

SANTA MARIA DI COSTANTINOPOLI

HISTORY

The church dates back to the Sixteenth century and is devoted to the Madonna of Costantinople, protectress of epidemics. His worship became particularly fervent in the city following a miraculous episode. According to a legend, in June 1529, during the plague erupted in 1527 caused by the french siege, the Virgin Mary appeared to an old lady ensuring her the plague's end. It happened exactly like that.

So was born a lay brotherhood which rebuilt as *ex voto* a small and crumbling chapel located outside the city walls, at the foot of Caponapoli hill. It was dedicated to the Virgin, as showed by the painting of Costantinopoli's Virgin on the exterior facade. A papal bull of Clement VII, dated 31 march 1531, documents the birth of the brotherhood and the oratory.

In 1575, escaped the danger of another plague in Naples the cult of Our Lady of Costantinopoli increased. As a plaque in the sacristy recalls, it was built a larger church with a conservatory for girls. Works ended between 1603 and 1608 according to the project of the architect **fra' Nuvo**lo (1570-1637), the dominican lay brother that was very active in the city and known for his colored majolica domes, like we can see in our church.

The church of Santa Maria di Costantinopoli became one of the most popular places of worship in Naples. It was considered as a symbol of protection from terrible events, such as the drought at the late sixteenth century, the eruption of Vesuvius in december 1631, the terrible plague of 1656 which caused 250.000 deaths, the epidemic of cholera of 1835, 1836 and 1854.

In the thirties of the seventeenth century the anniversaries of the imperial victories (on september 7, the victory of Nördlingen in 1634) were celebrated here. In the mid-twentieth century the parochial title of the nearby S. Aniello in Caponapoli (11th century) was transfered to SMC, with some decorations and sculptures.

THE FACADE

The impressive facade in marble, bricks and piperno is divided in two orders by a mighty trabeation on whose frieze runs the inscription «Matri Dei ob Urbem ac Regnum a peste servatum»: *to the Mother of God for freeing Naples and the Kingdom from the plague*. The facade was designed by the bigger engineer of the Kingdom **Orazio Gisolfo** in 1653; a collaborator of **Cosimo Fanzago** (1591-1678). **Costantino Marasi** from Carrara, is probably the author of the entrance portals. The central one, with columns and broken pediment, is surmounted by an aedicule with the image of Virgin, while above the two side doors there are two fake windows. On the top, stand a reinassance-style large window surmounted by a triangular pediment with a central oculus. In the nineteenth century were added two little bell towers on the sides of the facade.

THE INSIDE

Coming in, we meet two twin fonts dated 1616. The bright and wide nave (originally there were three naves marked by columns) is articulated in five chapels open on each side, containing altars and closed by iron gates of the early 18th century. Hig up, a magnificent wooden ceiling, carved and golden. At the four corners of the ceiling there is the emblem of "Sedile del Popolo (one of the six administrative instiutions of the city) that built the church and who ruled the brotherhood. On the arch of the crossing (as well as on the floor at the center of the nave, on the pulpit, on the main altar and in other places) we can see the emblem of the municipality, (at that time "Tribunale di San Lorenzo") a red and yellow shield, with the initials of the church and of the homonymous brotherhood, SMC, to indicate the belonging and the official role played by SMC in city life.

Among the chapels, wooden seats (1728) designed by the architect **Nicolò Tagliacozzi Canale** (1691-1763), who also designed the wooden gratings of the nuns right above the chapels. Tagliacozzi also completed the beautiful rococò stucco decoration started by **Domenico Antonio Vaccaro** (1678-1745) that still covers the church with fake draperies, giving it a peculiar and harmonious appearance. In the middle of the nave, two funeral monuments, work of Fanzago: on the left the jurist Girolamo Flerio (m. 1620), church's benefactor; on the opposite, the doctor and philosopher Giuseppe Bartiromo (1572-1638), with polychrome and mother-of-pearl marquetry.

The first chapel on the left side, dedicated to St Antonio, has an altarpiece from the school of **Francesco Solimena** (1657-1747). The frescoes, work of **Avanzino Nucci** (1552-1629), apprentice of Corenzio, tell stories and miracles of the Saint.

The second chapel is decorated with *Stories of Jesus' childhood*. The altarpiece represent an *Adoration of the Magi* of **Fabrizio Santafede** (1555-1626); on the vault we can see the *Adoration of the Shepherds*; to te left there is the *Circumcision of Jesus*, on the front *Jesus among the doctor of the Temple*. On the ground a seventeenth-century tombstone of Scipione Magio.

The third chapel is dedicated to the stories of the Virgin. The altarpiece depict the *Madonna of the Soul in Purgatory with the Saints Francesco d'Assisi and Francesco di Paola* of Luis Rodiguez (1580-1610?). On the left, we have a fresco with the *Flight into Egypt*; on the right the *Visitazione di Maria*; and then, on the vault, the *Coronation of the Virgin*.

The fourth chapel has an altarpiece with the Immacolata Concezione, work of Solimena's school.

The fifth chapel, dedicated to the Angels, hosts the grate of the "**comunicchino**", an opening through which the nuns could receive the Eucharist. Over it, is situated a modern statue of *St. Lucia*. In the central lunette *San Michele Arcangelo*; on the left the *Eternal Father with a glory of angels*; opposite the *Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden*, in the vault, again the *Eternal Father surrounded by a choir of angels*. To follow we have a nice wooden crucifix from the 14th century.

In the big left chapel, there is on the altar an *Annunciation* of the seventeenth-century painter **Giovanni del Po**. On the left, the monument of Nicola Pianelli (m. 1696), patrician of Bitonto. Below we can find the sepulcher of Nunzio Pelliccia (1540-1608), jurist and antique dealer from Aversa; above, a beautiful high-relief of the *Madonna col Bambino*.

In the sacristy are preserved: a seventeenth-century marble laver with dolphins; a canvas, probably attributable to Francesco Antonio Serio, depicting the *Parable of the guest at the wedding banquet* copy from F. De Mura; four medals with the *Evangelisti* (1764) once again work of F. Antonio Serio; a monumental marble inscription. It was placed on the counter-facade in 1612, in occasion of the inauguration of the conservatory, and also recalls the interest of the emperor Carlo V for SMC.

The impressive and scenographic main altar, created by Cosimo Fanzago. However, in the 18th century, it has suffered some interventions by Domenico Antonio Vaccaro (1678-1745) and Niccolò Tagliacozzi Canale, who arranged the large marble rising adding stucco decorations to it. What remains of the original fanzaghian installation is the aedicula with the fresco, on tufaceous slab, of the miraculous *Madonna di Costantinopoli*, dates back to the beginning of the 16th century. She was surrounded by a golden nimbus and a crown, and bordered below by angels throwing water over a burning town. On the top, high-relief with the *Eternal Father*; on the sides, eighteenth-century stucco statues: *Meekness* (with the lamb) to the left, *Purità* (with the fleur-de-lis and dove) to the right. It is also attributable to Fanzago the ornamentations of the two rich side doors and the overhead statues of the protector saints of the plague: *St. Rocco* to the left, *St. Sebastiano* to the right. They lead to the wide choir (18th century wooden backbenches) with polygonal apse.

Very interesting is the semi-circular vault of the apse, frescoed by the Greek painter **Belisario Corenzio** (1558-1646) and revised by **Giuseppe Cammarano** (1766-1850): in the middle *The Virgin and St. Giovanni begging Trinity to rid Naples from the plague*; in the lunette *Doctors of the Church, Patrons of Naples e Apostoles*. Of Corenzio are also the frescoes in the dome, unfortunately in a really bad state of conservation; remain *Salomone, Daniele, Mosè* and *Elia* on the pendentives; *Profeti e Sibille* in the soffit of the cross vault. On the right of the altar has been repositioned a painting by F. Santafede, originally in the Purità chapel, depicting the *Madonna of Costantinopoli and saints Francesco d'Assisi, Francesco di Paola and Vincenzo Ferrer*, a small portrait of the donor on a burning town landscape on which two flying angels pour water.

In the big right chapel, on the altar, the altarpiece (1759?) of F. A. Serio, signed in the lower right corner, of the *Madonna del Rosario with saints Domenico, Rosa and Tommaso d'Aquino*. On the left, baptismal font from the school of Giovanni da Nola around 1530, from S. Aniello, with the name of the donor (Antonio Bruno) and scenes of Jesus baptism. It is set in a little chapel decorated with materials coming from the ancient conservatory, such as the altar by Fanzago and a painting with a copy of the Madonna of Costantinopoli. In the middle of the cross vault rises the slender dome resting on a high tambour with eight windows. In the corner, the seventeenth-century pulpit supported by beautiful ancient green columns.

Going again to the entrance, the first chapel on the right belongs to Santi family from Verona since 1556 (on the right, indeed, we can see the monument of Giovanni Paolo Santi); it houses the sixteenth-century *Madonna of the Purity*, a reproduction from a prototype of the Spanish Luis De Morales (1512-1586), preserved in San Paolo Maggiore. On the altar a statue of St. Vincenzo Ferrer.

In the second chapel we can see an altarpiece of the mid-16th century with the *Circumcision of Jesus* from Neapolitan school; on the altar, wooden bust of S. Anna.

The third chapel shows a *St. Nicola* from Solimena school.

In the fourth chapel, *Martyrium of San Bartolomeo* of the Flemish **Wenzel Cobergher** (1557 ca.-1634).

In the fifth chapel, wooden statue of St. Aniello of the mid-18th century originating from the nearby andonymous church. On the ground a tombstone of the Buzzacarin family. An exit door leads into a corridor with a marble gravestone. It reminds the document dated 29 July 1649 with which Innocent X granted particular spiritual benefits to the church, testifying the fame and the celebrity of the Marian sanctuary.