

# Santa Maria di Loreto al Foro Traiano



**Santa Maria di Loreto** is a 16<sup>th</sup> century church in Rome, located just across the street from the [Trajan's Column](#), near the giant [Monument of Vittorio Emanuele II](#). The dedication is to the Blessed Virgin Mary, under her title of Our Lady of Loreto. It is the smaller of the two landmark domed churches to the north-west of the Fori Imperiali. (The larger one is Santissimo Nome di Maria al Foro Traiano.) [1]

## History

At the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a little chapel was on this site which was dedicated to Our Lady of Loreto. It contained a painting of her, allegedly the one over the high altar now, although the latter seems too late in date. This chapel was given to the Università dei Fornari, the Guild of Bakers, in 1500 by Pope Alexander VI. To administer it, the bakers founded a pious sodality or Confraternita from among its members. This confraternity found the chapel to be too small, and so had it demolished to use the site for a bigger church. Construction of the Renaissance edifice started in 1507, with the project being in charge of **Antonio da Sangallo the Younger**. [1]

Progress seems to have been a struggle, and the church took a long time to complete. Despite the quoted year of 1507 for the initiation of the project, it seems that Sangallo was mainly at work

between 1518 and 1531. In 1534 **da Sangallo** completed the lower, cube-shaped part, which was covered by a temporary roof. Then there was a pause in construction. Work began again in 1573 under **Jacopo del Duca**. He completed the dome by 1577, and added the famous lantern in 1582. The exterior dome bears the date 1596 on a tablet, and this seems to be the year of the final completion. The elaborated lantern inspired many Baroque architects including Francesco Borromini. [1]

The provision of the sanctuary was a separate project, sponsored by a legacy to the confraternity by one Giovanni Battista Antifossi in 1627. The architect for the project was **Gaspare de Vecchi**, helped by **Stefano Longhi** and **Francesco Naldini**, and work was completed in 1630. [1]

In 1800, the guild was suppressed as part of a policy of dismantling the guild system involved in the various crafts and professions practicing in the city. However, the confraternity administrating the church was a legally separate entity and so survived. It remains in charge, and is involved in various charitable activities. [1]

In 1793 and again in 1840 the Church had to be restored because the foundations and walls were not strong enough to support the huge dome. From 1867 to 1875, there was a major restoration and remodelling of the complex. This was overseen jointly by Luca Caramini and Giuseppe Sacconi. Much of the interior decoration of the church dates from this work, including the frescoing of the dome. [1] [5]

Nowadays, the church is trying to exercise a specific pastoral function by offering Masses for Slovene and Japanese Catholic expatriates and pilgrims at Rome. Also, a subsidiary space has been fitted out as a little devotional chapel for Our Lady of Lourdes. [1]

It is served by diocesan clergy. [1]

## **Exterior**

The church complex occupies the entire city block, and the plan is in the shape of an irregular pentagon. The church itself is on a square plan, and is in naked red brick with architectural details in travertine limestone. Its main body is a square brick box, with an interior void which is octagonal in form. This means that the corners of the box are enormous buttress piers supporting the dome. [1]

Because the church is on a corner site and has two side entrances, there are three façades which are almost identical in design. The confraternity rebuilt its headquarters north of the church in 1871, in the triangular portion of the site. This incorporates the church's apse. [1]

### Façades

Each of the three façades has eight pilasters in four pairs, the capitals being in a rather sketchy derivative Composite style. These support an entablature occupying the roofline, and stand on two plinths with molded cornices which flank the entrance door. Between each pair of pilasters on each side is a completely unadorned round-headed niche. Above the pilaster pairs flanking the entrance is a triangular pediment with a broken top. [1]

The entrance zone, between the innermost pilasters, has an arch with a thin molded archivolt springing from Doric impostes. The capitals of the latter are continued across the façade as two string courses which are interrupted by the pilasters. The entrances themselves are accessed by short flights of stairs. [1]

The main entrance is differently treated from the two side entrances [4] [11]. Here, the molded doorcase is surmounted by a tablet with a dedicatory inscription, and over that is a triangular pediment supported on a pair of curled strap brackets with lion's heads. The cornice of the pediment (the lower edge) is at the same level as the string courses to each side. [1]

In the tympanum of this pediment is a sculpture group by **Andrea Sansovino** depicting *The Virgin and Child with the Blessed House of Loreto*, executed in 1550. Unfortunately this little sculpture is badly eroded. The date is given by the epigraph below, which reads: [1]

Divae Mariae Virgini et Matri Dei,

The identical side entrances differ in having smaller doorcases, and segmental pediments above. The cornices of the pediments are kept at the level of the string courses, as with the main entrance, and to do this they are elevated on blocks on top of curlicued strap corbels. The tympani of the pediments each contains a winged woman's head by **Jacopo del Duca**, and have a stone urn on top. Over the left hand side door is a marble tablet with an epigraph reading:

Ingredimini et videte, filiae Sion, Reginam vestram  
(Enter and see, daughters of Zion, your Queen).

This is actually a paraphrase from Scripture, Canticle 3:11; the original text has King Solomon, not a queen. [1]

### Drum

The dome has an octagonal drum, beginning with a brick plinth topped with two courses of stone. On this stand two pairs of pilasters at each of the eight corners, the inner two of the four being melded at the actual corners. These are blind (no capitals), and support an entablature with a cornice embellished with modillions (little brackets) decorated with tassels. [1]

Each face of the octagon has a large arched window. The one over the main entrance is highly decorated, the decoration being based on two arc cornices above the actual fenestration. The lower one of these rests on two corbels embellished with tassels and little human heads. This window has an ornate balustrade which intrudes into the broken pediment below. [1]

The windows on the diagonal faces have simple arch frames, the curves being sheltered by added arc cornices on block brackets with scallop shells inserted at the top. The windows over the side entrances and the apse have triangular pediments. [1]

### Dome

The actual dome stands on a circular brick plinth within the drum roofline, and from each corner of the drum springs a squat buttress supporting the plinth. The dome itself is in lead, with eight wide ribs having raised edges and two steps on either side. These ribs make the surface of the dome rather complex, although the overall form is hemispherical. Each sector created by the ribs contains a round window or oculus with a protruding stone frame, and over this near the lantern is a much smaller round window. The latter are sheltered by alternate triangular gables and semi-circular archivolt in stone, the latter each having a human face on its keystone. The large round window over the main entrance has below it a lead tablet with a pair of curlicues bearing the date 1596 which is thought to have been the final completion year of the church. [1]

### Lantern

The dome is crowned by an unusually complex lantern, known as the "cricket's cage" (gabbia dei grilli), designed by **Jacopo del Duca** in 1582. It is octagonal, with an arched soundhole on each face having Doric impost. Each corner has a radial screen wall attached containing a doorway with an oculus above, and at the ends of these walls are free-standing columns. The columns stand on the eight teeth of a cog-wheel entablature at the top of the dome, and support the ends of cornices extending from the tops of the screen walls. The column capitals are made up of human busts (you need binoculars or a telephoto lens to appreciate these). Above the columns are flaming torch finials. [1]

Above the octagon is a low circular drum, with eight square windows and another cog-wheel entablature on top. The teeth of these are connected to the wall cornices below by curlicue sweeps. On this second cog-wheel is a bronze ball finial on an ornate pedistal and with a cross on top. [1]

This is a candidate for the most ornate church dome lantern in Rome. [1]

### Campanile

**Sangallo** added a campanile at the top left hand corner of the church. It is a brick tower sandwiched in between the left hand side façade and the frontage of the confraternity headquarters, and has three undifferentiated storeys before the façade cornice. Each of these has a rectangular window in a stone frame. Then comes a course of stone before the fourth storey, which has a square window. [1]

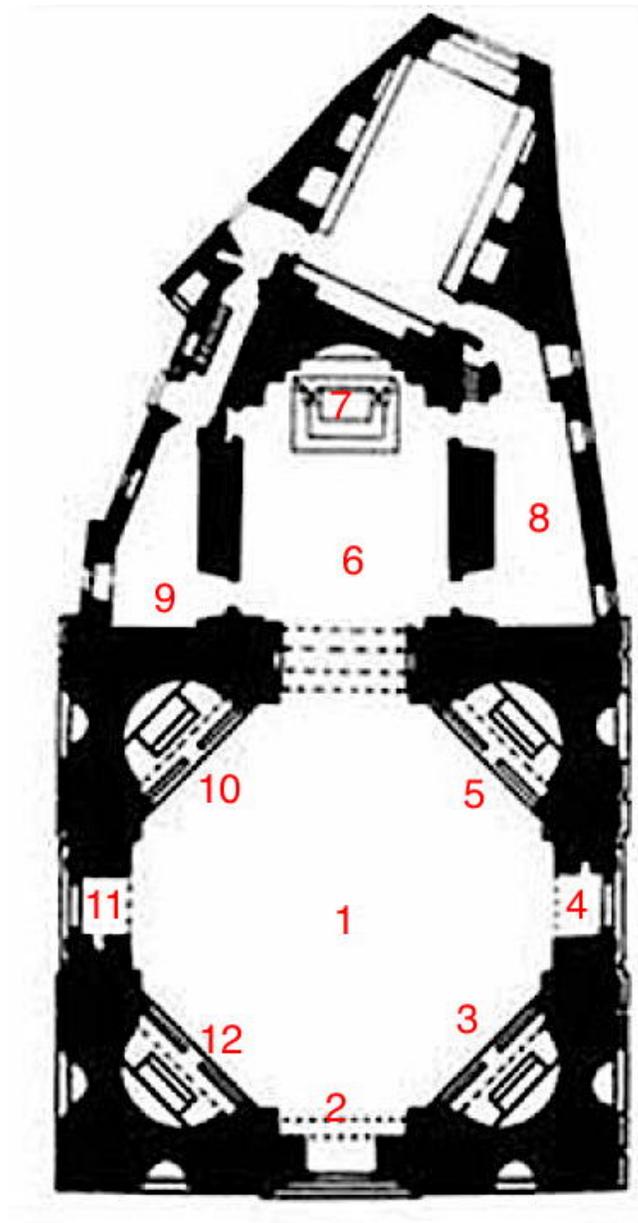
The actual bell-chamber is in the form of a two-storey limestone aedicule. The first storey is a cubical kiosk with an arched soundhole on each face, topped by a pediment with a broken cornice into which an oculus is intruded. The corners have projecting lugs in the form of silhouette volutes (no carved spirals). The second storey is a circular turret with four square soundholes, a cog-wheel cornice with four projections and finally a hemispherical lead cupola. [1]

### Headquarters

The frontage of the confraternity's headquarters is to the left of the campanile, and was erected in 1871. It is a decent enough exercise in neo-Renaissance, symmetrical in red brick with a triangular pedimented central door and windows having cornices on brackets. The design mostly matches the church, except for the rusticated stone block quoins. The headquarters block attached to the north side of the church incorporates the apse under its flat roof. [1]

### **Plan and Layout**

The interior has an octagonal floorplan within the square edifice, with four semicircular chapels in the oblique sides and a deep sanctuary apse. A little chapel has recently been added in the sacristy area to the left of the apse. [1]



## Interior

### Nave

The octagon of the nave [1] is dominated by the dome. This rests directly on an entablature supported by eight gigantic ribbed Corinthian pilasters, folded into the corners of the octagon and with gilded capitals and ribs. The frieze of the entablature is gilded, and bears the dialogue between Our Lady and the archangel Gabriel at the Annunciation. [1]

The eight sides of the octagon have arches inserted, springing from Doric impostes with verde antico panels and with busts of saints (the apostles?) in the spandrels. [1]

The two arches at the sides contain the side entrances, which have balustraded galleries over them dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century restoration. The right hand one contains the organ, delightfully decorated with four gilded angels. Two are dancing, and two are making music. In between them are festoons and wreaths containing musical instruments -trumpets, a lyre, cymbals and a set of pan-pipes. Over, the Holy House of Loreto is shown in flight, with angels and the Madonna and Child sitting on top. This decorative scheme is by **Giovanni Battista Montano**, 1596. [1]

The organ itself was installed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by William George Trice, an expatriate English organ-builder based in Genoa. [1]

Over the entrance is a lunette showing *Our Lady with the Holy House in Heaven* by **Cesare Mariani**, which was executed in 1870's. [1]

A statue to *St Expeditus* can be seen to the right inside the entrance. The inscription on the cross he carries says *Hodie* ('Today'), while he tramples on *Cras* ('Tomorrow'). He is the patron saint of getting things done on time. This may be the only statue of him in a Roman church. [1]

### Dome

The drum of the dome has four sides occupied by windows, and the other four sides by large painted panels (in oils, not frescoed). They were listed by Nibby, writing in 1839, as: *The Annunciation* by **Giovanni Baldassari**, *The Escape to Egypt* by **Pietro Buccilli**, *The Visitation* by **Pietro Rosso** and *The Presentation of Our Lady* by **Giacinto Garroni**. However, **Mariani** overpainted all these forty years later (beware of online descriptions uncritically regurgitating Nibby's list). He replaced the second and third listed by *The Adoration of the Shepherds* and *The Pietà*. [1]

The dome itself is frescoed by **Mariani**. It is in eight sectors, separated by wide ribs with central panels showing gilded rosettes on blue. Each sector has, from top to bottom, a prophet or sibyl, a saint in a tondo and an angel. The lantern oculus has a blue ring with stars, encircling a dedicatory epigraph (In honorem Beatae Mariae Virginis Lauretanae), and within the lantern is a fresco of the *Madonna and Child*. [1]

### Sanctuary [6]

The sanctuary's triumphal arch is of the same style and size as the other arches. The sanctuary itself has one shallow rectangular bay, barrel-vaulted with a central hexagonal lantern. The lantern, which is the high altar's only natural light, contains relief stucco decoration featuring putto's heads and Eucharistic symbols, now rather decayed. [1]

The walls are richly revetted in polychrome stonework from the 17<sup>th</sup> century restoration, and the balustrade is of the same period. [1]

The high altar is against the far wall of the apse. The latter is three-sided with the short curved side walls slightly on the diagonal, and has its own triumphal arch. This is fitted under the sanctuary barrel vault, and is itself barrel-vaulted over a tympanum behind the altar aedicule. [1]

The altar [7] is by **Gaspare de Vecchi**, 1628, although modified in 1867 by **Luca Caramini**. An alternative attribution is to **Onorio Longhi**, with **Vecchi** being responsible for the decorative elements. It has a pair of Composite columns in yellow Siena marble, supporting a triangular pediment with frieze and tympanum in green verde antico. The same stone is the background to the

early 16<sup>th</sup> century altarpiece which has been attributed to **Antoniazio Romano** or **Marco Palmezzano**. Recently, it has been discovered that it was painted in 1509 by two artists with names given as **Antonio Bevilacqua** and "**Petrus de Bresirius**". It depicts Our Lady with St Sebastian and St Roch. [1]

The side walls have two large works by the **Cavaliere d'Arpino** of 1630, which show the *Birth of the Bl. Virgin* (to the left) and the *The Death of the Bl. Vergin* (to the right). [1]

There are six marble statues in the sanctuary, in round-headed niches. The two angels furthest from the altar are by **Stefano Maderno** (who carved the famous statue at Santa Cecilia in Trastevere). The second statue on the right is of *St Cecilia*, by **Giuliano Finelli**, and that to the left is of *St Agnes* by **Pompeo Ferrucci**. The statue of *St Susanna* in the left hand apse wall was carved by **François Duquesnoy**, a Flemish sculptor, in the years 1629-1633. It became a model for many 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century sacred sculptures. Finally, the corresponding statue on the right hand side of the apse is of *St Domitilla* by **Domenico de Rossi**. [1]

### Side Chapels

The four side chapels are of identical form, being semi-circular apses with conchs. The chapels are described clockwise, starting from the left hand side of the entrance.

#### Chapel of St Charles Borromeo [12]

The first chapel on the left is dedicated to St Charles Borromeo, and was fitted out in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century by **Gaspere De Vecchi**. The white and gold stucco decorations are original. [1]

The altarpiece shows *The Charity of St Charles Borromeo*, and the side wall frescoes depict *SS Andrew and John the Baptist*. The ceiling vault has *St Charles Borromeo Distributes Communion to Plague Sufferers*, dated 1664. [1]

The picture of the Sacred Heart in the sacristy by Tedeschi apparently used to be the altarpiece here. [1]

#### Chapel of the Crucifix [10]

The second chapel on the left hand side is dedicated to the Crucifixion, and was fitted out in 1641. It has a large 16<sup>th</sup> wooden crucifix, set in a very interesting 18<sup>th</sup> century frame which incorporates eight reliquaries. [1]

The stucco work survives from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but the frescoes are by **Mariani** from 1870 to 1874. On the pilaster to the right are **SS Longinus and Veronica**, and to the left are **SS Helen and Joseph of Arimathea**. The large flanking frescoes are *St. John the Evangelist* and *St. Mary Magdalen*. [1]

The vault has three panels showing *The Resurrection*, *Christ at Gethsemane* and *The Women at the Empty Tomb*. [1]

#### Chapel of Our Lady of Loreto [9]

The door on the left hand side of the sanctuary leads into the little chapel of Our Lady of Loreto, which was fitted out in 1974. It has an interesting modern pottery copy of the *Black Madonna* found in the Cathedral of Loreto, but the interior is of its time and is very minimalist. [1]

#### Sacristy [8]

On the right side of the sanctuary is a door leading into the small anteroom and then the sacristy. Here there is a tablet recording bequests by Confraternity members, as well as the following paintings: *Sacred Heart of Jesus* by **Pietro Tedeschi**, 1796; *Madonna and Child with SS Anthony, Catherine and Onuphrius* by **Faustina Concioli**, 1806 (or 8); *Our Lady of Loreto with St Charles Borromeo* by an unknown Roman artist about 1700, and a set of six small pictures of Christ, Our Lady and the four Evangelists. The sacristy was re-modelled in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by **Carimini**, and the fittings and altar are by him. The altarpieces is *The Madonna and Child with St Anne*, 16<sup>th</sup> century. [5]

### Chapel of the Magi [5]

The second chapel on the right is dedicated to the Epiphany, and is the Cappella Marzetti. Giovanni Pietro Marzetti commissioned **Niccolò Circignani** in 1586 to decorate it, and most of the frescoes are by him. The altarpiece depicts *The Adoration of the Magi*. The lateral frescoes are *St Peter* on the left and *St Paul* on the right. The vault shows *The Trinity* in the centre panel, while the two side panels depict *The Annunciation*. The depiction of St Paul is by Paolo Rossetti, from a cartoon by Federico Zuccari. [1]

Charmingly the pilasters have two little portraits of the patron and his wife, hoping that those who see them will pray for their souls. [1]

The small painting of the chapel's altar is a *Our Lady of the Rosary with St. Domenic and St. Catherine* from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. [5]

### Chapel of St Catherine of Alexandria [3]

In the first chapel on the right are mosaics by **Paolo Rossetti**, executed in 1594. The altarpiece depicts *St Catherine of Alexandria*, to whom the chapel is dedicated. *St Francis of Assisi* is to the right, *St John the Evangelist* is to the left and the *Dove of the Holy Spirit* flanked by angels is in the vault. [1]

The small 19<sup>th</sup> century painting on the altar is of *St Aloysius Gonzaga*. [1]

### **Special notes**

The feast of *Our Lady of Loreto* is celebrated on 10 December. Another important feast in the church is the *Annunciation of Our Lord* on 25 March.

### **Location:**

26 Piazza Madonna di Loreto, 00187 Roma

Coordinates: [41° 53' 45" N](#) [12° 29' 1" E](#)

### **Info:**

Telephone: +39 06 6792235

Opening times

Open 08:30am-01:00pm 04:00pm-07:00pm

Mass schedule:

Holidays: 11:00 - 16:00 (winter in Japanese) -17:00 (Slovenian)

-18:00 (Summer-in Japanese)

Weekdays: 17:00

Eves :17:00-19: 00 (summer)

### **Artists & Architects**

Andrea [Sansovino](#) (1467-1529), Italian **sculptor** and architect of the High Renaissance

Antoniazio [Romano](#) (1430-1510), Italian Early Renaissance painter

Antonio Bevilacqua (16<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian painter

Antonio da [Sangallo the younger](#) (1484-1546), Italian Renaissance architect from Florence

Carlo [Maderno](#) (1556-1629), Swiss-Italian architect [also see [here](#)]

Cesare [Mariani](#) (1826-1901), Italian painter

Domenico de [Rossi](#), (1659-1730) Italian sculptor and engraver.

Donato di Pascuccio d'Antonio ( il [Bramante](#)) (1444-1514), Italian architect

Faustina Concioli (19<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian painter

Federico [Zuccari](#) (1541-1609), Italian Mannerist painter and architect

François [Duquesnoy](#) (1597-643), Flemish Baroque sculptor

Gaspere [de Vecchi](#) (17<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian architect

Giacomo [Jacopo] [del Duca](#) (1520-1601), Italian **sculptor** and **architect**

Giovanni Battista [Montano](#) aka *Milano* (1534-1621), Italian **architect**, designer, woodcarver and engraver

Giuliano [Finelli](#) (1601-1653), Italian sculptor of the Baroque period from Tuscany

Giuseppe [Cesari](#), aka **Cavaliere d'Arpino** (1568-1640), Italian Mannerist painter from Arpino  
Giuseppe [Sacconi](#) (1854-1905), Italian architect  
Luca [Carimini](#) (1830-1890), Italian architect & sculptor  
Marco Palmezzano (1459-1539), Italian mosaicist  
Niccolò [Circignani](#) aka Il Pomarancio (1520-1597), Italian late-Renaissance / Mannerist painter  
Onorio [Longhi](#) (1568-1619), Italian architect  
Paolo Rossetti (d. 1621), Italian painter  
Petrus de Bresirius (16<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian painter  
Pietro Tedeschi (1750-1805), Italian painter  
Pompeo [Ferrucci](#) (1566-1637), Italian sculptor  
Stefano Longhi (17<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian architect  
Stefano [Maderno](#) (1576-1636), Italian late-Renaissance sculptor and stuccoist from Bissone  
William George [Trice](#) (1848-1920), English organ maker based in Genoa

### **Links and References:**

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
2. [english Wikipedia page](#)
3. [Tourist info page](#)
4. [Info Roma web site](#)
5. [Anna's Guide](#) (Danish)

[De Alvaris gallery on Flickr](#)

- a. Donovan, Jeremiah; ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS; 1842