

San Lorenzo in Fonte



San Lorenzo in Fonte is a relatively unknown little 17th century former confraternity church (now conventual), on older foundations and located at Via Urbana 50 in the rione Monti (I). The dedication is to St Lawrence, a deacon who was martyred in 258 during the persecution of Christians instigated by the Roman emperor Valerianus. (1) (5)

This small church is also known as **Santi Lorenzo e Ippolito**, or **San Lorenzo in Carcere**; the names and the appellations refer to the imprisonment of St Lawrence. (1)

According to the legend St. Lawrence was imprisoned in the dungeon of the house of Hyppolitus, a Roman centurion. In the dungeon there was a small spring (*fonte*) of water, which was used by St. Lawrence to baptize another prisoner, a blind man who recovered his sight. The miracle convinced Hyppolitus to embrace the Christian faith and for this he was put to death. Probably because his name could mean loose horse, Hyppolitus was tied to two or four horses that dragged him to death; he is the patron saint of horses. (2)

A church was built above the dungeon and it was dedicated to Lawrence and Hyppolitus. (1)

To the left in the nave a long and narrow stairway leads to a Roman well, now underground some 18 meters to the southwest of the church. This well is faced with *opus reticulatum* which places it in the

Republican era, about the 1st century BC. It is associated with a Roman house, now lost but recorded in the 17th century. Only the well survives. (1)

History

The origins of the church are entirely unknown, it seems that originally there were two separate oratories in the area dedicated to the two saints: the Oratory of St. Hippolytus of the 4th century and the Oratory of St. Lawrence corresponding to this church. (4)

The first documented reference is very late at 1348. At that time it was a Benedictine convent, which lasted until 1518 when the nuns moved to Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura. There was a renovation of the old edifice in 1543 for the Spanish Cardinal [Juan Alvarez de Toledo](#), in the reign of Pope Paul III. The church was subsequently rebuilt in 1628 in the reign of Pope Urban VIII, by the architect **Domenico Castelli** from Melide, in what is now Switzerland. After that an association known as the Congregazione Urbana dei Cortegiani was put in charge of the church. Its name survives above the current entrance of the San Lorenzo; below the lunette we can read the Latin words CONGREGATIONIS VRBANA. (1) (3) (4) (5) (a)

The 17th century interior decoration of the church is attributed to **Andrea Camassei**, **Giovanni Battista Speranza** and **Marco Caprinuzzi**. (1)

The façade was remodeled in a late neo-Classical style in 1800, and has been altered since in the 1930's. (1)

Since 1918, the church has been administered by the Oblates of Saint Joseph. The hostel next door is named after the order's founder, Saint Giuseppe Marelli (1844-1895), and it is run by the Oblate Sisters. (5)

Exterior

Only the façade is visible from the street, since the church is abutted by buildings on both sides. To the right is the convent of the oblate nuns, number 50/A, and to the left is the Ostello. (1)

Façade (1)

The façade of the church, constructed in 1800 and altered in the 1930s, is an example of early 19th century Neo-Classicism. It is dwarfed by neighboring buildings. It looks as if it is stucco done up to look like white stone, and has four large, shallow Doric pilasters supporting an entablature and triangular pediment. There is a simple dedicatory inscription on the frieze. (1) (2)

The 16th century entrance doorway has stepped molding on its door case and a raised segmental pediment, and the tympani of the latter and the main pediment are both blank. Above the door is a pair of vertical rectangular windows either side of an arc supported by two little Doric pilasters. Inside the panel thus created is a thin red cross. Previously, this arched architectural feature was a round-headed window. In between the pairs of pilasters are two round-headed niches which contain frescoes, one on the right is *St Lawrence* and the other of *St Hippolytus*. (1) (3)

Campanile

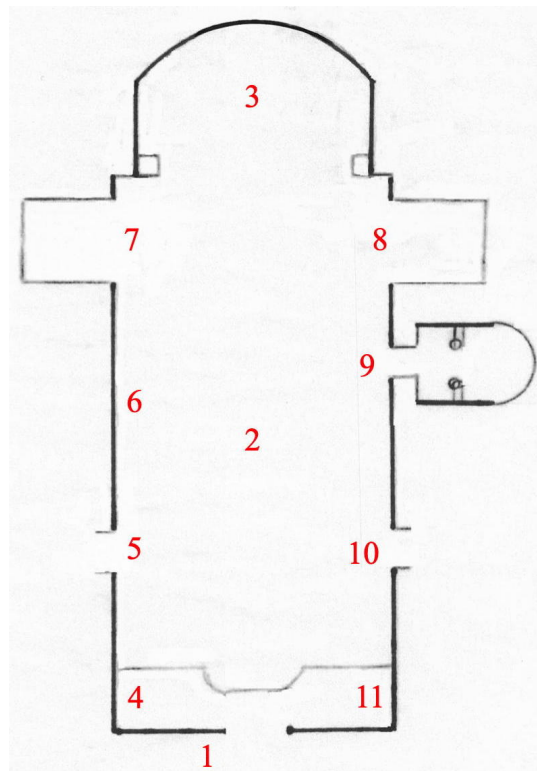
The attractive little Baroque campanile or bellcote was built in 1734, according to the wishes of Pope Clement XII. It is in the form of a triumphal arch, with the arch elongated and containing the bells. Above this is a tablet with the year on it (difficult to see without binoculars). There is a pair of gigantic volutes flanking this, supporting a corniced gable. (1)

Note the gridiron of St Lawrence on the weather vane. (1)

Interior

The church has a single nave which is very small, and which has a chapel on the right hand side. On the left hand side is the entrance to the underground area. Two further chapels flank the entrance to the sanctuary. (1)

Plan



Nave (2)

The nave has four bays, which are separated on each side by shallow blind pilasters revetted with what looks like pink marble. Each of these is flanked by a pair of narrow pilaster strips in slightly lower relief, having a decoration of a row of rosettes within circles. These panels spring from a yellow fake marble dado which runs round the interior (the pilasters themselves reach the floor). The pilasters have no capitals, but they support a cornice (not a proper entablature) which is posted out over them and the side strips. These posts are embellished with gilded egg-and-dart ornament in lieu of capitals. (1)

The cornice runs around the interior, and the barrel-vaulted nave ceiling springs from it. There are two deep lunettes in each bay, the edge-ribs of which meet to form a false cross-vault. These ribs delimit three large kite-shaped sections which contain fresco work in imitation of stucco, in white with two shades of grey and gilded highlights. The central section has an oval wreathed tondo containing the Dove of the Holy Spirit accompanied by putti, while the other two are hexagonal and contain a putto each holding an Instrument of the Passion. From the ceiling hang six large crystal chandeliers. (1)

The counterfaçade has a floating gallery with a coved (concave) central section, embellished with vine-scrolls on its solid balustrade. This has five decorative tondi, with putti and heads of saints. Between the windows is a painting of the *Madonna and Child*. (1)

Stations of the Cross commissioned by the Oblates. They are in an unusual style, featuring only the head of Christ at the various stages of his Passion. (1)

The marble floor has engravings of gridirons, referring to the martyrdom of St Lawrence. The floor has simple marble tomb-slabs, including the grave of architect Carlo Fontana.

There are now also two other large colored statues flanking the people's altar in front of the high altar; to the right is the *Sacred Heart*, and to the left is *St Joseph*. (1)

Sanctuary (3)

The triumphal arch is supported by a pair of square Doric piers clad in what looks like a pinkish marble, which support a pair of posts with exaggerated cornices. The elliptical archivolt springs from this, and has a stucco Baroque dedicatory tablet on its keystone embellished with two foliage sprays and a scallop shell. (1)

The sanctuary has a semi-circular apse with a conch, which has rays and is embellished in grotesque decoration in yellow, grey and white. The triumphal arch of this is supported by a pair of pilasters revetted in green marble, and the same stone is used in revetting the walls between pilasters and altar. (1)

The barrel-vaulted sanctuary ceiling has a pair of window lunettes, but these do not meet. In the center is a tondo with a monochrome depiction of *SS Lawrence and Hippolytus*. (1)

There are now also two other large colored statues flanking the people's altar in front of the high altar; to the right is the *Sacred Heart*, and to the left is *St Joseph*. (1)

The 17th century polychrome marble high altar has an aedicule which is coved (concave). A pair of doubletted Doric pilasters on the diagonal support a triangular pediment with a broken cornice, into which the round top of the altarpiece intrudes. The sides of the pediment are incurved, and the pilasters are revetted with pink marble edged with yellow. The altarpiece depicting the *Baptism of St Hippolytus by St. Lawrence* is now attributed to **Andrea Camassei**. This painting probably replaced a similar painting by Speranza. (1) (b)

Flanking the altar are two floating yellow marble credence shelves, which now bear a pair of angel statues -one with a pink gown, and one in blue. (1)

On the side walls of the sanctuary are two paintings. To the right is a depiction of the *Martyrdom of St Lawrence*, and to the left *St Lawrence Distributing Bread to the Poor*. Both of these, from 1773, are attributed to **Marco Caprinuzzi** aka **Marco del Ruspoli** from Civita Castellana, a little known pupil of Marco Benefial. These pictures have white-veined black marble frames. (1) (4) (b)

Left side

Proceeding from back to front:

The first bay (4) of the nave has portrait of St Joseph Marello the founder of the Oblates. (1)

The second bay of the nave has a doorway (5) going down to the Prison and Well. Above the doorway is the inscription ADITUS AD CARCEREM ET FONTEM S.LAURENTI ("Entrance to the Prison and Well of St Lawrence"). In front of the door there is a striking polychrome statue of St Lawrence, looking youthful in a bright red dalmatic (the liturgical vestment of a deacon, which is what he was).

The well and prison

The door leads into a downward sloping tunnel with a stepped ramp, which turns right at the bottom to pass through a portal made up of ancient travertine limestone ashlar blocks. Here is a late 16th century relief of *Christ Leaving the Tomb*. The actual prison is the tiny room beyond the antechamber, with ancient opus reticulatum (stonework laid in a diaper pattern) on the walls. The holy well is through a small rectangular wall aperture at floor level. It is flanked by a pair of tiny Ionic columns, and over it is a 17th century bas-relief of *The Baptism of St Hippolytus*. (1)

The third bay (6) has a painting described as *The Madonna and Child with SS Margaret of Cortona and Elizabeth of Hungary* by an anonymous artist of the end of the 17th-century. (4)

Chapel of Sts. John and Paul (7)

The left hand chapel has an anonymous 17th century altarpiece showing *Martyrdom of Saints John and Paul*. There is much less decoration in here, and the ceiling vault is blank. The chapel has lost its frescoes by Speranza, which are recorded as having depicted SS John the Evangelist, Mark, Petronius and Jerome. On the floor at the entrance to the chapel is the opening to a burial vault marked PRO VIRIS (For Men). (1) (4)

Right side

Proceeding from front to back:

Chapel of Our Lady of Sorrows (8)

The chapel to the right of the triumphal arch is dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows, and the altarpiece is an icon of her within a gilded glory. This chapel has two panels for paintings on its side walls; both are blank. There is a little polychrome marble balustrade at the entrance. In the vault fragment of a fresco with "Eternal God", the only remnant of the disappd decoration from about 1628 by **G.B. Speranza**. On the floor at the entrance to the chapel is the opening to a burial vault marked PRO MVLIERIBVS. (For Women). (1) (4)

Chapel of the Immaculate Conception (9)

The third bay has the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception on the right, over which is a very good polychrome Baroque monument to Giovanni Oliviero (1633). The tondo contains a portrait of him. (1)

The chapel has a little vestibule entered through curlicued wrought iron gates, which has a statue of *Jesus the Nazarene* on the left as you enter, and a statue of *St. Francis* on the right. The actual chapel is apsidal, and is separated from the vestibule by a pair of free-standing Doric columns in what looks like pink granite. There is an arch over the portal between the columns. The altarpiece is a modern statue of the *Immaculate Conception*, in a gilded round-headed niche. The walls of the chapel and vestibule are revetted in a white and grey brecciated marble, but the upper surfaces are whitewashed. The chapel was restored in 1951. (1) (4)

The doorway (10) that on the right leading into the sacristy. Above the sacristy door is written THE SAVROS ECCLESIAE D PAUPERIBVS ("He gave the treasury of the Church to the poor." Before being martyred, St Lawrence distributed the goods of the Roman Church to the poor rather than hand them over to the civil authorities.) In the sacristy is a bust of *Pope Urban VIII*, plausibly attributed to **Bernini** although it might be of his school. (1)

In the last bay (11) is a crucifix in a little glazed niche to the right.

Special Notes

Excavations have revealed a Roman house beneath the church, possibly the home of the gaoler St Hippolytus. (1)

After the Oblates moved their Generalate the complex here was converted to a pilgrims' hostel, the Ostello Marelllo. This has earned a good reputation among those seeking cheap accommodation in the Centro Storico. The female branch of the oblates, the Oblate di San Giuseppe, are in charge. They give the impression of being a happy community.

The feast of St Lawrence is celebrated with great solemnity on 10 August. (1)

Artists and Architects:

Andrea [Camassei](#) (1602-1649), Italian Baroque painter and engraver

Domenico [Castelli](#) [aka *Fontanino*] (c.1582-1657), Italian architect

Gian Lorenzo [Bernini](#) (1598-1680), Italian Baroque sculptor and architect [also see [here](#) and [here](#)]

Giovanni Battista [Speranza](#) (ca 1600-1640), Italian Baroque painter

Marco Caprinuzzi (1711-1778), Italian Baroque painter

Burial:

Carlo [Fontana](#) (1634-1714), Italian architect of the Late Baroque period

Location

Addr: 50 Via Urbana, 00184 Roma

Info:

Telephone: 0039 06 4882120

Opening times:

Every day 7.00am-12.30pm 4.00pm-7.30pm

Masses

Weekdays 6.30

Holidays 11.30

Links and References:

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
 2. [Roma non per Tutti](#)
 3. [Info.roma web-page](#)
 4. [ROMAPEDIA blog](#)
 5. [Corvinus blog](#)
- a. Donovan, Jeremiah; [ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS](#); 1842; Vol. II, pg. 273
 - b. Parlato, Enrico; MARCO CAPRINOZZI E FRANCESCO PASCUCCI AL SERVIZIO DEI NOBILI AULICI NELLA CHIESA ROMANA DI SAN LORENZO IN FONTE; *Rivista dell'Istituto Nazionale d'Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte*, is a Peer to Peer Reviewed journal; 2018; Pp. 361-370

Other links:

[English Wikipedia page](#)

[WikiCommons Photo catalogue](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Interactive Nolli Map Website](#)

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

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

["Romeartlover" web-page](#)

[Roma SPQR web-page](#)

[Roman Despatches blog with gallery](#)

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