

# Santa Maria della Vittoria



**Santa Maria della Vittoria** is a 17<sup>th</sup> century baroque titular and conventual church in Rome dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, under her title of *Our Lady of Victory*. For wealth, harmony and beauty, this church is one of the most representative monuments of the baroque style.

## History

The present church is on the site of a very small but ancient chapel dedicated to St Paul, which had a hermitage attached for one hermit in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. He justified his social existence by helping travelers caught out by darkness, bad weather and the threat of robbery. Back then, the area was entirely rural to the point where the Roman nobility used to go hunting and shooting birds hereabouts, especially in the deserted and overgrown ruins of the Baths of Diocletian nearby. (1)

In the reign of Pope Paul V, however, the little chapel was demolished and replaced with a bigger edifice called San Paolo alla Fontana Felice (St Paul of the Happy Fountain), after a new aqueduct which had its terminus at the fountain across the road. (1)

The present church was built by the Discalced Carmelite Friars, who purchased the church and some land adjacent in 1607. Initially they financed the work themselves, but when clearing the foundations discovered a superb pagan statue, called the [Borghese Hermaphrodite](#), which is now in the Louvre. Cardinal [Scipione Borghese](#) made a deal with them, whereby he obtained the statue in exchange for paying for the work. Construction by the friars started in 1608, under the direction of **Carlo Maderno**, but the Cardinal's architect **Giovanni Battista Soria** was also involved after 1624 and it was he who designed the façade. The new convent, designed by **Filippo Breccioli**, was at first named San Paolo after the older chapel. The convent opened in 1612, but the church was only finished in 1626. The church is the only structure designed and completed by **Maderno**. (1) (6)

At the battle of the White Mountain at Prague in 1620, the Imperial Austrian forces destroyed a Czech Protestant army and hence saved Bohemia for the Catholic Church. The Carmelite chaplain of the imperial army had carried an icon of the Nativity around his neck. The image was brought to Prague, and from there to Rome. It was at first taken to Santa Maria Maggiore, and from there carried in procession to San Paolo, which was still unfinished. It was then decided to dedicate the church to the Blessed Virgin, in gratitude for the victory. This was done formally by Pope Innocent X. (1)

The 18<sup>th</sup> century saw the interior sumptuously embellished, with lots of gilded stucco and polychrome marble, turning the plain interior into one of the most complete examples of Baroque decoration in Rome, rich in color and glowing with marbles. The general project of decoration belonged to Mattia de Rossi. (1) (6)

During the French occupation after 1798, the convent was occupied by French troops who caused serious damage and stole anything movable of value. Worse was to follow, as on 29 June 1833 the church was very seriously damaged by a fire that started in the presbyterium. The apse frescoes were lost, and tragically the original miraculous icon was also incinerated. The friars restored the church and replaced the icon with another German icon which they had on a wall in their convent, and this is the image to be seen now. (1)

In 1873 the convent was confiscated by the Italian government, and it is at present the headquarters of the national geographic survey. In 1927 the friars returned to occupy a small part of their former convent behind the church choir, and they remain in charge of the church. The presbytery was completely reconstructed on expenses of Alessandro Torlonia in 1880 by **Nicola Carnevali**. (1) (6)

In the 1990's there were extensive restorations to both the interior and the exterior of the church, which is hence now in a good state of repair. In 1995 the crypt under the main altar, where at one time the deceased religious were burying, was freed by a huge mass of debris, restored and opened to the public. (1) (3)

The church was made titular in 1810. The present titular of this church is H.E. Seán Patrick O'Malley OFM Cap, Cardinal Archbishop of Boston. (1)

## **Exterior**

The edifice is on a corner site, and is hemmed in by buildings on the other two sides. The choir is invisible from the street. The side facing the Largo Santa Susanna, the left-hand side of the church, is merely rendered walling with no attempt at architectural display and is rather ugly. However, you can see here how the stone foundation plinth has shallow steps to accommodate the slope of the street. The squat octagonal dome is visible. The latter has no windows in its drum, and has a pitched and tiled roof in eight sectors meeting at a lantern in the style of a little circular temple, with a lead cupola and no capitals to the pillars. There is no campanile, merely a plain bellcote with arches for two bells which is attached to the top of the left transept. (1)

On the side facing the street is a lovely *Madonna and Child* street shrine.

The façade (1) is by **Giovanni Battista Soria**, designed in 1626 at the expense of Cardinal Scipione Borghese. Soria was influenced by Maderno's façade on Santa Susanna, to the left across the road from this church, and it is worthwhile comparing the two. (1)

The work is in travertine throughout, and is in two storeys. The first storey has six Ionic pilasters, two pairs either side of the entrance and a pair on the outer corners. The latter are doubled around the sides, where there is another pair where the façade meets the nave walls. The capitals of these pilasters are swagged with flowers, and above each is either a dragon or an eagle. These two creatures occur on the arms of the Borghese family. To either side of the inner pairs of pilasters is an empty round-headed niche with sunburst decoration in its conch and with a little triangular pediment above. The pediments have the central parts of their lower edges recessed; this is a motif of the design, as six of the total of seven pediments on the façade share the feature. Above these niches is a pair of large flower-swags crowned by another eagle and dragon. The main pilasters

support an entablature with a rather bombastic inscription on its frieze, saying that Cardinal Scipione did this. Above the cornice of the entablature is not the second storey, but its plinth instead. (1)

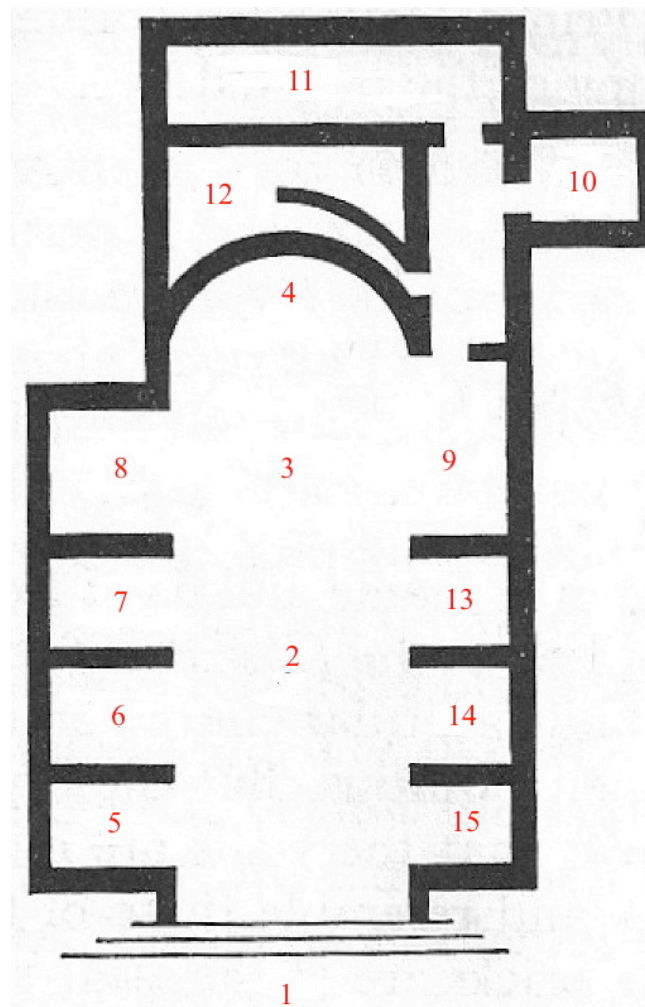
There is only one entrance, but this is unusually tall and is approached via a flight of steps. The lintel of the doorcase has a winged putto's head, and above this is a raised segmental pediment. This is broken in order to insert a relief copy of the original (now destroyed) icon of the Nativity. This has its own triangular pediment. The entrance as a whole has a shallow propylaeum, formed by putting two identically styled pilasters in front of the inner pair of the façade (you can see the latter peeping out from behind), bringing forward the relevant section of the entablature with its portion of the inscription and adding a large segmental pediment on top which intrudes into the second storey. The tympanum of the latter is decorated with a curlicued strap having cloth swags. (1)

In contrast with the lower storey's propylaeum, which brings forward the central part of the façade there, the second storey's central portion is recessed. It contains a large round-headed window flanked by a pair of Doric pilasters decorated with tassels, and supporting a segmental pediment. This storey has four Corinthian pilasters supporting a blank entablature and crowning triangular pediment, the tympanum of which has the Borghese coat-of-arms. The inner pair of these pilasters is doubled in relief, to match those below. The second storey is bound by a pair of gigantic volutes with their sweeps topped by Corinthian capitals. Rather winsomely, these volutes have a cute little dragon and an eagle sitting on them. (1)

The crowning pediment is echoed by a gable above and behind, with balustrading having capsule-shaped apertures. The crowing finial is a wire cross, but there are two flaming torches on the outer corners and a pair of flaming urns behind these. (1)

Don't miss Domenico Fontana's [Fountain of Moses](#) (1585) just across the road from the front of the church.

## Plan



## Interior

The interior has a single wide nave under a low segmental vault, with three interconnecting side chapels behind arches separated by colossal corinthian pilasters with gilded capitals that support an enriched entablature. Contrasting marble revetments are enriched with white and gilded stucco angels and putti in full relief. Beyond is the transept, with a dome over the crossing and a large chapel at each end. (1)

The general design is reminiscent of Maderno's earlier work at Sant'Andrea della Valle. The Baroque style was used to decorated the church later , after Maderno's death, partly through the example of Bernini's Cappella Cornaro in the left transept (see below). The interior decoration is a good example of the Baroque style taken to its extremes, with a very good result. (1)

### Nave (2)

The nave arcade arches are separated by gigantic Corinthian pilasters with gilded capitals, and these support an entablature with an exaggerated dentillate cornice. (1)

The ceiling barrel vault is shallow, with lunette windows. The great fresco of the vault, the work of the brothers **Giuseppe and Andrea Orazi** (late 17<sup>th</sup> century, early 18<sup>th</sup> century), representing the "*Triumph of the Virgin on heresy*". The composition is allegorical of the victorious battle in Bohemia. It was painted c. 1663, but the superb stucco angels and putti flitting about underneath are early 18<sup>th</sup> century. (1)

The interior decoration of the dome (3) depicting the "*Abduction of St. Paul in Heaven*" is **Giovanni Domenico Cerrini**. They were painted c. 1663. Cerrini also painted the angels in the cupola.

On the counterfaçade is the organ and cantoria by **Mattia de' Rossi**, who worked with Bernini. A cantoria is a balcony for solo singers, and this one is shaped like a drum flanked by trapezoids. There are more angels holding it aloft, and rich scrollwork above and below the balustrade. Yet another pair of angels on either side of the organ, and above the latter you can just about see the stained glass window which occupies the center of the second storey of the façade outside. Unfortunately the organ obscures it, but it is another depiction of the Nativity. (1)

### Sanctuary (4)

The sanctuary is a large apse with a conch. The miraculous icon of the *Nativity* was destroyed in the fire in 1833, but a copy that the friars had in their convent was brought out and is now enshrined above the high altar. It is framed by a typical gilt bronze Baroque gloria, although this was part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century restoration and was a personal gift of Prince Alessandro Torlonia. The altar has no aedicule, and this gloria is merely backed by alabaster revetting. (1)

The decoration of the apse walls is also 19<sup>th</sup> century, and includes a pair of very ornate foliated bronze screens covering apertures into the friars' choir behind. The two doors into this are on either side of the apse. (1)

In the conch of the apse above the high altar is a painting of the *Triumphal Entrance of the Image of the Madonna into Prague*, by **Luigi Serra**, also executed in 1885 as part of the restoration after the fire. It replaced a lost fresco by Cerrini. (1) (6)

The 18<sup>th</sup> century Nolli map shows that the apse used to have a square end before the 19<sup>th</sup> century restoration, not semi-circular as now. (1)

The opus sectile work on floors and altar frontals is amazing, designed by Carlo De Dominicis in 1744. (1) (4)

### Side chapels

The chapels are described clockwise, beginning to the left of the entrance.



### Chapel of St Andrew or Cappella Maraldo (5)

The last chapel on the left side is dedicated to St Andrew. The altarpiece shows him venerating the X-shaped cross on which he was martyred. This is by the Capuchin friar named **Padre Raffaele**. (1)

Here are monuments to Luca Angelo Maraldo, 1636, Blandina Verzaghi, 1862 and Marco Aurelio Maraldo, 1635. (1)

### Chapel of St John of the Cross (6)

The middle left hand nave chapel is dedicated to St [John of the Cross](#), the male Carmelite Doctor of the Church and colleague of St Teresa in founding the Discalced Carmelite friars. (1)

The paintings here are by **François Nicolas de Bar**, who was from Lorraine in France but did extensive work in Rome. The altarpiece shows *Christ appearing to the St John of the Cross*, and the side walls have two depictions of scenes from his life. (1)

The Corinthian columns and pediment of the aedicule are in red and white Sicilian jasper, a stone also used in revetting the walls. The angels on the pediment are by **Giuseppe Mazzoli**. (1)

### Chapel of the Holy Trinity or Cappella Gessi (7)

The far left hand chapel has a painting of the *Holy Trinity* by **Guercino** as its altarpiece. The altar is enriched with various precious stones very tastefully arranged. The fresco work from 1939 is by **Giovanni Francesco Grimaldi -Il Bolognese**, the *Birth of Jesus, Baptism and Transfiguration*, in the vault; *Saints Augustine and Ambrose*, the soffit of the arch. The polychrome stonework is especially rich. (1) (4) (b)

The crucifix on the side wall is a copy of one by **Guido Reni**, executed by **Vincenzo Camuccini**. To the right is a memorial to Cardinal Berlingero Gessi, 1639, with a portrait in oils by **Guido Reni**. (1) (b)

### Chapel of St Teresa of Avila or Cappella Cornaro (8)

The Baroque Cappella Cornaro was designed by **Gian Lorenzo Bernini** in 1646, and executed 1647-1652. He was out of favor with the Papal court at the time, and was patronized here by the Cornaro family who paid for the work. They were Venetians, and hence were not very worried about what Pope Innocent X thought about Bernini. The initial patron was Cardinal Federico Cornaro, Patriarch of Venice, who wished to establish a funerary chapel for the family and paid Bernini 12000 scudi for the work -an enormous sum. The latter himself considered it his best work. (1) (2)

Bernini made magisterial use of the shallow transept available to him. Instead of trying for an enclosed chapel, which would not have worked, he presented the composition as a theatre facing out into the presbyterium. Bernini also extended the fabric of the chapel upward and outward, as can be seen on the left exterior wall of the church. The altar is surmounted by a bowed propylaeum with two pairs of Corinthian columns in black and white breccia, supporting an ornate pediment with the central section recessed. This structure frames the famous sculpture, which is cleverly lit by a window hidden by the pediment. The altar frontal is a relief of the *Last Supper* in gilt bronze. (1) (2)

On the flanking walls are two opera-boxes containing sculptured representations of members of the Cornaro family (not all by Bernini himself; some are of his school). The one on the right features the Cardinal Patriarch watching the saint having her ecstasy, while his three companions are ignoring her for their own conversation. The one on the left has a half-hidden figure to its left, and this is reputed to be a self-portrait by Bernini. (1) (2)

The vault of the chapel has a trompe-l'oeil fresco showing cherubs in the open sky, with the *Holy Spirit descending as a dove*. It is by **Guid'Ubaldo Abbatini**. The walls are revetted with precious marbles; the pair of pilasters immediately flanking the sculpture are of verde antico. (1) (2)

Bernini's *Ecstasy of St Teresa of Avila* is carved from a single block of Carrara marble, and is highlighted by rays of gilded stucco radiating from the window. The saint, the Spanish founder of the Discalced Carmelite nuns and a Doctor of the Church in her own right, is depicted as seated on

clouds as on a bed. She is caught during an ecstasy that she described in her mystical autobiography, when she experienced an angel piercing her heart with a dart of divine love. Here she is shown as if on the point of getting out of bed, caught in her rumpled coverlet and with one bare foot on the way to the floor. The angel is standing over her, with a rather ambiguous smile and holding a gilt bronze stabbing-spear as if to pierce her again. The rumpled cloth in which she is swathed is rather odd symbolically, but Baroque sculptors liked to demonstrate their mastery of their medium by carving folded fabric and Bernini was extremely talented at this. (1) (2) (c)

On the 15th of October 1996 the Cornaro chapel was reopened after a complete restoration with a ceremony attended by the Presidente della Repubblica, Oscar Luigi Scalfaro. (6)

#### Chapel of St Joseph or Cappella Capocaccia (9)

The right hand transept chapel is dedicated to St Joseph, designed by Giovanni Battista Contini in 1697. It has a marble sculpture by **Domenico Guidi**, which shows *The Angel Revealing Mary's Virginal Conception to St Joseph*, a rather unusual subject for a sculptural group. The whole altar is inspired by the chapel opposite, and has four Corinthian columns in verde antico supporting a bowed triangular pediment with a recessed central section. The gilded rays from a hidden window is the most obvious homage to Bernini. (1) (4)

The bas-relief panels on either side depicting the *Adoration by the Shepherds* and the *Flight into Egypt* are by **Étienne Monnot**. The vault fresco, *St. Joseph in Glory*, is by **Bonaventura Lamberti**. (1) (5)

Under the altar is a wax effigy, containing the relics of an obscure catacomb martyr called Santa Vittoria, a young Roman lady, who suffered martyrdom in 250 in the persecution of Decius. (1) (b) (c)

#### Sacristy and Choir

The door to the left in this chapel leads to the sacristy (11) and choir (12). There is a collection of captured Ottoman Turkish battle standards in the sacristy, as well as one taken from the Moroccans by King Philip V of Spain at the Battle of Ceuta in 1415. Some of those captured at the Battle of Vienna in 1683 are here, as well as one from the Battle of Timisoara in 1662 and one from a galley captured by the Knights of Malta. The sacristy vestibule (10) is to the right of the entrance passage. (1)

The conventual choir (12) is a square room behind the apse, hidden away from view. It has a depiction of *St Paul with Putti* by **Gerard van Honthorst**, a reminder of the original dedication of the church. The fresco of the *Assumption* in the ceiling vault as also attributed to him. On an opposite wall is a painting of the *six Prophets that foretold the Advent of the Saviour*, by **Francesco Ferrari**. (1) (b)

#### Chapel of Our Lady of Mount Carmel or Cappella Vidoni (13)

The far right hand chapel is dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel. The present marble relief altarpiece features **Simon Stock**, whom the Carmelites venerate as a saint although the Roman martyrology lists him only as a beatus. He is shown *Receiving the Brown Scapular from Our Lady*, a mythical event created by a Carmelite forger of documents in the late Middle Ages. The sculpture is by **Alfonso Balzico**, 1860, and is possibly his best work. (1) (c)

This piece replaced a bas-relief of *the Assumption with SS Jerome and John*, which is now in the private oratory of the convent. It was by **Pompeo Ferrucci**, who also executed the monuments in here of Cardinal Girolamo Vidoni and Giovanni Vidoni (their Christian names explain the two saints in the sculpture). (1)

#### Chapel of St Francis (14)

The middle right hand nave chapel is dedicated to St Francis of Assisi and has paintings by **Domenichino**. The chapel is adorned with two columns of giallo antico. The altarpiece has *Our Lady Offering the Christ Child to St Francis*, and the side walls show the *Ecstasy of St Francis* on the right, and *St Francis Receiving the Stigmata* on the left. The three gilt stuccos on the ceiling also relate to the same Saint. The chapel was designed in 1635 by architect Mario Arconio. (1) (4) (b)

#### Chapel of St Teresa of Lisieux (15)

The near right hand chapel is now dedicated to St [Teresa of Lisieux](#), the other Carmelite nun who is a Doctor of the Church, together with St Teresa of Avila. The altarpiece of *St Teresa of Lisieux* was executed by **Giorgio Szoldaticz** in 1926. The Corinthian columns of the aedicule are in what looks like red and white breccia, spirally wrapped with bronze fronds. The vault is decorated with scenes from the life of *Mary Magdalen* by **Giovanni Battista Mercati**. The chapel was dedicated to her before 1925, and the earlier altarpiece was by a Capuchin friar named Padre Raffaele. (1) (b)

Giovanni Giustiniani, who was killed during the Siege of La Rochelle in France in 1638, has a memorial to the right. The event was another occasion when Catholic military forces (here the Kingdom of France) defeated Protestant rebels (here the Huguenots). (1)

To the left is a monument to [Enrico di Montmorency](#), who was a noted Huguenot rebel leader until he switched sides and became the Constable of France at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. (1)

## Artists and Architects:

Agostino [Corsini](#) (1688-1772), Italian sculptor  
Alfonso [Balzico](#) (1825-1901), Italian sculptor  
Andrea Orazi, Italian painter  
Antonio [Alberti](#) aka Barbalonga or Barbalunga (1600-1649), Italian painter of the Baroque period.  
Bonaventura [Lamberti](#) aka *Il Bolognese* (1653-1721), Italian painter of the Baroque period  
Carlo [De Dominicis](#) (1696-1758), Italian architect  
Carlo [Maderno](#) (1556-1629), Swiss-Italian architect [also see [here](#)]  
Domenico [Guidi](#) (1625-1701), Italian sculptor of the Baroque period  
Domenico Zampieri, aka [Domenichino](#) (1581-1641), Italian Baroque painter of the Bolognese School, or Carracci School  
Ercolo [Ferrata](#) (1610-1686), Italian sculptor of the Baroque period  
Ferdinando [Fuga](#) (1699-1781), Italian architect in the Baroque style  
Filippo Breccioli (1574-1627), Italian architect  
Francesco [Ferrari](#) (1634-1708), Italian **painter** and architect of the Baroque period  
François Nicolas de Bar aka Nicolò Lorensè (1632-1695), French painter from Lorraine  
Gerard [van Honthorst](#) aka *Gherardo Delle Notti* or *Gherardo Olandese* (1592-1656), Dutch painter from Utrecht  
Gian Lorenzo [Bernini](#) (1598-1680), Italian Baroque sculptor and architect  
Giorgio Szoldaticz (1873-1955), Italian painter  
Giovanni Battista [Contini](#) (1641-1723), Italian architect of the Late Baroque period  
Giovanni Battista [Mercati](#) (1590-1645), Italian painter  
Giovanni Battista [Soria](#) (1581-1651), Italian architect  
Giovanni Domenico [Cerrini](#) aka *il Cavalier Perugino* (1609–1681), Italian painter of the Baroque period  
Giovanni Francesco Barbieri aka *Il Guercino* (1591-1666), Italian Baroque painter  
Giovanni Francesco [Grimaldi](#) aka *Il Bolognese* (1606-1680), Italian architect/**painter**  
Giuseppe Mazzoli (1644-1725), Italian sculptor  
Giuseppe Orazi, Italian painter  
Guido [Reni](#) (1575-1642), Italian painter of high-Baroque  
Guid'Ubaldo Abbatini (1600-1656), Italian painter of the Baroque period  
Luigi [Serra](#) (1846-1888), Italian painter  
Mario Arconio (1575-1635), Italian architect, painter  
Mattia [de Rossi](#) (1637-1695), Italian architect of the Baroque period  
Nicola Carnevali (19<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian architect  
Padre Raffaele [Capuchin friar], Italian painter  
Pierre-Étienne [Monnot](#) (1657-1733), French sculptor in a late-Baroque period  
Pietro Berrettini [da Cortona](#) (1597-1669), Italian Baroque painter  
Pompeo [Ferrucci](#) (1566-1637), Italian sculptor  
Sebastiano [Conca](#) (c. 1680-1764), Italian painter  
Vincenzo [Camuccini](#) (1771-1844), Italian Neoclassic painter

**Burials:**

Domenico Cardinal [RIVAROLA](#), (1575-1627)

Girolamo Cardinal [VIDONI](#), (1581-1632)

Buried in the chapel *della Assunta*

Federico Baldissera Bartolomeo Cardinal [CORNARO](#), (1579-1653)

Buried in the chapel of S. Teresa, known as the Cornaro Chapel

Achille Cardinal d'ESTAMPES DE [VALENÇAY](#), (1593-1646)

Buried in the tomb of Cardinal Domenico Rivarola

Pietro Cardinal [VIDONI](#), *seniore*, (1610-1681)

Buried next to his uncle's tomb

Sebastiano Antonio Cardinal [TANARA](#), (1650-1724)

Memorial by Fuga, bust by Corsini, in 1744

Filippo Maria Cardinal de [MONTI](#), (1675-1754)

Buried in the tomb he had built

Paolo Cardinal [MANGELLI ORSI](#), (1762-1846)

Adriano Cardinal [FIESCHI](#), (1788-1858)

Giovanni Giustiniani (d. 1638)

<during the siege of La Rochelle>

Maraldo family members

**Location:**

Addr: Via XX Settembre 17, 00187 Roma

Coordinates: [41° 54' 16"N 12° 29' 39"E](#)

**Info:**

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Open Times:

08:30am-12:00pm 03:30pm-06:00pm

**Links and References:**

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
2. ["Ecstasy of Saint Teresa" page on Wikipedia page](#)
3. Church web site (no longer online)
4. [Info.Roma web site](#)
5. [Tesori di Roma web site](#)
6. rometour.org/ web site (no longer online)
7. [Tourist info on 060608.it web site](#)

[English Wikipedia web page](#)

[When in Rome blog](#)

[Stephen Danko blog](#)

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

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

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SV0JAB58pgg>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IBOXbHGxsQ>



(on YouTube)

- a. Sharp, Mary; A GUIDE TO THE CHURCHES OF ROME; 1966, pg 161
- b. Donovan, Jeremiah; ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS; 1842, pg. V1:589
- c. Watkins, Basil, OSB; THE BOOK OF SAINTS; Eight Edition, 2016

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