

HISTORY

San Giovanni in Fonte (also known as the **Lateran Baptistery**) is an early Christian baptistery located next to St. John Lateran and the Lateran Palace in Rome.

In the early Church, baptism was usually given by the bishops in an annual ceremony during the Easter Vigil. In Rome, this was done in the baptistery of this church, which was dedicated to St John the Baptist. This was the first structure built for this specific purpose in Rome. It is a separate building, and is today usually accessed through a side entrance. The main entrance is the one facing the basilica (through the Chapel of St Venantius), making it easy to move in procession from the basilica.

The construction is thought to have taken place after that of the basilica, between 320 and 330. A mediaeval legend, narrated in the *Liber Pontificalis*, claimed that the emperor Constantine was baptized here by Pope Sylvester. This is not true; the Church historian Eusebius wrote that Constantine was baptized on his deathbed at Nicomedia near Constantinople by his namesake Eusebius of Nicomedia.

The foundation of the present baptistery has been argued over by scholars to the present day. Archaeologists working from 1925 to 1929 found that the octagonal walls stand on a circular foundation plinth. The latest consensus is that the present octagonal structure is Constantinian and that Pope Sixtus only altered the interior arrangements as part of a major refit that also involved the side-chapels added by his successors.

Emperor Constantine had installed a porphyry font with seven silver deer pouring water out of their mouths, also an image of the Lamb of God in gold and images of Christ and St John the Baptist in silver. The original decoration of the font is only known from the *Liber Pontificalis*, the well-known collection of biographies of the Roman Popes compiled in the early sixth century. The original decoration had probably already disappeared by the time that the *Liber Pontificalis* was compiled, perhaps destroyed or stolen during the invasions in 410 or 455.

The original baptistery is thought to have been free-standing, surrounded by a piazza in which crowds could assemble. However, in the 5th century there was a massive re-modelling which resulted in the present plan of the complex and much of its present appearance. It is now thought that there was one long campaign lasting about thirty years, from the reign of Pope Sixtus III (432-40) through that of Pope Leo the Great (440-61) and ending in that of Pope Hilary (461-8).

The *Liber Pontificalis* records that Sixtus III renovated the interior of the baptistery, which was crumbling. Pope Sixtus was certainly responsible for the present interior arrangement, where eight porphyry columns support an open entablature on which the doctrine of baptism as spiritual rebirth, and the sacrament's connection to the sacrifice of Christ, is set out in eight inscriptions. He also added the portico, with an apse at each end, and it is now thought that he built the present chapel of St Venantius as an ancillary church. These chapels are on record as having been built by Pope Hilary. The surviving ones are dedicated to SS John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, and the lost one at the back was dedicated to the Holy Cross. This latter was on the plan of a Greek cross within a chamfered square, and was accessed via a little colonnaded atrium.

Saint Leo the Great restored the baptismal environment ruined by the Vandals of Genseric in 455. Pope John IV (640–642) either built or remodelled a chapel in honor of St Venantius of Salona and other martyrs of Dalmatia (the southern part of modern Croatia). Pope John was a Dalmatian himself, and when Slav barbarians overran his homeland he brought the relics of some of the more important Dalmatian saints here.

The next major intervention was by Pope Anastasius IV in 1154. He ordered the Sistine portico to be converted into two chapels, with altars occupying the apses at each end. The right hand chapel was originally dedicated to SS Andrew the Apostle and Lucy, but was re-dedicated to SS Cyprian and Justina when their relics were enshrined under the altar. The left hand one is dedicated to SS Rufina and Secunda, local Roman martyrs. Pope Anastasius also enshrined their relics here.

Pope Adrian IV, who succeeded Pope Anastasius, oversaw the restoration of the Aqua Claudia aqueduct water supply to the baptistery.

Problems arose with the structure at the start of the 16th century. Pope Leo X (1513-22) ordered repairs to the outside of the 5th century dome, but this seems to have failed completely and it was demolished in 1540 under Pope Paul III. This meant the loss of the 5th century mosaics that it contained, which apparently had already started to fall off in the early part of the century. A ceiling was provided around the new dome, in gilded wood with carved figures of *Christ, Our Lady* and *SS John the Baptist* and *John the Evangelist*.

Pope Gregory XIII (1572-1585) commissioned a carving of *The Assumption of Our Lady* as the dome centerpiece in 1574, and provided a roof in lead. He also had a new ceiling provided for the Chapel of St Venantius, in the previous year. He also ordered a major re-ordering of the baptismal arrangements. The ancient plunge-pool was replaced by the present basalt basin (itself ancient, from an unknown bath-house), which was surrounded by a balustrade. The atrium of the Chapel of the Holy Cross was removed, and the present entrance doorway from the piazza inserted.

In 1587, Pope Sixtus V authorized Domenico Fontana to demolish the 5th century Chapel of the Holy Cross as part of his scheme to improve the access to the basilica. This resulted in the present piazza. The original access door from the baptistery was then turned into the main public entrance to the basilica, which it remains.

The present interior appearance of the baptistery is basically 17th century. Pope Urban VIII (1623-9) began a massive restoration project in 1625, the heraldry of his family, the Barberini, can be seen in the interior in several places. Supervision was by Domenico Castelli *Il Fontanino* from 1629 to 1635. The 16th century ceiling and dome were remodelled. The walls of the baptistery and the dome interior were frescoed by a team of artists under the supervision of Andrea Sacchi. He did the dome frescoes himself, finishing in 1645, and his team did the main wall frescoes which took another three years. This work entailed the loss of all the mosaics remaining from the 5th century.

From 1655 to 1667 Francesco Borromini continued restoration work, involving the balustrade and floors and also covering the roofs of the dome and portico with lead in 1657. He also added a roofline frieze with heraldic emblems of Pope Alexander VII. The interior of the portico was restored, and given a Baroque makeover. Fortunately one of the two ancient conch mosaics had survived, although damaged, and this was left alone. In 1674, the Ceva family commissioned Carlo Rainaldi to restore the Chapel of St Venantius, replacing the old altar in the process. In 1689, Ciro Ferri provided the font with an ornate bronze cover.

The 18th century saw certain noble families sponsoring renovations in the chapels. In 1757 the Lercari family restored the Chapel of SS Rufina and Secunda as a mortuary chapel, and about ten years later the same was done for the Chapel of SS Cyprian and Justina by the Borgia di Velletri family. In 1780, the Chapel of St John the Baptist was remodelled by Giovanni Battista Ceccarelli. Very slow damp penetration led to damage to the frescoes and this was first addressed in 1785 when Cristoforo Unterperger was commissioned to restore them. This took ten years.

There was a restoration of the chapels of St Venantius and St John the Evangelist in 1967, on the orders of Blessed Pope Paul VI. Unfortunately this involved the removal of 18th century decoration from the latter, and a rather violent scraping of the former. The pope also commissioned two sculptures of deer for the baptistery. After this work, the Chapel of St Venantius became the main place of worship for the basilica's parish.

The bomb that detonated in the piazza on 27 July 1993, as part of a Mafia bombing campaign, damaged the public entrance to the baptistery. It also seems to have moved the edifice very slightly on its foundations, because the Vatican website reports the loss of the famous musical sound produced by the moving of the bronze doors of the chapel of St John the Baptist. This had been noted for centuries. The wall frescoes have recently been restored again.