

# Sacro Cuore di Gesù al Castro Pretorio

(Sacred Heart of Jesus at the Praetorian Barracks)



**Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at the Praetorian Barracks** is a 19th century parish and titular church, a minor basilica, at Via Marsala 42. This is in the modern rione Castel Pretorio, and very close to the front of Termini station. The dedication to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and is the Italian national shrine to the Sacred Heart. [1]

## History

This Basilica was wanted and prioritized by two Popes: Pio IX and Leone XIII. The church was initially proposed by St John Bosco, and the foundation stone was laid in 1870. However, the annexation of Rome by the Kingdom of Italy delayed matters, and the building was finally finished in 1887. The majestic Church was built on the Esquillino Hill in Rome within the Aurelian walls. Its bell tower is the highest point in Rome. This was the first parish Church built after the capture of Rome and it became a parish in February 2, 1879. [1] [5]

The design of the new edifice was by Francesco Vespignani, and he produced one of the most ornate and richly decorated of Rome's modern churches. The Basilica was consecrated on May 14, 1887 in the presence of St. John Bosco. [1] [2] [a]

The church is served by the Salesians, whose founder the saint was. They run a boarding-school of arts and industries next to the church on the right side, attached to the building. [1]

The title was established in 1965, with H.E. Maximilien de Fürstenberg as the first titular. The second titular priest (pro hac vice) was H.E. Giovanni Cardinal Saldarini, Archbishop of Turin, who was created Cardinal in 1991 and who died in 2011. The present cardinal deacon is Giuseppe Versaldi, appointed 2012. [1]

## Exterior

### Layout

The plan is of a Latin cross, with a very long presbytery or chancel having a skylight in the roof near the crossing which lights the choir of the Salesian community. There is no separate structural apse, neither are there any external domes as the roof is pitched throughout. The material used in the external walls is white travertine quarried at Tivoli, with some brick backgrounding in the façade to give a contrast to the architectural elements. [1]

### Façade

The façade (1) is in neoclassical style in Travertino marble from Tivoli, crafted by artists such as **Angelo Benzoni**, **Adolfo Pantoresi** and **Eugenio Baroni** who worked on it. The stained glass windows are murano glass, a work of the Mosaic Company of Venice. [5]

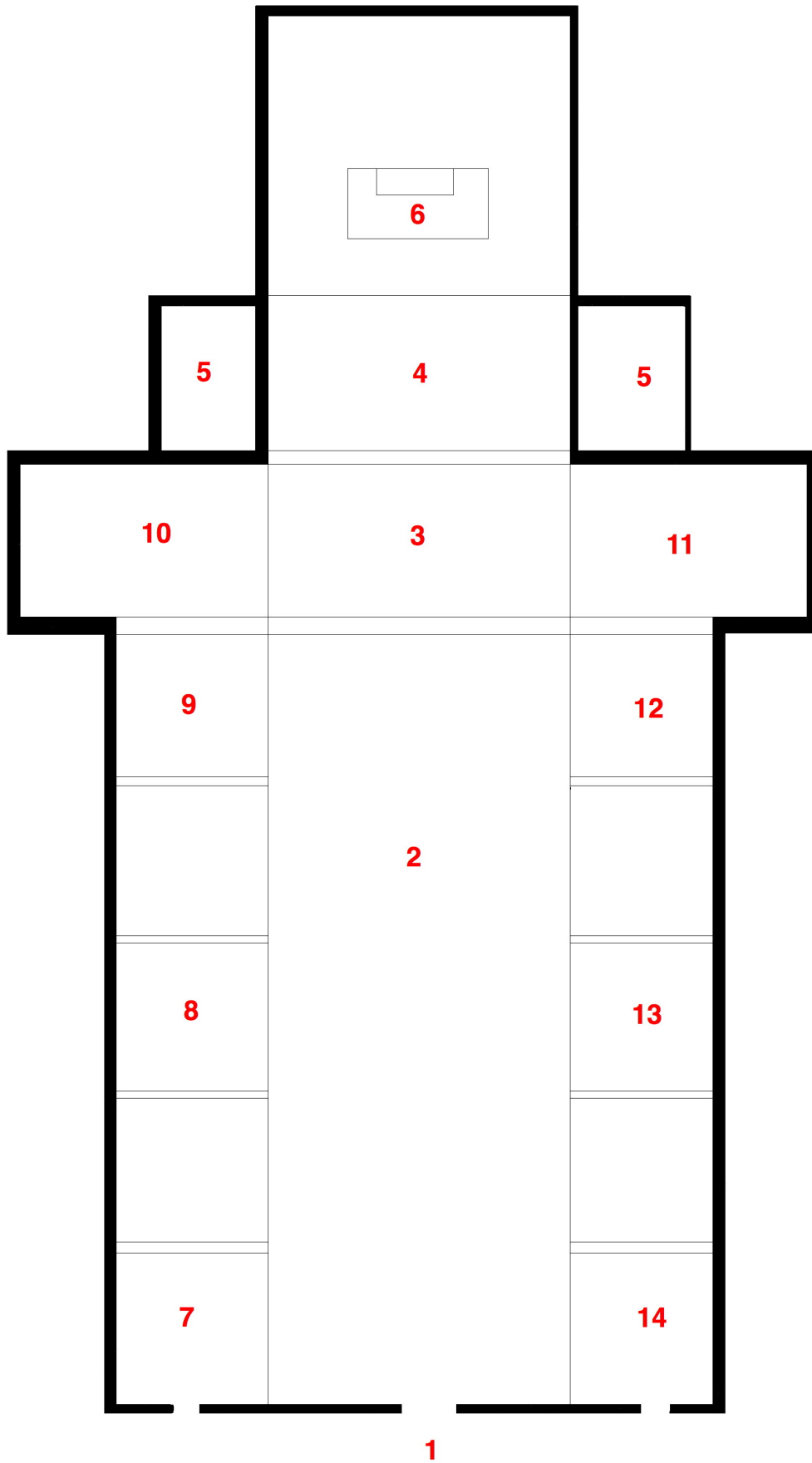
There are three entrance doorways for nave and aisles, of identical design although the nave entrance is bigger. The lunettes over the portals are supported by columns with Corinthian capitals. The three mosaics in the lunettes depict, respectively, *The Sacred Heart of Jesus*, *St. Joseph* and *St. Francis de Sales*. Each is flanked by a pair of grey granite Composite columns in the round, supporting an entablature above which is a tympanum displaying a mosaic and sheltered by a projecting archivolt. The central tympanum has the Sacred Heart being venerated by angels, the left hand one has St Peter and the right hand one, St Paul. [1]

There are eight Corinthian pilasters on the façade in four pairs, two pairs at the corners and the other two flanking the main entrance. Above the aisle entrances are two tablets bearing inscriptions, the left hand one reading *Venite ad me, omnes qui laboratis et onerati estis, et ego reficiam vos* (Come to me, all you who work and are burdened, and I will refresh you), and the right hand one *Quisquis hoc templum beneficia petiturus ingrur cuncta se impetrasse laetetur* (Whoever enters this temple to ask for benefits, may he rejoice over those already granted). The pilasters support a full entablature with a blank frieze, and above this is a solid attic balustrade decorated with blank tondi and tablets. On one corner is a statue of *St Francis de Sales* by **Eugenio Baroni**, and on the other is one of *St Augustine* by **Adolfo Pantoresi**. [1]

The second storey nave frontage, above the aisle rooflines, has an arcade of three arched windows flanked by four Composite pilasters supporting an entablature and triangular pediment. The pediment contains a coat of arms of Pope Leo XIII carved by **Antonio Gelpi**, and placed above the right and left corners are a pair of angels carved by **Angelo Benzoni**. [1]

### Campanile

The campanile is on the far side of the left hand transept. Two storeys rise over the church roof, each side of both having an arcade containing three arches. At the top there is a little octagonal drum dome, standing on which is a colossal gilt statue of *Christ the Redeemer*, by **Raffaello Politi** and erected in 1931. [1]



### Layout

There is a nave with side aisles of five bays, then a transept as wide as the nave and aisles and finally a square choir with a cupola. Beyond this, and separated from the public church by a wall behind the high altar, is the chancel which is also square but slightly larger and which has its own semi-circular apse. [1]

One oddity that visitors often overlook is that the façade is at an angle to the major axis of the church, so that the left hand side wall is longer than the right hand one. If you go through the right hand side entrance you will find yourself in the aisle, but the left hand side entrance passes through a little lobby first which is there to get the counterfaçade wall properly oriented. [1]

### Nave

For a modern-era church, the interior decoration is amazingly rich. The nave (2) arcades have four Doric grey granite columns on each side, with impostes supporting the arches. Above each arch is a round-headed window, with framed frescoes between them of the Twelve Prophets by **Cesaro Caroselli**. The spandrels of the arches have tondi containing heads of saints carved in high relief, and the arch voussoirs are coffered. [1]

Over the main door, there is a tablet which explains the reason for the name of the Church. Above there are three stained glass windows representing *Jesus*, *St. Peter* and *St. Paul*. The Salesian College of Alassio gave as gifts the two nearby holy-water basins. [5]

The ceiling is also coffered and carved, in red, blue and gold with frescoes in the central panels except for the middle one which has a gilded wooden relief of the Sacred Heart by **Andrea Brevilacqua**. He also carved all the other figurative woodwork. The frescoed panels are by **Virginio Monti** illustrating four episodes God's mercy: [1] [2]

*Jesus and the Samaritan,*  
*Jesus among the children,*  
*Jesus and the adulterer,*  
*the Prodigal Son*

In the transept, (3) starting from right are eight apostles with the four evangelists. At the center of the arches, two roundals with *Jesus and the Eucharist* and *Jesus the Good Shepherd*. In the ceiling, *Annunciation* and *Nativity* by **Virginio Monti** and in the center the first coat-of-arms of the Salesian Congregation made of wood by **Andrea Bevilacqua**. [2] [5]

Between the transept and the presbytery is a choir (4) in the center of which is the people's altar. On either side are screened in rooms. above these is the organ. The great organ (5) built by the **Giuseppe Bernasconi** of Varese, placed on the balcony facing the presbytery. The wooden case is by the sculptor **Raffaello Falleni** of Livorno. [2]

There is an internal dome over this choir, with a large open oculus but no lantern. The transparent covering over the dome was placed on June 7, 1991. The fresco in the dome is by **Virginio Monti**, and refer to the triumph of the Sacred Heart. At the base of the dome a blue band with golden characters reads: "Ibi cunctis diebus oculi mei et cor meum" ("Here every day my eyes and my heart"). In the four pendentives of the cupola, **Caesar Caruselli** frescoed *David* and other prophets. [1] [2] [5]

### Presbytery

After the choir is a deep presbytery (6) with the altar at the front. The main altar is an enormous Baroque aedicule 12 meters in high with four alabaster columns with gilt Corinthian capitals supporting a triangular pediment, and was originally from the church of San Francesco in Siena. At the top in a triangular tympanum is a *Dove of the Holy Spirit*. [1] [2]

The altarpiece is a canvas by **Franz von Rohden** of the *Sacred Heart*, inspired by the third vision of **Santa Maria Margherita Alacoque**. The tabernacle is richly decorated with precious stones and

polychrome marble. [1] [2]

Behind the altar is a screen wall, inserted in 1969 to separate the private choir chapel of the Salesians from the main body of the church. Over the door towards the Sacristy, there is a tablet to commemorate the date of the Church Consecration on May 14, 1887. [1] [5]

The aisles have saucer domes with more frescoes in their pendentives and oculi. Each aisle has three side altars, with rich polychrome marble decoration, and another altar is at each end of the transept. [1]

### Left hand aisle

#### Baptistry

In the left aisle near the entrance there is the baptistry, (7) with a Carrara marble font and a marble bas-relief of the Baptism of Christ. In the nave in front of this altar is a full size statue of the *Blessed Heart*. [1]

#### Altar of Sts Joachim and Anne

Then there is a side altar dedicated to SS Joachim and Anne, (8) parents of Our Lady, with an altarpiece by **Guido Guidi** showing the holy couple teaching Our Lady to read. [1]

#### Altar of Sts John Bosco and Dominic Savio

The next altar is dedicated to Sts John Bosco and Dominic Savio, (9) who was an Italian adolescent student of Saint John Bosco. He was studying to be a priest when he became ill and died at the age of 14. The altar was built shortly after John Bosco was canonized in 1934. This altar was remade by the architect **Guerra Galdellie** who set it in classical form to harmonize it with the basilica. The decoration of the chapel was completed by the firm Arrighini of Pietrasanta to the designs of **Paolo Giovanni Crida**. The two ancient fluted grey-veined marble columns, from the Temple of Concordia in Cori, were the private gift from a family. [a] [5]

It also has a charming altarpiece of the two saints by **Paolo Giovanni Crida** of 1934, who also carved the marble reliefs below the altar rails. In the front, the largest bas-relief is represented by Don Bosco, accompanied by Don Michele Rua, presenting a model of the basilica to Pope Leo XIII. Two angels on either side one holding a rose and the other lilies. The reliefs on the plinth of the columns show Don Bosco among young people and among the Indians of Patagonia. The two sides of the altar table are the coats-of-arms of the Pontiffs Pio IX and Leone XIII, great supporters of Don Bosco in this work building the basilica. [a]

The faithful often stop in front of this altar who are having problems with their growing children to entrust them to the great Father and Master of the young. [a]

#### Chapel of Maria Auxiliatrix

The spectacular Baroque altar to Mary Help of Christians (10) in the left transept was originally in the demolished church of Santa Teresa alle Quattro Fontane. Then it was taken down and lodged in Villa Torlonia (in Via Nomentana) until it was donated by Prince Torlonia, Mayor of Rome. The altar is rich in precious marble with a precious tabernacle. The canvas is made by **Giuseppe Rollini**, as shown by the signature and the date placed in the lower right corner. The coronation, with a tiara and scepter, blessed by Pope St John XXIII on the deathbed in May 1963, were placed by Cardinal Paolo Marella on behalf of the Vatican chapter on May 31, 1963. [2] [5] [a]

At this altar, Don Bosco celebrated the Mass on May 16, 1887: here it was interrupted 15 times, with a miraculous glimpse of the whole panorama of his life, enclosed in the words of the dream of nine years: "to your time will all understand." At this altar he understood and was moved deeply. On May 16, 1987, a memorial inscription to the centenary was placed on the wall next to the altar. [2] [a]

### Right hand aisle

#### Chapel of St Joseph

The altar at the end of the transept (11) is dedicated to St Joseph, and it was the high altar in the choir, already used for the celebrations while the rest of the church was still under construction. The altar is made up of two marble columns with Corinthian capitals supporting a broken tympanum. In the center read ITE AD JOSEPH. The canvas is by **Giuseppe Rollini**, a former pupil of Don Bosco in Valdocco. Saint Joseph is next to the Virgin Mary, the Child Jesus in his arms and, with his right hand stretched out, he protects the Basilica of St. Peter, offered by an anguished angel. The illusion of the Holy Patron of the Universal Church is clear. [a]

#### Altar of St Francis de Sales

The next altar is (12) dedicated to St Francis de Sales, patron of the Salesian Family and journalists. The altar comes from the hospice of the 100 priests, a retirement home for elderly priests, built by Sisto V and demolished in the 1800s for the construction of the lungo Tevere. This altar was the fruit of Don Bosco's pledge to Cardinal Parocchi, Vicar of Leo XIII, during lunch after the consecration of the Church. [a]

The canvas by **Attilio Palombi** represents the saint, bishop and doctrinal of the Church, patron and holder of the Congregation founded by Don Bosco and named by him, writing while an angel holds the book. The glance of the saint is turned to heaven from where he expects inspiration for ascetic and theological arguments. [a]

#### Altar of St Mary Domenica

Then there is a side altar (13) dedicated to St Mary Domenica Mazzarello with a very good altarpiece by **Paolo Giovanni Crida** of 1966. She is counted as the foundress of the female branch of the Salesian religious family, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and in the picture she is shown pointing to a picture of the Madonna and Child over a Baroque altar. [1]

The right aisle near the entrance (14) has a marble statue of *Pope Pius IX* by **Francesco Confalonieri**. Pope Pius IX, friend of Don Bosco, who was responsible for the acquisition of the land on Esquillino Hill on where the Basilica was to be built. Over this statue is an admirable portrait of *Pope Leo XIII*, who wanted Don Bosco to build this Church. [1] [5]

### **Access**

The church is open:  
6:00 to 12:00, 16:00 to 20:00.

### **Liturgy**

This parish church has a rich liturgical and devotional life.

Mass is celebrated:

Weekdays 6:30, 7:00, 7:30, 8:00, 9:00, 10:00, 17:30 and 19:00.

However, during July and August except Saturdays and First Fridays the two evening Masses are replaced by one at 18:30.

Sundays: 7:00, 8:00, 9:00, 10:00, 11:00 (in Tagalog), 17:30, 19:00, 20:30 (not July and August).

### **Location:**

Address: Via Marsala 42

Coord: [41° 54' 9" N, 12° 30' 9" E](#)

### **Artists and Architects:**

Adolfo [Pantoresi](#) (1830-1927), Italian sculptor  
Andrea Brevilacqua (19th cent), Italian woodcarver  
Antonio Gelpi (19th cent), Italian sculptor  
Attilio [Palombi](#) (19th cent), Italian painter  
Cesare [Caroselli](#) (1847-1899), Italian painter  
Eugenio Baroni (19th cent), Italian sculptor  
Francesco [Confalonieri](#) (1850-1925), Italian sculptor

Francesco [Vespignani](#) (1842-1899), Italian architect  
Franz von [Rohden](#) (1817-1903), German painter of the Nazarene school  
Giuseppe Bernasconi (19th cent), Italian organ builder  
Giuseppe [Rollini](#) (1842-1904), Italian painter  
Guerra Baldellie (19th cent), Italian architect  
Guido Guidi (1867-1911), Italian painter  
Orazio [Borgianni](#) (1575-1616), Italian painter and etcher of the Mannerist and early-Baroque periods  
Paolo Giovanni [Crida](#) (1886-1967), Italian painter and sculptor  
Raffaello Falleni (19th cent), Italian woodcarver  
Raffaello Politi (19th cent), Italian sculptor  
Virginio [Monti](#) (1852-1942), Italian painter

### Links and References:

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
  2. [Parish website](#)
  3. [Online descriptive leaflet](#)
  4. [Info.roma web-page](#)
- a. Information placards in church

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)