

San Luigi dei Francesi in Campo Marzio



San Luigi dei Francesi is the 16th century titular and French national church located near Piazza Navona in rione VIII (Sant'Eustachio). The full dedication is to the Blessed Virgin Mary, St Dionysius (St Denis) and St Louis IX, King of France.

History

The site was acquired by the French community in Rome from the monks of the Abbey of Farfam in 1478. The deal was facilitated by Cardinal Guillaume d'Estouteville. Pope Sixtus IV approved the project, sponsored by King Louis XI, and authorized the foundation of the Confraternita della Concezione della Beata Vergine Maria, San Dionigi et San Luigi Re di Francia, the ancestor of the present Les Pieux Etablissements.

The area was full of remains of Roman buildings, including the *Baths of Alexander Severus* and the *Baths of Nero*. Pope Sixtus IV (1471-1484) confirmed the exchange uniting various small churches into a single parish in honor of “The Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Dionigi (Denis) and St. Louis, King of France” (patron saints of the French nation), and also set up a Confraternity with the same name to manage the area.

In the early 16th century, the Medici family took over. Cardinal Giulio de Medici, later Pope Clement VII, commissioned Jean de Chenevière to build a small round church for the French community here in 1518. Building was halted when Rome was sacked in 1527. In the mid-16th century, with the support from Caterina de' Medici who lived in the nearby Palazzo Madama, a new church was begun. **Giacomo della Porta** was in charge of the final stage of building and probably supervised designs: he also designed the façade and was assisted by **Domenico Fontana**. Construction was completed in 1580, and the church was consecrated in on October 8, 1589 by Cardinal François de Joyeuse, the Archbishop of Toulouse.

From the late-16th century until the mid-18th century, no work was done on the church except for the decoration of the side chapels. The interior was restored by **Antoine Dérizet** in the period

between 1749 and 1756.

The church, together with the other French churches in Rome, is governed by an "Administrative deputy" named by the French ambassador at the Holy See.

Exterior

The fabric is in brick but the façade is entirely in travertine limestone. The gabled nave roof is pitched and tiled, and the aisles and side chapels are sheltered under single-pitched lower roofs. The sanctuary roof is slightly higher and, because the sanctuary has a saucer dome inside, it has a tall lantern. This is octagonal, with eight tall narrow round-headed windows and a hemispherical lead cupola. The apse has its own pitched and tiled roof. The campanile is a tall pierced slab, over the far end of the right hand side aisle. [1]

Façade

The Renaissance façade (1) was built between 1550 and 1568, designed by **Giacomo della Porta**, and assisted by **Domenico Fontana**. Wholly built in travertine marble, with two orders and a pediment. The first storey has six Doric pilasters, the inner four tripletted and the corner pair doubletted. These support an entablature with a blank frieze, and shallow untripletted posts over the pilaster capitals. [1] [a]

There are three entrances. The larger central entrance has a pair of Ionic columns with festooned diagonal volutes, supporting a triangular pediment with a recessed cornice on block posts. The two aisle entrances each has an oversized segmental pediment on strap corbels, over which is a large lunette window in a molded frame with a pair of lion masks above. [1]

Next to the corner pilasters are two statues in round-headed niches, with decorative panels above and below. The statues are by **Pierre de l'Estache**, and depict *Charlemagne* to the left and *King St Louis* to the right. The medallions representing the salamanders, the heraldic symbol of Frances I, had been made for the original, circular church building that was never completed. [1] [a]

The second storey also has six pilasters, but these are Corinthian and stand on an attic plinth. Further, the corner pilasters are not doubletted, but the next pair in are. Another twist is that the cornice of the crowning entablature is dentillated -unlike the entablature separating the storeys. [1]

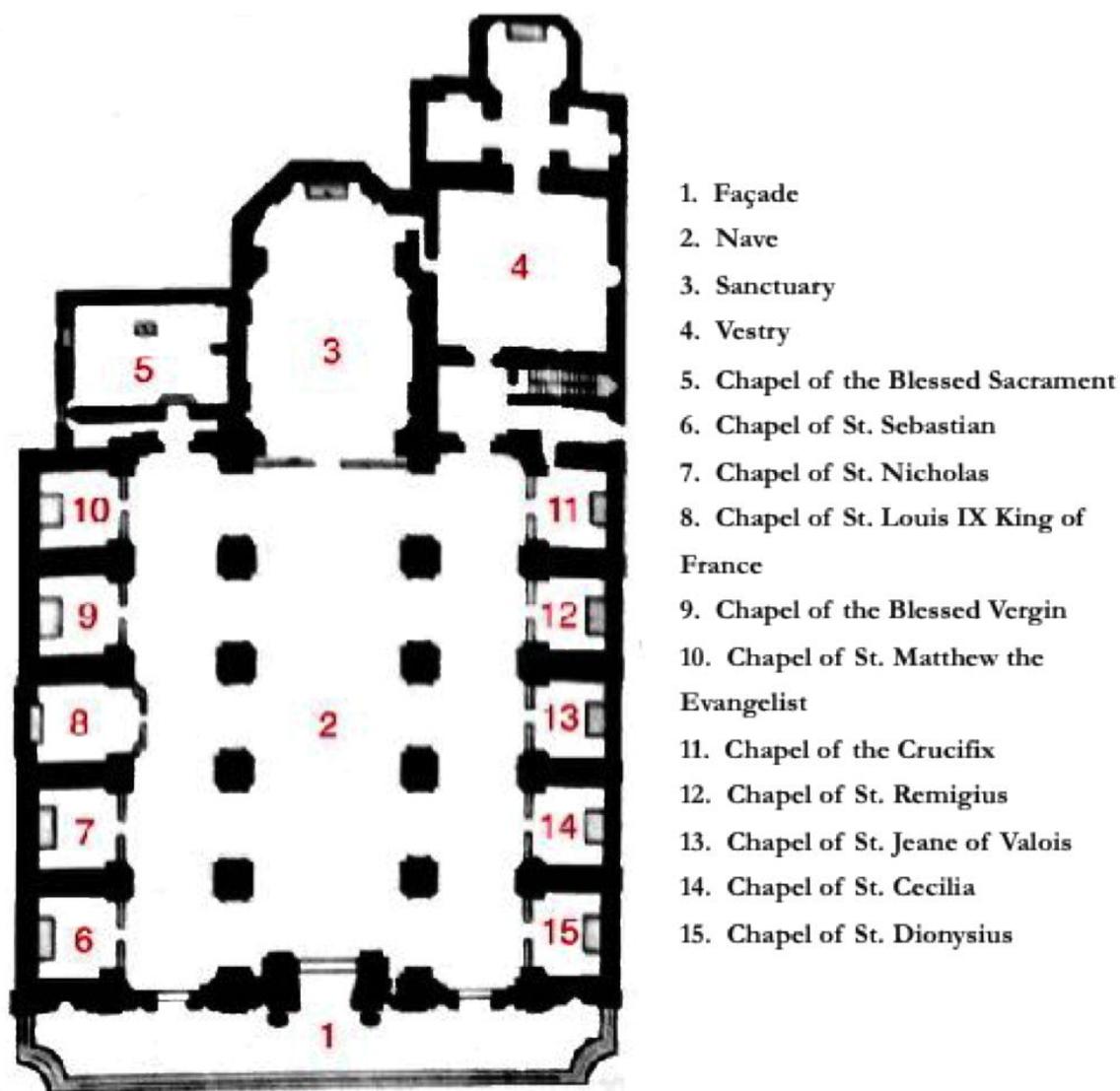
There is a large central rectangular window, with a segmental pediment on posts supported by a pair of Ionic columns with transverse volutes (unlike those flanking the entrance). The window has a balustrade which is part of the attic plinth. [1]

Between the pilasters on either side are two more round-headed niches with statues by **l'Estache**, these having triangular pediments and being set within blind arches with molded archivolts on Doric imposts. The statues represent *St Clotilde*, who was the 5th century queen of the Franks who converted Clovis, and *St Jeanne de Valois* who was a daughter of King Louis XI and who founded the female contemplative Order of the Annunciation in 1500. The four statues by **l'Estache** were added around 1747. Between the outer two pilasters on each side is a window in an ornate Baroque frame, with a swag of flowers above. [1] [a]

The façade is crowned by a triangular pediment, which only spans the space occupied by the inner four pilasters. It contains the coat-of-arms of France, carved in high relief. This was carved by **Niccolò Fiammingo**. [a]

Adjacent to the church is the late-Baroque San Luigi dei Francesi Palace. It was built in 1709-1716 as a "recovery for the French religious community and the pilgrims without resources". Its porch has a bust of Christ whose face is traditionally identified as Cesare Borgia. The interior houses a gallery with the portraits of the French kings and a notable Music Hall. [a]

Plan



Interior

St. Louis is the French national church, and was to represent, in the heart of Rome, the prestige of the Kings of France, who frequently took interest in its construction as well as its embellishment. Many funeral monuments in memory of more or less famous French having died in Rome, or having held important positions here, are to be found throughout the lateral naves and chapels (many of them in the Chapel of the Crucifix). [a]

The plan of the church is almost square. There is a main nave and apse, two side aisles with five chapels on each side divided by enormous arches sectioned off by pillars. The church has no transept, but a long rectangular sanctuary with apse which is slightly narrower than the central nave. The interior is decorated throughout with sumptuous Rococo-style hangings, stuccoes and great quantities of fine marble. These decorations were styled by **Antoine Derizet** who became the French Congregation's architect in 1742 and designed the sophisticated ceiling stuccoes, also completing the dome with its lantern, positioned above where the central nave crosses the presbytery area. [1]

Nave (2)

The overwhelmingly rich interior decoration in polychrome marble and gilded stucco is by **Dérizet**, who finished it in 1756. The arcade piers have gigantic Ionic pilasters with swagged capitals, revetted with a brecciated marble in red, green and white. This supports an entablature with its frieze in the same stone, which runs round the church. Above this each side wall has an attic plinth, on which sit four large round-headed windows. The barrel-vaulted nave ceiling springs from the plinth, with shallow lunettes over the windows. [1]

The walls are covered with polychromic marbles by **Antonio Denizet**. The frescoes in the vault of the nave depicting *The Death and Apotheosis of St. Louis* were painted in 1756 by **Charles-Joseph Natoire**, famous for his paintings at Versailles. [1]

The church organ is over the main entrance, in a balustraded floating gallery being held up by stucco angels. The organ dates from 1880. Charles Gounod was musical director of the church from 1841. [1] [a]

The late 16th century painted wooden pulpit on the left hand side is worth inspecting. [1]

In the aisles and the chapels there are numerous memorial, gravestone, and cenotaphs, both on the floor and on the pillars. For a long time, the church served as a burial place for French people in Rome of a certain social standing, and particularly, for artists. The painter Claude Lorraine (1600-1682) is buried here. He became famous for his studies of the Roman countryside. Other burials of note include the tomb of Pauline de Beaumont, died by consumption in Rome in 1805, erected by her lover Chateaubriand, the classic liberal economist Frédéric Bastiat and that of Cardinal de Bernis, ambassador in Rome for Louis XV and Louis XVI.

Sanctuary (3)

The sanctuary has a dome over the choir, which is coffered in hexagons containing stars and rosettes. The pendentives sport stucco sculptures of the four *Latin Doctors of the Latin Church* (Sts. Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose and Gregory) by various French and Italian artists (1752-54). St Jerome is shown being taken into heaven with his lion. It is known that St Gregory is by **Giovanni Battista Maini**. [1] [a]

The pilasters and entablature frieze in the sanctuary are revetted in yellow marble. The high altar is in jasper with bronze ornamentation. It is against the far wall of the apse, and a doubletted pair of these pilasters supports a shallow triangular pediment with a broken cornice. Into the break is intruded the round top of the enormous altarpiece, a painting of *The Assumption* (1580) by **Francesco Bassano the Younger**. The pediment is occupied by a numinous stucco glory representing *The Trinity welcoming the Bl. Virgin* (1775) by **Jean Jacques Caffier**. Above this the conch of the apse has diapered coffering bounded by wide flower garlands, all gilded. [1] [a]

On the left of the nave, just before the sanctuary balustrade is a lifeside painted statue of *St. King Louis of France*.

Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament (5)

In the corner of the left-hand aisle, a door leads into an oratory that was installed in the year 2000. The Monolithic marble altar with five pillars is from the 13th century and was originally in the old church of St. Yves of the Bretons. A small bas-relief made of painted alabaster and showing the Virgin Mary comes from the neighbouring Church of San Salvatore in Thermis, which was demolished in 1907. This picture was the object of great veneration among the Roman population. [a]

Chapels and monuments along the left aisle:

Chapel of St. Sebastian (6)

The altar, on which heraldic ermine can be seen, comes from the old church of St. Yves of the Brittoni, which was demolished in 1873. In the center, the *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* by **Girolamo Massei**. The frescoes date back to the beginning of the 19th century. [a]

To the left, the monument erected by Chateaubriand in memory of his mistress Pauline de Beaumont, who died in his arms in 1803, is by the **Cav. Paul Le Moyne**. Another memorial opposite commemorates Cardinal de Bernis (d. 1794), the last ambassador to represent France's Ancien Regime, by Maximilian Laboureur. [a]

Outside is a monument to the painter Claude Lorrain (1600-1682) by **Paul Le Moyne**. Lorrain was famous for his studies of the 17th century Roman countryside, when the city was surrounded by over-grazed and treeless prairie with an ancient ruin here and there. Le Moyne demonstrated his talent by carving an ancient Greek weeper embracing the bust of the deceased, while holding a wreath in that hand. Lorrain's remains were transferred here from the Church of Trinita del Monti, as is recorded by a slab on the floor before the monument. [1] [a]

Chapel of St Nicholas of Bari (7)

In 1587 this chapel was given to the community of Lorraine (northeast region of France) who came together in here until 1623, when they got their church. So this chapel was dedicated to St. [Nicholas](#). The altarpiece is *San Nicola resurrecting the three children previously killed and pickled in brine by the innkeeper* (1592), from an ancient tradition, by **Girolamo Muziano**. On either side is, *Catherine of Alexandria* and *Santa Barbara*, attributed to **Girolamo Massei**. [1] [a]

On the walls and the ceiling, various episodes from the life of St. Nicholas: left *The Birth of St. Nicholas*, on the right *The death of the holy bishop*. On vault *The good patron offer a dowry to the girls* (left) and *St. Nicholas saves the innocent from death* (right). At the center is *St. Nicholas in heavenly glory*. All of these frescoes by **Baldassare Croce** of Bologna. They were restored by **Giuseppe Manno** in 1829. [1] [a]

Outside is a memorial to Bartolomeo Lasagni, 1857 with a mosaic medallion. [1]

Chapel of St. Louis IX King of France (8)

This richly decorated chapel is dedicated to St. [Louis IX of France](#) and consecrated in 1680. This is the most sumptuously decorated chapel in the church, in a lush Baroque style. The chapel was paid for by the Abbé Elpidio Beneditti, agent for the crown of France in Rome. This chapel is the work of a woman painter, sculptor and architect: **Plautilla Bricci** who worked there from 1644 to 1680. The baroque decoration are faithful to Bernini and his school, while the portrait above the altar of *St. Louis*, by **Bricci**, is in the more Classic style. It has a frame in yellow marble, matching the arc cornice above which is supported by a pair of Corinthian columns in red and white marble. Two stucco angels sit on the cornice, holding a bronze crown projecting over the altar which is also supported by a pair of swags hanging in mid-air. [1] [a]

On the altar is a beautiful tabernacle of gilded bronze statues depicting the *Four Evangelists*. This work by **Jacob Cobaert**, was ordered by Cardinal Matthew Chanterelle, probably to compensate for the rejected statue of St. Matthew that he completed for the Contarelli Chapel that was rejected. [a]

The walls are covered by two large canvases. On the left, *Catherine de Medici presents the plan of the church to St. Louis* by **Nicolas Pinson**. This anachronistic scene commemorates the donation by the Medici of the land on which the church was built to the French. On the right, *St. Louis hands the Crown of Thorns to the Bishop of Paris*, by **Ludovico Gimignani**. [a]

This chapel has a little dome, occupied by angels and putti in white stucco relief superimposed on rays of glory from the garlanded oculus. [1]

Chapel of the Blessed Vergin (9)

The fourth chapel on the left was supposed to be decorated by **Giovanni Baglione**, but he only completed one painting. The altarpiece, *The Nativity*, and the right, *The Annunciation*, are by **Charles Mellin**, who was chosen to complete the decoration of the chapel. On the left, *The Adoration of the Magi* (1630), is by **Baglione**. [a]

The frescoes on the vault are also by **Mellin**. The three panels depict, *The Presentation of Jesus at the*

Temple, The Coronation of the Virgin and The Visitation. All these frescoes have been restored and modified in the 19th century by **Giuseppe Manno**, who transformed the *Assumption of the Virgin* on the vault in a *Coronation*. [a]

Chapel of St. Matthew the Evangelist (10) also known as the [Contarelli Chapel](#)

The fifth chapel on the left is one of the most famous in all of Rome. The chapel was decorated by Caravaggio between 1599 and 1602. The artist was commissioned by Cardinal Matthieu Cointerel (Matteo Contarelli in Italian), whose tomb is in the chapel. [1] [a]

The Inspiration of St Matthew is the altarpiece, between two Corinthian columns in verde antico marble. The side walls feature *The Call of St Matthew* (on the left) and *The Martyrdom of St Matthew* (on the right). The latter features a self-portrait by the artist, the figure furthest in the background. [1]

The original concept for the chapel was to have a statue representing St. Matthew and the Angel. The statue was commissioned from Jacob Cornelisz Cobaert who completed the statue in 1590 but without the angel and was placed above the altar. But in 1602 the sculpture is rejected and Cobaert is dissolved from the obligation of the execution of the angel, made later by Pompeo Ferrucci when the whole group will be transferred to the Trinity dei Pellegrini church. [b]

The congregation ordered a painting from Caravaggio of the same subject. Its first version was again rejected (and disappeared in 1944 in Berlin). He painted then the second version we see today. [a]

On the vault are frescoes (from 1593) by the **Cavalier d'Arpino**. The Madonna at the entrance to the chapel is from the 15th century. [1]

Chapels and monuments along the right aisle:

Chapel of the Crucifix (11)

In the first chapel in the right aisle is a 17th century wooden crucifix and sumptuous tabernacle in precious marble, lapis-lazuli, jasper and alabaster. [a]

On the walls, monuments and inscriptions in memory of French artists and residents of Rome. The inner monument to the left is that of Jean Baptiste D'Agincourt, the distinguished author and historian. The monument in the middle of the left wall commemorates French artist Pierre-Narcisse Guérin, by **LeMoyné**, 1836. The sculptor Edmond Grasset, 1880, has a memorial here, as does Jean-Baptiste Wicar 1834. The *Allegory of Painting* on the latter is by **Filippo Gnaccarini**. [1] [a]

The large Baroque monument is to Cardinal Henri Albert de La Grange d'Arquien, 1707. [1]

Chapel of St. Remigius (12)

The second chapel on the right, which was commissioned in 1548 by Nicolas Dupré de Passy, private secretary to King Henry II, is dedicated to St. [Remigius](#), Bishop of Reims, who converted and baptized Clovis, King of the Franks, in 496. According to tradition, Clovis vowed, during the Battle of Tolbiac, to be baptized in the faith of his wife Clotilde if he had won the battle. The chapel was painted between 1547 and 1564. Above the altar a painting by **Jacopino del Conte**: *Clovis and San Remigio*. (The King after his conversion orders the destruction of idols and San Rimigio baptizes the Franks). On the right wall: *The army of Clovis at the Battle of Tolbiac* is by **Pellegrino Tibaldi** and on the left wall: *San Remigio receives the sacred ampulla to anoint Clovis* by **Girolamo Siciolante**, painter of the school of Raphael. The vault is divided three parts by frame of grotesque motifs. In every part are illustrated episodes from the History of the Franks written by Gregoire de Tours: (from right to left) the *Taking of Soissons*, the *Vase of Soissons* and the *Battle of Tolbiac*. The vault frescoes are also by **Tibaldi**. [a]

Outside is a monument to Just Pons Florimond de Fay (1781-1837), marquis of La Tour-Maubourg, French ambassador to the Holy See, by **Paul Le Moyné**. [1]

Chapel of St. Jeane of Valois (13)

This chapel was executed after the beatification of St. [Jeane of Valois](#), daughter of King Louis XI of France and founder of the Annonciades, in 1742. At the center, *Saint Joan in the glory* (1743) by the painter Etienne Parrocel from Avignon. At the front of the yellow and green antique marble altar is a bas-relief bust of an unidentified saint. It could be San Filippo Neri, or St. Francis de Sales, who preached in this church, or St. Charles Borromeo, which the first chapel was dedicated in 1742. [a]

To the right is the sumptuous neo-Classical monument to Louise Guilleman, 1859. On the left wall is the monument to Cardinal d'Ossat, who was negotiator for the reconciliation of King [Henry IV of France](#) who was a Protestant but converted to the Catholic Church in 1595. [1] [a]

Chapel of St. Cecilia (14)

This chapel was set up between 1611 and 1614 according to the will of Pierre Polet, a French priest. On the altar: *The Ecstasy of St. Cecilia*, a copy by **Guido Reni** of Raphael's painting. St. Cecilia is surrounded by St. Paul, St. John, St. Augustine and St. Mary Magdalene. [a]

The side walls and vault have frescoes of the *Life of St Cecilia* by **Domenichino**, painted 1616-1617. They represent one of the purest expressions of the early 17th century classical Roman painting. On the right: *St. Cecilia distributes her wealth among the poor*, on the left: *St. Cecilia recovering from an attempt to suffocate her in a steam bath*. In the vault the frescoes represent: center, *Santa Cecilia in glory*; to the left, *Condemnation of the saint who refuses to worship the idols*; and to the right, *Santa Cecilia and her husband St. Valerian crowned by an angel*. [1] [a]

Outside is a monument to the painter Xavier Sigalon, 1837. [1]

Chapel of St. Dionysius (15)

Along the right aisle the first chapel is dedicated to St. [Dionysius](#) (Denis) of Paris. The design is unusual, for there is no altar aedicule. Rather, the altarpiece in a red and white marble frame is simply hung on the far wall, which is revetted with verde antico as if it were wallpaper. A pair of thin blind pilasters in alabaster occupy the corners. The altarpiece is, *St. Denis heals a blind man*, by **Renard Leveux**. [1] [a]

Two fine memorials dating from the end of the 16th century adorn the walls of this chapel. The left-hand one commemorates Cardinal Charles d'Angennes de Rambouillet (d. 1587). On the right, the tomb of Claude de Puy, from 1577. The former has a portrait in oils, the latter a good bust. To the right is also a memorial to Louis Roguet the sculptor, 1850. [1] [a]

Above the door leading into the sacristy is the monument of the Marquis de La Grange d'Arquien (d. 1707), an unusual personality. he was the father-in-law of the Polish king, John III Sobieski, and was made cardinal in 1695 at the age of 82. The monument is the work of **Pierre de l'Estache**. [a]

Outside is a memorial to the French soldiers killed in their siege of the city in 1849, when the rebel Roman Republic was suppressed on behalf of the pope. [1]

Special notes

Please note that to protect the Caravaggio paintings in the church, flash photography is strictly forbidden. There are coin-operated lights by the paintings, and as you can see above, it is possible to take pictures without flash.

Location:

Piazza di San Luigi de' Francesi 5, 00186 Roma

Open: 10am to 12:30, from 14:30 to 19 except on Thursday afternoon

Coordinates: [41°53'58"N](#) [12°28'28"E](#)

Access

The church is open:

Daily, 9:30 to 13:00, 14:30 to 18:30.

Saturday, 9:30 to 12:15, 14:30 to 19:00
Sunday, 11:30 to 13:00, 14:30 to 19:00

Liturgy

Mass is celebrated in French:

Weekdays 19:00

Saturdays 12:30.

Sundays 10:30.

Artists and Architects:

Antoine [Denizet](#) (1697-1768), French architect

Baldassare [Croce](#) (1558-1628), Italian painter of the late-Mannerist period

Charles [Mellin](#) (1597–1649), French painter of the Baroque era

Charles-Joseph [Natoire](#) (1700-1777), French painter in the Rococo manner

Domenico [Fontana](#) (1543-1607), Swiss-born Italian architect and engineer of the late Renaissance.

Domenico Zampieri, aka [Domenichino](#) (1581-1641), Italian Baroque painter of the Bolognese School, or Carracci School

Étienne [Parrocel](#) [aka Stefano [Parrocel](#)] (1696-1776), French painter

Filippo [Gnaccarini](#) (1804-1875), Italian Neo-Classic sculptor

Francesco [Bassano](#) the Younger (1549-1592), Italian painter

Giacomo [della Porta](#) (c.1533-1602), Italian sculptor and architect

Giovanni [Baglione](#) [aka il Sordo del Barozzo] (1566-1643), Italian Late Mannerist and Early Baroque painter

Giovanni Battista [Maini](#) (1690-1752), Italian sculptor of the Late-Baroque period

Girolamo [Massei](#) (c1540-c.1620), Italian painter

Girolamo [Muziano](#) (1532-1592), Italian painter, active in a late-Renaissance or Mannerism style.

Girolamo [Siciolante](#) da Sermoneta (1521-c.1580), Italian Mannerist painter

Giuseppe [Cesari](#) [aka *Cavaliere d'Arpino*] (1568-1640), Italian Mannerist painter

Guido [Reni](#) (1575-1642), Italian painter of high-Baroque

Guiseppe Manno (1784-1865), Italian painter

Jacob Cornelisz [Cobaert](#) (1535-1615), Flemish sculptor / goldsmith

Jacopino del [Conte](#) (1510-1598), Italian Mannerist painter

Jean Jacques [Caffier](#) (1735-1792), French sculptor

Ludovico [Gimignani](#) (1643-1697), Italian painter during the Baroque period

Maximilian [Laboureur](#) (1739-1812), sculptor

Michelangelo Merisi [aka *Caravaggio*] (1571-1610), Italian painter

Niccolò Fiammingo (see Nicolas [Mostaert](#))

Nicolas [Mostaert](#) [aka Nicolò Pippi D'Arras] (1578-1604), Flemish sculptor from Arras

Nicolas [Pinson](#) (1636-1681), French painter and engraver

Paul [Le Moyne](#) (1783-1873), French sculptor

Pellegrino [Tibaldi](#) (1527-1596), Italian mannerist architect, sculptor, and mural painter.

Pierre de [l'Estache](#) (1688-1774), French sculptor

Plautilla [Bricci](#) (1616-1705), painter, sculptor and architect

Renard Levieux (1620-1690), French painter

Burials:

Matthieu Cardinal [COINTEREL](#), (1519-1585) [also see [here](#)]

Buried in the chapel of S. Matteo that he had built

Arnaud Cardinal [d'OSSAT](#), (1537-1604) [also see [here](#)]

Henri Albert Cardinal de la [GRANGE D'ARQUIEN](#), (1613-1707)

Soldier of King Henri IV of France, never ordained priest

Joseph-Emmanuel Cardinal de [LA TRÉMOILLE](#), (1659-1720)

François-Joachim Cardinal de [PIERRES DE BERNIS](#), (1715-1794)

Viseral burial only, tomb in France

Gabriel-Marie Cardinal [GARRONE](#), (1901-1994)

Buried, temporarily, Campo Verano cemetery until the definitive tomb is finished

[Claude Lorrain](#) (1600-1682)

<painter>

Pauline de Beaumont (d. 1805)

[Frédéric Bastiat](#) (1801-1860)

[Pierre le Gros](#) (1666-1719)

<French sculptor>

[Florimond de Fay](#), Marquis de La Tour-Maubourg

Links and References:

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)

a. Various information plaques in the church

b. Hess, Jacob; “The Chronology of the Contarelli Chapel”; *The Burlington Magazine* Vol. 93, No. 579 (Jun., 1951), pp. 186+188-199+201 (870607)

[English Wikipedia page](#)

Sacred Destinations web page. (no longer online)

[060608.it web page](#)

[Contarelli Chapel on Wikipedia](#)

[Web Art Gallery web page](#)

Donovan, Jeremiah; ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS; 1842
Pamphlet: “The Church of San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome”, 2010