

San Giovanni in Fonte



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. In the first centuries of Christianity, those being received into the Church were baptized by triple immersion, in honor of the Blessed

Trinity, in the pool in the Baptistery. Also known as **San Giovanni in Fonte**. [B2] [Bd]

History

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. [B1]

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. [B1]

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. [B1] [Bb]

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). [B1] [Bc]

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. [B1] [B3] [Ba] [Bc]

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. [B1] [B3]

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. [B1]

Pope Adrian IV, who succeeded Pope Anastasius, oversaw the restoration of the Aqua Claudia aqueduct water supply to the baptistery. [B1] [B2]

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*. [B1]

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. [B1] [B3]

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. [B1] [Bc]

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 II 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. [B1] [Bc]

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. [B1] [B3]

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. [B1]

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. [B1]

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. [B1]

Exterior

Piazza side

The view of the baptistery from the piazza is of a rather grim octagonal brick box, with the first two corners to the right of the door being chamfered. If you look at the visible sides flanking the door, you will notice that each has the outline of a blocked door with an arc lintel, over which is the outline of a blocked round-headed window. These features are thought to be Constantinian. Each side now has an extant 17th century rectangular window, which is set in a larger partly blocked round-headed window which is 5th century and which is thought to have replaced the window below. [B1]

The simple entrance (1) has a molded doorcase, flanked by pilasters strips supporting strap corbels which in turn support a triangular pediment. Over the lintel is the simple epigraph **Gregorius XIII Pont. Max.** The late 16th century wooden doors were destroyed by the Mafia bomb. [B1]

The edifice was almost certainly not in naked brick originally. It is uncertain as to whether the Constantinian baptistery was rendered in plaster or clad in stone, but the Sistine baptistery was clad in large marble tiles.

The roofline frieze bearing the heraldic emblems of Pope Alexander VII is by **Borromini**. The shallowly pitched and tiled roof is in trapezoidal sectors meeting at the low octagonal dome, which has a circular window (oculus) in each side and a cap with eight tiled sectors. [B1]

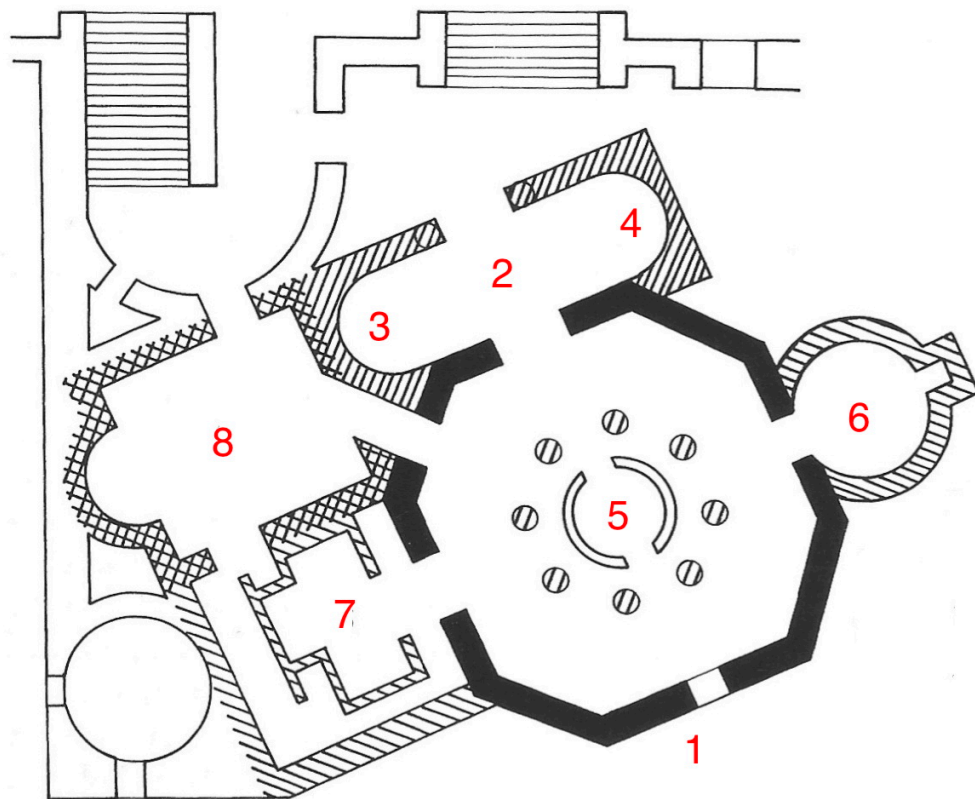
To the left of the baptistery is the Chapel of St John the Evangelist, on the plan of a very small Greek cross with a transverse vestibule. The chapel wall has an attractive little Baroque marble wall-fountain, bearing the heraldic symbols of Pope Clement VIII (1592-1605). Behind this chapel looms the larger Chapel of St Venantius. To the right is the oval Chapel of St John the Baptist. [B1]

Portico entrance

The rectangular portico is 5th century. It originally had an enormous portal divided into three rectangles by a pair of monumental porphyry Composite columns. The decoratively molded bases and the capitals of these two are matching, and are ancient. The bases are especially worth examining, as each has five bands of delicately carved decoration. The columns support a horizontal entablature spanning the portal, made up of three large blocks of stone. The architrave and cornice each consist of several rows of decorative molding, but the frieze has shrunk to a narrow, plain band. Apart from its lowest row of molding, the cornice is extended across the width of the façade below the actual roofline. [B1]

Affixed to the wall just to the left of the portal are the remnants of a ribbed Corinthian pilaster in white marble, supporting the end of the entablature. This is the sole survivor of the 5th century cladding of the baptistery and portico. The screen walls and large entrance doorcase inserted into the portico are originally 12th century. [B1]

Plan



Interior

Portico

The 5th century entrance portico (2) was remodelled by Pope Anastasius IV in 1154, when the two transverse apses were converted into chapels and the portals given two screen walls and a doorcase. However, the interior has always been open to the elements through the portal voids above these. Clear plexiglass panels have been inserted into the voids to protect the interior from the elements.

In the 17th century the roof was provided with a coffered ceiling, having a central oval quatrefoil coffer containing the title of the basilica. This indicates that the Chapter paid for it. Radial ribs from this coffer define the other main coffers, while the short ends have a lunette coffer each flanked by a pair of quarter-circles in the corners. The decoration involves grotesquery in dark grey and white. [B1]

Above the door into the baptistery is a white marble Crucifixion from the school of **Andrea Bregno**, 1482. Up in the top corners of the wall either side of this are remnants of intricate painted decoration of the 5th century, in grotesque style. The marble floor is in white and grey trapezoidal tiles. [B1]

Chapel of SS Cyprian and Justina (3)

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. In 1767 the Borgia family of Velletri restored the apse as a mortuary chapel for themselves, but preserved the 5th century mosaic. This is one of the oldest apse conch mosaic in Rome. It has weathered quite badly, and the 16th century repainting of lost bits has itself faded. The design is of green branching vine-scrolls on a blue background, with flowers and an ascending line of four little jewelled crosses within mandorlas in the centre. The semi-circular panel at the top features a very small *Lamb of God* and four doves. [B1]

The late Baroque re-fit left the apse wall clad in polychrome marbles. The triumphal arch is supported by a pair of Ionic piers in yellow Siena marble, and on the archivolt are two stucco angels holding a banner that proclaims the presence of the relics of the martyrs under the altar. The archivolt springs from posts, which are continued as an entablature around the curve of the apse. This has a verde antico frieze in between yellow marble cornice and architrave. A pair of shallow intermediary pilasters break the curved wall into four sections having panels in Sicilian jasper, having molded black marble frames within purple-veined marble surrounds below red marble sub-friezes. A further two pilasters flanking the altarpiece are tripletted, with matching posts which support two fragments of a broken and separated segmental pediment. More angels and putti disport themselves on these. These pilasters have panels in alabaster. [B1]

The altarpiece depicts *The Martyrdom of St Justina*. The altar frontal is a slab of verde antico, in which is an oculus with a bronze grille surrounded by palm branches. The chapel is enclosed by a polychrome marble balustrade and wrought iron railings, on an ogee curve plan. Outside these, to the left, is the fine Baroque monument to Alessandro Borgia 1767 by **Tommaso Righi** in the style of Bernini. An angel and a putto in white marble support the large medallion portrait, below which is the epitaph flanked by a pair of gigantic fronded curlicues. The deceased was an archbishop of Velletri. Unfortunately the outdoors conditions have caused many of the lead insert letters of the epitaph to fall out. [B1]

Chapel of SS Rufina and Secunda (4)

The left hand chapel is dedicated to SS Rufina and Secunda, local Romans, martyred on Via Cornelia in 260, who used to have a 4th century cathedral basilica on the Via di Boccea near what is now the western suburb of Selva Candida. Pope Anastasius IV enshrined their relics in the chapel in 1153. In 1236, Pope Gregory IX issued a Bull confirming that the shrine-chapel of the two saints was to be regarded as under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Porto-Santa Rufina. In other words, this chapel is not part of the Diocese of Rome. [B1] [B3]

In 1757 the Lercari family restored it as a mortuary chapel for themselves. Apparently the 5th century apse conch mosaic had already fallen off. The conch now has diapered coffering in three sectors, separated by a pair of wide ribs with rosettes. [B1]

The Baroque refit here is similar in style to that of the chapel opposite, although the polychrome marble color scheme is different and the pilasters and columns are Composite. **Tommaso Righi** was responsible for it. A pair of columns in a bright red mottled stone flank the altarpiece and support posts which bear angels and putti adoring the *Dove of the Holy Spirit* in a gilded glory. These heavenly beings are by **Giacomo Monaldi**. The round-headed altarpiece in a yellow marble Baroque frame depicts *Christ crowning the two martyrs*. [B1]

The altar is flanked on the apse wall by two pictures in elaborate, billowing putti-inhabited white stucco frames. The one on the right depicts *St Philip Neri* by **Guido Reni**, and the left is an icon of the *Madonna and Child* by **Giovanni Battista Salvi**. [B1]

Outside the railings there are two very good polychrome marble Baroque memorials by **Righi** showing the deceased at prayer and venerating the altar. One on the left is to Cardinal Nicola Maria Lercari. He died in 1757 and is buried in St. Pietro in Vincoli. In 1767 his cousin Archbishop Lercari of Genoa, erected this splendid monument in his memory. The memorial on the right to Nicola Lercari 1784. [B1] [B4]

Colonnade (5)

The famous set of eight columns in imperial porphyry which surround the original plunge-pool are not matching, but are of slightly different lengths. Two are Ionic, two Corinthian and two Composite. The pedestals are all the same, having base-slabs in grey marble each of which has a Barberini bee in gold. These are evidence that Pope Urban VIII had the colonnade dismantled and re-erected in his restoration. [B1]

The columns support an octagonal entablature, which is spolia from an ancient building. The molded decoration is similar to that on the entablature of the portico portal, and faces inwards. On the outer faces Pope Sixtus III had a set of Latin texts carved, which reads: [B1]

"Here a people and city, intended to be sacred, is born from a nourishing seed, which the spirit brings out from fertile waters. The sinner is immersed in the sacred cleansing flow, the billow which takes him as old and presents him as new. The one reborn is at no separation from those made one; one fountain, one spirit, one faith. By a virginal reproduction Mother Church has new-borns, who are conceived by the spirit of God and born by means of the river. You wish to be guiltless through being cleansed by this washing, whether oppressed by the parental [Adamic] sin or your own. This is the fount of life which sets all free, taking its origin from the wound of Christ. Those reborn by this fountain hope for the Kingdom of Heaven; the happy life does not receive those brought forth only once. Let not the number or type of his sins frighten the one born in this flow, he will be saved".

The entablature supports eight light grey marble Corinthian columns, which in turn support the wooden dome entablature. It is thought that these columns are 17th century replacements. [B1]

Font

The font is an ancient green basalt bath-tub on a polychrome marble plinth, itself on a circular polychrome marble base. It is in a circular depression which is a reminder of the original baptismal plunge-pool before the re-ordering by Pope Gregory XIII in the latter part of the 16th century. The void is surrounded by a balustrade with two entrances, one facing the public doorway and the other opposite, and these are flanked by ball finials. The polychrome marble cladding of the walls and floor here are by **Borromini**. [B1]

The font has an elaborate bronze cover with gilt detailing by **Ciro Ferri** 1689. This has two reliefs, one showing *The Baptism of Christ* and the other, *The Baptism of Constantine*. [B1]

To the sides are two modern bronze sculptures of deer, commissioned by Blessed Pope Paul VI. The scriptural allusion is Ps 42:1. [B1]

Wall frescoes

The eight walls display frescoes mostly dating from the 17th century.

The entrance from the piazza is flanked by a pair of monochrome depictions; of the emperor Constantine and Pope Sylvester, of SS John the Baptist and John the Evangelist. The window above has a winged putto's head inserted into a split segmental pediment, as do the other seven windows, and contains stained glass showing the coat-of-arms of Pope Pius XI (replaced after the Mafia bomb of 1993). [B1]

The subsequent walls feature fresco depictions from events in the career of Constantine, helpfully labelled. Going counterclockwise from the piazza entrance, the panels show:

The Vision of the Cross by **Giacinto Gimignani**,

The Battle of the Milvian Bridge and

The Triumphal Entry into Rome, both by **Andrea Camassei**.

Above each panel and flanking the windows, two monochrome tondi display a bust of Constantine and one of the churches that he founded in Rome, and this theme is repeated on the other upper walls. [B1]

Then comes the portico entrance. Below the little triangular pediment surmounting the doorway is a short epigraph commemorating the restoration by Pope Urban VIII Barberini 1625, and over the pediment is his monochrome coat-of-arms. Above this in turn is a blocked window displaying the Barberini bees again. This window is flanked by late 18th century frescoes which commemorate the restoration sponsored by Cardinal Carlo Rezzonico. [B1]

Next is a monochrome fresco featuring the heraldry of Pope Innocent X with two allegorical female figures by **Carlo Maratta**, which is above the doorway of the Chapel of St Venantius. There follows: [B1]

The Overthrow of the Idols by **Maratta**,

The Burning of the Heretical Books by **Carlo Mannoni** and finally

The Council of Nicaea by **Mannoni** again.

The frescoes are separated by Siamese-twin pilasters in the corners, which have recessed panels in a grey marble. The ones in the first storey have block capitals featuring reliefs with ribbons, swags and Barberini bees, while the second storey ones are topped with what look like miniature ancient Roman aqueducts. These pilasters support the ceiling entablature, which has a frieze with frescoes vine-scrolls and a gilded cornice with modillions. [B1]

Ceiling

The richly gilt coffered 16th century ceiling includes carved figures from the previous 15th century one. Four of the eight sections contain the coat-of-arms of Pope Urban VIII, with the bees again. The corner coffers have the Sun in Splendour, or an oak tree with yet more bees. The other four sections have representational carvings in natural color, each flanked by two narrow coffers containing angels: *St John the Evangelist*; *Christ in Majesty*; *St John the Baptist* and *The Assumption of Our Lady*. [B1]

Dome

The drum of the dome has eight frescoes by **Sacchi**: [B1]

The Visitation,

The Apparition of Gabriel to Zechariah,

The Birth of St John the Baptist,

The Naming of St John the Baptist,

St John the Baptist in the Desert,

The Preaching of St John the Baptist,

The Baptism of Christ and

The Beheading of St John the Baptist.

These frescoes are separated by ribbed Corinthian pilasters folded into the corners, which support the entablature of the cupola. This is decorated in blue and gold, and is separated into eight sectors by wide ribs. Each sector has a round window in a lunette, then more bees with a Sun in Splendour symbol. The sectors meet at a large oculus containing the *Dove of the Holy Spirit* in glory, surrounded by a text which reads: "The spirit of God moved around over the waters" -Genesis 1:2. [B1]

Chapel of St John the Baptist (6)

The two little 5th century side chapels have very similar entrances. Each has a pair of porphyry Corinthian columns supporting a horizontal entablature in grey-veined marble.

The chapel of St John the Baptist is on the right as you enter from the piazza. Its entrance entablature bears two inscriptions: [B1]

"The rough places will become level ways" -Lk 3:5, and

"Hilary bishop to the people of God".

The doors to the chapel are contemporary with it, and are said to be made of an alloy of bronze, silver and gold. They bear a dedicatory inscription: In honorem beati Iohannis Baptistae, Hilarus episcopus, Christi famulus offert. The top half of the doors is decorated in a network, the bottom with a cross. Famously, they used to give a pleasing sound when they were moved on their hinges and this used to be a tourist attraction for centuries. Unfortunately, the sound vanished after the 1993 bombing. [B1]

The chapel's interior was entirely remodelled by **Giovanni Battista Ceccarelli** in 1780. The altar aedicule has a pair of spirally fluted green serpentine columns with gilded bases and capitals. which flank a bronze statue of the saint was cast by **Luigi Valadier**. He was the father of the more famous Giuseppe Valadier. The statue replaced a wooden one, which is now in the confessio of the basilica. [B1] [B3]

Side wall frescoes depict *The Baptism of Christ* and *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*, and are from the end of the 18th century. [B1] [B3]

Chapel of St John the Evangelist (7)

Like the previous one, this chapel was built by Pope St Hilary (461–468), and the dedicatory inscription can still be seen on the entablature above the door. It reads:"To his liberator, blessed John the Evangelist, Hilary the bishop, slave of Christ". Below this is a later inscription "Love one another", from the First Letter of St John. [B1]

The panelled bronze doors date from 1196, and were made by **Uberto** and **Pietro of Piacenza**. To the top right there is a dedicatory inscription: Anno V pont. domini Coelestini III papae, Cencio cardinalis S. Luciae et domini papae Camerario iubente opus istud factum est. To the top left there is a relief of a pope holding a globe and standing in front of a Gothic façade with two towers, thought to be a representation of the mediaeval basilica. [B1]

The little chapel is on a Greek cross plan, with a vestibule. The floors and walls display polychrome marble work of a high quality, some dating from a restoration ordered by Pope Clement VIII (1592-1605) for the Jubilee of 1600. His coat-of-arms is displayed in gilded bronze reliefs on the flanking piers in between the vestibule and chapel proper, and his heraldic emblems are inlaid into the floors. [B1]

Urban VIII had the chapel restored by the architect **Domenico Castelli** in 1626-1635 and Alexander VII by **Francesco Borromini** in 1657, author of the external frieze bearing Chilean heraldic elements. The restoration of 1967 eliminated the plaster and nineteenth-century additions. [B3]

The vault is decorated with a surviving 5th century mosaic of the *Lamb of God*, surrounded by a wreath of flowers with two birds. This is a good example of an early Christian mosaic in the

Classical style. Otherwise, the vault displays grotesque decoration by **Giovanni Alberti**, and angels by **Giacomo Stella**. Other fresco work is by **Agostino Ciampelli**, who depicted scenes from *The Apocalypse*, and **Antonio Tempesti**, showing scenes from the life of the saint. The Florentine painter **Andrea Comodi** also added frescoes. [B1] [B3]

The altar aedicule has two Ionic columns of oriental alabaster, supporting a triangular pediment with a broken cornice into which a gilded bronze eagle is inserted. bronze statue of *John the Evangelist* by **Giovanni Battista della Porta**, and was cast in 1772 by **Luigi Valadier**. [B1] [B3]

The side altar to the right, dedicated to the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady, is claimed to be the oldest Cosmatesque work in Rome. To the left is a late 15th century marble relief by **Luigi Capponi**, showing *Giovanni Rossi, Bishop of Alatri, with St John*. [B1] [B3]

Chapel of St Venantius (8)

The entrance into the Baptistery from the piazza is through this chapel. It is a large rectangular room, accessed via a short passage from a doorway in the far left diagonal side of the baptistery. [B1]

History

The present chapel was commissioned by Pope John IV (640–642) in honor of St Venantius of Salona and other Dalmatian martyrs. Pope John was a Dalmatian himself, and seeing that the Slavs were overrunning his country he brought the relics of the more important Dalmatian saints here and enshrined them. The project was completed under Pope Theodore I (642-9), and involved an impressive sanctuary mosaic. [B1] [B2]

A carved wooden ceiling was inserted in 1593, as part of a restoration ordered by Pope Clement VIII. In 1674, the Ceva family commissioned **Carlo Rainaldi** to restore the chapel, which involved the replacement of the old altar with a Baroque aedicule. In 1967, there was a rather destructive restoration which left the interior mostly in bare brick. The chapel is now, in effect, the parish church of the basilica's parish although it does not have the formal dignity of a church. [B1]

Nave

The interior is now grim, a rectangular box in naked red brick with a polychrome marble floor having a central roundel commemorating Blessed Pope Paul VI. To the side are voids left after excavations under the chapel, which allow you to see the original mosaic pavement of the 2nd century bath-house which was here before the baptistery. [B1]

There are five large round-headed windows on the right hand side. The left hand side is a puzzling architectural palimpsest, encouraging the theory that the chapel by Pope John was not the first building here. Two brick arches of unequal widths are separated by an ancient Corinthian column in a pale brown marble. The wider arch to the left shows evidence of a former door and window in its blocking wall, while the narrower partly blocked arch to the right has two arched niches under the present large plate-glass window. These niches were blocked up and covered by plaster bearing painted decoration imitating polychrome marble work, and this looks 7th century. [B1]

The counterfaçade has a stucco relief coat-of-arms of Pope Clement over the door, and to the right is a 14th century aumbry or holy-oil cupboard, featuring a pair of angels in relief venerating the actual cupboard. Above is a little relief of Christ in a scallop-headed niche. [B1]

The carved ceiling is coffered, and is unpainted. The oval central coffer contains a carving of *The Assumption of Our Lady*. [B1]

Steps on the right-hand side lead to remains of the 3rd-century bathhouse that once stood here, including its mosaic pavement. [B5]

Memorials

The left hand wall nearer the altar has a side door with a marble Baroque doorcase, and above this is a black marble tablet in a yellow Siena marble frame which commemorates Cardinal Francesco

Adriano Ceva, who died in 1655. His memorial is the left hand one of the matching pair that flank the altar. These were designed by **Rainaldi**, and sculpted by **Giacomo Antonio Fancelli**. Each has a white marble effigy in high relief, of the deceased kneeling at a prie-dieu, flanked by a pair of dark grey marble Composite columns supporting an omega cornice. The latter shelters a family coat-of-arms, and has a pair of putti sitting on it by **Paolo Naldini**. [B1]

The identity of the other deceased is the subject of serious confusion. It seems to be Carlo Francesco Ceva who was a bishop of Tortona and died in 1700. [B1]

Altar

The altar aedicule by **Rainaldi** unfortunately impedes the view of the mosaic. It has four black marble Corinthian columns set diagonally, the back pair supporting entablature ends and the front pair a triangular pediment. The entablature frieze looks as if it is in Sicilian jasper. The altarpiece is a 14th century fresco fragment of the *Madonna and Child*, set in a verde antico frame surrounded by gilded floral festoons and putti. Two of the latter are holding a crown at the top. [B1]

The altar frontal is intricate polychrome stone pietra dura inlay work. It surrounds a quatrefoil oculus with a bronze grille in the form of a crown over crossed palms, a reminder that the Dalmatian martyrs are enshrined here. [B1]

Rainaldi had the sense to keep the four columns of the 5th century altar aedicule that he replaced. These are ancient Corinthian columns in pavonazzetto marble, spirally fluted -very high status items originally. [B1]

Mosaic

The mosaic occupies the upper part of the far wall, and the conch of the little apse of the sanctuary. It appears to have been made by local artists, influenced by the newly developed Byzantine tradition of iconography. Overall the background is in gold. [B1]

The triumphal arch has no pilasters, imposts or molded archivolt but the latter is embellished by bands of intricate geometric mosaic decoration. The wall above it has three windows, a small one above the keystone and two larger ones flanking it. These are screened by transennae, pierced stone slabs. In between the windows are two rectangular mosaic panels, showing the symbols of the four Evangelists, and between the outer windows and the corners are two panels showing the holy cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. [B1]

The lower register has two panels flanking the arch. These have figures of saints, who are unfamiliar Dalmatian ones, from left to right: *Paulinian* and *Attelius (Telio)*, soldiers; *Asterius* a priest; *Anastasius* a nobleman (?); *Maurus* a bishop; *Septimus* a deacon, and *Antiochanus* with *Gaiannus* who are soldiers. Their names are given as labels. [B1]

The conch of the apse is dominated by a bust of *Christ* emerging from red and blue cloud, flanked by angels. Below him is the *Blessed Virgin* standing in prayer, with hands outstretched. She is flanked by (left to right) *St Venantius* (holding a model of the chapel), *St John the Evangelist*, *St Paul*, *St John the Baptist*, *St Domnius* and *Pope Theodore I* in whose reign the mosaic was finished. You need to peer behind the aedicule to see these figures. At the bottom of the conch is an original dedicatory epigraph of Pope John. [B1]

Artists and Architects:

Agostino [Ciampelli](#) (1565-1630), Italian painter of the Baroque period, from Florence
Andrea [Bregno](#) (1418-1506), Italian sculptor and architect of the Early Renaissance
Andrea [Camassei](#) (1602-1649), Italian Baroque painter and engraver
Andrea [Commodi](#) (1560-1638), Italian painter of the early-Baroque period, from Florence
Andrea [Sacchi](#) (1599-1661), Italian painter of High Baroque
Antonio [Tempesta](#) [aka Tempesti] (1555-1630), Italian painter and cartographer
Carlo Mannoni (18th cent.), Italian painter
Carlo [Maratta](#) (1625-1713), Italian Late Baroque Classical painter
Carlo [Rainaldi](#) (1611-1691), Italian architect of the Baroque period
Christopher Unterberger (1732-1798), Italian painter of the early-Neoclassical period
Ciro [Ferri](#) (1634-1689), Italian Baroque painter and sculptor
Domenico [Castelli](#) [aka *Fontanino*] (1582-1657), Italian architect
Domenico [Fontana](#) (1543-1607), Swiss-born Italian architect and engineer of the late Renaissance.
[Donato da Formello](#) (16th cent.), Italian painter, sculptor
Francesco [Borromini](#) (1599-1667), leading figure in the emergence of Roman Baroque architecture
Giacinto [Gimignani](#) (1606-1681), Italian painter of the Baroque period
Giacomo Antonio [Fancelli](#) (1619-1671), Italian Baroque sculptor
Giacomo [Monaldi](#) (1819-1905), Italian architect
Giacomo [Stella](#) (1545-1630), Italian painter of the late-Renaissance or Mannerist period, from Brescia
Giovanni [Alberti](#) (1558-1601), Italian painter, brother of Cherubino Alberti, from Arezzo
Giovanni Battista [Ceccarelli](#) (18th cent), Italian sculptor and architect
Giovanni Battista [della Porta](#) (ca.1542-1597), Italian sculptor
Giovanni Battista Salvi da [Sassoferrato](#) (1609-1685), Italian Baroque painter
Guido [Reni](#) (1575-1642), Italian painter of high-Baroque
Luigi [Capponi](#) (1445-1515), Italian sculptor
Luigi [Valadier](#) (1726-1785), Italian sculptor and goldsmith
Paolo [Naldini](#) (1619-1691), Italian painter, sculptor
Pietro da Piacenza (12th cent.), Italian sculptor
Tommaso [Righi](#) (1727-1802), Italian sculptor and stuccator
Uberto da Piacenza (12th cent.), Italian sculptor

Links, sources and references:

[B1] [Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[B2] [roma.katolsk.no web site](#) (no longer active)

[B3] http://www.vatican.va/various/basiliche/san_giovanni/it/battistero/battistero.htm

[B4] [Cardinals of the Roman Cathoic Church](#) {Cardinals of the Church}

[B5] [Sacred Distinations](#)

[Ba] Thayer, David Tyler; “The Lateran Baptistery: Memory, Space and Baptism”; *University of Tennessee*; 2012 (Graduate school thesis)

[Bb] Brandt, Olof; “Deer, Lambs and Water in the Lateran Baptistery”; *RAC LXXXI*, 2005, pp. 131-156. (available at https://www.academia.edu/1362078/Deer_lambs_and_water_in_the_lateran_baptistry)

[Bc] “The Lateran Baptistery in Three Dimensions” (available at http://samla.raa.se/xmlui/bitstream/handle/raa/5009/ro2010_18.pdf)

[Bd] Places in Rome: “The first house churches and The Baptistery of St. John Lateran”; (available at http://univforum.org/sites/default/files/pictures/st_john_lateran_en.pdf)

Photographic web sites:

<http://www.flickrriver.com/photos/antmoose/sets/926413/>

<http://www.worldsiteguides.com/europe/italy/rome/basilica-of-st-john-lateran/>

[Virtual tour of Chapel of St Venantius](#)

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

[WikiCommons gallery](#)

[Media center for art history](#)