

# Sant'Agata dei Goti

(alla Suburra)



**Sant'Agata dei Goti** is a palaeochristian basilica of uncertain date, as well as a conventual and titular church in Rome located in Rione Monti (I). It is a very old church and is dedicated to the Sicilian martyr Saint Agatha. [1]

## SAINT AGATHA

She was born in Catania, the city in Sicily, and is one of the most famous martyrs of Christian antiquity, together with St. Agnes, the martyr of Rome, and St. Lucy, martyr of Syracuse. According to tradition, she was killed in the year 251, during the persecution of the Emperor Decius, after having rejected the appeals of the matron Aphrodisia, and her daughters. After the amputation of her breast, she was miraculously healed by St. Peter. [4] [a]

## **History**

The period in which this church was built is not known. The church was built (or possibly rebuilt) by Flavius [Ricimer](#) (an Arian, Germanic general who effectively ruled the Western Roman Empire from 456 until his death in 472, who was buried in the church) for the small Gothic colony of Arian observants who had settled in the area. From this derives the modern-day Church epithet "dei Goti." Formerly called only "alla Suburra" because it was here in the old Subura district. The first historically verifiable witness goes back to the years 467-470, when Ricimer had the church embellished with a mosaic in the apse with an inscription. The ancient mosaics were still to be found

in the church in the 16th century when they were destroyed, but there is a drawing of them from the 15th century in the Vatican Library. It is the only Arian church that has been preserved in Rome.

[3] [4]

The Goths were Arians, so when the Arian heresy was finally suppressed in Rome in the first half of the 6th century, the church was then abandoned and fell into disrepair. In the year 592, St. Gregory the Great restored the church for Catholic worship, dedicating it to Sts. Sebastian and Agatha. He had the church decorated commemorating that event. The building was restored again under Pope Leo III (795-816) and it was probably on this occasion that the monastery was built, entrusted by Leo IV (847-855) to the Benedictine monks, who had the bell tower erected in the 12th century.

[3] [4] [7]

It was about this time the remains of the so-called Greek martyrs, who were buried in the Catacombs of San Callisto, were removed to the church. The Greek martyrs were Hippolytus, his sister Paulina, her husband Hadrias and their children Maria and Neon who are supposed to have suffered during the persecutions of Valerian (r. 253-260). Paulina is buried beneath the altar of St. Agatha and the others beneath the high altar. [e]

In 1031 Card. Giovanni Crescenzi, the Bishop of Palestrina, consecrated an altar in the presence of some important members of his family. It is not clear whether it was the main altar or that one dedicated to St. Agatha. In 1048, on the occasion of his monastic profession, Gregory Crescenzi had the relics of the martyrs placed under the main altar. [3] [4]

At the end of the 12th century a campanile was built on the left side of the Church. It was probably in three floors with double windows, but by 1622 the top two were so dilapidated that they were demolished so that today only one floor with windows remains. Otherwise the campanile appears as it did in the 12th century. [3] [c]

In the 13th century the Church was officiated by the diocesan clergy. In 1461, Pius II entrusted the Church to Cardinal Francis Gonzaga, who embellished it with a highly decorative floor. The floor is in late-Cosmatesque style and the middle part still exists in the Church today. [3]

The old church was in the basilica form with a high nave at ca.22x18 meters and two small aisles with side altars and a chapel at each end. The apse was semi-circular and stood until 1589, where a large part of the wall collapsed. The old form has been preserved to the present day, where you can clearly see traces of the old walls and windows, which is now changed. It is still the ancient granite columns that divides the church nave. Of the original seven arches in each aisle, two were closed in the 17th century, so that today there are only five. The ceiling was built with vaults. [3]

After the Sack of Rome in 1527, and after much neglect, the church was in need of extensive restoration. At the expense of Cardinal Niccolò Ridolfi, the works was carried out (1535-36) by the Siense architect and hydraulics engineer, **Tommaso Ghinucci**. The only feature dating from Ridolfi's possession of Sant'Agata to have survived the extensive renovations carried out in later centuries is the well. It stands in the quadriportico, outside the western door of the church and inside the gate leading to Via Mazzarino. The well has a worn stemma that is barely visible, comprised of two feathers or palm fronds encircled by a crown and tied together by a ribbon bearing the word SEMPER. [b]

The "most beautiful gardens" at the church of Sant'Agata dei Goti provided the setting for a learned circle of Greek scholars, Florentine exiles and sympathisers who met under the aegis of Cardinal Niccolò Ridolfi during the 1530 and 1540s. [b]

In 1566, Card. Giovanni Battista Cicala rebuilt the quadriportico, right outside the main door, replacing a possible colonnaded atrium as was common with many other palaeochristian basilicas. [7]

In the early 16th century the Títular-Cardinal Lodovico decorated a chapel at the end of the right aisle. The chapel was dedicated to Sant'Agata and here placed the relics of the Greek martyrs who had been moved to the church from the Catacombs of San Callisto in the 9th century. [3]

The complex was granted to the Benedictine Congregation of Montevergine in 1579. [3] [d]

The apse of the church collapsed in 1589 and the old mosaic from Ricimer's time was destroyed. In the late 1500s the Titular-Cardinal Federico Borromeo had the apse rebuilt and in 1599 his successor Titular-Cardinal Carlo di Lorena de Lorraine-Vaudemont had frescoes painted. The following year, the Monastery became an Abbacy. [7]

Shortly after 1630 the Titular-Cardinals Francesco and Antonio Barberini restored and radically changed the church in the baroque style with stucco decorations, with **Domencio Castelli** as an architect. From here stems the gilded coffered ceiling, which was built over the former arched vaults. In 1633 Card. Francesco Barberini had a new fresco painted above the apse, and installed four rectangular windows at the top of each side and between them set up a series of paintings with scenes from *Sant'Agata's life and martyrdom*. In 1636 Card. Antonio Barberini rebuilt the choir, the main altar, as well as that of the Cappella di Sant'Agata. [1] [7]

In 1703, the organ was completed, as commissioned by Card. Carlo Bichi. [3]

In 1729, the Monks of Montevergine rebuilt from the foundations the monastery adjacent to the church. They had the external façade constructed by **Francisco Ferrari**, and brought to completion a few other finishing touches. [b]

After the restoration of the Papal government, after the French occupation, in 1815 the Jesuits took over, and briefly ran a college here until they handed it over to the Maestre Pie Filippini in 1820. They ran a school for girls. Then in 1838 it became the site of the Irish College, by the decision of Gregory XVI. [1] [7]

During the Irish College's tenure at Sant'Agata, the church became the burial place for the heart of the Irish political leader Daniel O'Connell. Heading to Rome on pilgrimage, the Liberator died at Genoa, commending "his soul to God, his body to Ireland and his heart to Rome." The memorial erected to him was removed from the church when the Irish College was transferred to its present seat in via SS. Santi Quattro, but O'Connell's heart may still be buried in the crypt of Sant'Agata.

[1] [d]

In 1838, the Titular-Cardinal Juan Francisco Marco y Catalan had some works of restoration done. Card. Giacomo Antonelli, who was the secretary of State under Pius IX, and the Titular-Cardinal of the church, had his family tomb constructed in the church, and he renewed the main altar. [7]

1925-1933: in order to extend the buildings of the Bank of Italy, the monastery was torn down, and the Irish College was transferred. As a quid pro quo, the bank paid for a restoration which involved stripping the stucco off the exterior walls, rebuilding the ciborium and relaying the floor. [3]

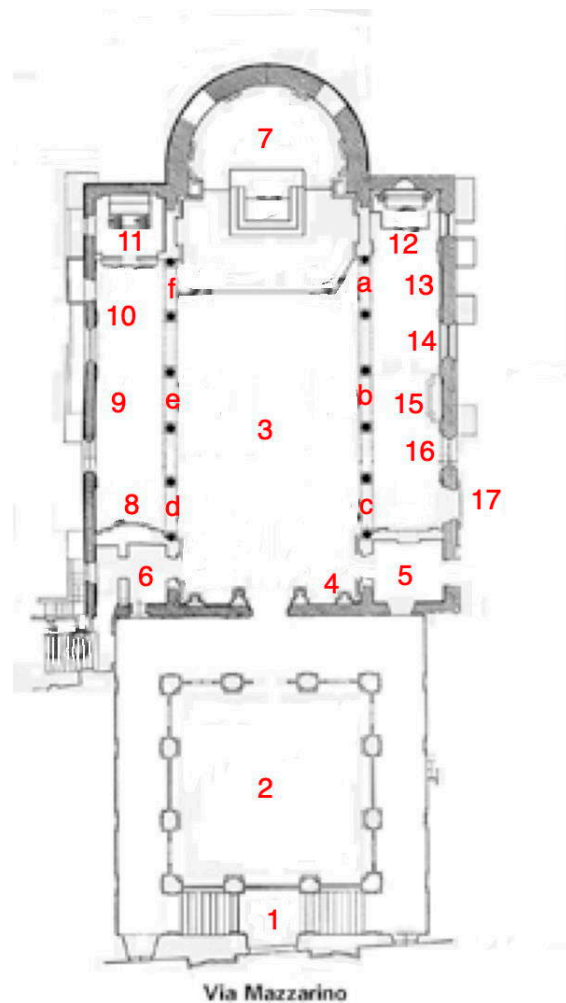
Then in 1926 the church was then entrusted by Pius XI to the Congregation of the Sacred Stigmata of Our Lord Jesus Christ (the Stigmatines), and the adjacent building became the residence of their Generalate. [7]

In 1933 the Titular-Cardinal Gaetano Bisleti performed the ritual of recognition of the relics of the Holy Greek Martyrs, and the canopy was built over the main altar, making use of some medieval material that had been preserved in the square portico outside the entrance. The sanctuary was thus its present appearance. An inscription to that effect is on the left wall, just before the triumphal arch.

### Cardinalate

The current cardinal-deacon is Raymond Leo Burke (as of 2023). [1] [2]

## Plan:



## Exterior

The exterior walls are in brick. In the 17th century these were covered with stucco, but in the 1930's this was removed. The exterior wall of the semi-circular apse is interesting, as most of it survived the collapse at the end of the 16th century which destroyed the conch and its mosaic. It has sloping buttresses, and visible are the outlines of two round-headed windows which were blocked at an early period. It is evident that the stability of the structure was causing concern even when the church was still relatively new. [1]

### Campanile (6)

Outside the church on the left side is the Romanesque campanile from the late 12th century. It is today of two floors with double windows. Two floors were demolished in 1622 because it was about to collapse. The lower outer portion is decorated with bands of alternating brick and cut stone. It can be viewed from the Via dei Serpenti; look to the right of the church from there. [c]

### Processional Entrance and Quadriportico

The processional entrance (1) façade on Via Mazzarino was rebuilt by **Francesco Ferrari** in 1729.

This work is not part of the church but was intended as the public entrance to the quadriportico. Two pairs of gigantic Composite pilasters flank the entrance, the inner pair being doubled in relief. They support an entablature the frieze of which has a short dedicatory inscription to the saint

([Dedicata] S[anctae] Agatha v[irgini] e[t] m[artiri]),

and above this is a triangular pediment which only occupies the width of the inner pair of pilasters. The entablature beyond this is curved up and over to touch the pediment on each side with a little volute. [1]

The pilasters are in stone, but the rest of the façade is mostly rendered in pale yellow. The stucco

relief above the door is within a wreathed tondo with its own arched cornice, accompanied by two heads of putti in the round and with wings resting. It shows *St Agatha holding the palm of martyrdom* and her severed breast on a plate, attributed to **Giacomo Ferrari**. Above the tondo is a relief of two crossed sprays of lilies surmounted by a crown. This is a symbol of virginity triumphant. In the tympanum of the pediment is a putto's head with six wings, symbolizing a cherub. [1] [4] [d]

Within the entrance from Via Mazzarino there is a staircase on each side and a series of arches around a 17th century quadriportico (2). On the inside of the staircase there is bricked in an altarpiece from the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the Barberini family crest. It had earlier been the frontal on the high altar. [3]

In the center stands an old well with a column on either side and an ivy overgrown lintel. The well was probably built for the occasion of the visit of Pope Clement VII to his nephew Card. Nicolo Ridolfi in 1530. [3] [4]

On the right side are the remains of an old wall with column fragments from the 5th-9th century. On the left side is a bust said to depict the philosopher Seneca and various antique fragments, among others, a veiled face, which may come from it 6<sup>th</sup> century. [3]

In the arcade facing opposite the portal is the entrance to the church itself, a high door crowned by a triangular gable and an inscription naming Cardinal Antonio Barberini, who was responsible for the 17th century renovation of the church.

## Interior

Access to the church is usually through the entrance from Vis Panisperna.

Although it was redecorated in the Baroque style and has some 19th century additions, it is still possible to see traces of the 5th century plan, which was a basilica with a nave and two side aisles. The aisles originally had windows, but they are now bricked up. At the end of each aisle is a small chapel. [3]

### Nave (3)

The nave arcades have six columns on each side, although the first pair have been walled in to create two entrance vestibules. Also, the far pair of columns have been included in two walls enclosing the chapels at the ends of the aisles. The granite columns separating the naves are ancient, and seem to be a set pillaged from some local building such as a small temple. They have their original Ionic capitals, and these support arcades with decorative impostes. Above the arches of the arcade some medallions have been placed, which picture some Irish Saints, a memento of the Irish College. They were painted in 1863. [1] [4]

At the top there are four rectangular windows with large paintings between. Originally, there were seven arched windows, as one can see traces of still. The rectangular windows were installed in the at the request of the Cardinals Francesco and Antonio Barberini (1633). [3]

The paintings between the windows, recently restored, attributed to **Paolo Gismondi**, (aka Paolo Perugino), depict some episodes of the life and death of St. Agatha: [3] [3]

- (a) *St. Agatha among the daughters of Aphrodisia,*
- (b) *St. Agatha refuses to worship the idols,*
- (c) *Martyrdom of St. Agatha,*
- (d) *St. Peter appears to St. Agatha in prison,*
- (e) *St. Agatha is placed on burning wood,*
- (f) *St. Agatha on her deathbed.*

On either side of the triumphal arch are *Faith* and *Hope* by **Gismondi**. [3]

The gilded coffered ceiling with rosettes and acanthus scrolls is from 1633, commissioned by Cardinal Francesco Barberini, was designed by **Domenico Castelli**, carved by **Bartolomeo de' Rossi**, (1632–33) and decorated by **Simone Laggi** and **Francesco Incocca**. [3] [d]

The restrained modern floor, of the 1930's, contains remains of the original 15th century Cosmatesque pavement. It is a very late example of the style. In the middle of the nave it has an unusual, but very nice, design. [1]

In the floor are some tombstones, including for Ranieri Fauloni Finocchietti (1710-1793), Francesco Paolo Remotti (1932-1961), and for Terence McSweeney (d. 1858) by **Giuseppe Leonardi**, 1859.

[5] [d]

The organ above the entrance was restored in 1930 and surrounded by gilded stucco decorations from 1703, crowned by the coat of arms of Cardinal Carlo Bichi, who paid for it. [3] [d]

On the counter-façade to the right of the entrance is a funeral inscription (4) of the Greek humanist Janus Lascaris (d.1534) who is interred in the church. The translation is roughly the following: [3]

"Lascaris was laid to rest in foreign soil,  
in no way, stranger, faulting it as excessively strange;  
he found it kind, and is grieved that his homeland  
no longer raises a barrow in freedom for Greeks". [e]

The funeral inscription below is for Catherine Lascaris. [3]

"Stranger, beneath me lies a woman of Laconia, daughter of Rhallos,  
who came to Italy in flight from the enslavement of her country,  
obedient to her grandfather; who married her to an illustrious man.  
By reason of her own virtues she was indeed a credit to them,  
but the evil fate of Hellas, albeit from afar, cut Katerine off,  
pitying her neither for her being with child nor for her youth". [e]

The door to the right of the counterfaçade is to a small chapel (5).

The door to the left of the counterfaçade (6) leads to the base of the Romanesque campanile.

The triumphal arch is supported by a pair of gigantic Ionic pilasters, and these and the walls of the apse are in stucco falsely colored in the 19th century to resemble polychrome marble. [1]

### Sanctuary (7)

The semicircular apse may originally have had two windows, instead today it has 19<sup>th</sup> century rectangular wall panels of painted false marble separated by pilasters. The current appearance dates from a restoration in 1932, which removed the stucco angels Domenico De Rossi had done that previously adorned the room. The choir and episcopal chair in marble are from the 18th century. [3]

The fresco in the apse conch shows the *Glory of St Agatha*, made by **Paolo Gismondi** in 1633.

The fresco takes the place of the ancient mosaic of Ricimer, unfortunately destroyed in 1589 when the apse collapsed, then later substituted by the fresco of the *Martyrdom of St. Agatha* by Giovanni Rocca (1599). All of the current frescoes are from the 1633 renovations. [1]

The 12th century ciborium over the main altar has four columns of pavonazetto marble, all decorated with Cosmatesque mosaic in the spandrels, and a pyramidal canopy supported by little columns. The original ciborium pieces, damaged by the 16th century collapse of the apse, had been preserved in the portico. The ciborium was rebuilt, using some of the original pieces, during the 1932 restoration by the Italian Central Bank. The original frontal of the altar with the emblem of the Barberini family (the famous bees) is preserved in the portico. [1]

The Main Altar is dedicated to the Greek Martyrs. Beneath the altar are enshrined the relics of four Greek martyrs named Hippolytus, Adria, Neon and Martia (or Martana). These were re-interred in 1933. It is not known where in Greece they came from, but their relics were originally brought from there and enshrined in the catacombs of Callistus by the time of Pope Damasus, who mentioned them in an epitaph. From the window of the altar it is possible to see the urn containing the relics.

[1] [4] [6]



Above the altar is a Crucifix in the Byzantine style.

The side aisles will be described starting from the left back in a clockwise direction:

At the beginning of the left aisle is a 18<sup>th</sup> century funeral monument of Cardinal Carlo Bichi (8). It is made of stucco by **Carlo De Dominicis**, his first public commission. The organ was donated by Cardinal Bichi. [1] [6]

In the middle of the left aisle is the funeral monument of Card. Enrico Dante (9) (d. 1967), who has been buried in the crypt, designed by **Angelo Fattinanzi**. Cardinal Dante was Titular-Cardinal of the church from 1965 until his death. [1]

Entrance to the crypt (10) where the members of the Antonelli family and Dr. Remotti (d. 1961) have been buried: their tombstones are on the floor. Remotti was a medical doctor working in Africa when he died during the Kendu massacre in 1961.

To its right is the entrance to the sacristy, which has an ancient stone basin from the 16<sup>th</sup>-century provided by the monks of the Abbey of Montevergine. [3]

#### Chapel of St Gaspare Bertoni (11)

The chapel at the end of the left aisle was originally dedicated to the Virgin Mary. It was built in 1681 and redecorated in 1863 for Cardinal Giacomo Antonelli as the funerary chapel of the noble Antonelli family. Cardinal Antonelli's coat-of-arms is seen in the middle of the dome. The chapel is vividly decorated with colorful frescoes. The chapel was later rededicated to Saint Gaspar Louis Bertoni, who was the founder of the Congregation of the Sacred Stigmata of Our Lord Jesus Christ, known as the Stigmatines. This probably occurred after he was canonized in 1989. The altarpiece of *St. Gaspare Bertoni* is by **Aronne Del Vecchio** (1991). The altar frontal is decorated with three reliefs: *Adoration of the Shepherds* and small round reliefs *Annunciation* and *Assumption*, carved in the first half of 1600s. [1] [6] [d]

#### Chapel of St Agatha

The chapel at the end of the right aisle (12) has the Altar of St. Agatha, commissioned by Card. Ludovico Podocathor (1429-1504). The altar, from 1504, is a white marble sarcophagus decorated with palm leaves and contains an urn which holds the relics of a set of virgin martyrs, brought here from a set of catacombs in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Their names were Paulina, Dominanda, Donata, Rogata, Serotina, Saturnina and Hilaria. On the left wall is a gilded wood reliquary with the relics of Greek martyrs. [1] [2] [6]

Above the altar is a niche with a gilded wooden statue of *Sant'Agata*, from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The niche is flanked by two pillars that support a lintel. On the left wall is a memorial inscription for Card. Podocathor from 1504. [1]

On the wall hangs (13) a tapestry depicting the Greek martyrs. It was done in 1933, on the occasion of their body recognition by Cardinal Camillo Bisleti. [3]

On the wall in the next bay is a memorial inscription (14) for Columba Marmion, OSB. He was born Joseph Aloysius Marmion (April 1, 1858 – January 30, 1923). He was a Benedictine Irish monk and the third Abbot of Maredsous Abbey in Belgium. Beatified by Pope John Paul II on September 3, 2000, Columba was one of the most popular and influential Catholic authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His books are considered spiritual classics. The inscription is dated 2007.

In the middle of the right aisle is the tomb of the former Titular-Cardinal Juan Francisco Marco y Catalan (15) (d. 1841). It is decorated with a relief of *The Cardinal praying to the Virgin and Child*. [d]

In the next bay (16) is a Crucifix.

At the beginning of the right aisle is the side entrance from Via Panisperna with an inscription of Card. Antonio Barberini on the right (17).

## Liturgy

The feast of the Greek martyrs whose relics are preserved here is on 2 December. It is usually celebrated with an evening Mass with the liturgy of the Byzantine Catholic rite.

Other important feasts are that of St Agatha on 5 February and St Gaspar Bertoni, founder of the Stigmatines, on 12 June.

## Note

The church is surrounded on all sides by taller buildings, except to the east, and so is not easy to find. The processional entrance on Via Mazzarino is rarely to be found open, so use the side entrance on Via Panisperna.

The church entrance here, up a little passageway, has recently been open on weekdays at least for an hour after 16:00 (it is wise to check before visiting). The uncertain opening hours, plus the discreet location, may mean that you have the church entirely to yourself.

The best view from the street is of the apse, from the Via dei Serpenti. It is on the other side of a car park, the gates of which are usually open during working hours so you can examine the palaeochristian wall fabric at close quarters.

## Artists and Architects

Angelo Fattininzi (20th cent), Italian architect  
Aronne Del Vecchio (1910-1998), Italian painter  
Bartolomeo de' Rossi (17<sup>th</sup> century), Italian woodcarver  
Carlo [de Dominicis](#) (1696-1758), Italian architect  
Domenico [Castelli](#) [aka *Fontanino*] (c.1582-1657), Italian architect  
Francesco [Ferrari](#) (18<sup>th</sup> cent.), Italian architect and painter  
Giacomo Antonio Ferrari (18<sup>th</sup> century), Italian stonemason and sculptor  
Giuseppe Leonardi (18<sup>th</sup> century), Italian artist  
Paolo [Gismondi](#) [aka *Paolo Perugino*] (1612-1685), Italian painter  
Simone Laggi (active 1626-1639), Italian painter from Florence  
Tommaso [Ghinucci](#) (16th century), Italian Architect and hydraulics engineer  
Francesco Incocca (17<sup>th</sup> century), Italian artist

## Burials

Giovanni Cardinal CRESCENZI, (11th century)  
Bishop of Palestrina  
Ercole Cardinal [RANGONE](#), (ca. 1491-1527)  
Carlo Cardinal [BICHI](#), (1638-1718)  
Buried on the right side, at the back  
Juan Francisco Cardinal [MARCO Y CATALÁN](#), (1771-1841)  
Enrico Cardinal [DANTE](#), (1884-1967)  
Buried in the crypt  
Members of the Antonelli family  
Buried in the crypt  
Janus [Lascaris](#) (1445-1535), and his wife Catherine  
Greek humanist  
Francisco Paolo Remotti (1952-1961)  
Buried in the crypt  
Flavius [Ricimer](#) (d. 472)  
Gian Giorgio [Trissino](#) (1478-1550)  
Venetian Renaissance humanist, poet, dramatist, diplomat, grammarian, linguist, and philosopher.  
Tommaso [Masini](#) di Giovanni (c.1488-1546)  
a friend and collaborator of Leonardo da Vinci

## Location



Addr: Via Mazzarino 16, 00184 Roma

Coord: [41° 53' 47." N, 12° 29' 21" E](#)

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### Links and References:

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[Congregation website](#)

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