



St Nicholas News

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around the world

From Fr Gerardo Cioffari, o.p.,
director of the
St Nicholas Research Center in Bari

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THE MOST BEAUTIFUL CHURCHES OF ST NICHOLAS IN THE WORLD

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SAN NICOLA IN CARCERE / ROME
ST NICHOLAS IN PRISON

The Basilica of St Nicholas in Prison **S. Nicola in Carcere** in Rome

is certainly one of the most beautiful churches of our Saint and probably the most ancient in the West. The first documentary evidence of his dedication goes back however only to **the year 1088.**

Although scholars link its denomination to some Roman jail (Tullianum, Mamertinum), it is more likely that it was **dedicated to St Nicholas already at the end of VII or beginning of VIII century**, when he was known only as Patron Saint of prisoners and condemned to death.





Inaccuracies here and there have been made, even about the date of the dedication. In fact, you may easily read that it was dedicated to St Nicholas by the Pope Honorius II in the year 1128. Now, that this Pope decided to consecrate again the Church is sure, but that the connection with St Nicholas was stated by Honorius or even by Urban II (1088) is simply false.

The connection with Saint Nicholas goes certainly back to the beginning of the VIII century, if not to the VII. And the reason is very simple. In the Rome of VII and VIII century, to say "Prison" was to say "St Nicholas". This Saint in those centuries had no other patronage than prisoners and the most ancient **Roman Passionarium** (about 650) included him among the 50 Saints venerated in Rome **exclusively as Patron Saint of people unjustly condemned to jail** (Dufourcq, *Le Passionaire*, 1906; Künstle, *Hagiographische*, 1894). By the half of VIII century his cult was well

established in Rome: scholars date to 705-707 the fresco in S. Maria Antiqua together with the great ancient fathers of the Church. In 755 a relic in S. Angelo in Pescheria (B. de Montault, *Oeuvres*, XI, 146) and an altar in 757 in S. Maria in Cosmedin (Duchesne, *Lib. Pontif.*, 161) are documented. And documented is the fact that, when in jail in Rome in the year 756, the archbishop of Ravenna invoked exactly St Nicholas to be released (*Liber Pontificalis of Ravenna*).

Usually the denomination "In Carcere" is explained with a Legend narrated by Festus and Plinius. In that place there was a prison in which was shut a condemned man whom no one could visit bringing food. His daughter, to avoid his death, visited him and nourished him with the milk of her breast. When the Romans came to know this act of piety, the authorities decided to set him free and above the prison they built the **temple of Piety**.

According to Plinius: *locus ille eidem consecratis deae C. Quinctio M. Acilio Coss. Templo Pietatis extracto in illius carceris sede ubi nunc Marcelli theatrum est*.

Today the majority of scholars agree on the fact that the Basilica was built in the area of the *Forum Holitorium* near the *Theatrum Marcelli*. Here existed three temples dedicated to **Juno, Janus and Hope**, the remnants of which are still well visible.

Others have connected the Christian Basilica with several prisons (Tullianus, Mamertinus, Decemviralis and so on). Nobody connects it with St Nicholas, because nobody knows that till the end of VIII century to say St Nicholas was to say “prison” (the patron Saint of sailors, girls, and merchants shall come in the IX century, of children in the XI).

Therefore, the temple was certainly

dedicated to **St Nicholas from the beginning**, if not officially, at least in the mind of the people.

St Gregory the Great (+ 604) affirmed that at his time there was no *Passionarium*. **When the first Roman *Passionarium* (c. 650) was composed, St Nicholas was there**, together with other 50 Saints.

This implies that St Nicholas was among the first Saints venerated in Rome. Recent scholars date usually the fresco in S. Maria Antiqua in the pontificate of John VII (705-707).

The *Roman Passionarium* speaks of St Nicholas **only as liberator of three army commanders unjustly imprisoned and condemned to death**. And so does, as we have said, the *Liber Pontificalis of Ravenna* with the archbishop imprisoned in Rome in the year 756.





Scholars ascribe the diaconia “in carcere” to Pope Gregory III around the year 731, that is in the years of major spreading of St. Nicholas cult in Rome.

Ignoring this detail, almost all who were concerned with this Basilica (including G. B. Prota) believe that the church existed already in the VII century, but deny any reference to St Nicholas. For them “in Carcere” has to do with some Roman prison. But this link with the “place”, although not mistaken by itself (really there could have been nearby a prison), doesn’t keep into account that it deals with an ecclesiastical “diaconia”, a service of the church (in this case, in favor of *prisoners*). Therefore, the link with Saint Nicholas is much stronger than the link with the place.

On the documentary level the first mention goes back to the **year 1088**, as it is witnessed by an inscription in the wall at the right hand of the church.

With this long text the priest **Romanus**, rector of St Nicholas’ Basilica, donates to the church all his goods (houses, lands, liturgical objects, books and so on), in whatever way he had become the owner. Here it is the text:

"Ego Romanus Presbyter divine dispensationis gratia sanctissimi confessoris Christi **Nicolai ecclesie, que in Carcere dicitur, procurator, vel rector**, decerno, et firmiter statuo, ut quecumque bona, tam ex parentibus meis, quam ex multis amicis divinae bonitatis largitione acquisivi, vel que hactenus possidere videor, predicta

sancti patris Nicolai ecclesia pro salute anime mee post obitum meum perpetuo iure possideat, hec scilicet — Aquimolum unum. Unam pedicam terre, quam emi cum monasterio S. Marie in Aventino. Aliam pedicam quam emi ad Alberto Cimoviensi. Item pedicam, quam emi a Crescentio filio Zenonis de Sergio; similiter terram, quam emi simul cum Pantano a rustico filio Ioannes Irsuti, et terram, quam emi a Georgio fratre predicti Rustici. Item duas pedicas, quas emi cum ecclesia s. Marie in Campo Martio. Item quidem iste omnes sunt in Mustacciano. Item in casa Ferrata terram, quam cum vineis suis emi a Stephano de Paulo, et terram, quam acquisivi a Boccone cum horto in territorio vocato albanensi ad cantarum quatuor. Pedicas vinearum similiter tres. Domum unam, quam emi ab Eudone. Aliam, quam modo habito. Aliam, quae intra se puteum continet. Item unus pluvialis. Unum optimum, atque integrum paratum, dalmatica una, tunica una, tres albe cum tribus stolis, et manipulis, et amictibus, atque cinguli. Item quinque libri de pratico moralia Iob, Beda super Psalterium, liber Profetarum, liber Sermonum, unus liber Concordie, liber Manuales, unus calix argenteus cum patena. Crucem argenteam unam. Unum integrum paratum, minoris pretii. Ex iis autem bonis quicumque meo studio, vel labore, vel quolibet modo dicte ecclesie sua bonitate largitus est Dominus mei temporis regimine fideliter et devotissime omnia istituta, que subscribuntur preparare studui. In Mustacciano pedica una de terra. In Casa Ferrata XI horti cum quatuor petiis vinearum. Item ad sanctam Mariam, que appellatur in pariu VII petie vinearum; et in albanensi territorio ad cantarum quatuor petie vinearum. Una domus, quae fuit Ioannis de Ghisio. Item alia domus, que est sub domo Theiphylati Manducafarina. Similiter alia domus, quae fuit Eudonis. Item textus Evangeliorum cum tabulis deauratis. Una crux, et unus calix argenteus et due turibula, et dorsale, et solcrorum, et due casselle argenteae, et

duo parata integra. Unius Aquimoli mediatas in Insula in Macello. Angasteria quatuor.

"Quicumque igitur sacrorum Canonum transgressor, vel violator, et sancte religionis inimicus tremendum Domini iudicium non pertimescens, aliquid ex supradictis bonis a sancti Nicolai ecclesia quolibet modo alienari praesumpserit, excepta pauperum causa tempore famis, omnipotentis Dei, et beatorum apostolorum Petri, et Pauli, et beatissimi Nicolai cuius res agitur, et omnibus communiter; nec non **domini Urbani pape**, atque omnium romanorum pontificum iudicio una cum catholicis omnibus, quorum consilio, et auxilio anathema hoc composuimus, non solum a corporis, et Sanguinis Domini perceptione eum separamus, sed etiam a sancte Ecclesie liminibus in presenti, et in futuro excludimus, ed a totius christianitatis societate eum sequestramus, et perpetuo maledictionis anathemate illum constringentes cum diabulo, et angelis eius omnibus reprobis in eterno supplicio condemnamus, nisi resipuerit. Fiat, fiat, fiat. Amen."

As everybody can see, the text doesn't drop hints that the dedication was recent. Yet even G. B. Prota connects it to Urban II and to the translation of the relics to Bari, as if the "prison" were not enough to link it to St Nicholas. To justify his conclusion Prota quotes this inscription of the years 1846-1867:

Aedem vetustissimam
 Deo Servatori
 In honorem Nicolai Magni
 Pontificis Myrensium
 Antiquitus dedicatam
 Honorius II, P. M.
 Nova molitione auctam
 Per Conradum card.
 Episc. Sabinor
 Iterum consecrandam
 Curavit
 Anno Chr. M.C.XXXVII





As everybody can see, the inscription doesn't speak of an ancient dedication to Christ the Savior as Prota translates *Deo servatori*. The *antiquitus dedicatam* is referred *in honorem Nicolai Magni*, that is to say that it was dedicated to St Nicholas from the ancient times.

The powerful Pierleoni family who took possession of the Marcell Theater in 1086 (and administered it till 1368) was interested also to the St Nicholas' Basilica. In one of their houses close to the church died the pope Urban II, that was in Bari twice (1089 for the deposition of the relics, 1098 for a council with 185 bishops):

Qui Christi confessor et bonus Christi atleta apud sanctum Nicolaum in carcere, in domo Petri Leonis, III Kal. Aug. Animam Deo reddidit (Liber Pontificalis, II, 295).

A new consecration was made by pope Honorius II in 1128, as it is said in this inscription of the right nave of the church:

ANNO DNICAE INCARN
ATIONIS M . C . XXVII PON
TIFICAT . DNI HONORII II PP.
III . XII DIE MENSIS MADII IND .
VI DEDICATA EST HAEC ECCLESIA IN
HONOREM SANCTI . NICOLAI CF
a R. P. Domino Episcopo Sabinen.

In 1280 pope Nicholas III (Orsini) restored the church. **In 1294, St Nicholas in Carcere and St Nicholas in Bari were governed by the same rector: the cardinal William Longo** (+1319). In 1599 card. Peter Aldobrandini made a radical rebuilding (architect Giacomo della Porta). The last restoration took place in 1880.

The interior is with three naves divided by 14 columns. The coffered ceiling is adorned with decorations on golden wood. In the times of Pius IX along the central nave the artist Guido Guidi

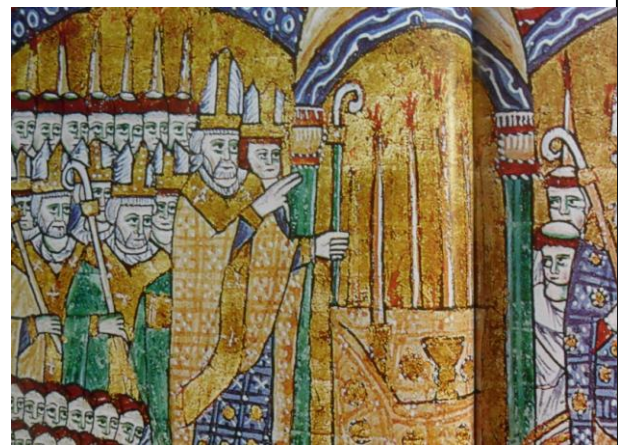
painted the following episodes from St Nicholas life: Birth, Dowry to the maidens, Sailor resurrected, Christ's apparition in the Holy Land, Christ foretells his Episcopal election, Imprisoned, He preaches while in prison, Three children resurrected (**see photo** here below), His death (**see photo** here below). At the end of the right nave is the sepulcher of the card. Giovanni Battista Rezzonico (1783)



In the upper part of the apse Vincenzo Pasqualoni (1819-1880) painted Christ in glory with the Virgin and St Nicholas. The centre of the apse is filled with the great fresco of **St Nicholas at the Council of Nicaea**. Beautiful the contrast between the majestic St Nicholas and the dark character of Arius. Behind the emperor Constantine (on the left) the painter gave to the figures the face of his Roman friends.

The altar is formed by a porphyry urn with Gorgons heads. In the urn are preserved the relics of the Saints Marcellinus, Faustinus and Beatrix. In the transept are the paintings of St Nicholas story by Marco Tullio Montagna. In the Blessed Sacrament Chapel you can admire the Last Supper by Cesare Baglioni.

San Nicola in Carcere is among the preferred Roman Churches for the celebration of marriages. St Nicholas devotion is alive and the 6th of December a finger of the Saint (mentioned in the Inventory of 1870) is publicly venerated.



Mausoleum of card. Guglielmo Longo, (1240-1319), at the same time rector of St Nicholas in Prison and of the Basilica in Bari (1294-1319)



BERGAMO. Basilica di S. Maria Maggiore. Piazza Duomo

Between S. Nicola in Carcere and the Basilica of the Saint in Bari there were always contacts. The most interesting are related to two names: **Pope Urban II** and card. **Guglielmo Longo**. The first (1088-1099) was in Bari the 1st October of 1089 to put the relics under the altar of the crypt (in the **photo above** Urban II consecrates the altar of Cluny monastery). Mistakenly some scholars ascribe to him the dedication to S. Nicholas of the Roman Basilica, that was dedicated to him in 705-707 or, at least in 755, at the times of the frescos in Santa maria Antiqua.

The card. Guglielmo Longo was rector of S. Nicola in Carcere, and at the same time he was Prior of **S. Nicola di Bari**, cooperating with Charles II Anjou and with pope Bonifacius VIII to the renaissance of the Basilica in Bari. To our Saint he dedicated a chapel in St Francis church and a monastery in Plonzano near Bergamo. He died in Avignon September the 9th of the year 1319. The great Mausoleum made by Ugo da Campione in 1330 in St Francis church (Bergamo) was transported in 1843 in S. Maria Maggiore.

ST NICHOLAS' CHURCHES IN ROME DOWN THE CENTURIES

In 1929 was published a volume commemorating the VIII centenary of the rebuilding of the Church of St Nicholas in Carcere as well as the foundation of the *Pia Associazione di S. Nicola di Bari* (february the 7th 1929). Inside it was reproduced the list of the Roman Churches in honor of St Nicholas written by Crescimbeni in 1790. In the *Bollettino di San Nicola* (1992, n. 9) fr Lorenzo Lorusso (today rector of the Basilica in Bari) dedicated an article to this subject.

Obviously the list presents many problems, only partially resolved. In fact the **same church** can be known for the **place** where it is, for the kind or **professions** of the people who attend the services, for the **family** that helped financially the restorations.

Therefore, it is not easy to determine whether we deal with one, two or three churches. The text that seems most interested in documents is, in my opinion, this one:

Christian Hülsen, **Le Chiese di Roma nel Medioevo**, Leo S. Olschki, Firenze MCMXXVII

In Appendix I think useful to add the other churches mentioned in the list of Crescimbeni. They are doubtful, but we cannot exclude that Hülsen could miss some document.



S. Nicola ai Cesarini or de Calcarariis.
Built probably before 1000 (first doc. 1132) on the temple of Juturna, nymph of the waters (241 b.C) . Ruins of the apse and of the altar (Rome, Largo di Torre Argentina).



St Nicholas at "Capo di Bove".
The gothic church was built in front of the Mausoleum of Cecilia Metella on the Via Appia by the family of pope Bonifacius VIII (1294+1303)

1. SN de **Agone** (de Griptis Agonis, all'Anima, de Acquaritiis, de Pasticceri) **de' Lorenesi**. Bull of Urban III (1186). Largo Febo, near Pza Navona, rione Parione.
2. SN de **Aqua Salvia** (Ad tres Fontes) Aventino hill. Bull di Honorius III 1217 (Potthast 5505)
3. SN de **Arcionibus** (de Archemoniis, degli Arcioni) « a Capo le Case ». Bull of Agapit II 955 (Kehr IP, I, 63), which could refer equally to SN de Tofis.
4. SN de **Calcarariis** (Calcariis, in Cesarinis) « S. N. ai Cesarini ». Inscr. 1132. Bull of Urban III (1186). Largo di Torre Argentina.
5. SN de **Capella Papae** (in the Lateran Palace) : Nicholas I (858-867, LP CVII, c. 81), Adrian II (867-872, LP CVIII, c. 14), Callistus II (1119-1124, LP CLXIII)
6. SN in **Carcere** (Tulliano), near the Marcellus Theater. Adrian I (772-795, LPXCVII, c. 13); Inscr. Romanus Presbyter (1088); Urban II (LP CLX, Duchesne, v. II, 294).
7. SN de **Domo Cincii** Gregorii (de Pecino, de Petine, Pincie, in picino alias de cerasa). Bull Urban III (1186).
8. SN de **Colosseo** (Inter duo, Inter imagines). Little church no more existing. Liber Censuum I, ed. Fabre-Duchesne, p. 300 ; Panvinius de VII ecclesiis.
9. SN de **Columna** (columpnae Adriani, ad columnam Traiani). Torre delle milizie or Torre dei conti. Doc. 1029-1032 (Hartmann, *Tabularium*, 78). Demolished in 1570 c.
10. SN de **Curte** o de Curtibus (post Campum Florae, prope domum de Capiteferreo, della Catena). *Libri Indulgentiarum* saec. XIV. In 1532 was dedicated to the Virgin.
11. SN de **Forbitoris** (de Servitoris, de Ianitoris, dei Fortitorii) demolished by the Jesuits in 1631. Many docc. Urban V (1362-1370, Reg. Tom. XXII, fol. 416).
12. SN de **Formis** (Iuxta formam Claudii, de Forma). On the Celius mount, near the Claudius-Neronian aqueduct. Bull of Gregory VII (Migne PL, CXLVII, 722).
13. SN de **Funariis** (in sinistra scalae Arae Coeli, in Vincis). Demolished in 1929 in order to build the Sea Road (today via Teatro Marcello). Inscr. 1180 (Ughelli I, 737).
14. SN de **Furca** (S. Nicola of the executed, of the hanged men, of the crowned men) : Piazza Padella. Bull of Urban III (1186), filial church of S. Lorenzo in Damaso.
15. SN de **Hospitale** (Ptochium, hospitale cum ecclesia S. Nicolai iuxta portam Sancti Iohannis). Bull Benedict IX (1033). After the XV did not exist anymore.
16. SN de **Macello** (In clivo argentario). At south of the Capitol toward the Consolation. Cadastre 1454 (Vat. Arch. Misc. Arm. VI, vol. 30, f. 76). After XV century no more existing.
17. SN de **Mellinis** (Mellitybus, de Militibus, de' Cavalieri, de Molinis, Molendinorum, prope S. Eustachium). Bull Urbano III (1186). 1577 dedic to S. Helen de' Credenzieri.
18. SN de **Monte** (de Pinea ?), in the rione Pigna. From the XVI century only a St Marc church with a St Nicholas de Monte chapel. Cartularium S. Mariae in Trastiberim, 1387.
19. SN de **Oliveto** (de Alivoto, de Olivetis). West side of the Quirinale. Ciencio, 311. Dopo il XV s. scompare.
20. SN In **Pa(la)tio S. Anastasiae**. Paris. 181. No further documents. Only quoted in Biondo.
21. SN de **Pinea** (belonging to the monastery of S. Ciriac in Via Lata). Is the same that "de Monte"? ASS Augusti, II, 332.
22. SN de **Portiis** (de Porcis, de Trivio, de Pontis, in Porcilibus). In 1575 the capucins dedicate it to St Bonaventure.
23. SN de **Praefectis** (de Praefecto, de' Profeti, de' Perfetti), in Rione Campo Marzio. Urban III 1186-87 (Migne PL, 202, 1469) (bull of Zaccaria 741-752 ?).
24. SN de **Tofis** (de Tofo, de Tufi). Today S. Carlo al Corso. Agapitus II (955)
25. SN in **Vaticano**. Catalogo Taurinense, 106. Today, Paulin chapel ?

Churches of doubtful identification:

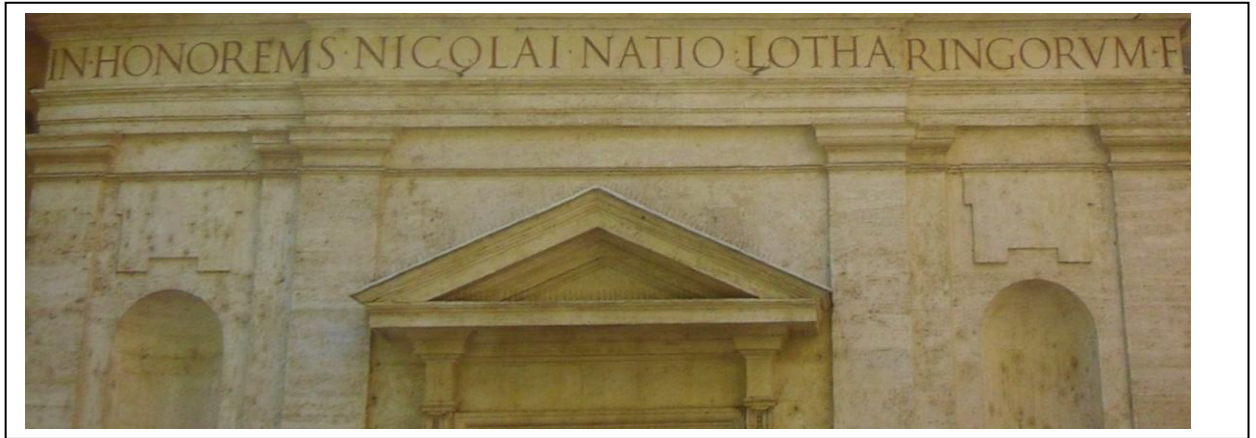
1. SN in Arenula (de Nazzarenis, de Treva) poi S. Maria de Monteserrato
2. SN alla Scrofa (popular denomination?). Today S. Antonio de' Portoghesi.
3. SN in Statera (in Mentuzza). Apocriphal according to Hülsen.
4. SN de ,, . Afterwards S. Maria delle Grazie.
5. SN. De Maccaris.
6. SN del Borgo de Sassari
7. SN in Laterano (chapel ?)
8. SN ad Sanctos quattuor (close to the Four crowned)
9. SN ad Viam Latam (the same that de Pinea ?)
10. SN de Palatio Maiore (the same that in Laterano ?)
11. SN in Saba (the same that in Statera ?)
12. SN delle Cariate. The same that de Mellinis
13. SN de Prediis
14. SN de Piscaria
15. SN de Frattis
16. SN de Marinis
17. SN degli Orsini
18. SN de Marmoratis (near S. Maria in Cosmedin)
19. SN iuxta Tiridarium (in ruga Francigena) near the papal palace.
20. SN in Cosmedin (close to S. Maria in Schola graeca)

NB 10, de' Mellini, 35 de Mellinis 48 de Militibus is the same church



Rome. **The Russian Orthodox Church** of St Nicholas the Miracle-worker in via Palestro. It belongs to the Moscow Patriarchate, on which depends directly (stavropigialnyj). However, the situation is similar to that I related about the St Nicholas Cathedral in Nice (France). The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (bishop Gabriel of Comana) equally claims jurisdiction on it.

The archpriest Vjačeslav Bačín, rector of the St Nicholas church in Via Palestro (Rome).



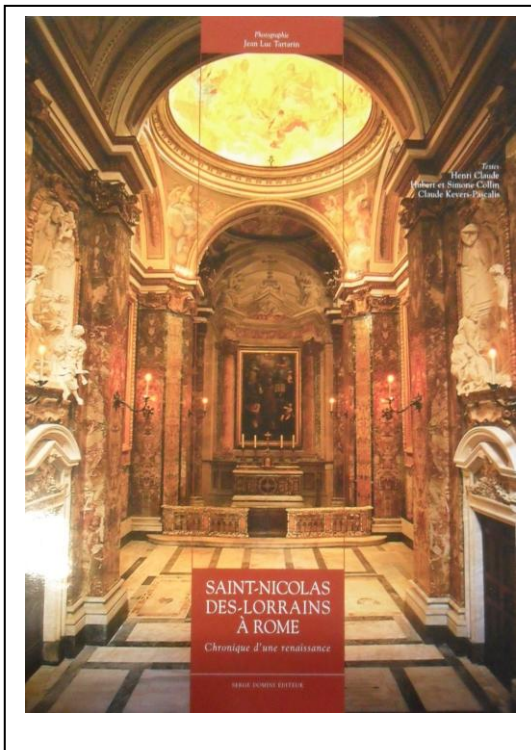
SAINT NICOLAS DES LORRAINS

By our friend Denis Schaming this church has been defined “The memorial of the Lorraine nation in the Eternal City” (conference held at Metz April 18 2011). From his report I get the following outline:

Francesi”. It was pope Sixth IV who confirmed in Rome the French Brotherhood

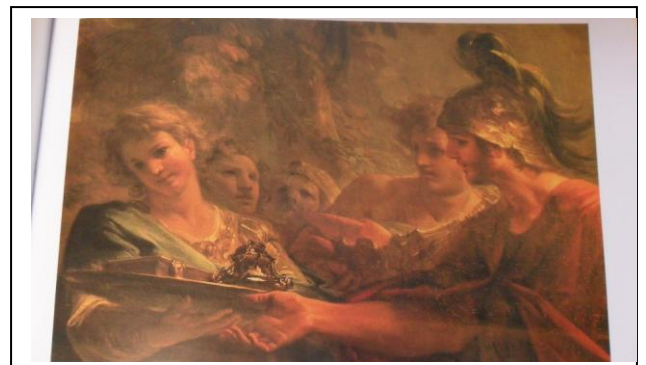


The exterior



The interior of the church as it appears on the front cover of a book by Serge Domini Editeur.

of the Virgin’s Conception, St Louis and St Denis. Although being an independent duchy (till 1776) the Lorraine people in Rome joined the French speaking Brotherhood. At first they expressed their preference for St Nicholas by building a chapel in his honor in the Church of St Louis (1518). Afterwards they received by the pope Gregory XV the church of St Nicholas “de Agone” (1622), that they rebuilt as their national church (1633) always *In honorem S. Nicolai natio Lotharingorum f.* (as it is solemnly written of the façade of the church).



Saint Nicolas des Lorraines is one of the French cult buildings in Rome, of which the best example is the church of “S. Luigi dei

In 1731 the inside was made more beautiful thanks to the paintings of Corrado Giaquinto (an apulian artist who shortly afterwards was invited to the Escorial by the Spanish king). Very beautiful is the painting of Nicholas blessing the army commanders who went to him with gifts on the part of the emperor Constantine (see fig. p. 13). Another painting is the liberation of sailors during a tempest.

In the dome are depicted several Saints, especially founders of religious orders (fig. below).

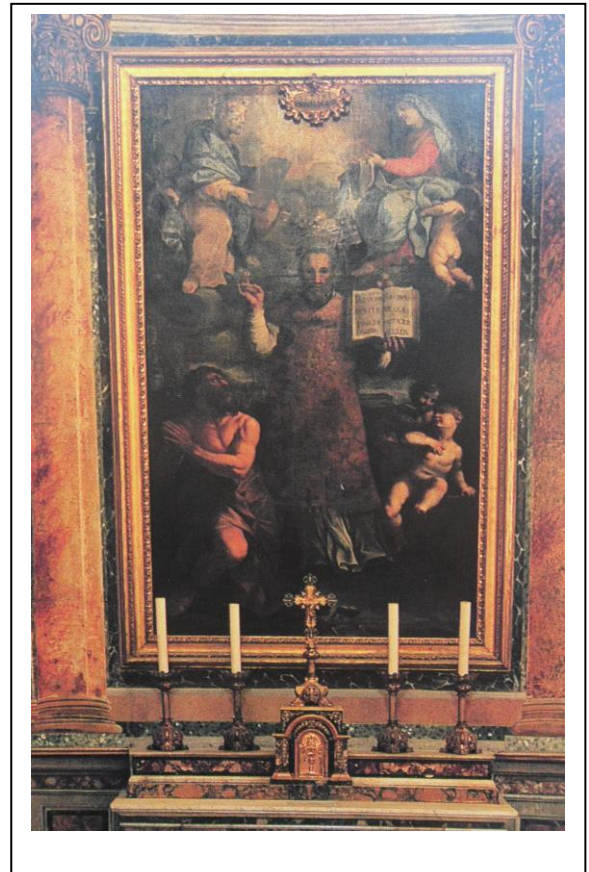


St Dominic and St Louis IX king of France

A new radical restructuring took place in 1750.

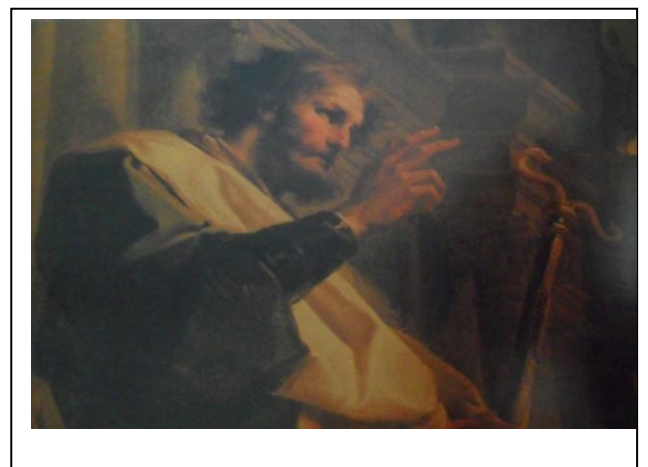
The church is a propriety of the Holy See and the Roman Soprintendenza is vigilant on the restoration works. But, obviously the Lorraine people are very active in keeping high the prestige of this church.

The *Association des Amis de Saint Nicolas des Lorrains* (founded in 1956) often urges the French Ministry of the Culture to take initiatives in favor of the church. Today the administrator is Mgr Bernard Ardura, president of the Pontifical Commission of the Historical Sciences. And is he who welcomes pilgrims from Lorraine, as it happened recently with the members of the *Association des Amis de St Nicolas des Lorraines*.



Above: the traditional St Nicholas (inspired to the serbian icon of the Basilica in Bari) on the main altar.

Below: St Nicholas as imagined by Corrado Giaquinto in St Nicolas des Lorrains



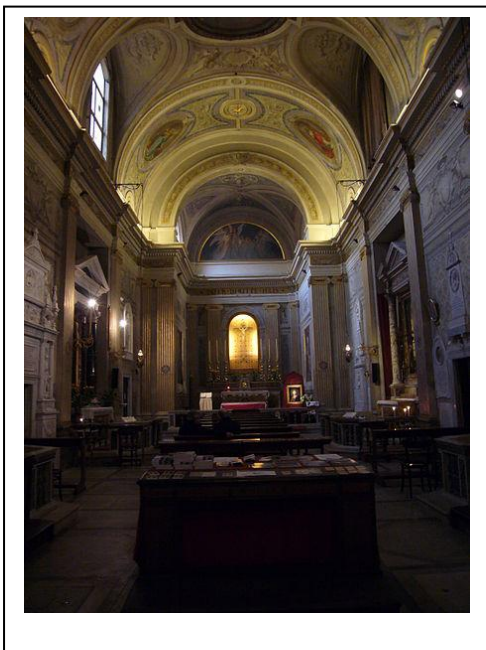
SAN NICOLA DEI PREFETTI

S. Nicola de' Prefetti or "dei Perfetti" (of the Perfects), as it is mentioned in the *Catalogue of Cencio Camerario*, 1192, derives its denomination from the nearby palace of the Di Vico family, which between 1297 and 1485 gave to the city of Rome many prefects or governors.



The
façade

The Armellini dates it to the times before pope Zachary (741-752). Abandoned by the Regular Clerics of St Gaetan of Thiene in the occasion of the sack of Rome (by the German Lanzikenechs) in 1527, pope Pius V gave it to the Dominicans (1567).



The
interior

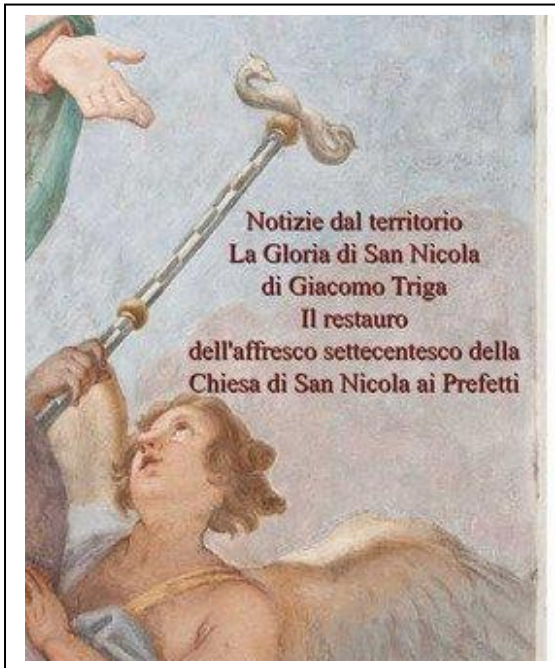
Relevant restorations took place about the half of XIX century. From the year 1927 the church was entrusted to the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

Inside, can be admired the painting of the *Mater Misericordiae* (on the main altar), as well as the fresco of the XVIII century by Giacomo Triga: *St Nicholas of Bari in Glory*.



This latter, commissioned by the Dominicans of Santa Sabina and made in the year 1730, has been recently restored under the direction of Adriana Capriotti, with a presentation to the world of culture on the part of Rossella Vaudret (for the

Museal Polo of Rome), fr. Giuseppe Cellucci (rector of the church) and fr. Alfredo Feretti (Superior of the Missionary Oblates).



S. Nicola dei Prefetti.
St. Nicholas with the three resurrected children and the young Basil (Adeodatus) set free from the Saracenic captivity.

