

# San Francesco Saverio del Caravita



**San Francesco Saverio del Caravita** is a 17th century Baroque oratory, next to the church of St. Ignatius in the rione Pigna. The church is dedicated to the great apostle of the Indies, St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552). It is commonly called the **Oratory of Caravita**. It is home to the Caravita Community, an international English-language Catholic community in Rome.

## History

The current oratory is built over the ruins of a mediaeval church named San Nicolò de Forbitoribus, which was possibly first mentioned in 1192. There is a definite reference in a bull of Pope Urban V (1362-70). The name Forbitoribus refers to the guild of cutlers or knife, razor and scissor makers, but it is unclear whether this was just a nickname deriving from workshops round about, or whether the guild had actual rights in the church. [1] [2] [3]

On the night of September 1, 1405 it was recorded that the church and its bell tower were seriously damaged by lightning. In 1551 Pope Julius II entrusted the ruined church to Camaldolese monks, who rebuilt the church, and built a small monastery next door. The dedication was changed to Sant'Antonio (St Anthony of Egypt). [1] [2] [3]

By 1631, the Society of Jesus had established itself next door with the Collegio Romano, and sought to expand nearby to accommodate the active sodalities and lay congregations regularly meeting in the College. The Jesuits acquired the property from the Camaldolese in exchange for a site near Piazza Venezia. The Camaldolese relocated to San Romualdo, and the Jesuits set about demolishing the older church and monastery in favor of a new oratory. [1] [2]

The current oratory was built by the Jesuit father of Terni, Pietro Gravita from 1631-1633. Known as the Oratorio del Caravita, popular corruption of the surname of father Gravita. It housed nine

congregations of laypeople who served Rome's homeless, sick, and imprisoned and then returned to the oratory to pray and to receive spiritual direction from Jesuits at the Roman College, just across the street. The oratory was originally dedicated to Santa Maria della Pietà (Our Lady of Pity) in addition to the great Jesuit missionary Saint Francis Xavier. [1] [2]

One of the first purpose of the Oratory of St. Francis Xavier was the Missione Urbana, a Jesuit outreach funded by charitable donation, focused on the evangelization and catechesis of farmers and others who came into the Roman markets from the outlying farmlands, which lacked proper pastoral care. Soon several confraternities, sodalities, and lay congregations began to use the oratory to support their work, including the Mantelloni, a lay penitential confederacy at the Collegio Romano known for its excessive displays of self-mortification. Another that quickly gained appeal for the students of the Collegio Romano, and which met at the Oratory del Caravita, was the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin, founded in 1563 by a Belgian Jesuit, Jean Leunis. At the height of their activity, there were nine such organizations housed in the Caravita Oratory, including the first to open membership to women. Each had its own meeting space in the Oratory, but on Friday evenings all would come together for common devotions and formation with the Jesuits who studied or taught at the neighboring Collegio Romano. [2]

The oratory was renovated between 1670 and 1677, probably under the guidance of architect **Giovanni Antonio de' Rossi**, and was once again dedicated to Saint Francis Xavier, Apostle of the Indies, and the Madonna della Pietà as indicated in the inscription about the entrance on the Oratory's façade. [2] [3]

In 1716, to facilitate passage of the Jesuits across the street, a skybridge was built connecting the old Roman College to Caravita, over the Via del Collegio Romano. It is known as the Arco dei Gesuiti (Arch of the Jesuits). [2]

In 1773, with the suppression of the Society of Jesus, the oratory was under the care of the Fathers of the Holy Faith (later called "Fathers of the Faith of Jesus"), with the help of the Vincentians. These attempted to maintain the Ignatian vision and mission strategy in the absence of the Jesuits. After the restoration of the Society in 1813, the Oratory was used as the center of activity for all Jesuit lay associations in Rome, until falling into disuse in 1925. [2]

### Caravita Community

In 2000, the Jesuits responsible for the Church of Sant'Ignazio sought to begin an English-language liturgy for pilgrims coming to Rome during the Great Jubilee Year. Rather than simply offer an English Mass near the pantheon, the community's founding members sought to revive the original mission of the Oratory for the support and development of lay formation and ministry with an Ignatian spirituality and vision for outreach from the center of Christ and the Church to the frontiers and margins. [2]

The Caravita Community was formed, and opened the doors of the Oratory again on 15 October 2000. Since then, it has been mostly used by an international English-speaking group, mainly consisting of expatriates from around the Anglophone world, particularly the U.S., U.K., Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Nigeria and Canada. Regular membership is composed largely of academics, leaders of religious communities, diplomats, and staff of international NGOs based in Rome. [2]

The community has a special outreach to English-speaking pilgrims in Rome as well, so there are often as many or more visitors as locals. [2]

## **Exterior**

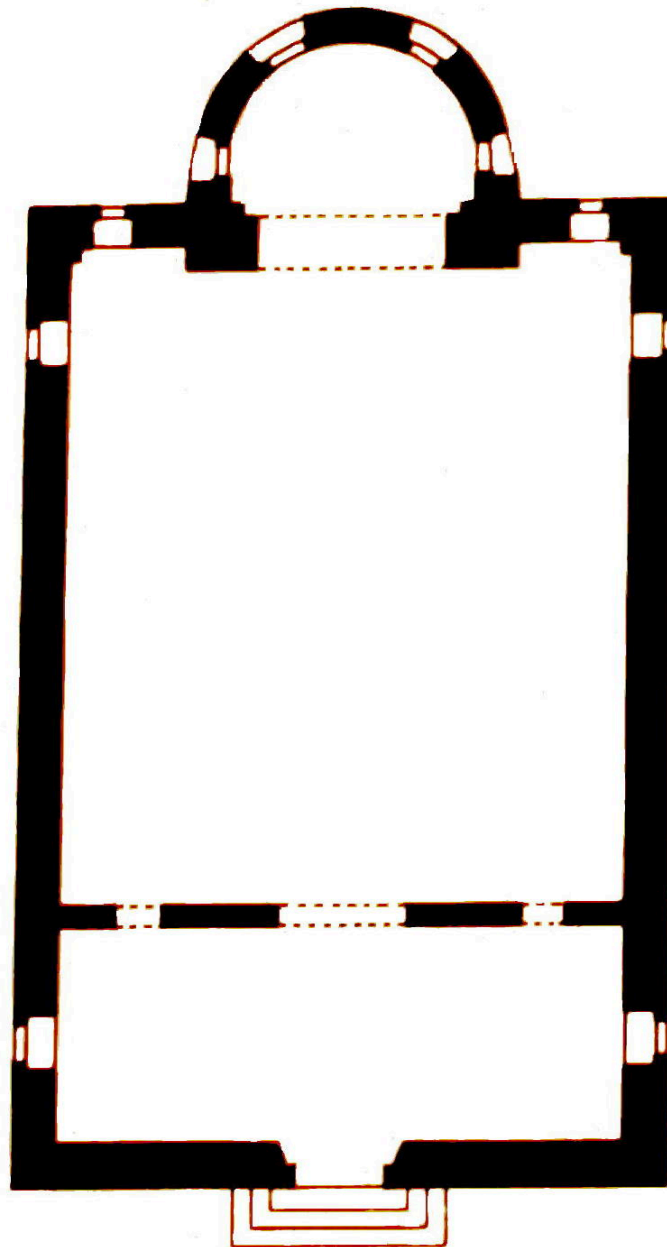
The oratory is on the corner of a junction of two narrow streets, and is aligned north to south. There are two architectural elements. The fabric is in pinkish-yellow brick. Down the street to the right of the façade, the Via del Collegio Romano, is a covered passage connecting the oratory and the College by means of a bridge over the street. This, the Arco dei Gesuiti, was built in 1716, and allowed college students to access the oratory without having to go outdoors. [1]

### Façade

The façade is divided into two orders of pinkish brick with architectural details in travertine limestone. The lower one is divided into three vertical orders by four Doric pilasters supporting an entablature with a strongly projecting cornice, at the center of which is the entrance portal, surmounted by a broken tympanum in the center of which is the papal coat of arms and the inscription reminding that the church is dedicated to "MATER PIETATIS ET FRANCISCO XAVERIO INDIARUM APOSTOLO MDCXXXIII". This storey also has a pair of large rectangular windows, with floating cornices over their lintels. [1] [3]

The upper order has three windows surmounted by oval quadrilobate openings. A balustrade attic is crowned with an iron cross and four flaming travertine vases. [3]

## Plan



## Interior

The interior consists of a vestibule, and an aisleless nave with a barrel-vaulted ceiling into which dormer windows are inserted. The sanctuary is an apse with a conch, and the triumphal arch of this has an oculus which directs natural light onto the altar. Around the apse runs a passageway or ambulatory, and this is accessed via two pairs of doors on either side of the triumphal arch as well as by two curtained doorways flanking the main altar. [1]

### Vestibule

The two holy water stoups have a motif of a crab holding a crucifix in its claws, surrounded by putti. This alludes to a story that the saint, while on his way by sea to Malacca (now in Malaysia) threw his crucifix into the sea while praying for a storm to abate. When he landed on the beach he was met by a crab holding the lost crucifix. [1]

### Nave

The nave has four bays, marked by four windows on each side inserted into the ceiling vault.

The entrance from the vestibule passes under a gallery supported by a pair of Ionic columns, and the organ is here. The balustrade is ornate, with caryatids in place of balusters, and above this is a mesh screen to protect the anonymity of choral singers accompanying the liturgy. The rectangular window over the organ pipes looks out over the flat roof of the vestibule block. [1]

All interior wall and ceiling surfaces are frescoed in the Baroque style. However, some 17th century frescoes survive. The main panel in the ceiling vault shows *The Apotheosis of St Francis Xavier*, by **Giovanni Antonio de' Rossi**. The side walls have non-figurative decoration which is painted to resemble stucco work from the 19th century restoration. [1] [4]

In the year 1670 as part of the restoration and in honor of the sacred image of the *Mother of Mercy* (*Mater Pietatis*), a fresco attributed to **Baldassarre Peruzzi** which came from the ancient Church of San Rocco all'Augusteo was donated to the Oratory. In 1677 it was placed in the apse and crowned by the Vatican Chapter. Today it is found to the left of the sanctuary. [2] [3]

There is a shrine to St Francis Xavier to the right of the sanctuary, comprising a 17th century silver bust-reliquary. [1]

The stalls along the side walls, in carved walnut with gilded decoration, are originals from the 17th century. There is a floating pulpit sticking out from the left hand side wall, on brackets and accessed through a door in the wall. [1]

In the middle of the floor is a 19th century burial slab.

### Organ

The organ located upstairs in the Gallery was built in 1790 by the distinguished Priori Family – one of the most important organ builders in Rome at the end of the eighteenth century and throughout all of the nineteenth. The organ at Caravita is defined as “pre-Romantic” – a decisively transitional instrument with respect to the Baroque organ more commonly found in Rome. It is a simple structure of only one keyboard with twenty-three keys and only eight pedals. It was renovated and tuned in 2012. [2]

It is said that Girolamo Alessandro Frescobaldi may have played on that organ. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was a teenager when he performed at Caravita in 1770 on an earlier organ, prior to the installation of the Priori instrument. [2] [a]

### Sanctuary

The triumphal arch of the sanctuary is supported by a pair of gigantic Composite pilasters revetted in what looks like yellow brecciated marble, and this design feature is replicated by four pilasters in the apse itself. The altarpiece shows *St Francis Xavier Preaching in the Presence of the Holy Trinity* by **Sebastiano Conca**, and the paintings on either side are of *St Michael* (left) and the *Guardian Angel* (right). The altar is right against the wall of the apse, and has no canopy. Instead, above the altarpiece is an icon of the *Madonna and Child* in a gilded stucco glory. In the conch vault are frescoes of angels, and two stucco statues of angel candleholders in the style of Bernini are on plinths flanking the altar. [1]

Above the side doorways are cantoria or opera-boxes for solo musicians, with heavily ornate bronze screens above the balustrades. [1]

### Ancillary chambers

The Ristretto degli Angeli, formerly an upstairs meeting-place for students from the Collegio

Romano, has stucco work by Giovan Battista Maini and painting by Gaetano Sottino who was from Sicily. The silver reliquary bust of St Francis Xavier, already mentioned, used to be in another room called the Sacello di San Francesco Saverio. [1] [2]

## Artists and Architects

Baldassare Tommaso [Peruzzi](#) (1481-1536), Italian painter and architect from Siena  
Giovanni Antonio [de Rossi](#) (1616-1695), Italian architect of the Baroque period  
Lazzaro [Baldi](#) (c. 1624-1703), Italian painter of the Baroque period  
Sebastiano [Conca](#) (1680-1764), Italian painter

## Location

Address: Via del Caravita 7, 00186 Roma

Coordinates: [41°53'56.6"N 12°28'50.5"E](#)

## Info

### Contacts

Telephone: 0039 06 6794560 (chiesa di S. Ignazio)

Fax: 0039 06 6794560

### Opening times

opened on Sunday during the Mass

### Masses

Sunday 11.00(in English)

### Notes:

Visit: It is possible to book the visit by calling the church of S. Ignatius from Monday to Friday from 10.00am to 1.00pm

Extraordinary opening on occasion of concerts and exhibitions.

## Links and References

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
  2. [English Wikipedia page](#)
  3. [Roma Segreta web site](#)
  4. [ROMAPEDIA web site](#)
- a. Allen, Jr., John L; "Oratorio del Caravita"; *National Catholic Register*; 2004

## Other Links

[Caravita web site](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Tourist info page](#)