

# San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane



**San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane** is a 17th century convent church at Via del Quirinale 23, which is in the rione Monti. The formal dedication of the church is jointly to the Holy Trinity and St Charles Borromeo, and this was the first church in Rome dedicated to the latter saint who had been canonized in 1610. The four fountains in the name (Quattro Fontane) refer to the ones which sit at the corners of the intersection where the church stands. A long-standing local nickname for the church is San Carlino, which literally means "Little Saint Charles" after the small size of the edifice. [1]

This is one of two small Baroque churches close together on the ridge of the Quirinal Hill, the other being Sant'Andrea al Quirinale. Together they are now recognized as being one of the great architectural experiences of Europe, and attract many discerning visitors from worldwide. [1]

The two churches are a pair of complementary masterpieces by the two titanic rivals of the architectural world of 17th century Rome, Francesco Borromini and Gian Lorenzo Bernini. [1]

## History

### Trinitarians

The church belongs to a convent founded by Spanish Discalced Trinitarians. The Trinitarian order of friars was founded near Paris at the end of the 12th century by St John of Matha, and its purpose

was the ransoming of Christians taken prisoner by Muslim pirates and slave-raiders as well as during wartime. The emblem of the order is a Greek cross, formed by putting a vertical blue bar over a horizontal red one. [1]

### Foundation

The Spanish Discalced Trinitarians set about founding a house at Rome at the start of the 17th century, and chose a site on the summit of the Quirinal. Here they built a little temporary chapel with one altar dedicated to St Charles Borromeo, and opened it in 1612. This was only two years after the saint had been canonized. The altarpiece of this chapel is now kept in the sacristy. [1]

In 1634 Fra Juan de la Anunciacion, the order's leader in Rome, became **Borromini's** first and most constant patron. **Borromini's** first project for them was to design the monks' residence and cloister. **Borromini** volunteered to work for no fee as long as he was allowed a free hand. [1] [a]

The site was an awkward trapezoidal plot at a crossroads that crossed at an oblique angle. **Borromini** began work on the main convent block immediately, In 1638 the church was begun. The unfinished church was consecrate in 1646. In 1665 **Borromini** began the façade, but committed suicide in 1667. His nephew, **Bernardo Castelli Borromini**, continued work using his uncle's plans, firstly building a permanent campanile in 1670 and then beginning the façade in 1674 which was finally completed in 1682. [1]

In 1710, the friars managed to extend the convent. as their refectory was behind the church and very cramped. In 1705 a new block containing a better refectory was finished. The old refectory became the sacristy, which it still is. The architect was **Alessandro Sperone**. [1]

The convent was sequestered by the new Italian government in 1873, but the popularity of the church among the citizens ensured that it was preserved and that the Trinitarians remained in charge. [1]

The floor of the church was re-laid in 1898, using money provided by a Basque widow lady from near Castro Urdiales in the Basque Country, Spain. [1]

The church became neglected in the early 20th century, and the fabric of the church was allowed gradually to fall into a state of serious disrepair. This situation has subsequently changed completely, as a result of a thorough and systematic restoration which was started in 1988 and finished in 1999. Nowadays, the church is one of the more popular destinations for knowledgeable visitors to Rome. [1]

### **Exterior**

It is not possible to see the external walls of the church from the street apart from the façade and a glimpse of the dome. The fabric is in brick, rendered in stucco, except for the façade which is in travertine limestone. [1]

The church has a complex plan based on an oval or quasi-ellipse dome within a chamfered rectangle floreplan. [1]

To the right of the façade (1) is the cloister block with a monumental entrance. Over the doorway is a tondo containing a mosaic of Christ enthroned between two liberated slaves, one black and one white. This is protected by an omega cornice ( $\Omega$ ) which is splayed outwards on two curlicue brackets. Above this is a shield supported by two angels, and displaying the Trinitarian cross. The entrance leads via a passage through the block to the cloister. On the corner, left of the facade, is the campanile over one of the four fountains (2). This faces diagonally into the crossroads. Around the corner is the frontage of the oldest block of the convent. The Trinitarian cross is again prominently displayed on the symmetrical façade. [1]

### Dome

The dome is not easily visible from the street. It has an oval drum with four octagonal windows, two

on the minor axis and a pair on the major axis. These give the concealed lighting to the interior dome. On top of the drum the lantern stands like a little temple or mausoleum on three concentric steps; it is again oval, and has four pairs of Doric columns with a little narrow round-headed window flanked by each pair. The pairs are separated by larger such windows, four in total, and support a cog-wheeled entablature. On top the lantern ends in four concentric steps and a very large ball finial. [1]

### Campanile

The campanile stands over one of the Quattro Fontane on the outside, and the spiral staircase (3) down to the crypt on the inside. At ground level is the fountain basin, behind which is a large arched niche containing a relief of a figure reclining under a tree with a wolf in attendance; this is thought to be a personification of the Tiber river. Above in turn is a rectangular window with a little triangular pendent raised over a wreath motif, then the Trinitarian cross again in a heart-shaped tablet embraced by the wings of an angel, and finally the campanile itself. This is on an incurved square plan, and has two pairs of Doric columns on each face supporting an entablature with rosettes and triglyphs on the frieze. The soundholes are large rectangular voids between the inner pairs of columns. Above the entablature is a trapezoidal plinth, and finally an incurved truncated pyramidal spire in lead with a gilded ball finial. [1]

### Façade

The travertine façade (1) was completed in 1667 by Borromini's nephew to his uncle's design. It is integrated with the monastery block to the right and the campanile to the left. There are two storeys, and three vertical zones which are curved. [1]

The first storey has four large Ionic columns supporting a serpentine entablature with a simple dedicatory inscription on the frieze:

In honorem [Sancti]ss[imae] Trinitatis et D[ivi] Caroli MDCLXVII

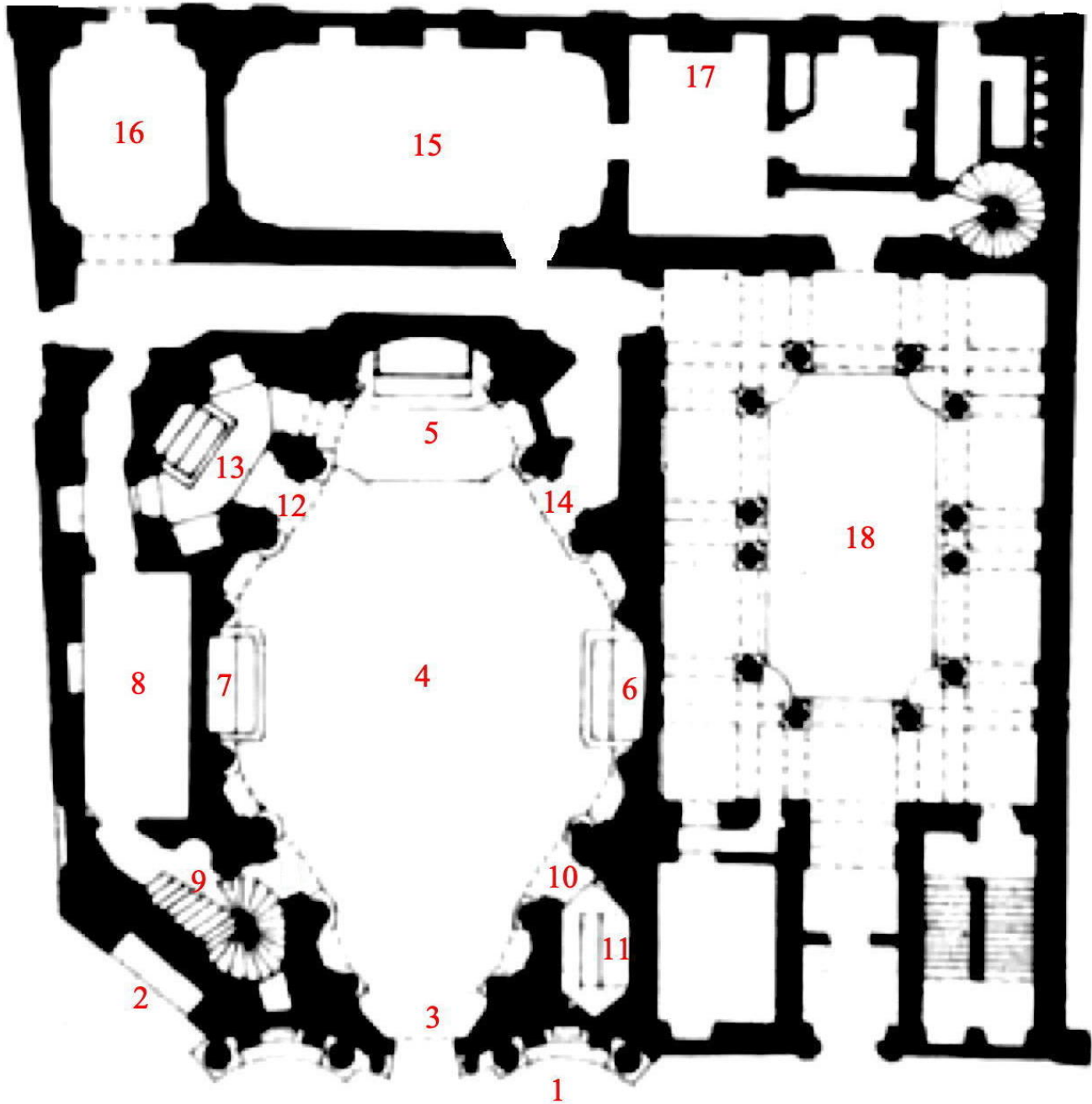
The projecting cornice of this entablature is richly decorated with curlicued brackets interspersed with wreaths. The columns are on a high plinth, and their capitals are wrapped in foliage, obscuring the volutes. Six smaller derivative Composite semi-columns support three curved entablature fragments which divide the storey into six equal areas. The lower central one of these is the only entrance doorway, approached by steps because of the crypt. The two on either side have a device of a large vertical oval window, recalling the dome plan, enclosed in a pair of palm fronds clasped by a crown above. Below is a goat's head a device with the Trinitarian cross and a large drooping swag. The upper central area, above the doorway, has a statue of *St Charles Borromeo* which is the work of *Ercolo Antonio Raggi*. The statue is flanked by a pair of angel caryatids, who hold up two wings to form a false pediment. To either side are statues of *St John of Matha* and *St Felix of Valois*, the founders of the Trinitarian Order, which were executed by *Sillano Sillani* in 1682 and were the last additions to the church fabric. The statues are in apsidal niches enclosed in molded rectangular frames; *St Felix* is on the left, and *St John* is on the right. The latter is holding a model of the church of San Tommaso in Formis on the Esquiline, which belonged to the first Trinitarian convent in Rome and where he died. [1]

The second storey also has four large columns, but the capitals are different and can be described as derivative Composite. Each pair of columns supports a concave entablature with rosettes on the projecting cornice, and in between these is a very large oval tondo supported by a pair of angels, sculpted by *Giovanni Cesare Dona* and *Francesco Antonio Fontana*, and topped by a pair of curlicues forming a false pediment. There used to be a painting in the tondo, *Holy Trinity* (1677) by *Pietro Giarguzzi*, but now it is almost entirely disappeared

As with the first storey, three pairs of smaller derivative Composite columns supporting cornice fragments divide the storey into six areas. In the lower middle area is an architectural device like a little oval mausoleum with an ogee cupola topped by a ball finial, and into this is inserted a large vertical rectangular window. The upper middle area is occupied by the flying angels supporting the tondo. The upper right and left areas have the Trinitarian cross again, this time in a tondo with a molded dentillate surround enclosed in a palm-leaf wreath and all within a molded rectangular frame. The lower right and left hand areas have empty statue niches; that statues were intended here can be seen from the vacant plinths intended for them. The four main columns also stand on box plinths, connected by attics. The inner pair of plinths is connected by a bowed (convex) balustrade

running in front of the central window. Although it is difficult to see from the street, the balusters in this balustrade are alternately normal and inverted. This design feature is more prominent in the cloister, and also features in the balustrade along the façade roofline which is mostly invisible from below. [1]

## Plan



## Interior

The interior shape can be described as an incurved rhombus with rounded corners. The dominant color of the interior is white, hued with a hint of pink. Opposite the entrance is the apse of the main altar, (5) and on either side is a subsidiary altar in a shallow segmental apse. The altar on the right (6) is dedicated to St Michael de Sanctis, and that on the left (7) to St John Baptist of the Conception. Both of these were Trinitarian reformers, and the dedications of the altars were changed from the original ones when they were canonized. [1]

Near the entrance is a pair of identical doorways; the one on the left leads to the crypt stairs and is

not used, but the one on the right (10) leads to a tiny chapel (11) in the shape of an irregular hexagon. It is dedicated to the Crucifixion. Flanking the apse of the main altar is another pair of identical doorways. The right hand (14) door leads into the sacristy area and convent, but the left hand (12) one leads into another external chapel, larger than the one just mentioned and in the form of a squashed irregular hexagon. It is dedicated to the Holy Family, and is known as the Cappella Barberini. (13) A beatified Trinitarian tertiary called Elizabeth Canori Mora is now enshrined here. [1]

The main altar apse, the two side apses and the entrance apse all have slightly ogee curves. Each apse has four monumental derivative Corinthian columns, one pair framing it and one pair within, giving a total of sixteen. The capitals have little rosettes in place of volutes. The columns support an entablature which runs round the entire church, and the ogee apse curves inform this to give the incurved rhombus with rounded corners as its shape. The cornice of the entablature is projecting, with rosettes, and the frieze is blank. In between the inner and outer pairs of columns in each apse is a pair of empty trefoil-headed niches, with scalloping in the conchs. These contrast with four similar but slightly larger niches above the four doorways in between the apses, which have round-headed conchs and rayed scalloped decoration embellished with curlicues. It is obvious that statues were intended for the niches over the doors, as plinths are provided. [1]

The floor was re-laid in 1898, as the attractive central device in opus sectile indicates. This has the Trinitarian cross within an oval shield reflecting the dome plan, surrounded by a manacle and chain together with an epigraph: *Munificentia piissimae Dominae Casildae Iturrizar, viduae Epalza Flaviobrigensis in Hispania, pavementum hoc stratum adornatumque est AD MDCCCXCXVIII.* The money came from a widowed Basque lady. [1]

Over the entrance door is a large circular tondo which used to contain a fresco. An organ gallery and a small organ were installed over the entrance door in 1855, at which time **Pierre Mignard's** oval fresco of the *Annunciation*, executed in 1641, was either destroyed or covered over. [1] [4]

## Dome

The interior dome (4) is the church's glory. To achieve its position, **Borromini** raised three semi-domes over the three altar apses and embellished them with coffering containing rosettes. Over the entrance he placed a wide arch instead, with a single line of coffering on its intrados, and this arrangement allows light in from the large window in the façade (the only direct natural light into the body of the church). In between the arches he inserted truncated pendentives, and on these placed an oval cornice. [1]

The pendentives have tondi with stucco reliefs by **Giuseppe Bernasconi** and **Domenico De Rossi**, illustrating scenes from the foundation of the Trinitarian order. They are:

*The Meeting of SS Felix and John,  
Pope Innocent III Approves the Order,  
The Founders Receive the Habit and  
The First Ransoming of Captives.* [1] [2]

There is no drum to the dome, which rests directly on the cornice and has lighting from four octagonal windows placed just above the cornice and which pierce the dome. On the projecting cornice are acanthus leaf finials, alternatively large and small, and below each large one is the Trinitarian cross again. The dome itself has a complicated and famous pattern of coffering, formed from crosses, octagons and squashed hexagons, and the coffering shrinks in scale until it meets the large oval oculus. Around the latter is a dedicatory inscription similar to that on the façade:

**Sanctiss[imae] Trinitati Beatoq[ue] Carolo Borromeo D[ivo] An[no] Sal[vatoris] MDCXI**

The oculus contains a Trinitarian symbol, being the *Dove of the Holy Spirit* within a triangle surrounded by a hexagonal glory, all in gold. [1]

## Main altar

The main altar (5) is placed against the far wall, and has an arched aedicule which fills the entire apse between the inner pair of columns. This aedicule is in gilded stucco with heads of putti, and the frame of the altarpiece has a trefoil top recalling some of the side niches mentioned. There is some detailing in verde antico marble, including on the large tabernacle which is the form of a shrine with

a cut-away ogee cupola. The altar frontal is in alabaster with a device featuring the Trinitarian cross yet again. The same symbol is at the top of the aedicule, embellished with a little starburst glory. Flanking the altar within the apse are two doorways with niches above them. [1]

The altarpiece, by a French artist named **Pierre Mignard**, shows *SS Charles Borromeo, John of Matha and Felix of Valois Venerating the Holy Trinity*. [1] [2] [3]

### Chapel of the Crucifixion

The tiny chapel, with a hexagonal plan, with three oil paintings by a rather obscure artist **Giuseppe Milanese** (1653). The *Crucifixion* on the altar features the Virgin, Magdalene and St. John at Golgotha. A *Scourging* on the left and a *Crowning with Thorns* on the right. The intricate wrought iron gate is made by Giulio Cianchi in 1642, to Borromini's design. [1] [2]

### Side altars

The two side altars are in gilded stucco, of almost identical design. The altars themselves are in what looks like Sicilian jasper, red and white, with some verde antico. The left hand one (7) has an altarpiece showing *The Ecstasy of St John Baptist of the Conception* by **Prospero Mallerini** of 1819; it shows the saint levitating while adoring a crucifix. San Juan Bautista de la Concepción (1561-1613) reformed the Trinitarian order and founded the discalced branch. [1] [2] [4]

The altarpiece of the right hand one (6) shows *The Vision of St Michael de Sanctis* by **Amalia de Angelis** of 1847. This seems to be the only work on view in Rome of this Florentine lady artist, who shows the saint and Christ swapping hearts. The little whip next to the skull is a discipline, used by religious of the period as a means of penance. [1] [2]

### Cappella Barberini

The external chapel on the left side is the Barberini Chapel, (13) in honor of the cardinal who partially pay for the convent and church. Six Corinthian columns arranged in a squashed hexagon support the incurved hexagonal vault, where the Barberini coat of arms featuring the famous bees in the gilded oculus. The epigraph around it commemorates Francisco Cardinal Barberini, and boasts that he was a nephew of Pope Urban VIII. [1] [2]

The chapel is now dedicated to Blessed Elizabeth Canori Mora, whose relics are enshrined in a modern little sarcophagus under the altar. Pamphlets and prayer cards concerning her should be available, and there is also a portrait of her on display. She replaced an alleged Roman soldier martyr whose corpse was on view. The altarpiece in this chapel is by **Giovanni Francesco Romanelli** in 1642, and depicts the *Flight to Egypt*. The setting shown is very bucolic, not at all like the Sinai in reality. Interesting is the cherub presenting a cross of twigs and a crown of thorns to the distressed Christ-Child, as this symbolism recalls that on the famous icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help at Sant'Alfonso de'Liguori all'Esquilino. [1] [2] [4]

A window in this chapel contains an attractive roundel icon of the *Our Lady of the Rosary*. The intricate wrought iron gate is made by Giulio Cianchi in 1642, to Borromini's design. [1] [2]

### Crypt

This is now open to the public, after restoration. To get to it, go through the door to the right of the main altar apse, turn left and left again, pass through the original sacristy and go down the spiral staircase. This staircase also leads up into the campanile. It has a very unusual helically spiral central column. [1]

The crypt itself is on the same plan as the floorspace of the church above, being an incurved rhombus, and is entirely painted in white. There is an altar at the far end, under the main altar of the church, and this has an attractive pietra dura frontal. The altarpiece is a wall fresco of the 18th century showing the *Crucifixion*, but damp penetration has seriously damaged this. [1]

The walls have large round-headed niches interspersed with rectangular niches or doorways. Above these is an entablature which runs round the entire crypt apart from above the altar, and above this in turn is a lunette placed above each niche or doorway. A simple oval vault with a very shallow

curve springs from between these lunettes without any decoration whatever. [1]

The floor is in red brick. A doorway to the left of the altar leads to a little side chapel or room which is the crypt of the Barberini chapel above, and it is this that is pointed out as Borromini's intended tomb. It contains nothing. [1]

### Sacristy

In the corridor (16) leading to the sacristy and the cloister are two pictures by Giovanni Domenico Cerrini, depicting *St Ursula* and *The Holy Family with SS Agnes and Catherine*. These pictures were formerly over the side altars. [1] [2]

The sacristy (15) currently consists of two rectangular communicating rooms, the larger of which was the old refectory, and has the same chamfered rectangular plan. There are beautiful stucco decorations, featuring six-winged seraphs at the corners. The vault springs from a continuous entablature, with rosettes and tulips on the frieze and stars on the architrave. The central panel of the vault has an hour-glass shape made up of four double curlicues, but has no fresco. [1]

Above the door that connects the two rooms is a painting of *St Charles Borromeo Adoring the Trinity*. It is by Orazio Borgianni, and is of 1611. The painting was formerly on the high altar of the church built here before this one. There is also a *Virgin Mary and Child with St. Simon of Roxas* (1767) by Francisco Preciado, a pupil of Sebastiano Conca. Other pictures kept here include *St Francis Renouncing His Patrimony*, *St Agnes*, *St Michael de Sanctis in Glory* and an engaging secular picture of two little girls which looks as if it is of the 17th century. The sacristy furnishings, all from the 17th century, are of exquisite workmanship. [1] [2] [5]

There is a tiny but exquisite porcelain holy water stoup, the design of which is attributed to Borromini.

In a small room off the sacristy there is an anonymous 18th century portrait of Francesco Borromini (17) with the following inscription: "Knight Francesco Borromini of Como, illustrious architect of this church and convent of St. Charles at the Four Fountains, and outstanding benefactor, died in Rome 1667." [1] [2] [4]

The sacristy may not be obviously accessible to visitors. If you have difficulty, you could ask the custodian who should be on duty in the church. However, please don't ring the convent doorbell for the purpose or accost any of the friars who may be passing. [1]

### **Cloister**

The cloister (18) is accessed to the right of the corridor leading from the door to the right of the main altar. It is a charming and intimate two-storeyed space, and is on the plan of a chamfered rectangle with arcades on all four sides. There is an octagonal well in the garth, surrounded by a brick floor, with no plants. [1]

The chamfers in the first storey are bowed or convex, and are each flanked by a pair of Doric columns supporting a trabeation. The short ends of the cloister each has an archway supported by one member of these pairs of columns, and these archways correspond to convent doorways. The north doorway leads through a passage to the street, while the south doorway leads to the sacristy. The long sides of the cloister have two arches separated by a trabeation supported by another pair of columns on each side, giving a total of twelve columns in the ground floor arcades. [1]

The second storey arcades have columns in the same positions, but these support a continuous trabeated entablature open to the sky. The walkways here have balustrades, and the balusters are alternately correct and inverted in a design feature already glimpsed on the church façade. [1]

### **Access**

The access arrangements have now been regularized. You should find the church open at the times given below. On the other hand, don't bother ringing the doorbell at the convent to be let in at other

times (as you may be advised to do in older guidebooks, and in online sources relying on them). You will only get the same information verbally, and with abruptness, if anyone answers the door at all. The brethren have better things to do. [1] [4]

Monday to Friday: 10:00 to 13:00, 15:00 to 18:00.

Saturday: 10:00 to 13:00 only (not open in the afternoon).

Sunday: 12:00 to 13:00 only (after the Mass).

## Liturgy

A public Mass is celebrated on Sunday at 11:00. Because of the small size of the church, visitors should wait until it is over before looking around. Taking photos during Mass will cause offence.

Special feast-days celebrated with solemnity are: Holy Trinity (first Sunday after Pentecost), St Charles Borromeo on 4 November, Blessed Elizabeth Canori Mora on 4 February and St John Baptist of the Conception on 14 February.

## Burials:

Jan Kazimierz Cardinal [DENHOFF](#), (1649-1697) [also see [here](#)]

Buried in front of the main altar

Elizabeth [Mora](#) (1774-1825) [also see [here](#)]

<Religious figure>

## Location [4]

Address: Via del Quirinale 23, 00187 Roma

Open daily 10:00 – 13:00

Coord: [41° 54' 6"N 12° 29' 26"E](#)

## Information [4]

Telephone: +39 06 4883261

Web site: [www.sancarlino.eu](http://www.sancarlino.eu)

Email: [info@sancarlino-borromini.it](mailto:info@sancarlino-borromini.it)

## Artists and Architects:

Alessandro [Sperone](#) (1680-1740), Italian architect

Amalia De Angelis (19<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian painter

Antonio [Raggi](#) [aka *Il Lombardo*] (1624-1686), Italian sculptor of the Baroque

Bernardo Castelli [Borromini](#) (1643-1709), Italian architect

Domenico de [Rossi](#) (1659-1730), Italian sculptor and engraver

Francesco [Borromini](#) (1599-1667), leading figure in the emergence of Roman Baroque architecture

Francesco Antonio [Fontana](#) (1641-1700), Italian sculptor

Giovanni Cesare Dona (17<sup>th</sup> cent.), Italian sculptor

Giovanni Domenico [Cerrini](#) aka *il Cavalier Perugino* (1609-1681), Italian painter of the Baroque

Giovanni Francesco [Romanelli](#) (1610-1662), Italian Baroque painter from Viterbo

Giulio Cianchi (17<sup>th</sup> cent.), Italian metal sculptor

Giuseppe Bernasconi (17<sup>th</sup> cent.), Italian sculptor

Giuseppe Milanese (17<sup>th</sup> cent.), Italian painter

Orazio [Borgianni](#) (1575-1616), Italian painter and etcher of the Mannerist and early-Baroque periods

Pierre [Mignard](#) (1612-1695), French painter

Pietro Giarguzzi (17<sup>th</sup> cent.), Italian painter

Prospero [Mallerini](#) (1761-1836), Italian painter

Sillano Sillani (17<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian sculptor

Francisco Preciado de la Vega (1712-1789), Spanish painter

## Links and References:



- 1) [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
- 2) [Church's website](#)
- 3) [Info.roma web-page](#)
- 4) [Tourist information](#)
- a) Morrissey, Jake; *THE GENIUS IN THE DESIGN: Bernini, Borromini, and the Rivalry that Transformed Rome*; 2005

**Other sources:**

[English Wikipedia page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Nolli map](#) (look for 180)

["Romeartlover" web-page](#)

["http://romafelix.com/scarlino.htm](http://romafelix.com/scarlino.htm)

["Romafelix" web-page 2\)](#)

["De Alvariis" gallery on Flickr 1\)](#)

["De Alvariis" gallery on Flickr 2\)](#)

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

["Sullivan at Bluffton" web-page](#)

["Understanding Rome" article on the geometry](#)

[Youtube video from Smarthistoryvideos](#)

[Youtube video from JPtheZ](#) (commentary taken from previous item)

[Wiki Commons web page of photos](#)

Hill, Michael; "Practical and Symbolic Geometry in Borromini's San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane"; *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 72, no.4 (December 2013)