

# San Bernardo alle Terme



**St Bernard's at the Baths** is a 16th century monastic and titular church resulting from a conversion of an ancient Roman building. It is at Via Torino 94, just off Piazza di San Bernardo and opposite Santa Susanna in the historical rione Monti (the present rione Castro Pretorio). The dedication is to [St Bernard of Clairvaux](#). [1]

## History

The edifice is actually ancient, being substantially a rotunda 22 metres in diameter which was part of the complex of the Baths of Diocletian. This enormous public facility, completed in 306, occupied a rectangular site measuring 380 by 370 metres, and was surrounded by an enclosure or peribolos wall. The main bath buildings are now occupied by the church of the former Carthusian monastery of Santa Maria degli Angeli. [1]

The rotunda was converted to a church of a new monastery for the Feuillants. These monks comprised a reform movement of the Cistercian monastic order, which itself was an early 12th century reform of the Benedictines, and which had a great similarity to the later Cistercian reform known as the Trappists. The reform started at Les Feuillants Abbey near Toulouse in France, and was instigated in 1577 by the abbot, Jean de la Barrière. In Italy the monks were known as Foglianti. [1] [2]

In 1587 Pope Sixtus V had the area in front of the church of Santa Susanna developed into a large piazza to make it a worthy "forum" for his newly created fountain "Mostra di Acqua Felice" or "Moses Fountain." [2]

Caterina Nobili Sforza, Countess of Santa Fiora and a niece of Pope Julius III, who was a great supporter of the French Abbot Jean de la Barrière, founded a Feuillant monastery in the city in 1594. Caterina bought a large piece of land on which there had previously been a beautiful country house belonging to Cardinal Jean Du Bellay , the so-called "Horti Bellainai" , and in the present ruins she financed the building and decoration of the monastery. The rotunda was converted into its church in 1598. The newly established church was consecrated in 1602 by Cardinal Arnaud D'Ossat, who had been a good friend of Jean de la Barrière , who died in 1600. In his honor in 1626 a tomb was set up between the choir and Altar of San Bernardo. The painting of the grave is attributed to **Andrea Sacchi** and is considered one of his best works. It was widely admired by the painter Carlo Maratta so much that he vainly tried to buy it instead of posting a copy that he himself had made.

[2] [a]

In 1647, Caterina Nobili Sforza's nephew Vincenzo Nobili built a family grave chapel to the right of the choir. It was devoted to San Francesco and to the San Gaudenzio and San Compagno, whose relics were transferred there. In this chapel and in the church many members of the Nobili, Sforza and Del Monte families are buried. On the wall opposite the main altar, Vincenzo Nobili's wife Eleonora Orsini in 1649 set up a tomb for her recently deceased husband. [2]

In 1670 , Pope Clement X appointed Giovanni Bona to Cardinal of San Bernardo and the new Cardinal immediately began a thorough restoration of the church. He provided the choir with wooden stalls and rebuild the high altar in stone with a balustrade. And it was on this occasion that the eight statues of **Camillo Mariani** were installed in their niches. The overtly Baroque decoration especially of the façade is thought to date from this restoration. [1] [2]

In 1718 the monks allowed Antonio de Laurentiis to use Altare di San Bernardo as the family's grave chapel, and then he changed the decoration with a new gable over the altar, as well as a lunette painted by **Giovanni Odazzi**. Later, the monks also gave Altare di San Roberto a lunette by **Odazzi**.

The Feuillants in France were suppressed during the French Revolution, but the Italian monasteries including this one survived briefly until closed down during the Napoleonic occupation. After the restoration of Papal government to Rome, the monastery joined the Congregation of St Bernard (Congregazione Cistercense di San Bernardo d'Italia) which is part of the "Cistercians of Common Observance".

In 1803 the Abbot Sisto Benigni repaired the church that was damaged during the France. In 1857 the dome lantern almost crashed through the dome, and had to be removed. This restoration by Pope Pius IX is commemorated in an epigraph over the entrance. [1] [a]

In 1833 a small chapel was built next to Cappella di San Francesco. Here, Federico Napoleone, the son of the Grand Duchess of Tuscany Elisa Bonaparte, was buried. [2]

In 1857, Pope Pius IX repaired the church as seen from the memorial inscription on the facade above the main entrance. On that occasion, the old lantern was replaced with a glass lilies with lead potatoes. The choir got new wooden seats and the floor was restored, as the moisture problems still argued. And they continued so that after a few years the floor had to be reconstructed and in 1950 a piece of pigeon fell into the ceiling because it was destroyed by moisture. [2]

The abbey was sequestered by the Italian government in 1872, and used as army barracks for several years. In 1901 it was demolished for redevelopment, which created the Via Torino. The nearest modern building to the church on the east hand side of this street, number 94 built in 1909, was rented back to the Congregation of St Bernard as part of a small monastery which includes the surviving old north range of the cloister. The monks retain possession of the church. [1]

Before the to Jubilee 2000, the church was thoroughly restored and cleaned. [2]

## **Exterior**

The layout of the church looks circular, of course. The north-west portal of the ancient rotunda, the one that led into a library hall, is now the entrance. The opposite entrance is now occupied by the sanctuary, which used to be the monastic choir. The other two ancient entrances are occupied by side chapels. [1]

To the right of the presbyterium is the Chapel of St Francis, a small one-storey add-on attached to the monastery block containing the sanctuary. [1]

The ancient rotunda is in brick, and this can be seen from the Via Torino angle where the church wall is not rendered with stucco. [1]

On top of the rotunda is a decagonal drum for the dome, and this is capped by a tiled decagonal dome which has ten triangular pitches which are, interestingly, not all of the same size. The ones round the back are smaller, giving the impression that the dome is octagonal when looked at from the entrance side. This arrangement seems to be because the ancient rotunda is not quite circular, but is actually slightly oval. [1]

This dome used to have a prominent lantern with ten round-headed windows separated by Doric pilasters, and a semi-spherical cupola with a ball finial. The lantern had to be removed in the 19th century restoration, because its weight was cracking the dome. In its place is now a much lighter lantern, installed in the late 20th century, which is made up of 32 panes of glass joined in a hexadecagon with a conical sheet metal cap and a cross finial. [1]

Each face of the drum is coved (concave), and bears a large blank horizontal elliptical tondo in a molded stucco frame embellished with curlicues. This design element amounts to a Baroque feature, and seems to date from the 1670 restoration. Each pair of drum faces is separated by a squat pilaster with an inset rectangular panel. The drum is rendered in pale orange, with architectural details in white. The convent block containing the apse and choir has its own pitched, hipped and tiled roof and joins onto the surviving north cloister range. [1]

Perched on the roof of the latter, and attached to the side of the choir block on its far right hand side, is a little campanile. This is in the form of a cubical kiosk, with a little tiled cupola on a drum in the shape of a chamfered square and finally a large finial like a miniature version of the cupola. This campanile would just be visible from the Via Torino, but the trees in the garden get in the way. [1]

### Façade

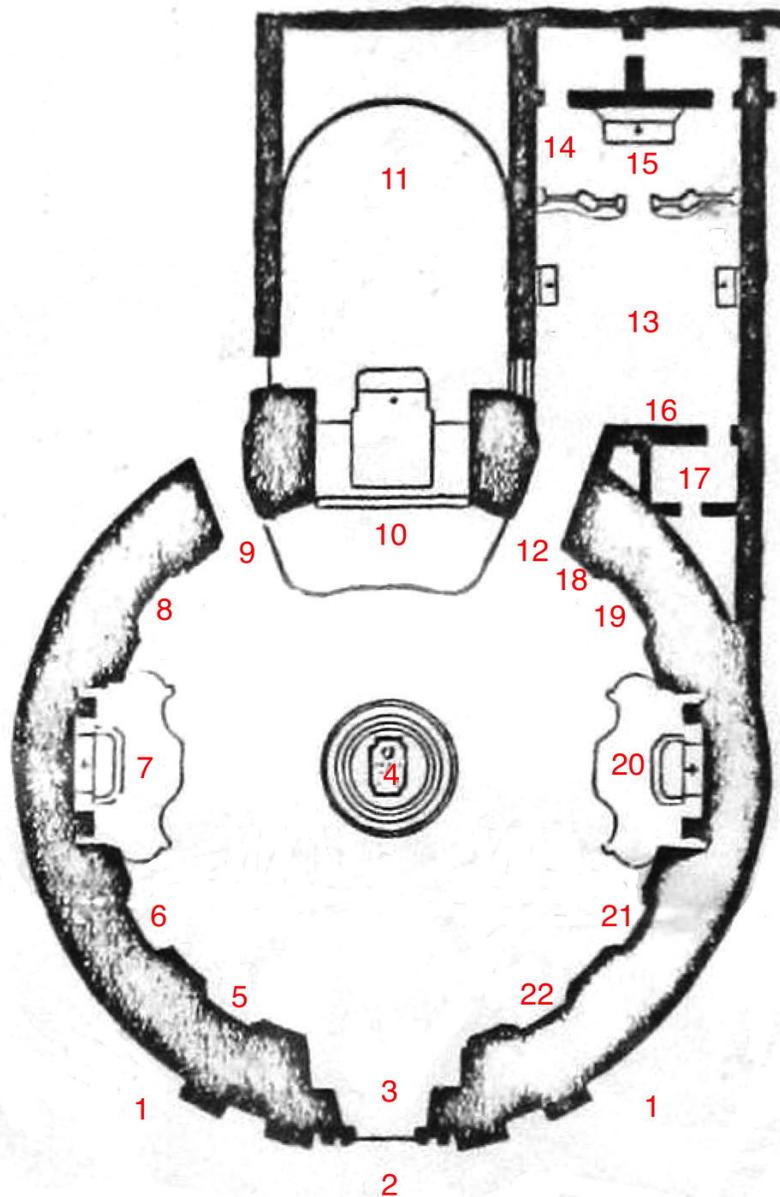
As mentioned, the façade (1) is rendered in stucco in the same color scheme as the drum and much of it is from the 1670 restoration. The roofline is a strongly protruding cornice with dentillations, but this only goes as far as the shapeless buttresses on either side (which seem to be there so that you can't see that the rest of the church is bare brick). [1]

The large single entrance has a raised triangular pediment over an inscription commemorating the 1857 restoration, and over that is a fresco (2) of *St Bernard Holding the Cross and Mandyllion*. This is in an extremely ornate early Baroque frame with curlicues, rosettes, a scallop shell, swags, flaming urns and a little segmental pediment. [1]

To each side of the doorway is a pair of large Doric pilasters in shallow relief on a high plinth, supporting a fragment of cornice rather than a proper entablature. These pilasters enclose a large empty round-headed niche with scallop decoration in the conch, and with an ornate frame topped by a segmental pediment. Above this is a blank tablet, also with an ornate frame, and at present the two of these display the coats-of arms of the pope (left) and the titular cardinal (right). [1]

Above each pair of pilasters is another, smaller and shallower pair of Ionic pilasters with swagged capitals and displaying hanging garlands. These pilasters reach the roofline cornice. Each pair encloses another empty round-headed niche, but this one has a cobra-hood finial with swags instead of a pediment. [1]

### **Plan**



## Interior

The structure is cylindrical, dominated by the dome which has a diameter of 22 metres (about 55 feet). The decorative scheme, in white and pastel orange with the dome all in white, gives an impression of cool, restrained elegance which contrasts with the polychrome Mannerist and Baroque riots across the road at Santa Susanna and Santa Maria della Vittoria respectively. The original artworks and sculptures here are Mannerist, too. The predominantly white decor is because the only natural light that comes into the church is through the dome oculus. [1]

The magnificent interior of the dome is coffered in octagons, which decrease in size towards the oculus at the apex. The lantern here allows in the only natural light that enters the church, and inside it is a stucco representation of the *Dove of the Holy Spirit*. [1]

The interior dome (4) has no drum or pendentives, but sits directly on a ring cornice. This is supported by tripletted Ionic pilasters, with three in each quadrant having their capitals connected by stucco swags. In between each set of three pilasters are two round-headed niches containing statues, eight in all. The apse and side chapels are entered through large archways of identical size, with their molded archivolts reaching up to the cornice; the same arrangement exists at the entrance, where there is a wooden interior doorcase. [1]

To the right of the presbyterium is the doorway into the Chapel of St Francis; the identical doorway on the left leads to the sacristy and convent. [1]

Over the entrance door inside the church (3) there is a memorial to the foundation of the church that says Caterina Nobili Sforza was married to the Count of Santa Fiore, the mother of Cardinal Francesco Sforza and had devoted the church to San Bernardo in the Jubilee 1600. [2]

### Statues and memorials

The eight statues of saints are in stucco. They are gigantic, over 3 metres tall, and are by Camillo Mariani. He finished them in about 1600. From the near left hand side, the saints depicted are: [1]

Jerome (5) (improperly dressed, as a hermit in the Syrian desert),  
Catherine of Siena (6),  
Catherine of Alexandria (8) (with her spiked wheel),  
Bernard of Clairvaux (9) (note the little building he is holding),  
Francis of Assisi (12),  
Mary Magdalen (19),  
Monica (21) (as an old lady -his mother), and  
Augustine (22) (reading from a book -he is a Doctor of the Church).

Several memorials have been affixed to the wall below the statues, of various ages and interest. The large and intricate neo-Renaissance tomb (8) under the statue of St Catherine of Alexandria, to the left of the apse, is to the sculptor Carlo Finelli who died in 1853. It is by Rinaldo Rinaldi, who was from Padua. [1]

On the walls of the room there are also dedicated memorial inscriptions for members of the Nobili family and their relatives, for Count Sforza, who was married to the founder of the church, Caterina Nobili Sforza, for Giulia Del Monte, Aunt to Catherine and the sister in law of Pope Julius III, for Maddalena Montaguti, a relative, for Vincenzo Nobili and Roberto Nobili, Caterina's father and brother. [2]

Under the statue of St Mary Magdalen is a tablet commemorating Blessed Clemens August von Galen (19), cardinal of the church and archbishop of Münster in Germany under the Nazis. He was beatified in 2005. In the center of the floor is the burial memorial for Cardinal Domenico Passionei.

### Side altars

The side chapels contrast with the rest of the church in having polychrome marble fittings. The altarpieces of both are by Giovanni Odazzi.

The altar on the left is dedicated to St Robert of Molesmes (7), regarded as the original founder of the Cistercians (although he died as a Benedictine abbot), and the altarpiece depicts *The Mystic Marriage of St Robert to Our Lady*. The altar has a pair of Composite columns in white, grey and black brecciated marble with gilded capitals. On the base of the columns are the arms of the Sforza and Boncompagni families. The columns support two fragments of a split and separated segmental pediment. Into the gap is inserted a tablet with a winged putto's head, and this has its own triangular pediment. A pair of stucco angels recline in the spandrels of the arch, the pilasters and archivolt of which are in red marble. To the left of the altar is the tombstone of the architect, painter and poet Carlo Enrico, Count of San Martino (1726).

[1] [2]

The altar on the right is dedicated to St Bernard of Clairvaux (20), and has the arch in the same style. The altarpiece shows *The Ecstasy of St Bernard*, and refers to a vision that he had of Christ descending from the cross to embrace him. The altar has a similar pair of columns, which support a triangular pediment into which the round-headed altarpiece intrudes. Above this is a tablet bearing the *Dove of the Holy Spirit* in a glory.

### Tomb of Jean de la Barrière

To the right of the door into the Chapel of St Francis is the tomb of Abbé Jean de la Barrière (18), founder of the Feuillant reform. The abbot died in the Convent in 1600, but the tomb dates from

1626. The painting of the abbot is by **Andrea Sacchi**. It is capsule-shaped, set in a curlicued frame in a greyish-green marble. This is itself inserted into an aedicule, with a pair of red marble columns and a triangular pediment over a frieze in alabaster. [1] [2]

### Sanctuary

The high altar **(10)** is in one long space made by expanding one of the four old entrance doors. Here in the wall of the choir **(11)** there are a number of stalls in dark nutwood and above a small organ with a balcony that is also in nutwood. The woodwork was carried out around 1670 under Cardinal Giovanni Bona. In the floor is tombstone for the church's sponsor Caterina Nobili Sforza and her son Francesco Sforza and for Cardinal Bona. [2]

The present sanctuary is a vaulted space lit by a pair of windows high up on each side, which are inserted into lunettes. The vault itself is merely whitewashed. [1]

Unusually, both the present high altar and the "people's altar" (for Mass celebrated facing the congregation) are of polychrome stonework. The latter is fronted with alabaster, and the former now bears the tabernacle together with a Calvary. There is no altarpiece. [1]

### Chapel of St Francis

The Chapel of St Francis **(13)** is accessed through the door to the right of the presbyterium. It is a rather small rectangular room, with an altar **(15)** having a stucco statue of *St Francis Receiving the Stigmata* by **Giacomo Fancelli**. The altar has a pair of Corinthian columns in what looks like yellow Sieneese marble. These support a split segmental pediment, with a mob of winged putto's heads in the gap. The chapel vault is adorned with frescoes from 1897 by **Mario Adami**, painted in a rich stucco framing, made earlier, attributed to **Giacomo Fancelli**. [1] [2]

The German painter Johann Friedrich Overbeck **(14)**, founder of the Nazarene art movement, died in 1869 and has his monument in the far left hand corner. The effigy is shown as if lying in a loculus or grave-niche in a catacomb. The sculptor was **Karl Hoffmann**. [1]

On the walls of the chapel are five tombs for the Nobili family members, made by **Fancelli**. They consist of oval frames with busts of the deceased, carried by little angels, and are on either side of the side altars and on the wall opposite the main altar where Vincenzo Nobili 's grave **(16)** from 1649. [2]

There is an attractive monument to Giuseppe Dynasta Villapiana and his sister Karolina of 1864, with busts showing them as they really looked and dressed. [1]

On the one side of the chapel there is a door to a small tomb **(17)** of the Federico Napoleone, which died in 1833. [2]

### **Access**

The church is open from 6:30 to 12:00 and 16:00 to 19:00.

### **Liturgy**

The Masses are at 18:00 on Saturday, and at 11:00 on Sunday.

Mass on weekdays is at 7:30.

Every day is celebrated all the canonical hours of the Divine Office, at which anyone can participate when the church is open to the public

### **Artists and Architects:**

Andrea [Sacchi](#) (1599-1661), Italian painter of High Baroque

Camillo [Mariani](#) (1565-1611), Italian Mannerist sculptor

Giovanni [Odazzi](#) (1663-1731), Italian painter and etcher of the Baroque period

Rinaldo [Rinaldi](#) (1793-1873), Italian sculptor of the Neoclassic period

Karl Hoffmann (19<sup>th</sup> cent.), German sculptor

Giacomo Antonio [Fancelli](#) (1619-1671), Italian Baroque sculptor

Mario Adami (19<sup>th</sup> cent.), Italian painter

## Burials:

Roberto Cardinal de' [NOBILI](#), (1541-1559)

Buried in the chapel of S. Francesco (viscera only)

Francesco Cardinal [SFORZA](#), (1562-1624)

Buried in the church which had been founded by his mother twenty-four years before his death.

Giovanni Cardinal [BONA](#), O.Cist., (1609-1674) (also see [here](#))

Giovanni Maria Cardinal [GABRIELLI](#), O. Cist., (1654-1711)

Centotaph only, buried in S. Sebastiano fuori delle mura

Domenico Silvio Cardinal [PASSIONEI](#), (1682-1761) (also see [here](#))

Johann Friedrich Overbeck (1789-1869)

<German painter and member of the Nazarene movement>

Abbot [Jean de la Barrière](#)

<founder of the reform Cistercian order known as the Feuillants>

Carlo [Finelli](#) (1785-1853)

<Italian sculptor>

## Location:

Coordinates: [41°54'12"N 12°29'40"E](#)

Address

Via Torino 94

## External links

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)

2. [Anna's Guide](#) (in Danish)

a. Descriptive brochure from church

[English Wiki page](#)

[RomeArtLover web page](#)

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Nolli map](#) (look for 195)

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

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

["Laboratorioroma" web-page](#) (closeups on paintings)

["Romaincamper" web-page](#)

[Youtube video](#)

["Italianvirtualtour" panorama of interior](#)

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