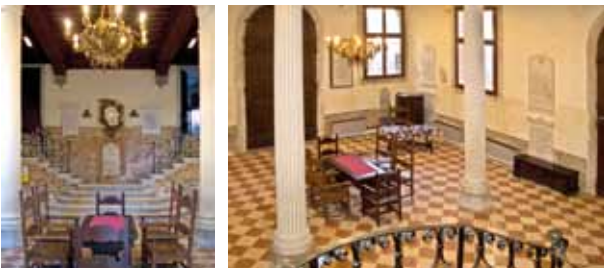


## The Church

Originally the “Confraternità dell'Angelo Custode” (Brotherhood of the Guardian Angel) held their meetings at the nearby church Santi Apostoli (Holy Saints). On May 20, 1713, the Brethren commissioned the architect Andrea Tirali to design and build a Scuola of their own. With its classical proportions, Tirali's style clearly shows Palladio's influences. Notably the simplicity of the building is impressive. Marking the different storeys, the cornices are projecting on all the four outer walls, something rather unusual in Venetian architecture. Typically Classicistic are the adornments of the portal as well as those of the windows. The marble Guardian Angel above the portal is a work of the German sculptor Heinrich Meyring, known in Venice under the name of Enrico Merengo.

In the inside, the building respects the plan common to all the Venetian Scuolas. The Sala on the ground floor is dominated by two Corinthian columns. On the walls, there are memorial slabs of members of the community, who have been buried on the island of San Cristoforo della Pace, but have lost their final resting place through the destruction of the cemetery that later was united with the island of San Michele to form the new cemetery. The eye is caught, however, by the beautifully curved staircase leading to the upper room which serves as the actual church. This room is marked by its brightness and its harmonious proportions. Immediately, the attention is drawn to the central altar-piece by Sebastiano Ricci at the front-side. The font comes from the church of Santa Maria Formosa and has been acquired by the community at the price of 80 Lire in 1811. In 1896, Emperor Wilhelm II and Empress Augusta have donated the altar bible as well as the organ of W. Sauer of Frankfort/Oder.



The Sala on the Ground floor.

## The Works of Art

**Sebastiano Ricci: The Guardian Angel**



This votive picture is part of the original belongings of the Scuola. It has been painted for the building by Sebastiano Ricci (1659-1734) in 1730. You see a child saved by the Guardian Angel from the devilish claws of a dragon. Above, the Virgin Mary with the Holy Child sits enthroned on the clouds – surrounded by further angels. The boy is standing with one foot still on the tail of the snake, with the devil at the left angrily gazing after his snatched prey.

**Tizian: The Blessing Redeemer**



This painting is by the great Venetian painter Tiziano Vencellio, in short Tizian (ca. 1490-1576). It comes from the Fondacco dei Tedeschi, which ordered the work in 1551 and had it hanging there in their gallery. Together with Giorgione, Tizian had once painted the façade of the Fondaco.

When in 1806 the German merchants had to leave their building, the Prefect of Venice left the painting to the Protestant community. The painting represents the life-size figure of the Redeemer with a glass orb in his left hand while the right one is blessing. Head and posture of the body are straight; the line of vision is slightly to the right. Notably remarkable is the look. The former archivist of the Fondaco, G. B. Milesio, describes the painting with the words of Torquato Tasso, “You are missing only the language in the picture, and this no longer once you see the mildness of the eyes.” (Liberated Jerusalem, 1575).

**Lucas Cranach: Martin Luther**



The painting (oil on wood) shows Martin Luther (1483-1546) in his later years. At the left of Luther's head you can read D.M.L. (Doctor Martin Luther) and below there is the signet of Lucas Cranach and his sons, the bound and winged snake. The work is from Cranach's workshop, either by Lucas Cranach the Older (1472-1553) or by his son, Lucas Cranach the Younger (1515-1586). It resembles the one at the Church of Weimar, started by the father and accomplished by the son. According to the signet on all Cranach's works since 1537, the portrait is reckoned to have been painted around 1540.

It is not clear how the painting came into the possession of the community. It could have been part of the heritage of a member of the community. According to another record, Johann Dietrich Sprecher, then parson in Venice was given the painting as a present by King Frederic IV of Denmark. Sprecher's signet is visible on the backside of the portrait. On the occasion of the royal visit to Venice, the pastor was conferred the honorary title of Ducal Counsellor of Holstein (Herzoglich Holsteinischer Hofrat). At the time of the Reformation, the Danish royal family fostered a close relationship with Lucas Cranach.

## The Community Today

Today the community has about 80 members; about half of them live in and round Venice, the others on the mainland. Throughout its history, the community has always been a small group, which, however, has actively co-operated for the good ecumenical life of the city in more recent times. It is one of the founding members of the Local Council of the Christian Churches of Venice (Consiglio Locale delle Chiese Cristiane di Venezia) as well as of the Venetian Foundation for the Research on Peace (Venezia per la Ricerca sulla Pace), and especially the Jewish-Christian Dialogue has been its concern for more than 25 years. Besides, regularly and with pleasure the church is being opened for tourists and other interested people. The pastoral care of the cure at Abano Terme is also part of the obligations of the community.

The community belongs to the Lutheran Church in Italy (Chiesa Evangelica Luterana in Italia – CELI), which was founded through the union of the former German Protestant Communities Abroad in 1949.

The small Venetian community is close to friends all over the world.



COMUNITÀ EVANGELICA LUTERANA DI VENEZIA  
LUTHERAN COMMUNITY OF VENICE

**Office:** Via Rio Caldo, 9  
I-35031 Abano Terme/PD  
+ 39 049 8668929  
venezia@chiesaluterana.it  
www.kirche-venedig.de

**Church:** Campo Ss. Apostoli  
Cannaregio, 4448  
I-30121 Venezia



COMUNITA' EVANGELICA LUTERANA DI VENEZIA  
EVANGELISCH-LUTHERISCHE GEMEINDE VENEDIG



## Our Community



Fondaco dei Tedeschi. For centuries, Lutheran services have been celebrated secretly on the third floor of the German Trading-House.

The Lutheran congregation of Venice is the oldest Lutheran congregation of Italy and in general one of the oldest outside of Germany. Already before the first publications of Martin Luther, citizens in the lagoon were interested in reformatory ideas. The Venetian Gasparo Contarini (1481-1542), later Cardinal, already in 1511 realized in his Easter confession that the human being was not saved through his or her deeds but solely through faith.



The Guardian Angel on the facade of the church (by Heinrich Meyring).

At about the same time, in a circle of Friends of Murano (Cenacolo di Murano), young patricians read the New Testament in the original together. Later, two of them sent far-reaching proposals for a reform of the church to the Pope.

In the heart of the “Serenissima Repubblica”, the Venetian educated class felt a strong need for a renewal of the Church. A chronicler wrote about an excommunicated Augustinian monk with the name of Fra Andrea of Ferrara, who gave sermons “according to the Lutheran teachings” and was attracting masses of listeners on the Campo San Stefano. The immediate protest from Rome was in vain. Culturally flourishing, Venice gave priority to the protection of her economical relationships. In religious questions one was open as long as the safety of the State was not questioned. Through the new impressive German trading-house, the “Fondaco dei Tedeschi” which was inaugurated officially in 1508 in the centre of the city, the teachings of Martin Luther spread all over Venice without delay.

The history of this German House has been closely connected with the adventurous and chequered history of the community. Today it is one of the smallest Lutheran communities worldwide, and for a long time it has been working in the underground, until two hundred years ago it could find a church of its own in the former “Scuola dell’Angelo Custode” (Oratorio of the Holy Guardian Angel).

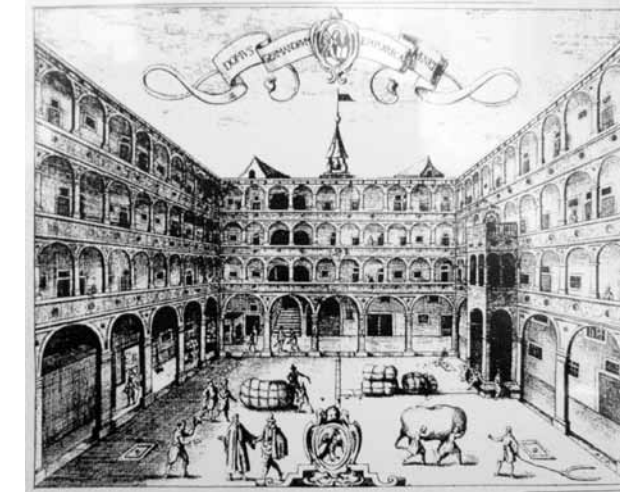


## The Early Period of the Community

On June 13, 1543, in one of his two letters to his Italian brothers in faith at Venice, Vicenza, and Treviso, Luther proves to be highly pleased at the evangelical life in the Veneto: “Which of you could have hoped that such could either have happened in Italy herself at our lifetime or be expected to occur?”

Already twenty years before, there had been first secret meetings of Lutherans at the German House – in spite of the Pope’s bull of excommunication against Luther. In 1527, the writings of the professor of theology at Wittenberg and those of his followers had been burnt openly at the Rialto Bridge. In Rome, many meeting-places of the supporters of the new faith in Venice were known. Since 1542, the Inquisition has stricken out without mercy. Within 50 years, 219 believers were charged with Lutheran heresy, and quite some of them might have been drowned before the Lido in nocturnal darkness.

The inhabitants of the Fondaco, however, were better off, since the Germans were asked as important trading partners for the Serenissima. With the protection of the German trading-house, the first parson – disguised as a physician – came to Venice in 1650. In two rooms secret services were celebrated, at which about 150 Lutherans received Communion at Easter. His successor, Johann Georg Renier, was busted and had to leave Venice within a few days. The discovery of the community meant a serious cut for the German Protestants. In fear of being banned, a church order was given which was to guarantee the secrecy of the community with 21 rules of behaviour – with most precise orders for newcomers and regulations of how to enter the room for the Service without becoming suspicious. In spite of this, towards the end of the 17th century a new conflict arose with the Inquisition, which accused a German of heresy. His appeal was granted, and for the first time foreigners were allowed to live according to their religion.



The “Fondaco dei Tedschi” was the German trading-house close to the Rialto Bridge. The picture by Raphael Custos (1616) shows the inner courtyard with merchants, porters, and bale-binders.

In the midst of the 18th century, Goethe’s father wrote on the occasion of his stay in Venice, “The followers of the Lutheran belief celebrate their service there (at the Fondaco dei Tedeschi), which the Republic quietly allows them. But they make use of prudence and caution not to let strangers in, and even the pastor and the other clerics wear civilian clothes” (Viaggio in Italia).

The church order was valid even until the fall of the republic in 1797.

Since in the course of time the conflicts with the German “heretics” kept recurring because of funerals, the German merchants applied for a burial ground of their own. The Magistrate granted this, and since 1719 the Lutherans have been buried on the island of San Cristoforo della Pace. In the question of godparents, a conflict became evident between the Republic of Venice and the Holy See in Rome. Although by decree the Senate explicitly allowed Protestants to be witnesses of baptism – registers of baptism were equally secular registers of birth for which the city of Venice was responsible – this question continuously led to new disputes. Already in 1759, the Venetian Patriarch Giovanni Bragadin revealed himself to be pragmatically open: when a parish-priest refused to baptize the child Sebastian Heinzelmann, son of a Protestant merchant, with two Protestant godparents, he himself took over the baptism.

With Napoleon’s invasion in 1797, the community came out of its illegality, but in 1806 the Nazione Alemanna (the German people) had to leave their trading-house. The community profited from the religious tolerance and freedom of faith, but now they had no place for their reunions. In 1813 precisely that child, whom the Patriarch had baptized, the merchant Sebastian Heinzelmann acquired the empty building of the former Catholic brotherhood dell’Angelo Custode (of the Guardian Angel) for 3886 Lire, and gave it to the community later.

When in 1815 Venice came to Austria, for the time being freedom was over, though. The community was allowed to enter their own church only through the side entrance, to give sermons only in German, and the charges for baptisms, weddings, funerals etc. had to be handed over to the Catholic Church. Only after 1866, with the independence of Italy the restrictions have slowly come to an end – and finally the community can even open their main portal.