

# Santa Maria della Concezione dei Cappuccini

## Cimitero dei Cappuccini: The Crypt

### Entrance arrangements

You need to buy a museum ticket to visit. The new entrance is at the far end of the museum, with the old outside entrance now closed. No photography by visitors is now allowed.

### **History**

When the new church was built, Pope Urban donated several cartloads of earth from the Holy Land, so that the deceased brethren could be buried in it. This was a seriously attractive privilege, linking to the legend that the Resurrection of the Dead would begin at Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, when the brethren moved from their old convent at San Bonaventura they brought the bones of their dead with them. According to the legend the quantity amounted to three hundred cartloads, which is an absolutely impossible number. Three hundred skeletons would be pushing it, since the brethren had only been there for about fifty years. However, the brethren had probably already been accepting bodies of laypeople in exchange for a payment.

It is unknown as to how or why the available bones were used to decorate the rooms of the church crypt. The first datable evidence for the complex is the heart-burial of Maria Felice Peretti in the chapel, dated 1656 and which was allowed because she was a great benefactor of the Capuchins. The next reliable evidence is the visit of the Marquis de Sade in 1775, who wrote about his experience so and put the place firmly on the Rome tourist map. The bone decorations were already extant in his time, and have not changed much since.

The existence of this way of disposing of bodies explains why there are so few funerary monuments in the church. The Capuchins certainly continued to accept bodies of laypeople as a special privilege, because there are bones of children in the ossuary.

Burial here, as anywhere within the city walls, was made illegal in the early 19th century but interred corpses were still producing bones allegedly until the convent was suppressed in 1873.  
How it worked

Those who know anything about dead bodies in quantity might wish that more is available on how the Capuchins managed the process of turning the bodies of their brethren into loose bones. According to the sources, they buried the corpses in the Holy Land soil in a separate chamber of the crypt, and left them there for thirty years before exhuming the bones.

Estimates on the number of skeletons in here range from 3500 to 4000.

### Original entrance

The original (now closed) public entrance was halfway up the stairs to the church, on the right hand side, where you will find the epigraph Coemiterium below an olive branch executed in green and white marble pietra dura work.

### Layout

The ossuary comprises six crypt chambers, which run under the right hand side of the church and are connected by a corridor off which they lead. The second (or fifth, depending on direction) is a chapel, and is not decorated with bones.

The decoration of the corridor various chambers is basically Baroque, using bones instead of stucco. Some of it is figurative, and is really well done. Different chambers are dominated by different types of bone, hence the names.

### Crypt of the Resurrection

The first crypt chamber contains a depiction of Christ raising Lazarus from the dead.  
Ossuary chapel

The chapel has an altarpiece of The Souls in Purgatory, which features Christ and Our Lady with SS Felix of Cantalice, Francis and Anthony of Padua.

The heart of Maria Felice Peretti, already referred to, is behind a plaque bearing the epigraph DOM for Deo Optimo Maximo.

Here also is a memorial to the nineteen Papal Zouaves who were killed in the skirmish when the army of the Kingdom of Italy broke into the city at the Porta Pia on 20 September 1870. This led to the annexation of Rome, and the final unification of Italy under one government.

### Crypt of the Skulls

In here, the far niche contains a winged hour-glass with the wings made of shoulder blades. This is in the central, larger tympanum of three delineated by archivolts made up of skulls. The wall beneath these is paneled with skulls, in front of which are three standing skeletons in Capuchin habits. Two further skeletons in habits recline in the side niches. The barrel-vaulted roof has Baroque decoration made up of small bones.

### Crypt of the Pelvises

This has a similar layout as the above, with five skeletons in the same poses. The three standing skeletons are under a large archivolt made of pelvises.

### Crypt of the Leg Bones

This crypt has four skeletal friars in niches on each side wall. The central motif on the far wall is the Franciscan emblem, the two crossed arms. The ceiling vault roundel is made out of jawbones.

### Crypt of the Three Skeletons

Two of the three child's skeletons are on the far wall, holding a winged skull and flanked by two more dead friars. The third, famous one is inset into the ceiling. It holds a scythe and hour glass.

### **Sources:**

The above information is from Roman Churches Wiki ([here](#))

### **Other sources:**

A Night in Rome Blog ([here](#))

Nomad Travellers blog ([here](#))

Wikipedia page ([here](#))