

# Oratorio del Santissimo Crocifisso



**Oratorio del Santissimo Crocifisso** is a 17th century oratory of the Sisters Missionary of Jesus Eternal Priest, dedicated to the Holy Cross, located in the rione Trevi. The oratory is actually a small chapel (oratories don't have altars). The Diocese refers to it as Chiesa Annessa Santissimo Crocifisso al Corso. The annessa means that it is subordinate to a parish church (here, Santa Maria in Via) and does not have its own priest. <sup>[1]</sup>

## History

The oratory was built in memory of a miracle that occurred in 1519, when the local parish church San Marcello al Corso burned down. A 15th-century wooden crucifix of the Sienese school miraculously survived the fire. When everything else was destroyed, it was found intact after the fire with a lamp still burning before it. <sup>[1] [3] [a]</sup>

When a pestilence swept through the city in 1522, the Spanish Cardinal Guillermo de Vich organized a great procession of people of all social levels, who carried the Crucifix solemnly to Saint Peter's. The plague ended, and this second prodigious event led the Cardinal and many prelates and Roman noblemen to institute the Societa del Santissimo Crocifisso di San Marcello. Its members wore a black penitential robe with the image of the Crucifix on the left shoulder, and a whip hanging from a cord tied around their waists. The *confratelli* carried the cross in procession through Rome each Thursday before Easter in Holy Years as well as in times of extreme need or political upheaval. <sup>[1] [3] [b]</sup>

A Confraternity was founded as a result in 1526, called the Archconfraternity of the Most Holy Crucifix (Arciconfraternita del Santissimo Crocifisso in Urbe). This was dedicated to promoting the

eneration of the Cross, and attracted many influential and important members, including the cardinals Ranuccio and Alessandro Farnese, nephews of the Pope. It has spread worldwide in the centuries following. <sup>[1]</sup>

An oratory was proposed early on, as a headquarters for this confraternity and as a place where the miraculous crucifix could be enshrined, but was only finally built by **Giacomo della Porta** in 1566. After the building was finished, the interior walls were given a very important fresco cycle based on the *Legend of the True Cross* to be found in the *Legenda Aurea* ([Golden Legend](#), based on earlier sources) of [Jacobus de Voragine](#), and several artists worked on this for six years from 1578. In 1578, the confraternity entrusted one of its members, [Tommaso dei Cavalieri](#) (the Roman aristocrat and friend of Michelangelo), and the painter [Girolamo Muziano](#) with the task of supervising the decoration of the oratory's walls. Since 1740, the crucifix over the altar has been a copy. The original was taken back to San Marcello, where it is to be found. <sup>[1] [3] [a] [b]</sup>

This oratory became famous in the 17th century for its contribution to the new forms of religious music. Musical concerts started here in 1639, when the first performances of fifteen musical oratorios by [Giacomo Carissimi](#) and [Emilio de' Cavalieri](#) occurred here. The word "oratorio" in musical parlance actually derives from "oratory". <sup>[1]</sup>

The Oratory was plundered and damaged during the Roman Republic (1798/1799), and restored in 1821 with a coffer ceiling with the *Triumph of the Cross*, by **Giovanni Gagliardi**. <sup>[3]</sup>

The original 1584 ceiling of the oratory had been carved by **Flaminio Boulanger**, who had also been responsible for that at San Giovanni in Laterano. It was destroyed in 1798, and only replaced in 1879 as part of a major restoration. A plaque recording this is to be found on the left hand side wall, under the prophet Joel. <sup>[1] [3]</sup>

In the late 20th century the complex was taken over by a female missionary order, the [Missionaries of Jesus the Eternal Priest](#) (*Missionarie di Gesù Eterno Sacerdote*) which was founded in 1947 and has a strong presence in the Philippines. It received papal approval in 1975. However, the sisters relinquished possession around the turn of the century and are now based at Via Trionfale 7585. <sup>[1]</sup>

The oratory was restored by the government in 1999, and continues to be a noted music venue. <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Exterior:**

The oratory is a simple rendered brick hall, with a pitched and tiled roof. The far end, all of the left hand side and part of the right hand side abut onto, and are incorporated into, neighboring buildings. <sup>[1]</sup>

### Façade

The façade is attributed to **della Porta**. It has two stories, and is in pink brick with the architectural details in limestone. <sup>[1]</sup>

The first storey has four pilasters supporting a strongly projecting cornice rather than a proper entablature. They are vaguely Doric and are tripletted, but the central element of the triplet has an odd device rather like a triglyph (actually a *tetraglyph* here) placed over its capital. <sup>[1]</sup>

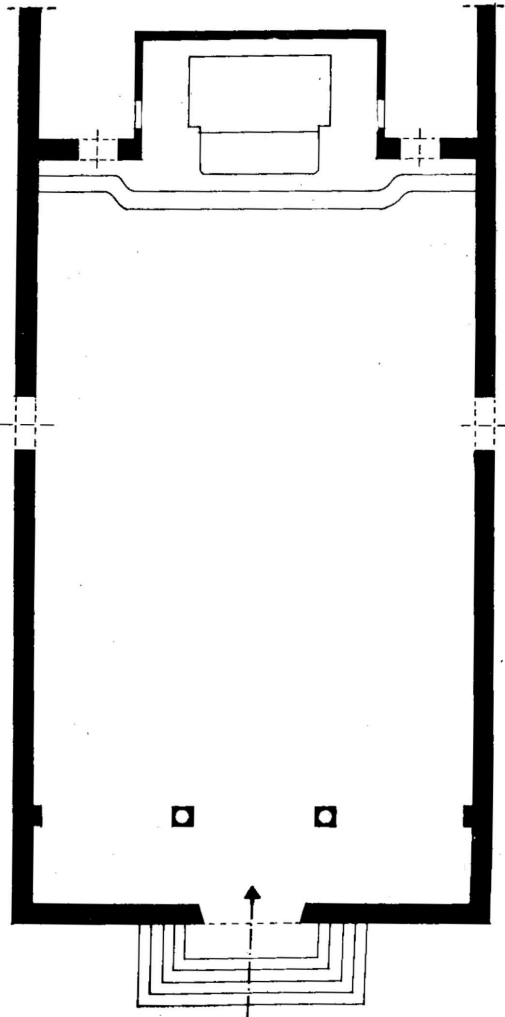
The single entrance is accessed by a flight of stairs. It has a molded doorcase, and a triangular pediment raised on strap corbels. Between the pairs of pilasters on either side is a low window, and over this is an empty round-headed niche with a molded frame and a segmental pediment supported by triglyph corbels. <sup>[1]</sup>

The second storey again has four tripletted pilasters. These do not have capitals, but only beading where they meet a cornice. The inner pair flanks a large inscription on a marble tablet, which commemorates the financial contribution from Cardinal Farnese that made it possible to build the oratory. This tablet is embellished with sprays, swags, ribbons and a winged putto's head. Between the pilasters are two windows with ornate Baroque frames, capped by triangular pediments with broken cornices. <sup>[1]</sup>

Above the cornice of this storey is the coat-of-arms of the Farnese family (featuring fleurs-de-lys) in a large recessed lunette with more flower sprays and ribbons and with a cardinal's hat. On top of this lunette is a crowning triangular pediment containing another winged putto's head, which is supported by a pair of squat Doric pilasters flanked by a pair of gigantic curlicues. The crowning finials are various; the outer pair are flaming torches, the inner pair on the pediment gable are flaming urns and the central one is the metal cross traditional in this position in Roman churches. [1]

The brick campanile is invisible from the street. It consists of two open arches, side by side, perched on the junction of the left hand side wall with the neighbouring building, about halfway down. [1]

## Interior



The plan is a simple rectangular hall, entirely frescoed, without any side chapels, but with a small apse in the form of an arched niche without a conch. The arrangement allows for the spectacular fresco cycle on the side walls. [1]

Over the entrance there is a musicians' gallery, accessed by a rather rickety set of steps and supported by a pair of columns in what looks like red marble. Above this is a frieze embellished with painted winged putto's heads and rose-and-lily garlands; 19th century, of course. [1]

The 1879 coffered wooden ceiling is intricately carved, and gorgeously painted. The central panel shows *The Second Coming of Christ*, and the two side panels show the emblem of the Confraternity and the coat-of-arms of Pope Leo XIII. [1]

The stalls along the side walls are for Confraternity members. [1]

The frescoes were painted by some of the great artists at Rome in the late 16th century, and demonstrate the evolution of figurative religious painting from the Mannerist style towards Baroque theatricality. The subjects depicted are the story of the miraculous crucifix at San Marcello, the Legend of the True Cross and the history of the Confraternity. [1] [2]

Each side wall has three large panels depicting events, with the dominant central ones as fictive tapestries. These

were to alternate with feigned niches. To the sides of these are smaller panels depicting figures of prophets (with their names) and sibyls, and above are other smaller panels showing angels and personified virtues venerating the Cross. [1] [a]

The frescoes of the History of the Cross (six large panels, three per wall), follow one another from the right wall, starting from the presbyteral area towards the entrance to the oratory, and in the opposite direction on the left wall.

The description is counterclockwise, from the right hand side wall near the entrance. [1]

### Right hand side wall

Giovanni de' Vecchi received the original contract for the fresco cycle in 1578 and was to have executed the entire work, but did not manage to get very far. The first two panels are his. Firstly, *St Helena Overthrows the Idols and Finds Three Crosses*. The empress St Helena had to demolish a pagan temple before her workers found three crosses thrown into a pit. Secondly, *St Helena and Bishop*



#### Left hand side wall

The first two panels on the left hand side wall are by **Circignani** again. They are: *The Emperors Heraclius and Chosroes Fight Over the Cross*. The Sassanid Persian emperor Chosroes II had conquered and sacked Jerusalem in 614, and taken the True Cross as war booty. Heraclius managed to defeat him (only for the Muslims to arrive later). And, *An Angel Appears to Heraclius Carrying the Cross Back to Jerusalem*. This allegedly occurred in the year 629. The angel told him that it was inappropriate for him to carry the cross on horseback, dressed as an emperor. <sup>[1]</sup>

The final panel on the left is the latest in the series, and shows *Heraclius Carrying the Cross into Jerusalem*, dressed as a penitent. This panel is by **Cesare Nebbia**. <sup>[1]</sup>

#### Counterfaçade

The frescoes at the entrance gallery have as a theme the foundation of the confraternity. There are two on each side, one on the actual counterfaçade and one on the end of the side wall making a corner with it. These were probably painted in 1583-84 and completed the decoration. <sup>[1]</sup> <sup>[a]</sup>

On the left are two by **Roncalli**: *Foundation of the Capuchiness Convent* and *The Miracle of the Unburnt Crucifix*. This is a reference to a miracle of the miraculous crucifix of San Marcello. The convent concerned was Santa Maria della Concezione dei Cappuccini, which has now been demolished. <sup>[1]</sup> <sup>[2]</sup> <sup>[3]</sup>

On the right are *Procession During the Plague of 1522* (another reference to the miraculous crucifix of San Marcello) by **Paris Nogari**, and *The Approval of the Statutes of the Confraternity* by **Baldassare Croce**. <sup>[1]</sup> <sup>[2]</sup> <sup>[3]</sup>

On the counterfaçade there is also the choir with an organ from 1744 by the master of Tyrolean origin **Giovanni Corrado Werle**. <sup>[3]</sup>

#### **Liturgy:**

The Feast of the Recovery of the True Cross is celebrated on 3 May, and that of the Exaltation of the Cross on 15 September.

The oratory is semi-public, so it is possible to visit it most days.

#### **Artists and architects**

François "Flaminio" [Boulanger](#) (active c.1550-1585), French woodcarver and cabinet maker  
Niccolò [Circignani](#) [aka *Il Pomarancio*] (1520-1597), Italian late-Renaissance / Mannerist painter  
Baldassare [Croce](#) (1558-1628), Italian painter of the late-Mannerist period  
Giacomo [della Porta](#) (c.1533-1602), Italian sculptor and architect  
Giovanni [de' Vecchi](#) [aka dal Borgo] (1536-1614), Italian painter of the Renaissance period  
Giovanni Corrado [Werle](#) (1701-1777), Italian organ maker  
Giovanni Gagliardi (19<sup>th</sup> cent.), Italian painter  
Cesare [Nebbia](#) (c.1536-c.1622), Italian Mannerist painter  
Paris [Nogari](#) [aka *Roman*] (1536-1601), Italian painter of the Renaissance period  
Cristoforo [Roncalli](#) [aka *Il Pomerancio*] (1552-1626), Italian Mannerist painter

#### **Location:**

69 Piazza dell'Oratorio, 00187 Roma

Coordinates: [41°53'58"N 12°28'55"E](#)

#### **Info:**

Contacts

Telephone: 0039 06 6797017

Opening times

Every day 7:00am-12:00am 4:30pm-07:00pm

Masses

Weekdays 7:00am

**Links:**

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
  2. [San Marcello church web site](#)
  3. [I Viaggi di Raffaella blog](#)
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- a. Eitel-Porter, Rhoda; "**The Oratorio del SS. Crocifisso in Rome Revisited**"; *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 142, No. 1171 (Oct., 2000), pp. 613-623 (jstor 888898)
  - b. von Henneberg, Josephine; "**An Early Work by Giacomo della Porta: The Oratorio del Santissimo Crocifisso di San Marcello**"; *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (Jun., 1970), pp. 157-171 (jstor 3048704)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oratory\\_of\\_Santissimo\\_Crocifisso](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oratory_of_Santissimo_Crocifisso)

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Oratorio\\_del\\_Santissimo\\_Crocifisso\\_\(Rome\)](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Oratorio_del_Santissimo_Crocifisso_(Rome))

<http://www.060608.it/en/cultura-e-svago/luoghi-di-culto-di-interesse-storico-artistico/cattolici/oratorio-del-ss-mo-crocifisso.html>