

The Church of St. Francis de Sales by Regina Coeli Prison

A short history account

When Italy wasn't yet united in a single state (before 1870), the area where Regina Coeli nowadays is, was covered with all sorts of market gardens, vineyards and old little houses. In the place of the prison were two monasteries: the Carmelite Scalze's monastery (the Barefoot Carmelite Nuns), and the monastery of the Sisters of Mary's Visitation, the last founded by St. Jeanne Fremiot de Chantal, a devout disciple of St. Francis de Sales.

The two monasteries had their respective churches: "Santa Maria Regina Coeli" ("Regina Coeli" means Queen of Heaven) - and "Santa Maria della Visitazione" (Holy Mary of the Visitation).

The part of the building that belonged to Mary Chantal's Sisters, both monastery and church, was erected by order of Pope Clement IX in 1669. Cardinal Henry Duke of York, enlarged and beautified the church which he himself consecrated in 1778. The church gradually lost its original title of Holy Mary of the Visitation, and took that of St. Francis, in memory of the great Swiss Saint who had inspired the Sisters' foundation.

In 1794 the whole building was bought by Vincenzo Masturzi from Sorrento, a silk merchant. He had it restored for his daughter and other young women who wanted to found a new religious association and intended to take vows in it.

In 1801, their community was approved by Pope Paul the Seventh with the title of "Serve di Maria" (Servants of Mary). The people who saw them going in and out, called them "Mantellate" (those with a mantel), because of the long black mantel they wore.

After the unification of Italy, the monastery of Regina Coeli was confiscated by the new Italian government and used as a state prison. In 1895 it was completely rebuilt, according to contemporary prison architectural criteria. Part of the monastery was anyway adapted to women's prison, and remained such till 1964, when the women prison was transferred to Rebibbia, in the suburbs of Rome.

In that prison was a bell of the former monastery, which continued beating time for rising, meals, work and sleep. Their tolls became famous outside the prison and inspired songs and poetry, such as:

"The Mantellate are nuns, but in Rome they are only dark cells: a bell tolls at any hour, but Christ is not inside these walls".

The Italian Ministry of Justice had this chapel restored. The church was assigned to the Central Office of the Prison Chaplains for their liturgical services.

ST. FRANCIS DE SALES' CHURCH

Information about the interior

The church was built by Giovan Battista Contini, It's a single nave church with two chapels at both right and left sides.

The painting in the vault represents *Jesus' Sacred Heart*. Over the high altar was once a painting of *St. Elizabeth's Visitation*, now replaced by a statue of the *Virgin Mary*.

Over the left side sacristy door, an epigraph recalls Giovanni Masturzi and his wife. At the right side, a second epigraph refers to the ceremony of taking the habit of nuns, in the presence of Pope Pious the Seventh.

The first right chapel is dedicated to St. Philip Benizi. A former painting (*St. Joseph's death*), which is now unrecognizable, is covered by a wooden *crucifix*. The fresco in the second right chapel represents *St. Philip Benizi while introducing St. Giuliana and St. Alex Falconieri to the Blessed Virgin Mary* (a copy of Pier Luigi Ghezzi's painting at St. Marcel's in Rome).

In the second left chapel is a copy of Guido Reni's *St. Michael*.

In the first left chapel, you can see the *Blessed Virgin Mary with the Seven St. Founders (18th Century)*.