

# San Bartolomeo all'Isola



**San Bartolomeo all'Isola** is a late 10th century titular church and minor basilica located on the Tiber Island, a place of particular importance for the history of Rome, halfway between Trastevere, district of the first Christian preaching, and the ancient Jewish quarter. The dedication is to St Bartholomew, apostle and martyr. The church is in the charge of the Franciscan Friars Minor, helped by the Community of Sant'Egidio. The Diocese has listed it as available for liturgical celebrations in the Oriental rites. [1] [3]

## History

The first temple on the island was dedicated, appropriately, to the river-god Tiberinus. But, in 293 BC, the city suffered a serious epidemic and the Senate decided to send an embassy to Epidaurus in Greece to ask the favor of Asculapius, the Greek god of medicine. The priests of the shrine gave the visitors a sacred snake to take back to Rome as a totem, but when the ship tied up at the end of the voyage the snake escaped from its box, slithered off the boat into the river, swam to the island and found a hole to vanish into. This was taken as an omen that a temple to the god should be built on the island, which it promptly was. The church is on the site of the temple. [1] [2]

The temple and its precinct was rebuilt in the 1st century AD. The porticoes of the sanctuary functioned as a hospital, and the site had this function right to the end of the Empire in Rome. In fact, it seems that a hospital of some kind remained on the island all the way through the Dark Ages until the church was built, and also from then on until the present day. [1]

The church was not of ancient origin, but was begun in the year 998 on the orders of Otto III, Holy Roman Emperor. It seems that it was fitted exactly onto the foundations of the old temple. The initial motivation seems to have been that the emperor wished to honor his friend St Adalbert of Prague, who had been martyred in Prussia in that year. An arm of the saint was enshrined here.

Also, the emperor wished to enshrine the relics of other saints that he had collected, notably SS Paulinus of Nola (not a martyr), Exuperantius, Sabinus, Theodora, Marcian and Marcellus as well as Abundius and Abundantius (although there is a query about this). The original dedication of the church was Sancti Adalbertus et Paulinus. [1] [2] [a]

It used to be thought that the ancient columns used in the arcades came from the old temple, but they are not a matching set and are thought to be too small to have belonged to the temple itself. It seems that the spolia of columns and bases were pillaged from the sacred complex as a whole, and assembled together in an obviously ad-hoc manner. However, the holy well on the altar steps, with its 11th century carved well-head, does seem to be an in situ ancient structure. The carving of the emperor on the well-head shows him holding the church, and this is depicted as having a single aisle. If this is a true representation, and not artistic license, then the original church had only one nave arcade and the other must have been added in the 12th century. At present it is not possible to decide this point. [1]

However, these saints were joined by the relics of St Bartholomew. This apostle was, in the Latin tradition, martyred by being flayed alive in the Roman province of Armenia (now that part of Turkey around the city of Sivas). Hence, his attribute in art is his flayed skin. The first historical reference to the relics is in 507, when Emperor Anastasius I gave them to the new city of Dara in Mesopotamia. [1]

Then, mysteriously, an alternative set of relics began to be venerated on the island of Lipari off Sicily, and the story developed that they had been washed up by the sea there miraculously. These relics were transferred to Benevento in 803, and were taken to Rome by Emperor Otto II when he conquered that city in 983. It seems that the emperor's intention was to take them back to Germany, but his death at Rome prevented that. So, his son Otto III included the relics with the others in his new church, which was completed around the year 1001. The dedication of the church was then changed. The first documentary reference to the dedication to St Bartholomew dates from 1088. [1] [a]

The church has had repeated problems with flooding by the river. As a result, it has needed several restorations. The first major restoration, or possibly completely rebuild, was recorded in 1113 by Pope Paschal II, according to the inscription above the entrance. [1] [2]

The bell-tower was built in 1118 as part of this restoration. However, the work as a whole seems to have been interrupted by flooding, and it was only completed in 1180 under Pope Alexander III. The present Baroque façade is an add-on, and the original mediaeval façade is hidden behind it. At the top of the latter, usually inaccessible to visitors, is a mosaic depiction of Christ giving a blessing and holding a book with the inscription Ego sum via et veritas et vita. This is in a style which seems to correspond with another mosaic at Santa Francesca Romana dating to 1161. [1]

Pope Martin IV ordered another restoration, which was completed in 1284. It involved laying Cosmatesque flooring (bits of which survive), and a baldacchino with porphyry columns (which does not). The artist responsible for the latter was Ognissanti Callario de' Tederini. Also, the façade was embellished by further mosaic work which was described as being on a gilded background. [1]

The church was entrusted to the Franciscan Observants (now incorporated into the Friars Minor) in 1524, and they established a convent here. Their first edifice was erected to the right of the church, and survived until the late 19th century. [1] [2]

The 16th century was a disaster. Rainfall in the Tiber drainage basin was heavy in that century, and as a result there were major floods which damaged the church in 1530, 1557 and 1598. The one in 1557 washed away the right hand exterior wall, and the damp penetration destroyed most of the mosaics on the façade. Tragically, this led to despair on the part of the authorities; the relics of the saints were moved to St Peter's, and the church was left abandoned in dereliction for twenty-five years. [1] [2]

Then there was a restoration in 1583 ordered by Pope Gregory XIII and overseen by Cardinal Giulio Antonio Santorio, during which the collapsed side wall was rebuilt. Also, the mediaeval baldacchino was replaced with a new one which re-used the porphyry columns. An ancient porphyry

basin was brought into the church two years later, and used as the reliquary under the main altar when the relics of the saints were brought back home. A tablet listing the indulgences granted to pilgrims, and authorized by this pope in 1581, can be found to the right of the main entrance in the loggia. [1]

In 1601 the former sacristy, to the left of the apse, was converted into a chapel for the Confraternity of Millers which operated several water-mills on the river nearby. Here were enshrined the relics of SS Paulinus, Adalbert, Exuperantius and Marcellus. St Paulinus became the patron of the Confraternity, and the chapel was dedicated to him in 1636. The Confraternity moved out in 1846. [1]

In 1608, Cardinal Michelangelo Tonti gave **Antonio Marziale Carracci** the commission to decorate the side chapels. He managed four of them during his work until 1621, although many of the resulting frescoes have since been badly damaged. They are arguably the only important post-mediaeval works of art in the church. [1]

The church was heavily restored in a major project ordered by Pope Urban VIII in 1624. The architect was **Martino Longhi the Younger**, with at least some help from **Orazio Torriani** who we now know designed the façade in 1639. The construction of the new façade, the wooden ceiling and some other smaller interventions were carried out at the time of the Spanish cardinal Gabriele Trejo Paniacqua. The decoration provided in the restoration was in the Baroque style, giving the church its present appearance. [1] [2]

In 1638 the surviving convent range to the left of the church was built. This meant that the convent had two wings, on either side of the present trapezoidal piazza thus creating an impressive architectural ensemble focusing attention on the new façade. The right hand wing has since been demolished. In 1694 the friars opened a Missionary College here, which survived until the late 19th century. [1]

There was further embellishment on the interior, carried out from 1720 to 1739 under the supervision of Cardinal Juan Álvaro Cienfuegos. The mediaeval Cosmatesque floor was ripped up in the process, presumably because it was too damaged to be worth repairing. Also, the ceiling was painted, the cantoria for the organ installed over the entrance and stucco decorations added to the nave. [1]

The church was maltreated by the French occupiers of the city under Napoleon, and was restored as a result of damage to the sanctuary in 1801. Incredibly, in 1829 the Renaissance baldacchino was demolished and the four porphyry columns taken to the Gallery of Tapestries in the Vatican Museums. [1] [2]

Pope Pius IX ordered another restoration in 1868, which also mostly involved the sanctuary. A new main altar was provided, and frescoes painted. A plaque on the left side commemorates this restoration. [1]

After 1873 the Italian government confiscated the convent, allowing the Franciscans the use of a few rooms next to the church. The left hand wing became the premises of a Jewish hospital, and the right-hand wing was converted into apartments for Trastevere slum-dwellers displaced by the building of the Tiber embankments. However, scouring by the river around the island damaged the new embankments, and in response the government demolished this wing at the end of the century in order to make the river bed slightly wider. The missionary college had to close in 1885. [1]

The last flood was in 1937, and hopefully flooding is now a thing of the past because catchment reservoirs have been built in the upper reaches of the river. The level the river reached in this flood marked on a plaque in the left hand side of the entrance loggia. Another tablet with a flood-line is on the wall round the right hand corner of the façade. This dates to 1870, just after Rome had been conquered by the Kingdom of Italy. [1] [a]

In 1994 the complex was entrusted to the use of the Community of Sant'Egidio, although the Friars Minor retain canonical possession. [1]

There was a final restoration in 2000, which involved repainting the façade in the original 17th century color of cream instead of the previous rusty red. [1]

In 1999, in preparation for the Great Jubilee of 2000, St. John Paul II instituted a "Commission of the New Martyrs" to investigate the Christian martyrdom of the twentieth century. The commission worked two years in the premises of the Basilica of San Bartolomeo, collecting about 12,000 dossiers. After the Jubilee, St. John Paul II wanted the Basilica to become the Memorial of the New Martyrs. The proclamation was solemnly celebrated on October 12, 2002, in the presence of the Card. Ruini, Kasper and George, and of the Orthodox Patriarch of Romania Teoctis. The great icon dedicated to the Twentieth century Martyrs was placed on the high altar and the six nave chapels were each given the theme of a geographical area of persecution: those killed in Latin America, Asia and Oceania, in Spain and Mexico, and in Africa. [3]

The church has lacked a pastoral justification, especially since the adjacent church of San Giovanni Calibita takes care of the hospital. However, it has recently been declared available for the celebration of any of the Oriental rite liturgies of the Catholic church. This is especially useful to those worshipping communities of the Byzantine rite who do not have their own church in Rome for nationalistic reasons. [1]

## Exterior

### Piazza

The piazza is trapezoidal and has the surviving convent block on its left hand side. The corresponding edifice on the right has gone. In the center of the piazza is a short 19th century stone monument known as the guglia or "spire", built in 1869 by **Ignazio Jacometti**, the official sculptor of Pius IX. It is in the form of an quadrifrons aedicule on a plinth, topped by a heavily decorated neo-Baroque pyramidal finial ending in a ball and cross. There is a statue in a niche on each side, and according to the inscriptions they depict *St. Bartholomen*, whose remains are preserved in the nearby basilica; *St. Adalbert*, for whom the basilica was originally constructed; *St. John of God*, who founded the Fatebenefratelli Hospital on the other side of the island; and *Francis of Assisi*, whose convent once flanked the piazza to the east. This column was later called a 'column of infamy,' because upon its shaft, during the 1870s, was placed a blacklist of people who were singled-out as 'villains who were not attending Mass on Easter Day.' [1] [a]

This structure was commissioned by Pope Pius IX, to commemorate the First Vatican Council which is mentioned in the dedicatory inscription. It actually replaced a free-standing column which was knocked over and smashed by a badly controlled wagon in 1867. The inscription reads: [1]

Pius IX Pont[ifex] Max[imus] in columnae locum quae plaustrum impetu quassata  
concoerit pecunia sua fieri erigique iussit anno Christiano MDCCCLXIX Concilio  
Vaticano ineunte.

("Pius IX, the chief priest, ordered [this] to be made and put up using his own money in the place where the column fell which had been shattered by a collision with a cart, in the Christian year 1869, the Vatican Council having started".)

There used to be a small obelisk standing on this spot in ancient times, the fragments of which are scattered today among various European museums. The obelisk was not Egyptian, but of late Roman production. [1] [a]

The doorway in the former convent building to the left leads to the oratory of Santa Maria Addolorata dei Sacconi Rossi, which is now deconsecrated. [1]

### Layout

The church is basilical in plan, having a nave of eight bays with side aisles. There are six nave chapels, three on each side, and these were created by breaching the original outer walls. The presbyterium is in the center of a transept, which does not extend beyond the lines of the outer nave walls, and behind the main altar is a segmental apse. [1]

In front of the church is a loggia, added to the original structure in the 17th century. [1]

There is a large chapel on either side of the church. These do not fit well into the overall plan, and are obviously ancient. The left hand one is trapezoidal, with the far wall narrower than the entrance one. The right hand one has its exterior side wall slightly out of line with the nave wall, being stepped out. In between these two chapels, behind the apse, is the sacristy. [1]

There is a campanile over the near end of the left hand aisle, behind the left hand side of the loggia, and attached to the right hand side of the church is a narrow range of modern buildings which now comprise the Franciscan convent and offices. These sit above the aisle on this side. [1]

The edifice is of brick, which is rendered. However, it is known that the early medieval parts of the fabric incorporate bits of carved ancient Roman stonework, and some of this was revealed in recent repair work on the original façade behind the loggia. [1]

The roof is pitched and tiled in a T shape over nave and transept. The two large chapels have their own roofs with single pitches, shallow on the left and steep on the right. The apse and sacristy are covered by a single pitch which, unusually, continues as a cat-slide from the far pitch of the transept roof. [1]

### Façade

The Baroque façade (1) was added with a loggia in the 17th century, but the original medieval façade is still intact behind this. [1]

The Baroque façade has two storeys, and these are divided into three vertical zones corresponding to the nave and aisles behind. The two aisle zones are recessed, as is the middle third of the central zone all the way up to the gables of the pediment. The entire face had been a rust-red color with the windows in white relief until the 2000 Jubilee when the church was restored to its original cream color. [1] [a]

The first storey has three entrances which are all the same size and style, having molded archivolt on Doric pilasters. Four free-standing grey granite Doric columns on high plinths flank the main entrance, delimiting the two unrecessed zones of the central part of the façade. Above them is an entablature running the full width of the façade, with an inscription which reads:

In hac basilica requiescit corpus S[ancti] Bartholomaei Apostoli  
("In this basilica rests the body of St Bartholomew the Apostle").

This entablature is in travertine limestone, as are the supporting double-topped Doric pilasters flanking the side entrances. In between each pair of columns is a large round-headed niche with scallop decoration on the conch. [1] [a]

The second storey has five large rectangular windows, and below them a thin string course runs across the façade. Between this and the entablature below are five blank rectangular tablets with very wide relief frames. The windows have Baroque frames in relief, and the central three also have raised pediments over swag and tassel decoration. The central window pediment is triangular and empty, while the two others are segmental and have winged putto's heads in their tympani. [1] [a]

The crowning triangular pediment only occupies the central nave frontage. Its tympanum bears a relief depiction of the emblem of the Franciscans, being the crossed arms of Christ and St Francis showing the wounds in their palms. The aisle frontages are crowned by a pair of gigantic volutes of which each has an angular kink - a nice touch. The outer corners have flaming urn finials. [1] [a]

### Campanile

The bell-tower was built in 1118 by Pope Paschal II, as part of the first major restoration of the church. It is a typical Romanesque example of the period, in exposed red brick with a tiled roof and four orders of mullioned windows. There are three storeys visible above the nave roofline. The first has two narrow arched openings on each face, the second has three but the third has an arcade of three arches on each face with marble columns supporting block imposts. The tops of the storeys have cornices decorated with dentillations and modillions (little brackets). Above the arches on each face is a row of decorative roundels, three in each row for the first storey, and four for the other two. These are disks of Egyptian marble, obtained from Roman column drums combined with disks of painted Majolica pottery. There is a final tiled pyramidal cap topped with a cross. [1] [a] [b]

## Entrance Loggia

The loggia (2) is secured by an iron gate. The middle gate is topped with the Franciscan symbol.

This has three doorways and is of the same width as the nave. Above the loggia is the so-called "Room of the Mosaic", which contains the 12th century mosaic fragment of Christ from the original façade. This chamber used to be the convent choir, used by the friars in residence for reciting the Divine Office. [1]

An inscription over the central entrance in Greek marble reads:

"King Otho III transferred the bodies of these pious [men], adorned with which, this house now flourishes, in the year of the Lord 1113, in the seventh Indiction, the fourth day of the month, April, at the time of Paschal II."

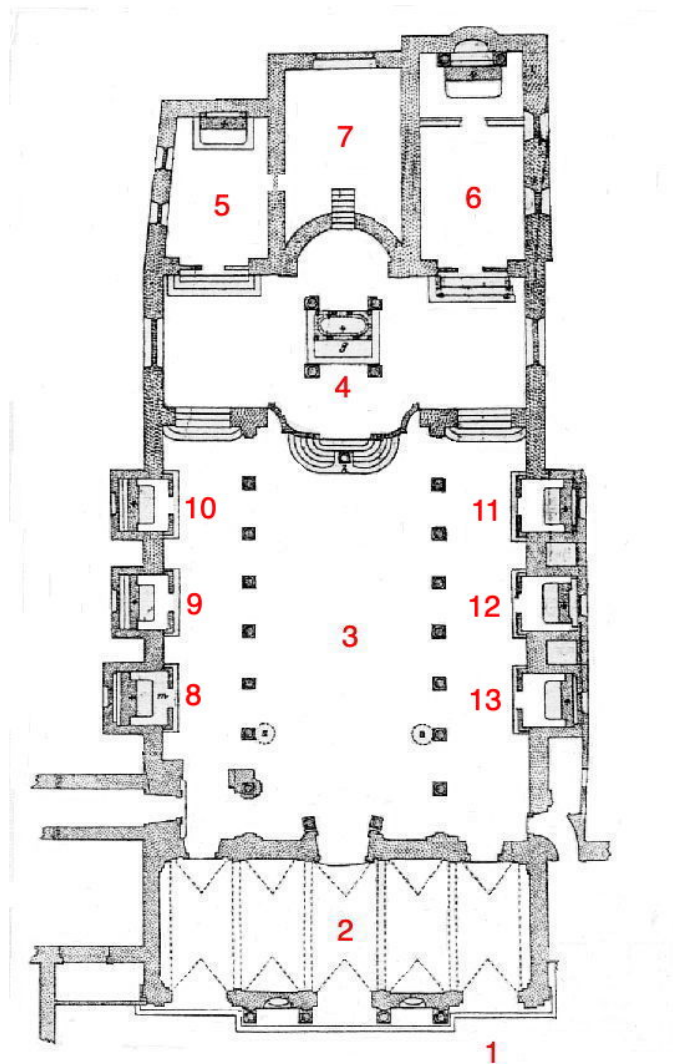
Underneath in larger letters reads:

"If you want to know the relics which this house contains, may you believe [they are] the bodies of Paulinus and Bartholomew."

This inscription was placed in 1113 during the construction of the bell tower. It records the first instance of Bartholomew's supercession of the church's name from Adalbert, the original namesake. On the left wall can be seen the remains of a former structure on the island which was revealed during the 2000 reconstruction. [a]

On the wall to the right of the main entrance is a tablet listing the indulgences granted to pilgrims, and authorized by Pope Gregory XIII in 1581. On the wall left of the main entrance is another tablet listing indulgences granted by Pope Pius VI, 1782. Below this tablet is a plaque marking the level the river reached in the flood of 1937. On the right wall of the loggia is a tablet commemorating the visit of Pope Benedict XVI visit to the Community of Sant'Egidio in 2008. [1]

## **Plan**





## Interior

The church is basilical in plan, having a nave with side aisles. There are six nave chapels, three on each side. The presbyterium is in the center of a transept, which does not extend beyond the lines of the outer nave walls, and behind the main altar is a segmental apse. There is a large chapel on either side of the apse. [1]

### Nave

There are fourteen ancient marble columns in the nave arcades (3), seven on each side, which were formerly thought to have come from the original temple. This is now considered unlikely, since they are too small. However, two of the bases are tentatively identified as possibly belonging to the temple; the fifth, on right and left. The columns are of different heights, and the bases are a mixed bunch so the builders of the church played at mix-and-match. You can see how they chose a tall base for a short column, and vice versa. However, in places they had to make do with mortar to fill a gap. [1]

The columns are of three different types of rock, which are all claimed to come from Egypt. They are: one in alabaster (sixth on right), two in green marble (third on right and fourth on left) and the rest in red granite (of differing hues, some more brown than others and with the second on the right and the sixth on the left looking greenish). The granite came from Aswan. [1]

The Composite capitals are a set, and as seen are part of the 17th century restoration. The detailing, with exaggerated volutes, is actually in stucco. Above them, the arcade archivolts on each side form a continuous molding topped by a projecting cornice which is not supported by any pilasters. Above these in turn are three large round-headed windows on each side, separated by panels with stucco symbols of martyrdom, and then the flat ceiling. [1]

The finely carved and painted lacunar ceiling, in large coffering panels, dates from 1624 and restored by the pope Pius IX in 1865, but the frolicking putti are original. However, the three large panels were repainted by one of the friars, **Bonaventura Loffredo**, in 1865. The middle one shows *St Bartholomew Scorning the Idols*, and the other two are *The Immaculate Conception* and *St Francis Receiving the Stigmata*. [1] [2]

The original Cosmatesque floor has been lost during the restorations in the 18th century and has been completely remade in 19th century. The pavement of the basilica is quite uneven due to the erosion from frequent floods. [2] [a]

The bowed cantoria or balcony above the main entrance is 18th century. It is supported by two red marble columns with capitals matching those of the arcades, and has a balustrade topped with vine-scroll metalwork. The organ is here. [1]

The triumphal arch is on two gigantic Doric pilasters, and is decorated with curlicues and swags of flowers. At its apex is a heraldic shield. [1]

### Sanctuary and transept

The transept and sanctuary (4) are one architectural space, and have a raised floor level because of the crypt underneath. You go up to the main altar via six steps, which have a short balustrade on either side at the top. In the middle of the second step is the 11th century holy well. [1]

The transept ceiling is in the same style, and of the same age, as the nave one. The large panels here show scenes in the life of St. Francis. Fresco on the wall above the Millers' Chapel, on the left side, shows *Christ with the Apostles*. On the right wall above the Orsini Chapel is *St. Bartholomew teaching*.

The wall fresco in the apse behind the altar is the *Martyrdom of St Bartholomew* by **Francesco Manno** of 1806, but the *Christ in Glory* in the conch above and the other wall and ceiling paintings here are by **Loffredo** again. [1]

The main altar in white marble, gift of Pope Pius IX in 1865, is supported by a red porphyry basin

with a lion mask, relief handles and a cartouche with the inscription "CORPUS SANCTI BARTHOLOMAEI APOSTOLI" [Body of the saint Bartholomew] since it is here that the apostle's relics are enshrined. The authenticity of the relics is disputed, however, as it has been claimed that they are the relics of St Paulinus of Nola. The latter were meant to have been taken home to Nola in 1909, but there is a suspicion that there was a mix-up. The altar has no canopy, and now bears a large modern icon of the *New Martyrs*, installed in 2000. [1] [2] [a]

Remains of the original mediaeval Cosmatesque floor survive in two places. [1]

At the right end of the transept is the entrance to the Orsini Chapel, now the Blessed Sacrament Chapel. Outside it, either side of the steps, is a pair of medieval stone lions of the 12th century, attributed to **Cosma di Iacopo di Lorenzo**. These would originally have supported the doorcase of the main entrance (stilofori or "columns supporting"), and probably previously placed at the entrance of the ancient church. [1] [2] [4]

On the right hand wall, near these lions, is a bronze bowl enclosed in a metal grating. This is meant to have been the original container for the relics of the apostle when they were at Benevento in the early 9th century, but is actually a work of the late 10th century from a Muslim milieu. It was probably from Sicily, and intended as a hanging incense burner since you can see four sets of three rivets on it which would have held the chains. It certainly could have held the relics when the emperor took them to Rome, and would have been new at the time. [1] [2] [a]

On the left wall of the transept is the funeral memorial for Cardinal Lorenzo Cozza. He was the minister general of the Franciscans, and died in the monastery here in 1729.

### The well

In the middle of the steps leading to the Main Altar is an ancient well. There has been some dispute about how old the well is, but now somebody has taken the trouble to put a camera down it to look at the construction. It is 10.25 meters deep, and is of opus quadratum work of a type which dates it to the early Republican period when the shrine to Asculapius had been set up. Hence, this is the oldest structure on the site. The really interesting thing about this well is that it was the focus of the church being built around it at the end of the 10th century. The temple was closed at the end of the 5th century, so the existence and (presumably) the use of the well in ritual had continued for half a millennium afterwards. Nobody knows how the site functioned during this time, but it must have had a ritual element for the continuity to have been kept. [1] [a]

The little 11th century well-head is contemporary with the first church, and is a superb piece of work attributed (tentatively) to **Niccolò di Angelo**. It was made from the base drum of an ancient column, and shows four figures in relief standing under a richly decorated colonnaded arcade. The figures are: Christ holding an open book; a bishop (either St Paulinus or St Adalbert); Emperor Otto III, with a very Germanic mustache and holding a disc with an image of the church, and St Bartholomew holding a book and the knife used to flay him. Letters above the figures add up to an inscription that reads: "The saints surround the mouth of the well as the orb rotates", literally. There is another inscription on the lip of the well, but grooves formed by ropes used to draw water for centuries have defaced most of it. Apparently there is no water down there now. [1] [a]

### Chapel of the Millers

To the left of the sanctuary (5) is the chapel of the Romanorum Molendinariorum or the Roman confraternity of millers. The Cappella dei Molinari was dedicated for the owners and proprietors of floating granaries which were anchored to the island since the sixth century. Previously, Roman millers had used the power of the aqueducts' water flow to grind their grain until the Gothic king, Vitiges, sieged Rome in 537 and blocked the city's aqueducts to deprive the Romans of their water supply. The granaries were then relocated along the banks, around the perimeter of the island. By the end of the nineteenth century, most of the floating mills had disappeared due to the construction of the embankment walls which now enclose the bed of the Tiber. [1] [a]

The chapel was converted from the former sacristy by order of Pope Julius III, and was originally dedicated to St Paulinus of Nola. After the restoration of 1583 the relics of SS Adalbert and Paulinus were enshrined here, and the chapel was given to the millers in 1604. They left in 1846, and St Paulinus was taken to Nola in 1909. So, the chapel is now usually described as dedicated to St



Adalbert. His arm is in a little metal box within a glass case here, near the door on the right which leads into the present sacristy. [1] [a]

The ancient Romans did know about water mills In the city, the two aqueducts terminating on the crest of the Janiculum, the Aqua Traiana and the Aqua Alsietina, dropped their excess water down a slope to the river which was steep enough for the driving of watermills. By tradition, when these aqueducts fell into disuse the millers took the stones and invented ingenious floating watermills on the river, using the current channelled between two boats on which the mill sat. [1]

The ceiling, of 1704, shows the *Apotheosis of St Paulinus*. There are remains of the original Cosmatesque floor. The frescoed altarpiece, of 1665, shows *The Assumption of Our Lady, with SS Paulinus, Adalbert, Exuperantius and Marcellus*. Above it is an *Annunciation* of about the same date. The chapel walls are decorated with images relevant to the activity of the millers. A door on the right wall leads to the present sacristy. [1] [2]

Above the entrance is an inscription commemorating the restoration and dedication of the chapel to the Confraternity of Millers. A plaque on the left wall commemorates a restoration carried out in 1626. An inscription on the right wall commemorates the restoration of the chapel by Card. Pietro Francesco Galleffi in 1804. [1] [4]

### Orsini Chapel

To the right of the sanctuary (6) is the Chapel of the Virgin, also known as Chapel Orsini di Pitigliano, from the family that assumed its patronage in the 17th century. It is also the Blessed Sacrament Chapel and is a place for private prayer. The axis of the chapel, not corresponding to the basilica one, could date back its origin to the ancient basilical building. The ceiling is attributed to **Martino Longhi the Older**. The altar beneath has an impressive frontal in polychrome marble opus sectile work, and has an inscription proclaiming that St Theodora the Matron (i.e. a married woman) has her relics here. [1] [2]

The altarpiece fresco, only discovered in 1904, shows *The Madonna and Child with SS Theodora, Abundius, Abundantius and Marcian* and is of the beginning of the 13th century. Unfortunately it has been touched up in subsequent centuries, although the surviving blue background in genuine ultramarine is as bright now as when it was painted. [1] [2]

The walls of the chapel are frescoed with six scenes in the life of the Blessed Mother by **Giovanni Battista Mercati** from 1631, probably commissioned by Paolo Giordano Orsini. There are three scenes on each side separated by monochrome frescoes of statues within alcoves. On the wall are:

[4]  
*Young Mary in the temple*  
*Birth of Mary*  
*The Annunciation*

On the the right wall are:

*Marriage of Mary and Joseph*  
*Birth of Jesus*  
*The Visitation*

In the middle of the floor is an opus sectile memorial for Alexandro Orsini, Comte di Pitigliano, dated 1604.

On the left hand side wall is an iron cannonball. This was fired from a French cannon during the siege of the city in 1849, when the Roman Republic was being suppressed. It smashed through the outer wall of the chapel, but lost momentum in the process and ended up sitting on the altar. This was regarded as miraculous as no one inside the chapel was injured, so it was inserted into the wall and an inscription put on a tablet beneath. This reads: [1]

Bellicum hoc tormentum in perduelles a Via Aurelia iactum exeunte Iunio  
MDCCCXXXIX disiectoque antico pariete huc immissum Sosipatatrice Maria opifera  
super altare inopinato constitit Franciscalum que incolumitatem posteris refert.

("This war-shot, thrown against the enemy from the Via Aurelia at the end of June 1849,

broke up the ancient wall and came in here. By the help of Mary the savior it stopped unexpectedly on the altar and [now] tells the safety of the Franciscans to posterity".)

### Nave side chapels

Apart from the frescoes by **Carracci**, the artworks in the nave side chapels are mediocre and of little interest. The chapels themselves are little barrel-vaulted alcoves, with rich Baroque decoration and each with a window above the altar. These windows now have modern stained glass in abstract patterns, and look rather incongruous in the Baroque context although worth a glance in their own right. [1]

The displays of artifacts relating to the New Martyrs may change from time to time, apparently. For an up-to-date description of the exhibits, see the church's website (link in "External links"). [1]

The descriptions are clockwise, from the bottom left.

The first chapel on the left (8) is dedicated to St Anthony of Padua, and has had its frescoes by **Carracci** touched up in the 19th century. It displays mementoes of the New Martyrs of Africa and Madagascar. [1]

The second chapel on the left (9) is dedicated to Our Lady of Peace, and was decorated by **Carracci**. On the left wall is *The Annunciation*, and on the right wall is *The Birth of the Virgin*. It displays mementoes of the New Martyrs of Spain and Mexico. [1]

The third chapel on the left (10) is dedicated to the Crucifixion, and the frescoes here by **Carracci** have not been well preserved. The fresco on the left wall is *The Scourging at the Pillar*, and on the right wall is *The Crowning with Thorns*. Displayed are mementoes of the New Martyrs under the Nazis. On the altar was a letter in a gilt frame. It had been written by Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian Catholic who in 1943 was executed for refusing to serve in Hitler's army. [1] [d]

The third chapel on the right (11) is dedicated to St Francis of Assisi and has an altarpiece showing *SS Francis and Bonaventure* by **Antonio Fiorentini**. The same artist was responsible for the frescoes on the walls and the fresco of the Life of St Francis. The chapel displays mementoes of the New Martyrs under Communism. [1]

The second chapel on the right (12) is dedicated to St Charles Borromeo. The frescoes by **Carracci** are the best of his in the church; he also executed the altarpiece of the saint. The chapel displays mementoes of the New Martyrs of Latin America. [1]

The first chapel on the right (13) is dedicated to St Frances of Rome, but was formerly dedicated to St Margaret of Cortona. It displays mementoes of the New Martyrs of Asia, Oceania and the Near East. [1]

### Crypt

The present crypt is generally believed to be a survival of Otto's church, which, on the basis of the decorative eagle-capitals at the confessio. This used to be accessed by means of a stairway in the sacristy behind the apse, but is now reached via a little garden just to the left of the transept. It is usually inaccessible to visitors, despite a restoration in 1975.

The vaulting is held up by two rows of little columns, three on each side. Some of the cushion capitals display the Imperial eagle, rather crudely carved, and these obviously derive from the first church. [1] [c]

### Buried

Lorenzo Cardinal COZZA, O.F.M.Obs., (1654-1729) [also see [here](#)]

## Artists and Architects:

Andrea Martini, OFM (20th cent), Italian sculptor  
Antonio Fiorentini (19<sup>th</sup> cent?), Italian painter  
Antonio Marziale [Carracci](#) (1583-1618), Italian painter  
Bonaventura Loffredo da Alghero (1830-1903), Italian painter and Franciscan Friars Minor  
Cosma di [Iacopo di Lorenzo](#) (13<sup>th</sup> cent.), Italian sculptor  
Domenico Antonio da Sermoneta, Italian painter  
Francesco [Manno](#) (1754-1831), Italian painter and architect  
Giovanni Battista [Mercati](#) (1590-1645), Italian painter  
Ignazio [Jacometti](#) (1819-1883), Italian sculptor  
Martino [Longhi](#) the Elder (1534-1591), Italian architect  
Martino [Longhi](#) the Younger (1602-1660), Italian architect of the Baroque period  
Orazio [Torriani](#) (or Torrigiani) (1602-1657), Italian architect and sculptor  
Niccolò di Angelo (12<sup>th</sup> cent?), Italian sculptor

## Access

Opening hours are:

Weekdays 9:30 to 13:30, 15:30 to 17:30.

Sundays 9:30 to 13:00.

The Office of the Basilica is open from 19:30 to 13:30 on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays. You can ask in here about guided tours, and also about getting into the crypt.

Alternatively, for guided tours e-mail:

[info@sanbartolomeo.org](mailto:info@sanbartolomeo.org)

It is hoped to establish a small museum, but nothing has been posted on the church's website about this yet.

## Liturgy

At present (2017), Mass is only advertised on Sundays at 11:30.

The Community of Sant'Egidio holds a prayer liturgy at 20:00 on Mondays, and 20:30 Tuesdays to Fridays. Please note that the church is only accessible then for those joining in, not in any way for visitors.

Location:

Coord: [41°53'25.3"N 12°28'41.5"E](#)

Address:

Piazza San Bartolomeo,  
Tiber Island

Phone:

06-68.77.973

## Links and References

- [1] [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
- [2] [L'Isola Tiberina web site](#)
- [3] [Church's website](#)
- [4] [Info.roma web-page](#)

- [a] Bruce, William Nolan; RESURVEYING THE RELIGIOUS TOPOGRAPHY OF THE TIBER ISLAND; University of Florida, 2004 (Graduatef Thesis)  
([http://etd.fcla.edu/UF/UFE0004894/bruce\\_w.pdf](http://etd.fcla.edu/UF/UFE0004894/bruce_w.pdf))
- [b] 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)
- [c] Coates-Stephens, Robert; "Dark Age Architecture in Rome"; *Papers of the British School at Rome*, Vol. 65 (1997), pp. 177-232 (jstor 40310950)
- [d] Thavis, John; THE VATICAN DIARIES; Viking press; 2013, pg 233

[English Wikipedia page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Nolli map \(look for 1098\)](#)

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

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

[Romeartlover web-page](#)

[Thayer's web-page](#)

[Tesoridiroma web-page](#)

[Isolatiberina web-page](#)

[Armellini's history \(p. 620\)](#)

[Medioevo.roma web-page](#)

[Gallery on Flickr](#)

[Trip Advisor](#)