

# San Benedetto in Piscinula



**San Benedetto in Piscinula** is an early 12th century church, heavily restored, in the rione Trastevere, just south of the south end of the Ponte Cestio. The dedication is to St Benedict of Nursia. [1]

The Latin piscina means "fish pond" or "swimming pool"; the latter is the meaning in modern Italian, and the former the original meaning in Latin. So, piscinula seems to mean "small pond or pool". The two alternative guesses as to what this was are: Either the plunge-pool attached to a set of public baths, or a large tank in which to keep fish alive (and hence fresh) before their sale at a local fish-market. Both theories lack any archaeological confirmation, although ruins of baths were apparently recorded in the 18th century. [1]

## History

St. Benedict was born in Norcia around 480 AD, immediately after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, by a wealthy family of the gens Anicia. His father, consul and general captain of the Romans in the region of Norcia, sent him to Rome to undertake his literary and juridical studies at the age of twelve. In Rome, he found only corruption and debauchery, and when he was seventeen he left the city to take refuge in the Enfide (modern Affile), in the Aniene valley, where he performed miracles, founded monasteries and elaborated the Benedictine monastic rule. [2]

But in the few years that he stayed in Rome legend has it that he lived in the paternal house in Trastevere. He lived in prayer and solitude in a narrow cell next to which an oratory was built in the eighth century. [2]

The wall structure and some capitals of the church reveal the existence of an oratory dating back to the 8th century, from whose restoration and enlargement, after the sacking of Roberto the Guiscardo of 1084, the church would have been born. The origin of the church is not documented at all. However, it has a traditional link to its patron saint derived ultimately from the Dialogues attributed to St Gregory the Great. According to this, St Benedict came to Rome as a young man to study, about the year 500, before going off to be a hermit at Subiaco. The site of the church is alleged to be where he stayed, and the church was part of the remains of the palace of the noble family of the Anicii, the "domus Aniciorum". The tiny room where he is meant to have slept and studied is still venerated within the church, which, by tradition was founded in the year that he died, 543. [1] [4] [6]

The first documented records date back to 1192 when Cencio Camerario, in his "Liber Censuum", mentions it as "San Benedetto de piscina". However, parts of the fabric seem to date to the 8th century although there is no evidence for its use as a church. The consensus among scholars is that the edifice as a whole seems to have been built around the year 1100, or perhaps a little earlier. The tiny bell in the campanile is dated 1069, although again this is not conclusive. The campanile, Cosmatesque floor and the frescoes of the nave walls were executed in the early 12th century. [1]

A narthex was added in the late 13th century, and the Chapel of Our Lady was set up next to the alleged cell of St Benedict. During this period, in the year 1386, the parish was erected. It was one of many in medieval Trastevere, and as part of its status obtained the right to have a cemetery adjacent. This lasted until the French occupiers forbade any burials within the city walls at the end of the 18th century. [1]

In 1412 the roof was replaced, and paid for by one Giovanni Castellani whose family owned a palace nearby. In the 16th century the apse was frescoed, and in 1678 a new façade was built. It seems that the entrance loggia was open to the street before this. At the same time a small accommodation block, the Collegio Sant'Anselmo, was provided next to the church for the use of Benedictine monks visiting Rome, and as part of the same project a small hospital was founded. This lasted until the nearby, larger hospital of San Gallicano opened in 1726. [1] [6]

A benefaction by the parish priest, Antonio Veraldi, allowed the façade to be stuccoed and decorated with frescoes in 1687. He also provided a grand new entrance into the narthex. [1]

A new altar dedicated to St Anselm was provided in 1718, by a parish priest who had the same name. In 1728 the church was reconsecrated after the roof apparently failed and had to be repaired, and the parish priest Antonio Piervenanzi then rebuilt the parish house. [1]

The parish, always small and weak in a poor neighborhood with several other churches close by, was suppressed in 1824 and the church abandoned. [1] [6]

Carlo Massimo and his family of local nobility took an interest in the church. In 1844 a thorough restoration project was carried through under the supervision of **Pietro Camporese the Younger** and paid for by the Massimo family. Cardinal Antonio Tosti sponsored the restoration project at the Vatican. **Camporese** provided an entirely new Neo-Classical façade, but otherwise the restoration was sensitive and the church re-opened in 1855. [1] [2] [6]

The church seems to have been closed again in 1910. Yet another revival came in 1929 when the Lancellotti family took over its upkeep. In 1939, after the renunciation of the right of patronage of the Lancellotti family, the church was reopened to the public and restored at the expense of the Vicariate of Rome. The roof was restored in that year. [1] [6]

Unfortunately the church fell into disrepair during the second half of the 20th century and was targeted by vandals and thieves. The church was derelict, and artworks had been looted. In 2003 the church was granted to the Heralds of the Gospel, a new Brazilian religious order which has carried out another thorough, badly needed restoration. The church is now in good condition, and hopefully has a secure future after so many vicissitudes. [1]

## Exterior

This is a small church, and is surrounded by buildings on three sides so that only the façade and campanile are visible. The plan is that of a basilica, with a nave and aisles. The façade is in front of a vestibule made up from the former narthex, and has the entrance to the convent on the right. To the left is what looks like a domestic building, but this contains the Chapel of Our Lady on the ground floor; there used to be a separate street entrance (now blocked) into this. [1]

### Campanile

The later 12th century Romanesque brick campanile is over the bottom end of the left aisle. It is the smallest in Rome that is still in use, which also preserves the oldest bell in Rome. There are two bells. The smaller one, with a diameter of 45 cm, has the year 1069 engraved on it. It is allegedly the only one in the city that survived the Sack by the Normans in 1084. [1] [6]

It has two storeys, of which only the top one appears over the roofline. There are two arched soundholes on each face, separated by a small pillar with a trapezoidal impost. The storey is bounded at top and bottom with a crude dentillate cornice, and there is a tiled pyramidal cap sitting on several courses of brick above the top cornice. A string course identical to the cornices runs around the campanile at the level of the arch springers. There are interesting decorative features on the street side, best viewed through binoculars; above the soundhole is a cross in green stone, to the right of them is a T in red stone with a green rectangle at its bottom, and to the left is what looks like a capital I in green stone with a white stone block forming the upper horizontal stroke. Nobody seems to have commented on what these could mean. [1] [a]

### Façade (1)

The simple and restrained frontage is 19th century, and is very similar to that of San Pantaleo. The recent restoration has cleaned it up and repaired the stonework, which is now in white with recessed pointing. The entrance doorway has a raised cornice supported by volutes, and above this an architrave runs across the breadth of the façade. On this is a large lunette window. The composition is crowned by a triangular pediment, and there is an acanthus leaf finial on top. The whole façade is joined onto domestic buildings on both sides. [1]

From the slope descending into the piazza from the bridge you can see the frontage of the nave of the church behind this façade, and this also has a lunette window. [1]

## **Interior**

The layout of the church is surprisingly irregular, with the side walls and arcades at angles to the major axis. The present entrance of the chapel is in the left wall of the vestibule, which is a trapezoid with the left hand wall narrower than the right. This chapel also has an entrance from the main body of the church, at the bottom end of the left hand aisle. Next to this entrance, against the church's exterior wall, is the so-called "Cell of St Benedict". [1]

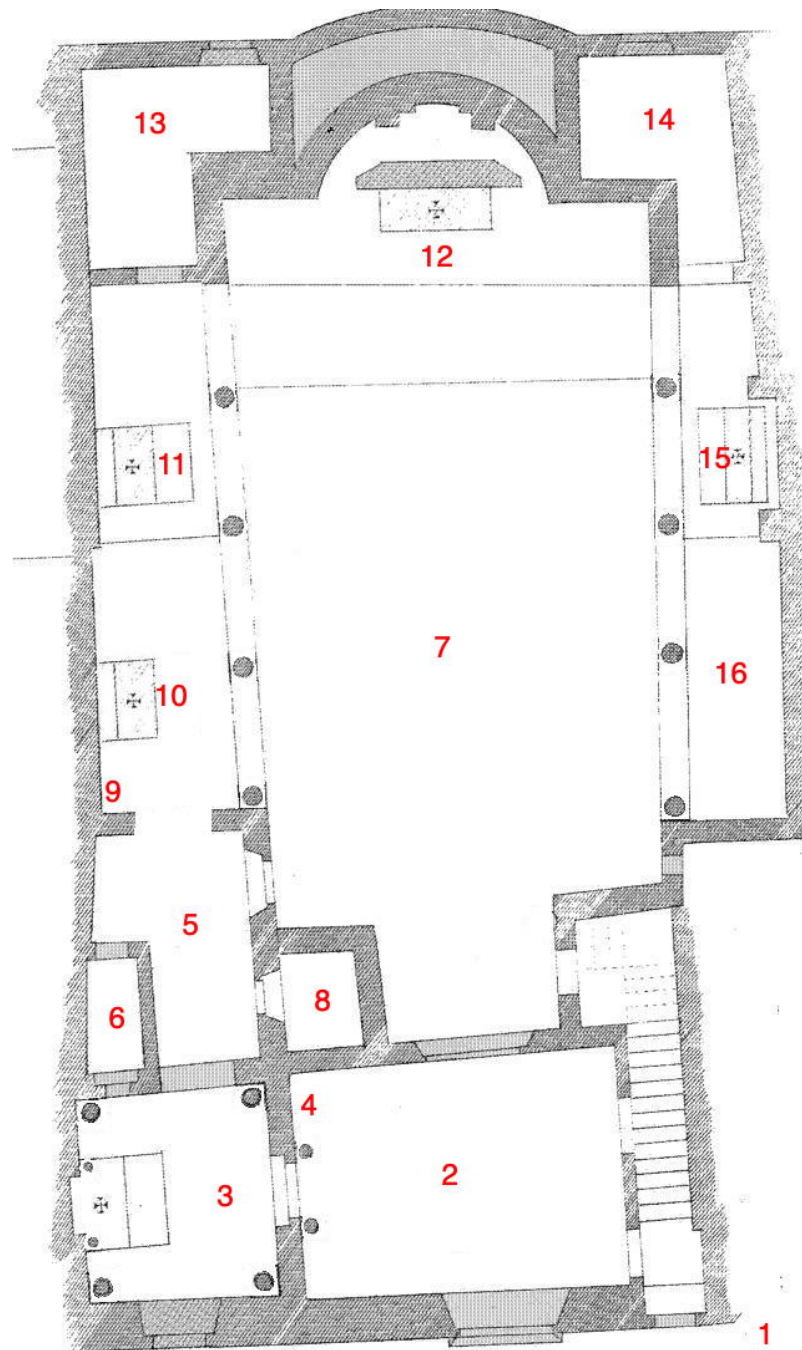
The plan of the church itself is basilical, with a nave and aisles. The nave has six bays, the first of which has the base of the campanile on the left and the exit to the convent on the right. Then come arcades on each side, with four columns each. Both of these arcades are skewed to the left from the major axis, the left hand one noticeably so. The left hand side wall is skewed to the right, and this means that the left hand aisle narrows appreciably from its near end to its far end. This aisle contains two side altars. The right hand side wall has an angle in it, so that the far part is skewed to the left, and the aisle here contains one side altar.

There is a shallow sanctuary, with a segmental apse. A pair of sacristies occupy the far corners of the church, with entrances at the ends of the aisles, and these communicate via a corridor behind the apse. [1]

## **Plan**

### Vestibule (2)

On entering the church you will find yourself in the vestibule, which used to be the medieval atrium.



To the left is the main entrance into the Chapel of Our Lady. The doorway here is medieval, and has two thin stone semi-columns with debased Corinthian capitals supporting a lintel and cornice, above which is a relieving arch in the wall. The lintel is decorated with a strip of Cosmatesque mosaic work, as is the doorcase although the latter has lost much of the inlay. [1]

To the right of the chapel doorway is a fresco (4) of the 14th century Roman school, showing the lactating *Madonna and Child with SS Peter and Paul*. A fragment of another fresco can be seen on the wall to the left of the entrance into the church, and this is thought to depict *Our Lady in Majesty with St Placid and the Prophet Elijah*. [1] [2]

To the left of the chapel doorway is a stone plaque in Italian, recording the granting of indulgences to those praying before the icon in the chapel and dated 1854. Saying the Litany of Our Lady earns three hundred years less time in Purgatory, with an additional hundred days if three Hail Marys are said for the conversion of sinners. [1]

In a floor slab to the right of the church entrance is scratched part of a layout of an ancient board game known as Nine Men's Morris in modern English; the Latin name is Merels. [1]

Chapel of Our Lady (3)



The little chapel is vaulted, the vault resting on four columns with capitals thought to be of the 8th century. This is one detail hinting at an ancient foundation of the church, although the chapel itself is 13th century. The chapel was decorated in 1844 and has a Cosmatesque floor from the 12th century. The venerated icon is over the altar, which was consecrated in 1604, and is enshrined within two Doric columns in grey veined marble supporting a triangular pediment. The altar frontal is a slab of porphyry. [1] [6] [7]

The icon itself is a detached portion of a 14th century fresco of a type known as *Our Lady of Mercy* (*Madonna della Misericordia*). Note that the Christ-Child is holding a little cross. The indulgence notice outside mentions the tradition that St Benedict prayed before this picture, which is anachronistic by about nine hundred years. The icon was touched up in the 18th century. The crowns that are attached to the two figures are by Domenico de Angelis. [1] [6]

### Cell of St Benedict (6)

To the right of the chapel altar, with side walls in Roman brick, is a very narrow slot a meter wide. It contains a little statue of the saint, with a prayer and a kneeler is provided at the entrance for veneration. [1]

### Nave (7)

The nave has four assorted columns in the arcades on each side. They are of different stones, and have assorted ancient limestone capitals of assorted orders which date from the 1st to the 5th centuries. The builders of the church had to play mix-and-match between columns and capitals in order to get the tops level, and some of the capitals had their bottoms chopped off. [1]

The columns are, in the left hand arcade: Pink granite, with Corinthian capital having rosettes. Grey granite, with an inverted column base having egg-and-dart moulding on it in lieu of a capital. Pink granite, with an Ionic capital. White marble with ribs, with a cut-down Composite capital having four volutes and its carving unfinished. The right hand arcade columns all have Corinthian capitals, and are of pink granite except the third which is of cipollino marble. [1]

The open truss roof now lacks a ceiling. There used to be one, with a fresco depicting The Apotheosis of St Benedict, but this apparently collapsed at some stage in the 19th century. The walls have mostly been stripped, revealing the brickwork, except for areas bearing fresco remnants. [1]

The church is rightly proud of its early 12th century Cosmatesque porphyry and serpentine floor by **Magister Paulus**. There are many larger and grander ones in Rome, but this is the only one which has been conserved rather than restored. As a result, it looks shabby since the marble pieces have worn and cracked with time, and many of the inlay pieces are missing and have been replaced with cement. On the other hand, everything that you see is original and not replacement work of later centuries as most of the other such floors in the city are. Much of the detail is intricate. [1] [6]

The nave walls show fragments of 12th century frescoes which have been conserved in the last restoration; the right hand side shows scenes from the Old Testament, and the left hand side from the Last Judgment. A beautiful Glorification of Christ on the counterfaçade, which today is, unfortunately, hidden by the high choir of the 16th century. [1] [5]

In 1849 during the Roman Republic the Church suffered a cannon shot from the French army still visible in the wall. [7]

### Sanctuary (12)

The triumphal arch of the apse is very straightforward brickwork, without any imposts or architectural details. To the left of it is a monument to Antonio Piervenanzi, priest of the church from 1720 to 1730. To the right is another monument to Giovanni De Pretis di Taverna, of 1691. The sculptors of the busts seem to be unknown. [1] [4]

The side walls of the shallow presbyterium have a pair of old frescoes. To the left is one depicting *St Helena*, of about 1500 but restored by **Francesco Giangiacomo** in the early 19th century. To the right is a very interesting 15th century fragment showing *St Anne holding Our Lady*, who is in turn holding the Christ Child. [1]

In the apse itself, the 16th century frescoes of two saints on either side are of *St Nicholas of Myra* on the left, and *St Blaise* on the right. These were restored by **Giangiacomo** again. [1] [2]

In the middle of the apse is displayed a mediaeval icon of *St Benedict* as a young man, which was restored by **Luigi Galli** in 1844. It was stolen during the latter part of the residence of the Carmelite sisters. The Heralds replaced it with a modern picture, but were able to recover the original after the police tracked it down. The book that he holds reads: *Ausculda, o fili, precepta magistri, inclina aurem cordis tui* ("Listen, son, to the precepts of the Master, and incline the ear of your heart"). It is the first line in his famous monastic rule. [1]

Above this is a 14th century icon of *Virgin with Child*, unfortunately damaged, in a shallow niche with egg-and-dart carving on its vertical sides. [1]

The conch of the apse contains a damaged fresco of the 16th century, in the Venetian style. It depicts *Our Lady, Queen of Heaven* with allegorical representations of the Trinity. The figures are flanked by a pair of angels, one with a lute and the other with a triangle (for percussion). The fresco was unknown until the restoration of 2000. [1] [2]

To the so the sanctuary is the sacristy (13), and to the right is a room known as "Ancient sepulcher" (14).

#### Left hand Side aisle

In the near corner of the left hand aisle is a fragment of a 14th century fresco (9) depicting *St John the Baptist Pointing Out the Lamb of God*. [1]

The first altar (10) in this aisle is dedicated to St Rita of Cascia. The statue was donated in 1939 by Elvira Iacomini Ranaldi. She is the patron of abused wives as well as hopeless causes. The fresco that used to be in the round-headed niche has perished. The statue is sometimes moved to the right hand side of the sanctuary. [1]

The second altar (11) in this aisle is dedicated to St Anselm, and the 19th century altarpiece comes from the art school at San Michele a Ripa. The statue on the altar is of *St Anthony of Padua*. [1]

At the rear of the left aisle is the old sacristy (5) that preserves a number of 12th century fresco fragments. From here also is access to the bottom room of the campanile (8).

#### Right hand side aisle

The altar in this aisle (15) is dedicated to St Laurence, and has a 19th century altarpiece which depicts *The Madonna and Child with SS Benedict and Lawrence*. The statue of *Our Lady of Fatima* on the altar is a focus of special liturgical devotion, and has been blessed by Pope John Paul II. [1]

On the wall to the right of this altar is a fresco (16) of *St Benedict* dating from the end of the 13th century. It used to be in the vestibule, but was restored and moved here recently. [1]

#### **Access**

At present (2017), opening times are advertised as:  
8:00 to 12:00, 16:30 to 19:30 daily.

#### **Artists and Architects:**

Pietro [Camporese](#) the Younger (1792-1873), Italian neoclassical architect  
Francesco [Giangiacomo](#) (1783-1864), Italian painter  
Luigi [Galli](#) (1817-1900), Italian painter  
Leopoldo Ansigliani (1832-1894)  
Magister Paulus (12<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian sculptor, mosaic floor maker

#### **Liturgy**

Mass is celebrated here on Sundays and weekdays, at 9:00 and 18:30. Confessions are heard for half an hour before the morning Mass, and there is Adoration for an hour after the evening one.

## Location

Address: Piazza in Piscinula 40

Phone: 06 58331609

Coord: [41°53'20"N 12°28'36.7"E](#)

## Links and References

[1] [Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[2] [I Viaggi Di Raffaella blogspot](#)

[3] [Info.roma web-page](#)

[4] [Tesori di Roma](#)

[5] [Church web-page](#)

[6] ["Roma Segreta" web-page](#)

[7] [Le Chiese di Roma web site](#)

[a] Priester, Ann; "Bell Towers and Building Workshops in Medieval Rome"; Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Vol. 52, No. 2 (Jun., 1993), pp.199-220 (jstor 990786)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Wikimedia Commons photos](#)

[Nolli map](#) (look for 1044)

["De Alvariis" gallery on Flickr](#)

[Info.roma web-page](#)

["Romeartlover" web-page](#)

[Roma SPQR web-page with gallery](#)

[Church's picture of St Benedict on Flickr](#)

["Heralds of the Gospel" website](#)

["Monastic Musings Too" blog with video](#)

[Le Chiese di Roma web site](#)

[Church's Youtube page](#)

[Video of the bells being rung](#)

[TripAdvisor](#)

