

The “twin” churches of Piazza del Popolo



The "twin" churches of Santa Maria in Montesanto (left) and Santa Maria dei Miracoli (right), seen from Piazza del Popolo. Between the two churches Via del Corso starts. Although very similar, differences can be seen in this image in the two small belfrys and in the two domes (noticeable from the number of windows in the two timpani).

Santa Maria in Montesanto (1675-1679) and Santa Maria dei Miracoli (1662-1675) are two churches located on the Piazza del Popolo, facing the northern gate of the Aurelian Walls, at the entrance of Via del Corso on the square. The churches are often cited as "twin", due to their similar external appearance: they have indeed some differences, in both plant and exterior details.

Looking from the square, the two churches define the so-called "trident" of streets departing from Piazza del Popolo: starting from the left, Via del Babuino, Via del Corso and Via di Ripetta. The first two are separated by Santa Maria in Montesanto, the latter by Santa Maria dei Miracoli.

The origin of the two churches traces back to the 17th century restoration of what was the main entrance to the Middle Ages and Renaissance Rome, from the Via Flaminia (known as *Via Lata* and *Via del Corso* in its urban trait). Pope Alexander VII commissioned the monumental design of the entrance of Via del Corso to architect Carlo Rainaldi. This included two churches with central plant, but the different shapes of the two areas available forced deep modifications to the projects.

Both were financed by Cardinal Girolamo Gastaldi, whose crest is present in the two churches.

Santa Maria in Montesanto



Santa Maria in Montesanto is one of the twin 17th century churches on the Piazza del Popolo. Unlike the other, this church is a minor basilica and is also Rome's "Church of the Artists". The dedication is to the Blessed Virgin Mary, originally under her title of Our Lady of Mount Carmel but lately under that of Our Lady, Queen of Heaven. The name Montesanto (Holy Mountain) referred to Mount Carmel in Israel. ⁽¹⁾

History

The Reformed Carmelites of Monte Santo, the Carmelitani del Primo Istituto, from Messina, obtained papal approval to establish a convent in Rome in 1640. They settled on a site near the Porta del Popolo at or near the present church, and started with a little chapel which was probably just a room in their house. Then, on July 15, 1662 Cardinal Girolamo Gastaldi laid the foundation stone for a proper church. ⁽¹⁾

The first architect was **Carlo Rainaldi**. Unfortunately, Pope Alexander died in 1667 and his successors had little interest in the project. Work stopped for four years, but the Carmelites wanted their church. So, work resumed in 1671 under **Carlo Fontana**. The plans were revised by **Gian Lorenzo Bernini**, assisted by **Mattia De Rossi**, changing the plan of the church from circular to Elliptical. **Fontana** completed the church in 1673 in time for the Jubilee of 1675. However, it seems that the Carmelites only opened the church to the public in 1679. Today it is difficult to distinguish the contribution of **Rainaldi** from that of **Fontana**, and from that of **Bernini** and **De Rossi**. Certainly that was the last work of **Bernini**. ⁽¹⁾ ⁽⁶⁾

In 1761, the campanile was added to a design by **Francesco Navone**. ⁽¹⁾

In 1825, the dome was re-covered in grey fish-scale slates on the orders of Pope Leo XII. He also conferred the title of minor basilica on this church. Further, he removed the church from the administration of the Carmelites, re-dedicated it to Our Lady, Queen of Heaven (Santa Maria Regina

Coeli) and put in the charge of a chapter of prebendary canons of the same name which had previously been in charge of Santa Lucia della Tinta. The church is now a rectory in the parish of Santa Maria del Popolo. ⁽¹⁾

Church of the Artists

The Via del Babuino became the center of an artists' quarter in the 18th century, soon after the Spanish Steps were built, and was famous as such in the 19th century. Hopeful artists could use the Steps for open-air exhibitions, hoping to catch the eye of a possible patron. Santa Maria in Montesanto performed that function for an area with a bohemian reputation. In 1953 the enormously erudite art critic Monsignor Ennio Francia began the celebration of a "Mass of the Artists" in this church every Sunday. This tradition has continued ever since, and so the church has become the Chiesa degli Artisti. The funerals of personalities from the world of art, theatre and culture are often held here. ⁽¹⁾ (c)

Exterior

The church appears to be identical to its twin church, but there are differences. The church is elliptical on the major axis, whereas the other one is circular. Both churches have deep external apses, but here there are six side chapels instead of four. The fabric is in brick, rendered in a very light tan color, with architectural details in travertine limestone. Unlike the other church, the apse here is within the buildings of the former convent. ⁽¹⁾

Dome

The shapes of the domes also differ. This one is dodecagonal, 12 sided, stretched on the major axis to fit on the ellipse. In 1825 the dome (and that of her sister), was covered with scales that give the characteristic slate gray so rare in Rome. The edges of the dome are highlighted by ribs. ⁽¹⁾ (6)

The dodecahedral drum has a large, almost square window on ten faces, and these windows provide most of the light for the church. The corners have tripletted blind pilasters supporting a projecting cornice on which the dome sits. The twelve sectors of the dome are separated by slated ribs matching the pilasters in form. ⁽¹⁾

Lantern

The lanterns are also different. Here, the dome's oculus has a simple elliptical plinth bearing corbels on which are twelve flaming torch finials. On the plinth is an elliptical tempietto with six narrow arched windows separated by twelve little Corinthian pilasters supporting an entablature and a tiled cupola. In the middle of the cupola is another plinth, decorated with horizontal ovals, and this ends in a second-storey tiled cupola in the shape of a trumpet with a ball finial. ⁽¹⁾

Campanile

The campanile was built in imitation of that of the twin church, but is not as complicated a design. Also, it is set further back and is not over a chapel but over the end of the former convent building. Here, the campanile is in the form of a kiosk with each face having a pair of Ionic pilasters with swagged capitals which support an entablature and triangular pediment. The corners have four Ionic columns supporting diagonal posts. Above, the cupola in lead is in the form of an incurved square trumpet on a plinth, and has a ball finial. ⁽¹⁾

Façade (1)

The façade is dominated by the portico, but to each side is a coved (concave) zone with a side door having a square panel above with a molded frame. The doors have raised triangular pediments, and these side zones are each bounded by a pair of columns in the same style as those of the portico. The far members of each pair are in front of two conjoined pilasters. Above is a balustraded entablature. ⁽¹⁾

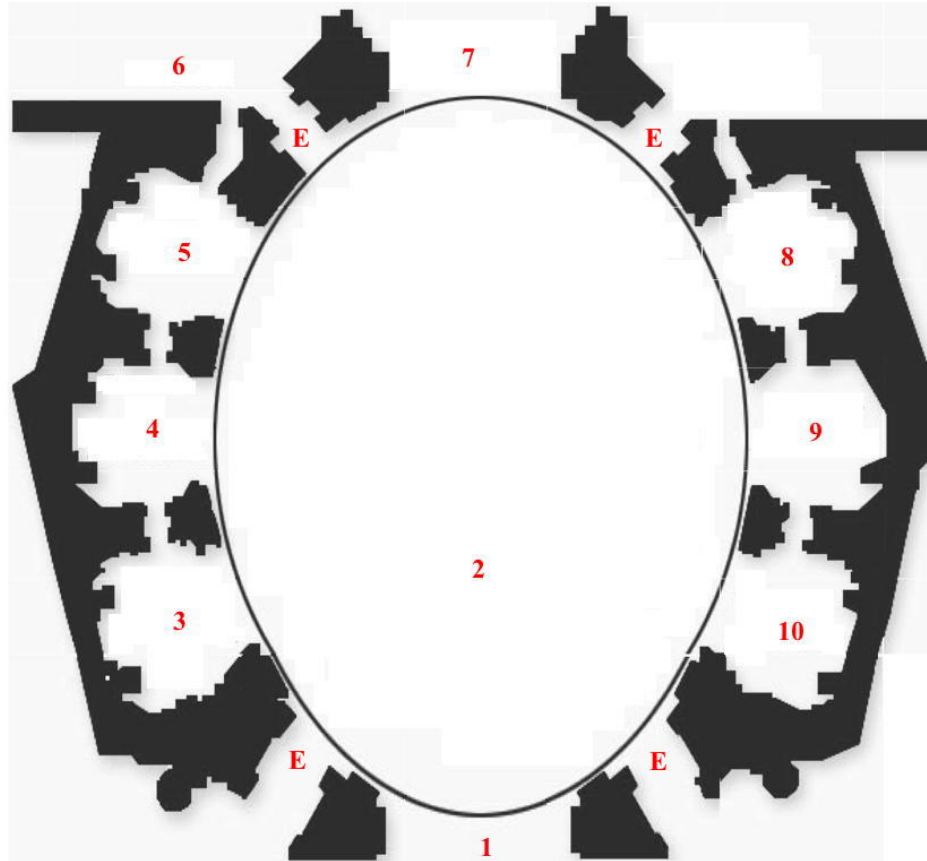
The portico is, in Classical terms, a pentastyle but the central column is missing leaving only four Composite columns with a wide gap in the middle. The volutes of the capitals are exaggerated. The columns support an entablature with an inscription on the frieze commemorating Cardinal Gastaldi's involvement. Then comes a dentillated pediment with a blank tympanum; it looks as if some sort of sculpture was intended for the latter. These columns originally were used for Bernini's bell tower on St. Peter's in Vatican. The columns were reused here when the bell tower had to be

dismantled due to structural damage to the St. Peter's. ⁽¹⁾ ⁽⁶⁾

The frontage behind the portico has four pilasters matching the columns. The main doorway has a raised segmental pediment, over a lintel giving the year 1675 which was a Jubilee year. ⁽¹⁾

There are eight statues on the roofline of the façade, which depict various Carmelite saints. Two flank the pediment, two are over the corners of the entrance frontage and four are over the far ends of the curved side frontages. They are by the school of Bernini, and the sculptors are listed as: Lazzaro Morelli, Francesco Rondone, Sillano Sillani and Antonio Fontana. ⁽¹⁾

Plan



Interior

The interior is an elliptical space dominated by the dome. The major axis of the ellipse is that of the church. To each side are three chapels, entered through arches with molded archivolts which spring from Doric impostes and which have heraldic shields on their keystones (some of these are supported by stucco angels). ⁽¹⁾

Flanking the entrance and the apse are four doorways (E), forming smaller and narrower archways with cantorias or opera boxes for solo musicians over them. The pair by the entrance are the side entrances (never used), while those flanking the apse lead to the sacristy (left) and former convent (right). These archways have molded archivolts on Doric impostes. ⁽¹⁾

Chapels and side entrances are separated by gigantic Corinthian pilasters supporting an entablature that runs round the entire church. This has a cornice with dentillations and modillions interspersed with rosettes. On this the dome sits; unlike in the other church, there is no proper drum but, instead, an attic with Doric pilasters from which the dome ribs spring. The ribs are molded but not decorated, and meet at the elliptical oculus which has a stucco flower garland. ⁽¹⁾

The shallow entrance bay and the deeper apse both have the entablature running round them and an arch above, that intrudes into the dome. Over these arches are a pair of windows with garlands on their lintels. The dome sectors on either side of these windows have stucco statues within

round-headed niches, themselves within frames crowned by double nested archivolts. The other eight dome sectors have windows with double nested segmental pediments. The four statues are by **Filippo Carcani**, who did much of the rest of the stucco decoration, under the direction of **Mattia de' Rossi**. The statues in the niches of the dome are of the *Prophet Elijah*, who is considered to be the spiritual founder of the Carmelite Order, and three Saints who had been monks: *St. Angelo*, *St. Elisha* and *St. Albert* were created in 1675. ^{(1) (3) (c)}

Over the entrance on the counterfaçade is a large tablet proclaiming completion of the architectural works for the Jubilee year 1675, and is topped by the coat-of-arms of Cardinal Gastaldi. ^{(1) (3) (c)}

The overall decorative scheme is in a cream color, very simple, especially in the dome. The chapels are a different matter, with polychrome marble decoration. ⁽¹⁾

In front of the presbytery a large plaque indicates access to the compartment below which is buried the canons. ⁽⁶⁾

The design of the floor due to **Rainaldi** projecting moldings of the dome. ⁽⁶⁾

The series of sculptures commemorating the Stations of the Cross is the work of several modern Italian sculptors. ⁽¹⁾

Presbytery ⁽⁷⁾

Over the triumphal arch is the coat-of-arms of Cardinal Gastaldi, supported by stucco angels sculpted by **Filippo Carcani**. ^{(1) (3) (c)}

The presbytery, designed by **Carlo Fontana**, has two bays, with a lacunar barrel vault having simple coffering panels and an apse with a conch. The conch is divided into three sectors by garlanded ribs, which meet at a scallop shell, and each sector contains a blank oval tondo. Also, at the bottom of each sector is a lunette window. The entablature of the nave runs around the sanctuary and below the conch, and is supported by two pairs of gigantic Corinthian pilasters. In between these are two doors with raised segmental pediments on each side, over which are cantoria. ^{(1) (c)}

Either side of the altar are niches framed by black marble pilasters supporting curved entablatures. These contain painted terracotta busts of popes who had assisted Cardinal Gastaldi: *Clement IX* and *Innocent XI* on the left side; *Alexander VII* and *Clement X* on the right. They were taken from the bronze originals by **Girolamo Lucenti**. ^{(1) (c)}

The design of the main altar was entrusted in 1677 with **Mattia De Rossi**. The altar aedicule has a pair of dark green marble Corinthian columns, supporting a triangular pediment embellished with rosettes, modillions and scrollwork on the gable interior. Two more columns support projecting posts to the rear at each side. On the entablature, we read in golden letters the words "ALTARE PRIVILEGIATUM PERPETUUM". On the pediment are two frolicking angels, and two more hold up the altarpiece, sculpted by **Filippo Carcani**. The author of the altarpiece is unknown but it is plausible to attribute it to the school Antoniazio Romano (1430? - 1510?). ^{(1) (3) (6) (c)}

The altarpiece is a 16th century copy of the icon of *Our Lady of Montesanto* (actually *Our Lady of Mount Carmel*), allegedly preserved from the former convent chapel that the church replaced. A pair of floating putti in stucco embellish it. The picture shows Our Lady holding a globe and in her right hand the Brown Scapular garment dear to the Carmelites. The label below reads: In Monte Sancto suo Carmelo steterunt pedes eius ("On his holy mountain Carmel stood his feet"). This is a reference to the prophet Elijah, whom the Carmelites used to claim as their founder. ^{(1) (6) (c)}

Sacristy ⁽⁶⁾

The church's sacristy is through a door to the left of the sanctuary. It was designed by **Fontana**, with an altarpiece of *The Deposition from the Cross* (c. 1600) by **Biagio Puccini**. The ceiling vault fresco is anonymous and depicts *Angels in Heaven with the Instruments of the Passion*. Decoration of the room adjacent to the sacristy was by **Giovanni Battista Gaulli**, known as *Baciccio*. ^{(1) (2) (3)}

Side Chapels

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

Chapel of St Lucy (3)

The first chapel on the left is dedicated to St Lucy. The 17th century altarpiece of the Roman school, depicting *Saint Lucia*. Note her eyes on a plate. The interior, more modest than those of the other chapels, is decorated with marbled portals. (1) (6) (c)

In 1831 the chapel passed to the Palombi family who used it as a family tomb. The coat of arms of the Palombi family (a dove with an olive branch) stands out in the keystone of the entrance arch. (c)

To the right are memorials of Francesco Palombi, who died in 1831, and his wife Isabella Moroni, by **Alessandro Massimiliano Laboureur**; Elisabetta Palombi, 1893 (above) and Adelina Morelli (below), who died at age five in 1858. To the left are memorials to Tommaso Palombi and his wife Costanza Romagnani, 1867, and to Giuseppe de Gasperis, 1862. (1) (3) (6) (c)

Chapel of St Mary-Magdalen de' Pazzi (4)

The second chapel on the left is dedicated to St [Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi](#) (1566 - 1607), a Carmelite nun and mystic, canonized by Pope Clemente XI in 1669. Her family were Florentine nobility, famous for the "de' Pazzi conspiracy" of 1478, who were patrons of the chapel. The original patron was Giovanni Battista Aquilanti, whose portrait bust is in a tondo to the right of the altar. In 1831 the chapel passed to Marquis Candelori Vulci, who provided to place their arms (today illegible) on the arch of access to the chapel, supported by two angels. (1) (2) (6)

The paintings in here are by **Ludovico Gimignani** (c. 1685), a student of [Pietro da Cortona](#). The altarpiece shows *St Mary Magdalen with Our Lady*, and the side walls have *The Apparition of St Augustine to St Mary Magdalen* on the left wall, and *The Communion of St Mary Magdalen* on the right wall. The vault fresco shows *Christ in Glory*. The stucco work is by **Carcani**, and is sumptuous with gilded garlands and putti. (1) (3) (6)

Chapel of SS James the Great and Francis (5)

The third chapel on the left is dedicated to St James the Great and St Francis of Assisi. It was the funerary chapel of the Montioni family, whose coat-of-arms is above the arch (the serpent, two turtledoves and three mountains), and the architect was **Tommaso Mattei**, pupil of [Carlo Fontana](#). Two Angels in stucco over the outer arc and the gilded stucco inside, are sculpted by **Filippo Carcani** under the direction of Mattia de 'Rossi. (1) (2) (3) (c)

The altarpiece depicts *Madonna and Child with SS. Francis and James the Great*, and is an oil on canvas from 1687 by **Carlo Maratta**, the dominant figure of the Roman Academy, which gave an impression to the late classical Baroque. The depiction of her face was surprisingly influential in Baroque art. The work represents an important moment in Maratta's artistic career. Here for the first time, he sets forth a Virgin type that will have a great influence on Roman painting of the end of the 17th century. (1) (2) (c)

The left hand painting of *St James curing a cripple* is by **Daniele Seiter** (1687), and the right hand wall is *Vision of Saint Francis* by **Luigi Garzi** (1686). The vault fresco from 1687 is the *Assumption of Our Lady* is by **Giuseppe Chiari**. Upon the altar is a modern statue in glass of the *Angel for the artists* by **Guelfo**. The altar is adorned, among other rare marbles, with two columns of verde antique. (1) (2) (3) (6) (b) (c)

Chapel of St Anne (8)

The third chapel on the right is dedicated to St Anne, mother of Our Lady. The chapel was completed in 1679 as the epigraph on the floor recalls. It came under the patronage of the Vivaldi Family, whose coats of arms can be seen on the doors to the side. The stonework is again very sumptuous, featuring Corinthian altar columns in red Sicilan jasper and revetting in verde antico and alabaster. The architect was **Carlo Bizzaccheri**, a pupil of [Carlo Fontana](#). (1) (b) (c)

The altarpiece, depicting *The Holy Family with St Anne*, is by **Niccolò Berrettoni** (1686). This painting

is the last work of the master, who died at the age of 45. He also painted the vault fresco featuring *God the Father*, the pendentives frescoes, *Pairs of Angels with Scrolls* (1679-82); and the side lunettes, *The Meeting of St. Joachim and St. Anne* and *The Angel Appearing to St. Joachim*. The stucco work in here, including the winsome putti, is by **Pietro Paolo Naldini**, not Carcani. ⁽¹⁾ ⁽⁶⁾ ^(c)

Chapel of Purgatory ⁽⁹⁾

The second chapel on the right used to be dedicated to "SS Albert and Lawrence", who seem to be St Albert of Jerusalem and Lawrence of Rome. However, it was purchased by the Expiatory Institute of the Souls in Purgatory of Our Lady of Montligeon on 1899, to whom it is dedicated. The crest of the Institute is over the entrance arch. The 17th century decoration survives in part. In 1904 the altar was reconstructed, using material from the destroyed church of S. Maria Liberatrice and replacing the late 17th century canvas by Onofrio Avellino dedicated to St. Albert and St. Lawrence. ⁽¹⁾ ⁽⁹⁾ ^(c)

The chapel is frescoed by **Silvio Galimberti**, except for the vault fresco showing the *Souls in Purgatory* which is anonymous. The sumptuous Baroque altar, with four Corinthian columns in yellow and black veined marble, now has an altarpiece showing *The Supper at Emmaus* by **Riccardo Tommasi Ferroni**, a very interesting modern artist influenced by Mannerist and Baroque art. This painting was placed on the altar in 1981. ⁽¹⁾ ⁽⁶⁾

The fresco work by **Galimberti** is: ^(c)

- Right Wall: *St. Gregory in Prayer*, tempera on stucco
- Lunette: *The Benediction of the Tomb*, tempera on stucco
- Left Wall: *St. Albert, St. Lawrence and a Carmelite Brother*, tempera on stucco
- Lunette: *Funeral Mass*, tempera on stucco
- Pendentives: *Faith, Hope, Charity and Peace*, fresco

Here were memorials to Bishop Achilles Rindaldini, 1880 and Carolina Fratoddi, 1866. ⁽¹⁾

Chapel of the Crucifix ⁽¹⁰⁾

The first chapel to the right is dedicated to the Crucifixion, and was designed by **Alessandro Cesani** in 1670. The chapel was placed under the patronage of the de' Rossi Family in 1667, then the Olivati and finally, the Pierantoni. ^(c)

The fine stucco chapel and the cherubs are **Pietro Papaleo**. The altar has a rich design, type opus sectile, in marble. The altarpiece crucifix is anonymous. ⁽¹⁾ ⁽⁶⁾

This chapel used to have four works by Salvatore Rossi, but these were sold in 1802 (according to the inscription to the right). The replacements, from 1822, are: ⁽¹⁾ ⁽⁶⁾ ^(c)

RIGHT WALL:

- **Ludovico Venuti**, *The Story of Tobia* (1822), oil on canvas
- Above: **Ferdinando Cavallèri**, *David with the Head of Goliath* (1822), oil on canvas

LEFT WALL:

- **Ludovico Venuti**, *The Prophet Abijah with the Wife of Jeroboam* (1822), oil on canvas
- Above: **Ferdinando Cavallèri**, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (1822), oil on canvas

VAULT:

- **Pietro Papaleo**, *The Glory of Angels and Cherubs* (1677), stucco
- *The Dove of the Holy Spirit* (1822), oil on canvas

On the left wall is a memorial for Carolus de Rubeis, a musician who died in 1677.

Access

The church is undergoing a major restoration (2014), and there is no possibility of any sort of visit until this is completed.

Location:

Address: 197 Via del Babuino 00187 Roma
Phone: 06 36 10 594
Coord: [41° 54' 35"N, 12° 28' 36.25"E](#)

Burials:

Carlo Cardinal [COLLICOLA](#), (1682-1730)
Buried in his family's tomb
Bishop Achilles [Rindaldini](#), (1818-1880)
Titular Bishop of Cyrene

Artists and Architects: (1) (2) (3)

Alessandro Cesani (17th cent), Italian architect
Alessandro Massimiliano Laboureur (1794-1861), Italian sculptor
Antonio Fontana (1818-1882), Italian sculptor
Biagio [Puccini](#) (1673-1721), Italian painter
Carlo [Fontana](#) (1634-1714), Italian architect of the Late Baroque period
Carlo Francesco [Bizzaccheri](#) (1656-1721), Italian architect early Baroque and Rococo style
Carlo [Maratta](#) (1625-1713), Italian Late Baroque Classical painter
Carlo [Rainaldi](#) (1611-1691), Italian architect of the Baroque period
Daniele [Seiter](#) (1642-1705), Italian Baroque painter
Ferdinando [Cavallèri](#) (1794-1865), Italian painter
Filippo [Carcani](#) [aka *Filippone*] (17th century), Italian sculptor
Francesco Navone (d. 1804), Italian architect
Francesco Rondone (1600-1670), Italian sculptor
Gian Lorenzo [Bernini](#) (1598-1680), Italian sculptor and architect.
Giovanni Battista [Gaulli](#), aka *Bacivvia* (1639-1709), Italian painter of the High Baroque
Giolamo [Lucenti](#) (1627-1692), Italian sculptor
Giuseppe Bartolomeo [Chiari](#) (1654-1727), Italian painter of the late-Baroque
Guelfo Bianchini [aka *Guelfo*] (1937-1997), Italian sculptor
Lazzaro [Morelli](#) (1608-1690), Italian sculptor of the Baroque period
Ludovico [Gimignani](#) (1643-1697), Italian painter during the Baroque period
Ludovico [Venuti](#) (19th cent), Italian painter
Luigi [Garzi](#) (1638-1721), Italian painter
Mattia [de Rossi](#) (1637-1695), Italian architect of the Baroque period
Niccolò [Berrettoni](#) (1637-1682), Italian painter of the Baroque period
Pietro Paolo [Naldini](#) (1619-1691), Italian sculptor
Pietro Papaleo (17th cent), Italian sculptor
Riccardo Tommasi [Ferroni](#) (1934-2000), Italian painter
Sillano Sillani (17th cent), Italian sculptor
Silvio [Galimberti](#) (1869-1956), Italian painter
Tommaso [Mattei](#) (1652-1726), Italian architect

Links and References:

- 1) [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
- 2) [Wikipedia](#)
- 3) [info Roma website entry](#)
- 4) [060608 website entry](#)
- 5) Church website [homepage](#); [history](#)
- 6) [RomaInteractive website entry](#)
- 7) [Official diocesan website](#)

8) ["Art in Rome" website entry](#)

9) Our Lady of Montligeon website (no longer online)

a) Sharp, Mary; A GUIDE TO THE CHURCHES OF ROME; 1966; pg 143

b) Donovan, Jeremiah; ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS; 1842; pg. V2:40

c) Information from descriptive plaques in the church

d) Watkins, Basil, OSB; THE BOOK OF SAINTS; Bloomsbury Publishing; 8th ed.; 201

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