

# Santa Bibiana



**Santa Bibiana** is a very heavily restored 5th century church, formerly monastic and now parochial, in the rione Monti. The dedicated to St Bibiana, a 4th century virgin and martyr. The church was Bernini's first church commission. The church of Santa Bibiana is located adjacent to Termini Station tracks and not far from the so-called "Temple of Minerva Medica". The parish is administered by the congregation of the Sons of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

## History

In ancient times this area was the so-called "Licini gardens", ie the gardens belonging to the emperor Licinius Ignazio Gallieno (260-268). It was a grandiose complex, called the "palatium Licinii", with parks, baths and buildings of various kinds. [3]

The first church was built by Pope Simplicius (468-483) in a locality that used to be the Horti Liciniani, and consecrated in 467. The original church was named San Paolo iuxta Sanctam Bibianam. The Pope also declared that it was a pilgrimage shrine. The site originally belonged to St Bibiana's family. The church was certainly built on a Roman house but according to an ancient tradition, the Church, instead, would have been built over a century before, by the Roman matron Olimpina Faustina, in 363, as it is written in the plaque under the fresco by Ciampelli on the right side of the nave. [1] [3]

Pope Anastasio 1 (399-401) erected nearby a cemetery called "ad ursum pileatum", a unique name deriving from the marble statue existing there of a bear with a cap on his head, probable sign of an artisan shop. In 683 the bodies of Saints Simplicio, Faustina and Viatrice were transported here from the catacombs of Generosa by Pope Leo 11. [3]

It was restored by Pope Honorius III in 1224. At the same time, a convent was built adjacent to the church for the community of Benedictine nuns. This convent apparently stood opposite the church façade. Epitaphs of abbesses of the convent survive in the church. The nuns resided there until 1440, when Pope Eugene IV (1431-1447) suppressed the monastery for the misconduct of some

nuns. The abandoned convent was demolished in the Bernini restoration in the 17th century. [1] [3]

The miraculous recovery of the body of the martyr on the 2nd March, 1624, obliged, in view of the Holy Year, the radical restoration financed by Urban VIII, as part of the preparations for the Holy Year of 1625. The complex had apparently stood empty for almost a century and the pope wanted to “rescue” the church from obscurity by assigning the task to **Gian Lorenzo Bernini** when he was 26 years old, to turn it into a Baroque church. The work was in progress in the years 1624 to 1626. This was the first architectural project that **Bernini** undertook in his distinguished career. [1] [a]

The original little basilica was apparently left substantially intact. **Bernini** rebuilt the apse to contain his gigantic statue of St Bibiana, and also added chapels at the ends of the aisles. Most importantly he demolished the convent (which must have been ruinous by then), and added an entrance loggia to the front of the church with a priest's house above to replace it. The church was reconsecrated after the transfer of the reliquaries on the 14th November, 1626. [1]

The mediaeval Romanesque brick tower-campanile was also demolished, and replaced by a little roof-campanile. The tower used to be by the near end of the left hand aisle. [1]

During the 19th century the church was surrounded by vineyards and the extensive gardens of the Villa Sacripanti. The country setting began to vanish in 1863, when Pope Pius IX opened the new Termini station for all the railways entering the city. The enormous extension and elevation of the railway station pressed right against the church, especially after the Second World War when the present station was completed. Finally, the street adjacent to the church was used as the terminal approach for an electric interurban railway, the tracks of which cut the church off from the main street. [1]

At the end of the 19th century the church was described as “semi-abandoned”. Some repair work on the roof and floor was carried out on the orders of Pope Pius X (1903-14), and in 1920 the church was granted to the Sons of the Holy Family (Figli della Sacra Famiglia di Gesù, Maria e Giuseppe). The church was made parochial in 1953. [1] [2]

The Figli converted a sacristy into a chapel of the Holy Family in 1957, and established their Roman headquarters at the church. From 1961 to 1965 a restoration and conservation of the fabric and artworks took place. However in 1982 part of the ceiling collapsed, and this was blamed on the vibration set up by passing trains. As a result the church had to close for three years, and repair work was only finished in 1987. Further restoration of the frescoes, columns and marble fixtures of the three access doors took place from 1997 to 1999. [1] [3]

## **Exterior**

Due to all of the external additions the ancient fabric cannot be seen anywhere from the outside. From the street you can see how the entrance block is much higher than the church behind it, and has its own pitched and tiled roof. The central nave has its own roof, similarly pitched and tiled. The side aisle and ancillary rooms on the church's right hand side have rather complex roofing; the main area is a single cat-slide pitch covering both aisle and far right hand room, while the near right hand room has its own pitch and the central chapel its own double-pitched roof on a transverse axis. The large lunette window belongs to this chapel. [1]

The fabric is brick, rendered in a rather dirty-looking ochre color. The Bernini loggia and façade have architectural details in travertine limestone. [1]

The campanile sits on the roof of the near right-hand room, next to the loggia block. It has two storeys, each with an arched void for a bell and with the upper void being smaller. The second storey is flanked by a pair of incurved volutes, and has a little triangular pediment. The two bells are the 17th century originals, and the larger one has a relief of St Bibiana and a dedicatory inscription mentioning Pope Urban VIII. [1]

The convent block has its own little single-bell campanile on its eastern roofline, overlooking the convent courtyard. The entrance to the courtyard is through a metal gate to the right of the church when looking from the street. This campanile was provided with its own bell in 1927. [1]

## Façade

The architecturally separate frontage was completed in 1625 by Bernini. It is an early Baroque work, and is rather severe with a lack of decoration. Nowadays it looks over the little church garden but used to face a piazza, so it is rather difficult to appreciate unless you go into the garden (which is inaccessible when the church is closed). [1]

There are two storeys, the bottom one comprising an entrance loggia. This has three equal sized large entrance archways taking up the entire width, together with one on each side around the corner. The archivolt of the arches spring from Doric impostes. The three are separated by a pair of triplet bunches of Ionic pilasters, with the central pilaster of each triplet proud of the other two, and the inner one prouder than the outer one. This design feature informs the appearance of the entire façade. Another pair of single Ionic pilasters occupies the outer corners, and these are doubled round the corners onto the side elevations. The complement of pilasters support an entablature with a blank frieze, a slightly protruding cornice and proud sections corresponding to the capitals of the pilasters below. [1]

Note that over the archivolt of the central arch is a little marble tablet reading SMM. This stand for Santa Maria Maggiore, the chapter of which used to be responsible for the church. [1]

The second storey has pilasters in the Doric order, matching the Ionic ones of the first storey. It is as wide as the first storey. The arrangement in the vertical placement of the central pair of pilaster triplets is continued here. The outer pair of each triplet has its capital under a flat roofline with a balustrade, which itself has a flaming urn finial on the outer corner of the façade. The central and inner pilasters rise higher, to support a small segmental pediment which has two vertical steps outwards to accommodate them. Today the papal coat of arms of Urban VIII is no longer on the tympanum, having fallen after some centuries.

[1] [3]

A pair of vertical rectangular windows flanks the central section of the second storey, each with raised horizontal cornices. The central zone of this storey is actually recessed beneath the pediment, and has a smaller rectangular window with a raised triangular pediment. In front of this is a balustraded balcony. [1]

## Campaniletto

It has two small bells. It is from the 17th century and was built to replace the medieval one, which was on the opposite side. It is part of the project developed by Bernini for the renovation. Preserve the two small original bells of 1625: the upper one, smaller and the other with the image of S. Bibiana and the coat of arms of Urban VIII and the inscription of dedication. In the second largest bell tower, on the opposite side, there is a third bell by Alessandro Lucenti (1927). [3]

## Loggia

The interior of the loggia has a vaulted ceiling, the vault springing from Ionic pilasters with swagged capitals. [1]

The central entrance has an elaborate doorcase, with an intricately framed heraldic shield inserted into the top of the broken triangular pediment. The shield itself is now blank, and presumably was once painted. Over the door is a short epigraph recording the restoration ordered by Pope Urban VIII. [1]

To the left of the door is the 12th century inscription mentioning ad Ursum Pileatum, which reads: "This is the way which goes to the place which was called in ancient times the Bear with a Cap, and in modern times is the monastery of St Bibiana, in which place were buried five thousand, two hundred and sixty [plus another] six thousand corpses of holy martyrs, not including women and children." The last bit, which is not very clear in the Latin, seems to prescribe an indulgence of six thousand years off one's time in purgatory if these saints were venerated on All Saints Day or during its octave. [1]

To the right of the door is another inscription, unusual in being in Italian. This repeats the information on the previous tablet, while recording the transfer of the former convent church to

## Interior

The five-bay nave with aisles is short for its width, almost square. A further bay is provided by the Bernini loggia, which architecturally is an add-on to the original ancient little basilica. On either side is a range of three rooms as long as the nave, and as wide as the aisles. The central apse is rectangular, and at the ends of the aisles is the pair of side chapels added by **Bernini**. [1]

The trabeation columns are mismatched, three being in pink granite but the far pair being in white marble. This pair exhibit spiral fluting, indicating that they came from a very high-status building (try to imagine the task of fluting a marble column spirally, with only hammers and chisels to work with). The odd one out is the third on the left, which is of grey granite. These granite columns would have been considered as precious in ancient times. The pink ones came from Aswan in Egypt, a very long way up the Nile. The grey one is also from Egypt, from the quarry of Mons Claudianus in the desert east of the river. The Corinthian and Composite capitals of the columns also differ, and they were obviously looted from more than one ancient building. They have been repaired with stucco. [1]

The counterfaçade bears a tablet with an inscription recording the 17th century restoration, and over this is a window leading into a room over the loggia. The present grey marble floor is early 20th century, and the undecorated ceiling dates to 1987. [1]

### Column and herb of St Bibiana

An ancient red marble column in a corner on the left near the entrance is said to be the one St Bibiana was tied to when she was flogged to death. Until the 18th century, dust scraped off from this column was mixed with a plant that grew on the saint's alleged original grave in the church's garden, and used as a remedy against epilepsy. The column is protected by a diapered grating of bronze designed by Bernini, with gilding on the exaggerated joints. The herb concerned features in the Bernini sculpture on the high altar, and was known as "St Bibiana's herb". [1]

### Memorials of abbesses

On the aisle walls, there are epitaphs which used to mark the tombs of several abbesses and patrons of the former adjacent convent. They were moved here from the floor of the nave when the church was restored in the 17th century. Notable are those of abbess Donna Lucia, (d. 1351), abbess Donna Maria 1424 and Crispoldo de' Mattei, 1420 on the left hand side; on the right hand side, of the abbess Onesta Maria, 1423, and the abbess Viviana de Salvectis, (1330). [1] [c]

In the first chapel on the left an incised slab for Mattheus Puccione de Peruso (d. 1420). Possibly the slab came here from another church or monastery. Arms : two bears. A sword on either side. He wears a turban berretta, a gown with wide sleeves. Crossed hands. He has a girdle at his waist. It is a burly, good-natured face. The slab is good, and interesting. [c]

### Nave frescoes

The nave walls above the trabeations, the spandrels above the apse arch and the counterfaçade are frescoed in a cycle executed in the 17th century restoration. To prepare the surfaces, the former windows above the trabeations were blocked up. [1]

The paintings on the walls of the central nave, by **Pietro da Cortona** (left side) and **Agostino Ciampelli** and his school (right side), show scenes from the *Life of St Bibiana*. Executed in 1624, they were commissioned after Cardinal Francesco Barberini, Pope Urban VIII's nephew, had discovered **da Cortona's** talent. The patronage of the Barberini family explains why their heraldic shield is so prominent, with its three bees. [1]

The cycle begins at the left hand side next to the triumphal arch, continues on the left hand back wall, then picks up at the near right hand side at the to the triumphal arch again. [1]

On the left are:

*The Condemnation and Death of St Demetria,  
Rufina Trying to Persuade St Bibiana to Apostatize and  
St Bibiana Being Flogged While Tied to a Column.*

The two figures in between are *St Flavian* and *St Demetria*.

On the right are :

*The Corpse of St Bibiana Dumped in the Forum Taurii,*

*The Burial of St Bibiana* and

*The Erection of the Church by Olimpina.*

The two figures in between are *St Olimpina* and *St Dafrosa*.

The entrance door is flanked by still-lives of torture instruments by **Ciampelli**, a horrible reminder of the sufferings of the martyrs. The counterfaçade inscription above is flanked by a pair of angels playing musical instruments -a harp and a lute. The two sisters Bibiana and Demetria feature again, reclining on the archivolt of the triumphal arch.

### Sanctuary

The sanctuary has a shallow barrel-vaulted rectangular apse. The triumphal arch is supported by a pair of Doric pilasters. There is a lunette window in clear glass in the apse above the altar, containing a stained glass representation of the Barberini coat-of-arms with its famous bees. [1]

The vault has a fresco representation of *God the Father*, accompanied by putti. Note that the right hand side panel has a fresco of an angelic musical duo, but that the equivalent place on the left hand side of the vault has a window instead. When **Bernini** blocked the nave windows, he left the church in danger of being rather dark and so introduced this arrangement into the apse to compensate. [1]

The altar is monochrome, in white marble. A pair of Ionic columns with swagged capitals support a little triangular pediment. A proclamation of an indulgence attached to the altar is on a curlicued scroll on the entablature. On either side is a recessed pair of pilasters in the same side, supporting continuations of the entablature below the pediment. The fresco work here is by **Giovanni Domenico Marziani**. [1]

The altarpiece is **Bernini's** statue of *St Bibiana*. The statue was completed and mounted in 1626, assisted by **Giuliano Finelli**. It is set in a round-headed niche with scallop decoration in its conch, and shows the saint standing next to her pillar. She is holding a gilded bronze palm branch in one hand, giving you a wave in greeting with the other and has her herb growing at her feet. The statue is a first for **Bernini** - it is the first fully clothed statue he sculpted. He was to become a master in carving marble draperies. [1] [2]

The six bronze candlesticks on the altar are in bronze and also date back to the time of Pope Urban VIII. They were designed by **Bernini**. At the base there are the image of the Saint, the coat of arms of the Pope and an inscription that recalls Msgr. Alessandro Valtrini, commissioner of the same and benefactor of the church. [3]

Below the altar is a 4th century alabaster basin behind a grille in the same style as that protecting the miraculous column. It has lions' feet, and is decorated with a leopard's head. An extremely prestigious item when made, it is thought to have been part of the bathroom arrangements of a luxurious private villa. It was found in the **Bernini** restoration in 1624 buried beneath the sanctuary floor, and was then used to enshrine the relics of SS Bibiana, Dafrosa and Demetria which remain in it. The relics of the first two were found in the same place, at a shallower depth. Those of St Bibiana were in a box, and those of St Dafrosa in some sort of marble urn. The identity of the relics was indicated by an inscription on a piece of metal buried with them. [1]

### Side Chapels

The aisles have identical layouts. There is a chapel at the far end of each, and three rooms off each. The first and third rooms each have an ordinary doorway surmounted by an oeil de boeuf (horizontal elliptical) window, but the central room is a large chapel entered through a substantial archway flanked by a pair of Ionic pilasters. All these openings were created by smashing through the ancient aisle walls. The other rooms were originally sacristies, but the far right hand one has been converted into a chapel. [1]

The church has five side chapels, treated in clockwise order from the near left hand side.

### Cappella Pacetti

The large chapel off the middle of the left hand aisle is the early 18th century Cappella Pacetti, and is dedicated to St Gertrude the Great. The reason for this dedication was that she was a Cistercian nun. [1]

It has a rectangular plan, with a white marble balustrade and antique yellow marble mirrors. In the back wall there is a large lunetted window, with friezes of leaves and flowers. The altar has a pair of red and white breccia Corinthian columns supporting two halves of a split and separated segmental pediment, with stucco heads of cherubs and an angel supporting the cross, and a large lunette window above. [3]

The altarpiece is in a frame of the same stone, and shows *St Gertrude in Ecstasy* by **Giacomo Verona**. She is dressed as a Benedictine abbess, with a putto helpfully holding her crozier for her. On the altar is a rather oversized statue of St Pius of Pietrelcina, still often referred to in English as St Padre Pio. [1]

On the right hand wall is a memorial to Vincenzo Pacetti, a canon of Santa Maria Maggiore who paid for the chapel and was responsible for the Cappella Paolina. The small monument is in white marble, in the shape of a sarcophagus, and rests on the shelves between which there is a winged skull. At the top there is the emblem of the deceased. [1] [3]

### Chapel of St Demetria

At the end of the left hand aisle is a chapel dedicated to St Demetria. This has an identical design to its twin at the end of the other aisle, and features a rather stark monochrome altar with an oeil-de-boeuf window inserted into its broken segmental pediment. [1]

The altarpiece shows *St Demetria being crowned as a martyr* by two putti, and holding a lily and a palm branch (symbols of virginity and martyrdom respectively). It is by **Ciampelli**. There is a statue of the Sacred Heart here. [1]

### Chapel of St Dafrosa

The chapel at the end of the right hand aisle is dedicated to St Dafrosa. The altar has been removed, but the altarpiece by **da Cortona** remains and depicts the saint at prayer. A wooden crucifix is here, with a statue of *Our Lady of Sorrows* in attendance. [1]

### Chapel of the Holy Family

The far room off the right hand aisle used to be one of the sacristies, but the Figli della Sacra Famiglia have converted it into a small chapel dedicated to the Holy Family. The decoration is by **Bruno Mastacchi**, of 1957, and the altarpiece showing *The Holy Family with Jesus as a young carpenter* is by **Giovanni Battista Conti** of 1953. [1] [3]

### Cappella Petroni

The large chapel off the middle of the right hand aisle is the Cappella Petroni, dedicated to Our Lady and St Flavian (the putative father of St Bibiana). It has Spanish interest, because it was founded in 1702 by a Spanish priest called Francesco di San Giovanni e Bernardo. The priest was to make intercession for the king of Spain and his kingdom. On the archivolt of the entrance archway is the coat-of-arms of the Petroni family, later patrons.

The chapel itself has stucco work by **Andrea Bertoni**. The balustrade is in pietra-santa and the altar frontal in polychrome marble. The pair of columns framing the altarpiece mimic the spirally fluted ones in the nave trabeations. [1] [3]

The paintings here are by **Girolamo Troppa**. The altarpiece depicts *San Flaviano, San Fausto and the Presbyter Giovanni Venerating an Icon of Our Lady*. The icon depicted is meant to be that of Salus Populi Romani in the Cappella Paolina at Santa Maria Maggiore. [1] [3]

The painting on the right hand wall shows *Sts Charles Borromeo, Philip Neri and Francis Xavier*, great saints of the Counter-Reformation. A putto is holding a portrait of King Charles II of Spain (1665-1700). He was the last of the Spanish House of Habsburg. [1]

The painting on the left hand wall shows *Sts John the Baptist, John the Evangelist and James the Great*. At

the bottom left, there is a portrait of a sovereign, Leopold I, emperor of Austria (1640-1705). [1] [3]

There is a statue of *St Anthony of Padua* in the chapel. [1]

### Access

Visitors who have read that the church is down the side of Termini station, may need to be warned that it is a long, noisy and boring walk from the front of Termini. People don't realize how gigantic the rail station is. Look at a map.

The church is served by bus route number 71, which starts at Piazza San Silvestro and passes Santa Maria Maggiore. This is the best way to visit it.

The opening hours are: 7:30 to 10:00, 16:30 to 19:30.

### Liturgy

Weekdays 8:00 and 18:00 (19:00 in summer);

Sundays and Solemnities 8:30, 10:30 and 18:00 (19:00 in summer).

### **Artists and Architects:**

Gian Lorenzo [Bernini](#) (1598-1680), Italian Baroque sculptor and architect

Agostino [Ciampelli](#) (1565-1630), Italian painter of the Baroque period

Pietro da [Cortona](#) (1597-1669), Italian painter of the Baroque period

Giovanni Domenico Marziani (16th cent.), Italian painter

Giacomo Verona (17th cent.), Italian painter

Giovanni Battista Conti (1878-1970), Italian painter

Bruno Mastacchi (20th cent.), Italian painter

Andrea Bertoni (17<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian stucco artist

Girolamo [Troppa](#) (1637–1710), Italian painter of the Baroque period

### **Relics:**

St Bibiana, her mother Dafrosa and her sister Demetria

### **Location:**

Address: 154 Via Giovanni Giolitti

00185 Roma Phone: 06-44.65.235

The church is only open from early to 10.30am, then 5 to 8pm

Coordinates: [41°53'43"N 12°30'33"E](#)

### **Links and References:**

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)

2. [Info.Roma web site](#)

3. Church Homepage: [www.santabibiana.com](http://www.santabibiana.com)

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