

Chiesa di Santa Croce e Purgatorio al Mercato

The church is located at the center of the monumental exedra of Piazza Mercato, in the historic heart of Naples. Recently restored to its former splendor following significant consolidation and restoration interventions curated by the competent Superintendency and the Municipality of Naples, the church has been entrusted to the Municipality's Cultural Office and is now dedicated to hosting cultural activities such as exhibitions, concerts, readings, workshops, seminars, and guided tours.

The Site

The church was built at the end of the 18th century as part of a general restructuring of the old Largo del Mercato area, based on a design by military architect Francesco Sicuro. This occurred during the reign of Ferdinand IV, a period in the city's history characterized by the realization of important urban projects, including the redesign of Largo del Castello (now Piazza Municipio) – where Sicuro had designed the Real Gran Guardia building (now demolished) and the Teatro del Fondo, today the Teatro Mercadante – the development of Piazza Carlo III, where the imposing Albergo dei Poveri was being built, the creation of the Villa Reale (now Villa Comunale), and, as we will see, the redesign of the Forum Magno (now Piazza Mercato). A fire that broke out in 1781 during the famous blaze in the bell tower of the Chiesa del Carmine, which spread and destroyed the shacks in the square, prompted a broader reflection on the design of the large square. Sicuro presented several proposals: one involving a grand monumental fountain at the center of a large two-winged exedra designed for shops, but its high cost was prohibitive, and a second version, which was chosen, placing an elegant church at the center of the two wings.

The sacred building was conceived to recall the site of a chapel dedicated to the Cross, established to commemorate the place where the young Conradin of Swabia, heir to the Holy Roman Empire of Frederick II, was decapitated in 1268 on the orders of Charles I of Anjou. It also remembered a small chapel dedicated to the many souls of the dead from the 1656 plague, nearly 47,000, whose bodies were buried in four mass graves right in the square. The project, both elegant and harmonious, was modern and in tune with the times. The church, designed as a low, continuous building in the shape of a semicircle, was inspired by an ancient model that was gaining popularity in the late 18th century, especially thanks to the design of the grand Crescent in Bath, England, created by John Wood the Younger, a prototype of residential communal housing. Some have seen this model as full of symbolic references, possibly Masonic, which may also be reflected in Sicuro's design, suggested by the presence of two obelisks with sphinxes – symbols of Freemasonry – that adorned the square and also served as fountains. What is certain is that Sicuro sought to give the square – a place historically associated with trade, craft activities, uprisings, executions, and vendettas – a new modern identity, in line with a political era that aimed to give the city the stature of a great European capital. In essence, no more fruit and blood!

However, the ambition of this project was thwarted by the fate of the place, which became once again a site for uprisings and executions during the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799, and its elegant design was stifled by real estate speculation in the 1950s.

The church, an integral part of the project, was built in the form of a Greek cross, with a symmetrical façade in two orders, featuring statues of Saints Peter and Paul and Eligio and Gennaro, along with a light dome, covered, as was fashionable at the time, with colored tiles.

The interior is empty of furnishings and decorative elements. The paintings, attributed to Andrea Malinconico and Giacinto Diano, are stored in the deposits at Castel Nuovo.

Surviving are marble altars, splendid angelic shelf-holders by Angelo Viva, and barely legible fragments of fresco: two pendants representing the Evangelists Matthew and John, and a ceiling fresco that divides the balcony.

At the entrance, on the left side, stands the red porphyry column, an important feature of this story.

The chapel with the column and the Cross was said to have been erected, according to tradition, in 1331 by a tanner named Domenico Persio (or Punzo, according to some sources), who, moved by pity for the young Swabian heir whose fate was recalled by an inscription: "Asturis ungue, leo pullum rapiens aquilinum. Hic deplumavit, acephalumque dedit" (The lion, with claws at Astura, seized the eaglet here, tore off its wings, and beheaded it).

From that moment, the chapel became famous among the Neapolitans: "In the floor of this chapel, a marvel is observed continuously, and that is, in the middle, there is always a wet circle, both in summer and winter, while the rest of the floor remains completely dry, and the circle is exactly where Conradin was beheaded, to show, I believe, that the very earth cannot stop weeping for the death of an innocent prince, so cruelly condemned to death." In front of the site, Persio was said to have placed a statue of Queen Margaret, Conradin's mother, which was later removed.

Another source attributes the chapel's foundation to Charles of Anjou, as atonement for the act of beheading a young boy, an act certainly justified by the war events.

The opening of the Chiesa di Santa Croce e Purgatorio al Mercato, a project desired by the Municipality of Naples after centuries of neglect, is only the first step in an important process of enhancement that will allow citizens and tourists to experience yet another significant part of our immense cultural heritage.

Visiting Hours

The church is located at Piazza Mercato 288 and is open for visits from Tuesday to Sunday, including holidays, from 10:00 AM to 6:00 PM.

Contacts

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