthquakes**, which are thought to have been the **major cause of the ruination of the city's ancient monuments**.

Second basilica

According to tradition the church was **severely damaged in 1084, in the sack of Rome by the Normans** of southern Italy

Middle ages

In the Middle Ages, and up to the end of the 16th century, the church was in the countryside and had no pastoral function apart from **ministering to pilgrims**.

17th and 18th centuries

After the **Ambrosians** had been shut down in 1643, **Dominicans** from San Sisto Vecchio took over in **1645**. However, this community was **replaced in 1697 by expatriate Irish Dominicans** who moved from Santi Giovanni e Paolo. The Catholic Church had been **viciously persecuted in Ireland by the British especially under Oliver Cromwell**, and many of the clergy had been expelled including the Dominicans here.

Modern times

In 1861, it was realized that a full-sized lower church existed. In 1863, the shrine of SS Cyril and Methodius was uncovered, and then the work proceeded in the lowest, ancient Roman levels up to 1870 and in 1936 a small set of catacombs was discovered. Since then, work has been going on more or less continuously and results of excavations are still being published. A "recent" discovery has been the church's 6th century baptistery

Exterior - Layout

The church is on a **classical basilical plan, with a central nave having arcaded side aisles and an external semi-circular apse**. The central nave has a pitched and tiled roof, except for the entrance loggia and a range of rooms over it.

Façade

The mediaeval façade had an **external narthex or loggia**, with the arcade of the same design as the one there now. There was a single-pitched tiled roof, and the frontage of the nave above this had a small central **oculus** (round window) flanked by a pair of small round-headed windows.

Schola cantorum

The schola cantorum and associated sanctuary screen dates to the 6th century, and originally belonged to the old church below. It was salvaged and re-assembled in the new church at the start of the 12th century, and embellished

with **Cosmatesque** inlay work. In Baroque churches, the **schola** is often replaced by **cantoria** which are opera-boxes raised above floor level for singers and musicians.

Sanctuary

The apse is richly decorated with frescoes and mosaics. The curved wall of the apse itself has a 14th century fresco cycle. In the conch and on the triumphal arch are 12th century mosaics which are described here under separate headings. The high altar has a 12th century **ciborium** or **baldacchino**. It has four Corinthian columns in **pavonazetto** marble supporting a rectangular cornice, on which are six little columns at front and back and five on each side. These in turn support a pitched roof with pediments at front and back; on the tympanum of the front pediment is St Clement's anchor.

Beneath the high altar is the **confessio** or crypt installed in 1868. The tombs are here of St Clement (enshrined in 868) and St Ignatius of Antioch (believed to have been thrown to the beasts in the Colosseum.)

Triumphal arch mosaic

The **mosaics are among the finest in Rome**. They are from the **12th century**, but look earlier since they are in the **Byzantine** style, obviously still influential in Rome at the time. The appearance is dominated by the golden glow of the background, which was achieved by applying gold leaf to the backs of the clear glass **tesserae** used for it.

Apse mosaic

The vine with curlicued foliage that dominates the apse mosaic is a symbol of the living Church, with its roots in the Garden of Paradise and its fruit, the Cross of Christ. The composition is described from the bottom to the top: At the bottom, Christ and the Apostles are depicted in mosaic in the form of the Lamb of God flanked by a flock of twelve lambs. Actually, they are all depicted as full-grown sheep (as was the iconographic tradition), standing on a flowery meadow.

Chapel of St Catherine of Alexandria

The chapel of St Catherine of Alexandria is at the bottom of the left hand aisle, immediately to your right as you enter through the church's side door. It is in the **Gothic style**, rather unusual in Rome, and is entirely covered in beautiful early Renaissance (**Quattrocento**) frescoes which are among the most important of the period in Rome.

Spring

After passing the **Mithraeum** and making your way into the rooms on the south side of the possible **moneta**, you can **hear water rushing by. The sound comes from a spring feeding into the Cloaca Maxima, the great sewer that helped to drain the area of the Roman Forum**. Funnily enough, some tourists drop coins into it, taking the spot for a wishing well. When this level was first excavated, water seepage proved a serious problem and prevented people from visiting. In 1914 a project was put in place to tap the spring causing the inflow and to direct its course into the Cloaca Maxima via a new pipe. This was successful. The water is surprisingly clean and pure, and has been used by the convent in the past (not now) for domestic purposes.

Catacomb

In the 1930's, a small catacomb with sixteen **loculi** was discovered just north of the possible **moneta**, below the staircase by which you first entered the lower church from the shop. At that point, you might have noticed a grating in the floor opening into this catacomb. Another view is available through an iron gate, just before you reach a second set of stairs which provide you with the exit to this level. Because **the catacomb is within the city walls, something prohibited by ancient Roman law, it is dated to the 5th or 6th centuries** and hence was the old church's cemetery (an alternative date of around AD 700 has been argued for).

If you see the doors open earlier or later than these times, it is because a Mass is being celebrated. You are not welcome to visit the church during Mass, unless you wish to attend it.

The excavations have an admission charge; tickets can be bought in the shop. Unlike in the catacombs, you can look around by yourself without a guide to supervise. On the other hand, this means that the rooms of the Mithraeum are gated and are only viewable from the doorways by ordinary visitors. The church has a policy of not allowing any photographs.

Note that the popularity of the church means that it is worked by beggars. When it is opened in the afternoon, you may have one of them pretending that there is an admission charge or donation.