

Santa Prassede all'Esquilino



Interior of Santa Prassede

Santa Prassede is a 9th century minor basilica located near the major basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in the rione Esquilino. The dedication is to St Praxedes.

The patron saint of this church is one of those at Rome, the biographies of whom are now completely lost. The revised Roman martyrology now simply lists her as the person to whom the church is dedicated. A romantic legend of the 6th century, which may possibly preserve the names of real people, describes St Pudens as a Roman senator who gave hospitality to St Peter. He had two virgin daughters who were martyred, Sts. Pudenziana and Praxedis; the former has the nearby church of Santa Pudenziana dedicated to her. Santa Prassede used this church to hide the Christians persecuted by the then Emperor Antoninus Pius, providing for the burial of the martyrs at the Priscilla Cemetery, the catacombs of Santa Priscilla on the Via Salaria. In this Cemetery, Santa Prassede herself was buried with her sister and then returned to her church rebuilt by Pasquale I. ^[1] ^[2]

The existence of the martyr daughters is historically extremely problematic. Pudens himself has been deleted from the revised Roman martyrology. The most recent scholarly consensus on who Praxedis really was, concludes that she was probably a lady who donated property for the foundation of the original church, or money for the purpose. ^[1] ^[a]

History

The Basilica of Santa Prassede stands on the ancient Clivus Suburanus, not far from Santa Maria Maggiore. This church is the most complete monument of the Carolingian Renaissance, when the papacy aspired to revive the glories of Constantine's Christian empire. The first church here was probably built in the time of Pope St Siricius (384-399) and was one of the *tituli*, the first parish churches of Rome, known as *Titulus Praxedis*. ^[1] ^[g] ^[h]

The first definite mention of the forerunner of the present church is an epitaph dated 489, in which a Presbyter Tituli Praxedis is mentioned. This was found in the catacombs of St Hippolytus, near San Lorenzo fuori le Mura. Pope Adrian I (772-95) is described in the *Liber Pontificalis* as having restored this original church in *integro*, indicating that it had fallen into a bad state of repair. Pope Leo III (802-6) donated several valuable liturgical items. ^[1] ^[c]

Pope St Paschal I (817-24) abandoned the old church because it was in ruins, and built a new one on a terrace levelled on a slope of the Esquiline Hill in the year that he was elected. He planned Santa Prassede as small-scale copy of the Constantinian basilica of St Peter's in the Vatican, complete with an internal courtyard between the main entrance and the internal façade. This is essentially the building that we have, although there have been several major architectural interventions since. The plan was as a T-shaped basilica. The nave and two side aisles were separated by twenty-two columns. The columns are all ancient, a matching set of grey granite from Mons Claudianus, a Roman quarry in the eastern desert of Egypt. The nave and aisle terminated in a triumphal arch. ^[1] ^[3] ^[5] ^[c] ^[h]

It is Pascale who orchestrated the last great translation of the relics of martyrs from the cemeteries outside of the walls of Rome. He also moved the body of Pope Celestino I from the Catacombs of Priscilla to Santa Prassede. Part of the function of the new church was to serve as a repository for relics of martyrs from the catacombs. At the beginning of the 9th century, the government of the city of Rome had lost control of its surrounding countryside to gangs of marauders, and the safety of pilgrims could no longer be guaranteed. As a result, the Church undertook a campaign to collect the relics of martyrs being venerated, and to re-enshrine them in churches within the city walls. All the catacombs except those at San Sebastiano fuori le Mura were then abandoned, and their locations forgotten. The new shrine churches usually displayed the feature of a mock catacomb under the high altar, typically a semi-circular confessio (a sort of crypt) accessed by stairs from either end of the transept. The confessio was either genuinely underground, or was under the raised floor of the sanctuary. ^[1] ^[h]

The church was given another function by the pope; he attached the unique funerary chapel of St Zeno to the right hand side wall, to serve as a memorial for his mother. At this period side chapels in churches were still not the norm, as it was usual to build a separate church or chapel if one wanted to for a specific purpose. ^[1]

The pope also founded a monastery next to the church, and staffed it with some of the Byzantine-rite Greek monks who had arrived in Rome in numbers in the previous century as refugees from the Iconoclast policy in the Byzantine Empire. ^[1]

The mosaics commissioned for this church by Pope Paschal are deservedly famous. However, the surveying during the construction was seriously badly done. The nave walls and colonnades are not parallel, neither are they straight. The transept is not at right angles to the nave's major axis, and neither are the façade and the atrium. This left the structure compromised. The clearest sign of this is at the top of the mosaic on the triumphal arch, there is a sag between the wall and the ceiling. ^[1]

Middle ages

The presence of Byzantine rite monks at Rome faded away towards the end of the 9th century. Benedictine monks were probably here by the early 10th century, because they became dominant in Roman monasticism then. Pope Innocent III assigned the complex in 1198 to the reformed Benedictine congregation based at the abbey of Vallombrosa. The Vallumbrosans had been founded by St John Gualbert in 1073. The monastery here became one of their more important ones, and has survived as a functioning monastic community to the present day. ^[1] ^[c]

When the monks took charge, they had to instigate a major renovation because the fabric of the basilica was becoming unstable owing to the surveying quirks already mentioned. To consolidate the structure, three transverse arches were inserted into the nave which were supported by six massive piers enclosing ancient columns. Also, most of the original windows were blocked up, although it is difficult to ascertain when this happened because of the activities of later restorers. ^[1] ^[c]

In 1118 the Holy Roman Emperor Henry V, in order to enforce the privilege of investiture, had Frangipane supporters burst into Santa Prassede while Pope Gelasius II is celebrating mass. The Pope, thanks to the help of the people, manages to escape on horseback and in the night fled to Gaeta. ^[3]

In the late 13th century a squat tower campanile was perched on top of the left hand end of the transept, and a little later the right hand end of the transept was walled off to create a chapel dedicated to All Saints. ^[c]

Around the same time, in the reign of Pope Nicholas IV (1288-2), the relics of St Valentine were brought from his shrine on the Via Flaminia and enshrined in the Chapel of the Pillar. The reason why this church was chosen for the honor was that the St Zeno of the chapel next door featured in his fictional legend. ^[1]

Later restorations

The beginning of a series of major re-orderings of the church was in 1489, when Cardinal Antonio Pallavicini Gentili commenced a five-year project to enclose the sanctuary. The arcades just mentioned were blocked, and small elevated choirs for the monks were inserted on each side. The arrangement was possible because the apse intruded into the monastic range to the north, and the monks could enter from the second storey of their monastery. ^{[1] [3]}

In 1564 St Charles Borromeo, the saintly archbishop of Milan, was made the titular. He took a strong personal interest in the church, and it is on record that he used to spend a whole night in prayer in the confessio when on visits to Rome. Also he used to keep a set of rooms in the monastery as his lodgings, and distributed alms to poor people in the former atrium, now the courtyard. The table that he used is preserved as a relic in the church. ^[1]

After his appointment as cardinal he appointed Martino Longhi the Elder as architect for his interventions in the church, which were under way in 1575. The work involved: remodelling the entrance staircase from the main entrance to the courtyard; re-facing the façade; opening eight large windows in the upper nave walls; vaulting the side aisles, and building a new sacristy. Most unfortunately, he inserted two little balconies in front of reliquary cupboards on either side of the triumphal arch, destroying parts of the ancient mosaic in the process. These balconies or poggiosi were for the display of saints' relics on their feast-days. The other work done by Longhi in the sanctuary was destroyed in later restorations. The main project was finished in 1584, and also involved the rebuilding of the monastery to the north. ^{[1] [3] [e]}

Ten years after this, Cardinal Alessandro de' Medici became titular cardinal here (1594-1600) and commissioned the complete decoration of the central nave, with the stories of the Passion, from a group of late mannerist painters. In 1605 he was elected as Pope Leo XI. ^{[1] [3] [e]}

18th century

The next major intervention was by Ludovico Cardinal Pico della Mirandola, who became titular cardinal in 1728. This involved the complete re-designing of the sanctuary and confessio (crypt), entailing the loss of Borromeo's work. The entrances to the confessio in the ends of the transept were closed and filled in, and a new entrance created under the altar. The saints' relics found in a small room under the altar were re-enshrined in ancient sarcophagi found with them, and these were then placed in the entrance corridor which runs through the location of the destroyed room. The architect was **Francesco Ferrari**. ^{[1] [3] [e]}

19th century

The nave was provided with a coffered wooden ceiling in 1868, using wood and timber from the private forest of the Abbey of Vallombrosa. Unfortunately, the monks were in possession for only another five years. Together with all others in the city, the monastery was sequestered by the Italian government in 1874. Part of it served as an army barracks for a while, but was later converted into two Commercial Schools, one for boys and one for girls. In 1924 the monastic ranges were mostly rebuilt and given extra storeys, but the cloister garth and arcades remain. ^{[1] [3]}

20th century

In the 20th century, work was done on the basilica by **Antonio Muñoz**, who was Superintendent of Fine Arts and Antiquities for the city. In 1918, he replaced the 17th century brick and marble slab flooring with the present spectacular floor in the Cosmatesque style, a massively expensive project with a result good enough to fool many visitors into thinking that it is mediaeval. In the process, some evidence was found to suggest that the original basilica had a schola cantorum made of marble plutei such as the one that survives at San Clemente. **Muñoz** restored the façade in 1937. This involved stripping all the plaster off it to reveal naked brick, removing the central three-light window inserted by Borromeo and replacing it with a row of three identical windows. ^{[1] [3] [e]}

There was another unfortunate restoration between 1969 and 1973, when fresco work on the counterfaçade and on the intradoses of the transverse nave arches was replaced with whitewash. [1]
[3]

Exterior

The church is a typical basilica, with a nave of twelve bays having side aisles, a transept and an external semi-circular apse. Off the side aisles on both sides are several external chapels of various shapes and sizes; five on the right, and four on the left. In the right hand end of the transept is another chapel, and in the corresponding left hand end is the campanile the ground floor of which used to be another chapel. [1]

The fabric is in red brick. The nave roof is pitched and tiled in the usual way, but the separate tiled transept roof has the unusual feature of only a single pitch running down towards the apse. [1]

The exterior of the basilica itself is invisible from the street, and only the back walls of the right hand side chapels show up on the west side of the Via Santa Prassede. They are completely undecorated but show an interesting mix of window shapes. [1]

The 16th century cloister, with its garth garden and arcaded walks, survives embedded and massively altered in a modern block to the north of the basilica but is inaccessible to visitors. [1]

Prothyrum

The usual entrance to the church is by the side entrance, in Via Santa Prassede. However, main entrance gateway in Via San Martino ai Monti. The structure amounts to a porch. The technical name for it is a prothyrum. As it stands, it has a pair of ancient grey granite columns with Ionic capitals, supporting a short barrel vault now in rough brick but originally plastered. Above this is a little flat-roofed chamber or portarius, intended for the church's gatekeeper, which was apparently rebuilt by St Charles Borromeo. [1]

The column capitals are of different ages; the one on the right is ancient, but the one on the left was carved when the basilica was erected. The column bases are Doric capitals turned over. Over the actual doorway is a relief of St Praxedis, also part of the Borromeo restoration. [1]

However, the prothyrum entrance is nowadays very rarely, if ever, open.

Atrium

To get to the former atrium, now a courtyard, go through the church and back out again through the front door. (Hopefully this will be found open, but may not be in winter or in bad weather). You will find yourself in a courtyard. [1]

A double flight of steps, commissioned by St Charles Borromeo, in 1575, runs down to the other side of the prothyrum entrance. You may notice that it runs at an angle to the major axis of the courtyard. [1]

This courtyard was completely derelict in the 19th century, and allegedly was used for dumping unwanted items before being restored and cleaned up in 1937. It occupies the site of the former atrium, which was so thoroughly destroyed in the Middle Ages that scholars used to doubt its existence. It used to extend towards the prothyrum as far as the first major flight of stairs, and if you look in the bottom left hand corner (facing the church) you will see two columns belonging to it now embedded in the wall. Two other columns revealed in the 1937 restoration were moved to either side of the church entrance. The row of holes across the façade used to house the ends of the beams for the roof of the covered atrium walkway on this side. [1]

On the walls by the staircase are four limestone slabs showing traces of paintwork, which are thought to have been part of the original furnishings of the sanctuary. On the right wall is also the inscription commemorating Borromeo's restoration, preserved when the window it was on was destroyed. [1]

Façade

As it now is, since 1937, the façade is a brick cliff. It used to be a simple and dignified late Renaissance work by Longhi, of which the doorway survives. When the stucco was stripped, evidence was found for the three identically sized round-headed windows that were restored and are now to be seen. Interestingly, the window relieving arches are double, a hint that the builders were concerned about structural weaknesses. The geometric window mullions or transennae are Muñoz's trademark. The façade was originally decorated with mosaics, but now only a few fragments by the left window remain. [1]

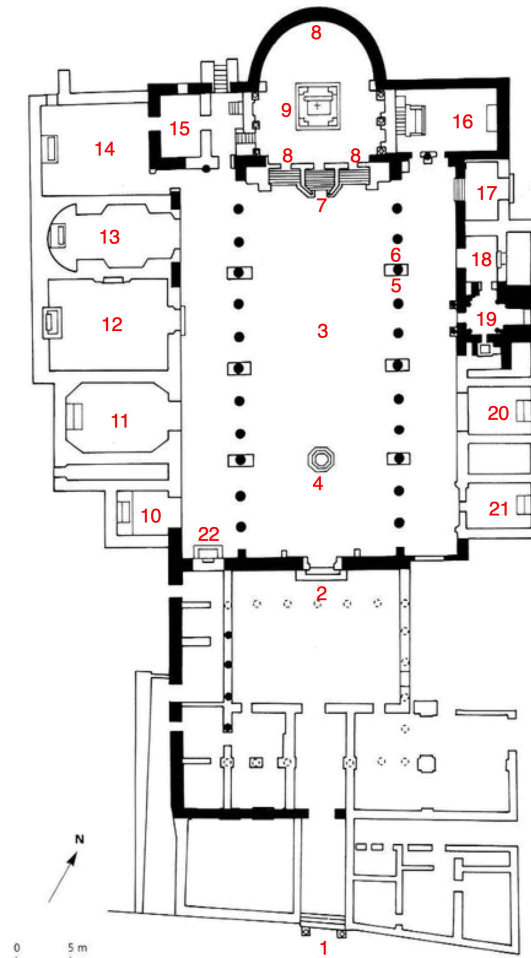
The rough niche inserted into the gable might once have contained a statue. It is flanked by a pair of little windows which open into the attic above the nave ceiling. The roofline has a limestone cornice with modillions (little brackets) in between two rows of dentillation. [1]

The Borromini entrance could be described as early Baroque. It has a molded doorcase, and a raised triangular pediment over a swag and a pair of lions' head masks. [1]

Campanile

The bell-tower over the left arm of the transept was built in the 12th century. It is invisible from any public place. A squat edifice in brick, it has three storeys above the aisle roofline. The first two storeys are undifferentiated and undecorated, but the third one is distinguished by a cornice. It has two double-arched apertures on each face, arranged horizontally, and the archivolts of the arches are connected by a string course. Each double arch is separated by a small limestone column with an impost. The tower has a tiled pyramidal cap. The north face now inserts into the modern school building to the north. A window survives with original transennae, which Muñoz used as a model for the 1937 windows in the façade. [1] [b]

Plan



Interior

Nave

The church's original basilical plan, with a nave of twelve bays separated from two side aisles eleven ancient columns on each side, has been obscured by the need to strengthen the structure. Hence, the nave is now divided into four equal portions by truss arches, and these spring from massive pillars which enclose six of the columns. These pillars used to have applied pilasters supporting the trabeation on each side, and fragments of these survive; they are of the de' Medici restoration in 1594. ^[1]

The floor was laid in the two years from 1916 by **Antonio Muñoz**, in faithful and successful imitation of the Cosmatesque style. By tradition, the large porphyry roundel near the back of the nave marks the site of a well into which (according to the legend) St Praxedis poured the blood of martyrs which she had sponged up. You can see her doing this in the main altarpiece in the apse. ^[1]
^[e] ^[g]

There are three incised grave slabs in the floor. Behind the 4th column on the right is 13th century grave slab of a mediaeval pharmacist named Giovanni da Montopoli. A very finely-cut Gothic inscription, a model of good lettering. The figure is dressed as a pilgrim, in a sheepskin mantle over a long civilian robe, with tight-buttoned sleeve; a pilgrim's hat with a scallop shell in front; a wallet, also showing a scallop; a staff with an iron spike in right hand; left hand raised high. There is a second incised slab of a cleric in long full robes with his head on a pillow. ^[1] ^[2] ^[f]

Also, there is a relief slab to the left of the entrance. Giovanni Carboni, a Neapolitan soldier who died in Rome. A very high relief in full armor-plate over chain. His feet rest on two little hounds; he wears a sword at his left, a dagger at his right, side. The inscription bears his name and the place of his death: Rome, September 24, 1388. The work is not great sculpture, but is interesting. The face has been much worn by feet. ^[e] ^[f]

On the first pillar on the left aisle is the memorial for Cardinal Antonio Domenico Gamberini who was the titular from 1829 to 1841.

The granite columns seem to form a set, and must have been pillaged from a very high-status ancient building. Their 16th century stucco capitals, in a Composite style, contain oaks and cockerels; these are thought to refer to Pope Gregory XIV (1590-1) and Cardinal Antonio Maria Gallo (1600-2), and if so help to date the work. The entablatures of the trabeation that they support were also scavenged from an ancient structure. ^[1]

Because of the truss arches there are three separate nave ceilings, inserted in 1868. The ceiling is made of wood from the forests of the Florentine abbey of Vallombrosa, each span is divided by large golden frames into six lacunaries painted with a blue background and each intersection is decorated with a stud surrounded by crowns and palm trees, symbols of martyrdom. ^[1] ^[2] ^[3]

Counterfaçade

The back wall containing the main entrance displays frescoes of the *Annunciation*, commissioned by Cardinal Alessandro de' Medici after 1592 and executed by **Stefano Pieri** (1542-1629). The angel is to the left of the door, and Our Lady on the right. Above these are two monochromes in sepia, depicting scenes from the life of Moses by **Giovanni Balducci**. Above these in turn are two angels on plinths bearing the Medici coat-of-arms. The doorway is flanked by a pair of shallow pilasters with apostles and putti, and above it is the coat-of-arms of Pope Clement VIII set on a trompe-l'oeil segmental pediment and flanked by allegorical figures of *Faith* and *Justice*, attributed to **B. Fazzini**. There used to be more fresco work above. However removing the plaster from the façade let the damp in to cause damage, and after 1969 the damaged portion was simply whitewashed. ^[1]

Nave frescoes

The cycle was created by the will of Cardinal Alessandro de' Medici between 1594 and 1596 and represents stories of passion. The cycle is an example of counter-reformist painting, it aims to bring the faithful back to the initial values of faith. ^[2]

The fresco work on the walls of the central nave are part of the same scheme as that on the counterfaçade, and each of the eight units has a similar layout as to be found there, that is, a large fresco flanked by a pair of much smaller monochromes on which stand a pair of angels on plinths bearing the Medici coat-of-arms. These angels carry symbolic items referring back to the main scene.

The eight main frescoes illustrate scenes from the Passion of Christ. Starting counter-clockwise from the front left hand corner, firstly we have *Christ Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane*, with the monochromes depicting scenes from the *life of Joseph the Patriarch*. The angels carry olives, because of the trees in the garden. The work is by **Giovanni Balducci**. The second scene, by **Paris Nogari**, features *The Arrest of Christ* and the angels carry the ropes with which He was bound. The third, by **Girolamo Massei**, depicts *Christ Before Caiaphas*, and the angels have books of the Law by which He was condemned. The fourth is *Christ Before Pilate* by **Agostino Ciampelli**, and the angels carry the sceptre of secular power. ^[1]

Crossing to the right hand side, we have *The Scourging of Christ* by **Ciampelli** again, with the Column of the Scourging featured and the angels carrying a rope and whip. The next is *Christ Crowned with Thorns* by **Baldassare Croce**, with the angels carrying the levers used to tighten the crown. The next is *Ecce Homo* by **Ciampelli**, with the angels holding the crown of thorns and the basin in which Pilate washed his hands. Finally, *Christ Meets Veronica* by **Balducci** again, with the angels carrying Veronica's Veil and the Title. ^{[1] [3]}

The pillars have frescoes of the *Apostles* by **Balducci**, surmounted by putti bearing tablets on which is the Creed. Another two flank the entrance door in the counterfaçade. ^[1]

Triumphal arch mosaic

The two mosaics on the triumphal arch and the apse are from the time of Pope St Paschal, and in them is his monogram. They are in the Byzantine style and, with the Chapel of St Zeno, are one of the most important examples of the Roman school of that style. The overall theme is the *Second Coming of Christ* and the *End of Time*, based on the description given in the "Apocalypse of St John" (Book of Revelation). ^[1]

On the triumphal arch, the one closest to the nave, *The Heavenly Jerusalem* is depicted as a walled and gated enclosure with its golden walls set with jewels. In it, Christ in a gold tunic outlined in red, accompanied by two angels, is venerated by two queues of apostles and saints; to the left, the first two are the *Virgin Mary* and *St John the Baptist*, and to the right the first is *St Praxedis*. At the ends of the queues are *Moses* and *Elijah*. On the right, next to the prophet, is an angel in a red tunic holding a book and a rod. The city gates are guarded by another pair of angels, and a further two escort more saints through flowery meadows, with the right hand group led by *Sts. Peter* and *Paul*. ^{[1] [e]}

Below this composition, on either side of the arch, are two crowds of people holding crowns and palm branches. These are the multitude of the martyrs. These two panels are the ones seriously damaged by having relic cupboards inserted into them by St Charles Borromeo. The chased bronze doors of the cupboards, with tondi featuring portraits of saints. ^{[1] [b]}

The intrados (underside) of the arch depicts flower garlands rising up to Paschal's monogram at the keystone, and was re-done in the 19th century. ^[1]

On the piers below the mosaic are two monuments. That on the right belongs to Cardinal Angelo Maria Quirini, titular from 1743-1755. He was buried in the cathedral of Brescia. On the left to Cardinal Lodovico Pico della Mirandola, titular from 1728-1731. Only his heart is buried here. ^{[1] [4]}

Presbytery

As it appears today, it is the result of a profound transformation carried out between 1728 and 1734 at the behest of Cardinal Ludovico Pico della Mirandola based on a design by **Francesco Ferrari**, including the construction of the baldacchino and the two staircases of rosso antico marble, ascending towards the altar and descending towards the crypt. ^{[1] [2]}

The presbytery space is delimited by the apse and by two lateral wings in which there are six

columns that frame four doors. Three of these are actually false, and the only genuine one is at bottom left which leads into the choir above. In between these doors are six very interesting ancient marble columns, which used to support the arcades inserted here in 1489 and which were later hidden by blocking walls. They are 1st or 2nd century AD, and might have come from Greece. The ribbing on them is interrupted by bands of acanthus leaves. Their capitals are mediaeval. Above the doors and columns on each side are two choirs for the monks. [1] [2]

On the left choir is the organ of **Filippo Tronci** from 1884, enlarged in 1942 by **Giovanni Tamburini**, both belonging to the most renowned Italian organ companies. On the right choir is a painting depicting the *Assumption* and is the work of **Francesco Gai**. The original rectilinear balustrade and the central staircase, which outlined the presbyterial space at the front, were transformed into the current lower mixtilinear balustrade which folds up at the altar in two lateral stairs that allow access to the presbytery and in a central access to the crypt. [1] [2] [3] [e]

The ciborium or baldacchino has an ogee cupola on four sets of triplet columns, the outer columns of porphyry and the inner of yellow Siena marble. The porphyry columns almost certainly came from the mediaeval baldacchino. The pillars support a dome set on arches. The top of the pillars is decorated with four stucco angels by **Giuseppe Rusconi** bearing the symbols of martyrdom, while the inside of the dome carries fresco decorations by **Antonio Bicchierai**. The ciborium, in the position acquired following the changes made to the previous structure, constitutes the focal point of the presbytery, attracting attention at the expense of the mosaic decoration of the apsidal basin. The reading of the mosaic cycle is interrupted in its unity by the ciborium which overlaps it by placing it in a subordinate position, in contrast with the initial intentions of Pasquale I. [1] [2] [e]

The altar itself is **Ferrari's** design, as are the late Baroque wooden choir stalls in the apse. He also blocked up the last surviving window of the five in Paschal's apse, and replaced it with an oil painting of *St Praxedes Gathering the Blood of the Martyrs*, painted c. 1730 by **Domenico Maria Muratori**. The renderings of *Sts Peter and Paul* are also by **Bicchierai**. [1] [2]

Apse mosaic

The mosaic in the conch of the apse looks very much like the apse mosaic in Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, also commissioned by Pope St Paschal, and is based on the earlier work at Santi Cosma e Damiano. Unfortunately, a clear view of the mosaic is obstructed by the baldacchino over the altar. [1] [e]

Here, the Risen Christ stands among the clouds, and is being awarded the wreath of victory from the hand of the Father. He is flanked by SS Peter and Paul, holding their arms round the shoulders of SS Praxede and Pudentiana. The two women are shown as Byzantine princesses, clad in cloth-of-gold with pearls, sapphires and a few rubies. They have red shoes instead of jewelled ones, indicating their status as princesses not empresses. [1] [e]

To the right is a deacon, of uncertain identity but claimed to represent the martyr St Zeno. To the left Pope St Paschal is seen holding a model of the church. The mosaic can be dated to the reign of St Paschal since he has a square halo, showing that he was alive when it was made. The composition is flanked by a pair of date palms, and in the palm tree next to the pope there is a phoenix, a symbol of immortality. [1] [e]

The blue band at the base of the composition is a common symbol of baptism, and here it is even identified as JORDANES, the River Jordan in which the sacrament of baptism was instituted. [e]

Below this, the lower rim of the conch depicts The Lamb of God with twelve sheep on a golden background, either symbolising the Apostles or the totality of the faithful. The sheep are emerging from the holy cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and the Lamb is standing on a sort of green carpet thought to represent either Eden with the Four Rivers of Paradise flowing from it, or the Gospels with the Four Evangelists as the rivers. [1] [e]

The epigraph on the rim of the conch records the foundation of the church by Pope St Paschal I, and the dedication to St Praxedes: [1]

EMICAT AULA PIAE VARIIS DEOCRATA METALLIS PRAXEDIS
D(OMI)NO SUPER AETHRA PLACENTIS HONORE PONTIFICIS SUMMI
STUDIO PASCHALIS ALUMNI SEDIS APOSTOLICAE PASSIM QUI
CORPORA CONDENS PLURIMA S(AN)C(T)ORUM SUBTER HAEC
MOENIA PONIT FRETUS UT HIS LIMEN MEREATUR ADIRE POLORUM

"The hall beams are decorated with various (precious) metals, in honor of the saintly Praxedes who has found pleasure with the Lord in heaven above, through the zeal of the Supreme Pontiff Paschal, raised to the Apostolic See, who collected the bodies of numerous saints and laid them beneath these walls, trusting that by his service he has merited as place in your house."

Finally, on the outer edge are two garlands converging on Paschal's monogram, as on the triumphal arch except this is original. ^[1]

The wall containing the conch has, at the arch keystone, the Lamb of God on a throne under which is the Book with Seven Seals of the Apocalypse (Rev 5:1). To left and right are the Seven Lampstands (Rev 1:12), then four angels and then four winged creatures which are the symbols of the Evangelists derived from the Apocalypse (Rev 4:7). Below, to the sides of the arch, are twenty-four elders with white beards and holding crowns (Rev 4:4). ^[1]

Confessio or Crypt (7)

A staircase leading to the confessio lies between the steps to the sanctuary, and leads to a corridor with a very shallow barrel vault and two ancient sarcophagi on either side, on top of each other. This 18th century corridor replaced the destroyed room in which the sarcophagi were found, having been translated here in 822 by Pope St Paschal I. The relics of Sts. Praxedes and Pudentiana are kept in one of them, according the inscription on the rim. In with them, there is also a sponge said to have been used by the sisters to collect the blood of martyrs. ^[1]

In the three other sarcophagi are relics from martyrs moved here from the catacombs. Ancient inscriptions at the entrance list the names of the martyrs that were brought into the church by Pope Pascale. A sarcophagus on the left has a relief showing Christ as the Good Shepherd and Jonah resting on the beach after his encounter with the sea monster, both were popular motifs in early Christian art. Jonah is also depicted at the entrance to the crypt; the lintel above the doorway has a relief of Jonah being swallowed by the whale, taken from the 3rd century sarcophagus of a woman called Ulpia, whom the inscription identifies as "the rarest of wives". All four sarcophagi have wavy decoration called strigillate, from the Latin for a cut-throat razor. The shelves separating the sarcophagi have Cosmatesque decoration, and are thought to have belonged to the original mediaeval high altar. ^[1]

The altar at the end of the corridor has Cosmatesque decoration on its frontal also, and probably also came from the old altar. The pair of marble lampstands to either side also incorporate mediaeval carvings of fantastic creatures, thought to have belonged to the chancel screen. Above the altar is an 18th century fresco which has deteriorated badly, apparently a copy of one found in the destroyed shrine room. ^[1] □

The semi-circular corridor that leads off to the left and right of the altar belongs to the original basilica, and displays several fragments of early Christian tombs and epigraphs. The niches that open regularly in the wall were for oil lamps. The staircase at the right hand end is modern, by Muñoz. ^[1]
[e]

Chapels and aisles

The chapels off the side aisles will be described in clockwise order, starting from the back of the left hand aisle.

Shrine of the Bed of St Praxedis (22)

At the bottom of the left hand aisle is a black marble slab, which is fixed into the wall within an 18th century aedicule inserted into an arched niche. It was said that St Praxedes used to sleep on it,

and that it was used as the slab for her original tomb. Above is an epigraph topped by an oversized segmental pediment and flanked by two volutes on the diagonal. These rest on entablatures supported by a pair of Corinthian columns, and decorated with a pair of flaming urn finials. The pair of frescoes flanking the aedicule show Sts. Pudens and Sabina, the legendary parents of St Praxedis. A painted wooden statue of the saint is usually kept in front of the slab. She is shown kneeling and squeezing a blood-soaked sponge into a vase. ^[1]

In the floor near here is the tomb-slab of Giovanni Carbone, 1388. The deceased wears armor, his hands crossed on his chest, his head on a pillow on four plumes and with his feet on a pair of little pet dogs. ^[1] ^[2]

Chapel of St Peter (10)

The first chapel on the left was originally erected in 1721, but was gutted and refitted in 1735. It is dedicated to St Peter the Apostle. The anonymous 18th century altarpiece has as its subject *St Peter Visits the Household of St Pudens*. On the left hand side wall is *St John the Baptist Points Out the Lamb of God*, and on the right hand wall is *St Emerentiana's Vision of St Agnes*. The story behind the latter work is that St Emerentiana went to pray at the grave of her sister St Agnes after the latter had been martyred, and had a vision of the saint inviting her to come to heaven immediately before being spotted by pagans and stoned to death. These two works are by **Giuseppe Severoni**. ^[1] ^[e]

Chapel of San Carlo Borromeo (11)

The second chapel on the left hand side is dedicated to St Charles Borromeo. It was built in 1735, and is a white-painted room on the plan of a chamfered rectangle. There is an octagonal dome with a lantern (the dome is tiled on the outside). The altarpiece, by **Étienne Parrocel**, shows *San Carlo Thanking God for the End of a Plague in Milan*. The angel above him is sheathing a fiery sword, and the acolyte holding the crucifix has no shoes on because there has just been a barefoot penitential procession. ^[1] ^[e]

The side walls have two works by **Ludovico Stern** showing *San Carlo in Ecstasy*, one while contemplating the Blessed Sacrament and the other while meditating on the Crucifixion (the angels are holding the Instruments of the Passion). ^[1] ^[e]

In the chamfered corners are little niches with scalloped conchs, and these contain stucco statues of the Cardinal Virtues: *Prudence, Justice, Temperance* and *Fortitude*. ^[1] ^[e]

In the middle of the floor is the burial slab for Cardinal Vitaliano Borromeo, dated 1793. He was the titular cardinal from 1783 until his death, and a distant relative of San Carlo. His coat-of-arms is in the floor at the foot of the altar.

The little fold-stool in the glass case was used by the saint. ^[1]

Olgiati Chapel (12)

The third chapel off the left hand aisle is the Cappella Olgiata, overshadowed by the Chapel of St Zeno opposite but itself an important work. It was designed as a funerary chapel by **Martino Longhi the Elder** for Bernardo Olgiati, who intended it for his Como banking family which had scored a spectacular success at Rome, and was finished in 1587. It is large, on a rectangular plan with Ionic pilasters supporting an entablature on which rests the cross-vault. This has four lunettes, the side ones of which contain windows. The overall decorative scheme is again in white, but the vault is spectacularly frescoed by the **Cavalier d'Arpino**. ^[1] ^[3]

The altarpiece, by **Federico Zuccari**, depicts *St Veronica Meets Christ Carrying His Cross*. This is flanked by two saints by the **Cavalier**, the left being *St Andrew* and the right, *St Bernard of Clairvaux* who was the founder's patron. ^[1]

The vault has a central fresco of the *Ascension of Christ*, with the main arms of the cross-vaulting depicting the prophets *Moses, Jeremiah, Ezechiel* and *Micah* with *Sibyls*. The lunette vaults show four Doctors of the Church: Sts. *Gregory the Great, Augustine, Jerome* and *Ambrose*. The panels over the entrance and altar show the *Resurrection of Christ* and the *Assumption of Our Lady*. In between the vault and entablature are eight anonymous monochromes depicting *Episodes of the Passion* (these are

thought to be by the Cavalier as well, but their poor condition precludes conclusive attribution). [1]
[3]

Finally, over the door is *The Last Supper*, on the right hand wall is *The Risen Christ Appears to St Mary Magdalen*, and on the left hand wall is *The Road to Emmaus*. [1]

On the left wall are two funeral memorials. The one on the right is for Bernardo Olgiati, the founder of the chapel, dated 1607. The one on the left is for MarcAntonio Olgiati, dated 1627. There is one memorial on the right wall, for Septimus Olgiati, dated 1623. The inscription on the right is for Clementina Ricci, wife of Dominico Olgiati, who died in 1862 at the age of 64.

The table is preserved here at which St Charles Borromeo used to give donations to poor people in the courtyard. [1]

Mounted in the wall between these two chapels is a beautiful funerary slab of a bishop. He was John II of Jenzenstein, and had St John Nepomuk as his secretary in 1374. The inscription in Gothic script along the edge reads: [1]

**Here lies the most reverend in Christ, Father Lord John, patriarch of Alexandria,
formerly the third archbishop of Prague. Pray for him, do penance. He died on
17/06/1400, in the time of Boniface (the pope).**

Chapel of St John Gualbert (13)

The last chapel on the left hand side is dedicated to St John Gualbert, founder of the Vallumbrosans. This was a project long in the execution, because it was commissioned by Pope Pius VI at the end of the 18th century with the architect being **Giuseppe Camporese**. The work was stopped by the French occupation by Napoleon, and only re-started under Pope Gregory XVI in the mid 19th century. The interior was completely re-fitted in 1933 by **Ernesto Leschiutta**, the artist being **Giulio Bargellini**. The chapel is harmoniously neo-Baroque with an elliptical dome lit by eight windows in its drum, and there is an apse with conch lit by two windows with transennae. [1] [3] [e]

The paintings and mosaics are in the realistic Art-Nouveau style soon to be made deeply unfashionable by the patronage of Hitler and Stalin, but here seen at its best. The apse mosaic altarpiece shows *St John venerated by angels*, in a neo-Byzantine manner, while the apse conch mosaic shows Vallumbrosan monks and nuns venerating *The Assumption of Our Lady* into heaven. [1] [e]

The right hand picture shows *St John conquering Heresies*, while the left hand one shows *St John receiving his vocation as a monk*. He had been a typical young noble knight of Florence, until his brother was murdered. He assembled his crew to hunt down the killer and, when they had cornered him the miscreant stretched out his arms in the form of a cross and the saint forgave him on the spot. The picture depicts the exact moment of enlightenment. [1] [e]

Sacristy (14)

The sacristy was built by St Charles Borromeo (his coat-of-arms is in the vault), and contains some important artworks. [1]

The altarpiece shows *The Vision of St John Gualbert at the Crucifix*, by **Agostino Ciampelli** of 1594. After forgiving the murderer, the saint (the one on the right) was praying at a crucifix when Christ nodded at him in approbation, whereupon he left his military kit and went off to be a monk. Below the main painting are small rectangular panels with scenes from his subsequent life. Also kept here is a *Supper at Bethany* by the same artist. [1] [3]

On the left wall is the *Deposition from the Cross* by **Giovanni de' Vecchi**, the altarpiece discarded from the Cesi Chapel. It is a work of superb quality, and it is a pity that it was moved. Next to it is *The Flagellation of Christ*, in a very realistic style. It used to be ascribed to **Giulio Romano**, but is now thought to be a later replacement of an original work by that artist. The musculature of the floggers is very well rendered, as is the polychrome marble floor. [1]

On the right hand wall is *St John Gualbert Finds the Site of His Monastery*. It was originally next to an enormous beech tree in the Forest of Vallombrosa (the forest mostly survives thanks to the monks,

and is an important nature reserve now in charge of the State). ^[1]

Above the entrance is a portrait of *Torello of Poppi* (1201-82) by **Antonio Raffaele Calliano**. He was a Tuscan hermit from Poppi who, after being a brigand as a youth, lived walled up in a cell for sixty years and was buried at the Vallumbrosan monastery of San Fidele. He was not a consecrated religious, and both the Vallumbrosans and the Franciscans claimed that he was affiliated with them. He has been venerated as a patron of women giving birth, but his veneration has no official status. ^[1]

Also here is a depiction by **Francesco Gai** of *St John Gualbert Making His Testament*. The saint is shown as about to die of extreme old age. ^[1]

The sacristy preserves two other relics of Our Lord: A small piece of the Seamless Garment, and a small portion of the Crown of Thorns. ^[1]

Campanile chapel (15)

When the campanile was erected in the late 13th century, its ground floor was fitted out as a chapel but has not been one for centuries. Its original frescoes were discovered in 1808, but are in poor condition and are not viewable by visitors. They feature scenes from the legends of various martyrs. The martyrs' legends concern Sts Celsus and Julian, Chrysanthus and Daria, Jason and Maurus. ^[1]

Chapel of the Crucifix (16)

The Cappella del Crocefisso occupies the right hand end of the original transept and was created at the end of the 13th century. Back then, it was dedicated to All Saints but was re-dedicated at some stage to the Crucifixion. The chapel was restored from a state of dereliction by **Muñoz** in 1927, and contains several items of carved stonework found when the nave floor was re-laid in 1916. Some of these are from the 9th century furnishings of the church. Especially, note the heavy marble slabs thought to have been plutei belonging to a schola cantorum. ^[1] ^[2]

The altarpiece is a medieval painted crucifix, and attempts to date it vary from the 13th to the 15th century. The 14th century is the consensus. Tradition claims that it was here when St Bridget of Sweden used to pray in the church in the 14th century, and that it once spoke to her. (It is possible that the crucifix we see today is more recent, and replaces the one St Bridget saw here). ^[1] ^[2]

The chapel contains the tomb of Cardinal Ancherio Pantaléon, Archbishop of Troyes and nephew of Pope Urban IV, who was the titular from 1262 to 1286. The cardinal was assassinated in the chapel and an epigraph recalls the date November 1, 1286. The chapel would have needed re-consecration after such an event, and this is possibly when it was dedicated to the Crucifixion. The monument shows the cardinal reclining on a draped tomb embellished with Cosmatesque decoration, and is a very fine work. The sculptor is unknown, but the work has been attributed to Arnolfo di Cambio on limited stylistic evidence and the decoration to Giovanni Cosmati. The epigraph is on a tablet above the effigy. ^[1] ^[2] ^[3]

Madonna della Salute (17)

Next to this chapel is the usual entrance to the church, and in the lobby is enshrined a 13th century icon, framed by a marble shrine on a red background, which is the subject of devotion as the *Madonna della Salute*. A row of suffering pot plants on the shelf below it demonstrates the popular affection. ^[1] ^[2]

Coëtivy chapel (18)

Next to the entrance lobby is a small chapel containing the tomb of Cardinal Alain de Coëtivy who was the titular from 1448 to 1474. The artist was **Andrea Bregno**, and it is thought that the original location was elsewhere. The deceased is portrayed lying on his bier, and over him are half-length relief sculptures of *Sts Peter* and *Paul* in separate arched niches. The pilasters on either side have little statues of *St Praxedis* on the left, holding her sponge and basin with which she mopped up the blood of martyrs, and *St Pudentiana* on the right holding the more generic symbols of book and palm branch. Another monument here is to Federico Colonna, commander of the Papal army, of 1711. ^[1] ^[3]

There is a small souvenir shop now located in this chapel.

This chapel has a doorway passing into the Chapel of St Zeno. Above the door is a fresco painted by **Francesco Gai** in 1863 to replace a decayed 1585 fresco showing the *Flagellation of Christ*. Here, the realistic depiction shows how the little Column of the Flagellation venerated in the church is meant to have functioned. ^[1]

Bernini pillar

The pillar nearest the sanctuary in the right hand aisle displays three important works.

Firstly, on the side facing the presbytery is a stone tablet (6) bearing a long epigraph commemorating the action by Pope Paschal in moving the relics of 2,300 martyrs from here to the catacombs. The tablet is part of the original furnishings of the 9th century basilica, with the lettering well carved, and used to be in the sanctuary. However, it was moved to here by St Charles Borromeo. In the process, it seems to have been smashed; the lower portion is not original, but was copied at some stage (then, or 15th century?) from the original text. The marbles used are different, and the copy is on a slab of precious pavonazzetto. Eighty-six saints are identified by name in the inscription, grouped in categories of type: popes, bishops, priests and Levites, martyrs, and then the female martyrs, virgins etc., ending with a line that says all in all there are 2,300 bodies translated here. Others are referred to in numbered groups of martyrs, whose names are 'known only to God', or 'in the Book of Life'. ^{[1] [2] [c]}

There is a fresco on the aisle face of the pillar, depicting a Calvary. The fresco is attributed to the Roman school is dated between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. ^[1]

One of **Bernini's** earliest works, a funerary bust of Giovanni Battista Santoni (d. 1592), Bishop of Alife, (5) can be seen in the monument on the side of the pillar facing the main entrance. The rest of the decoration, including the ornate framing of the epitaph with its winged putto's heads, is thought now not to be by him. The bust was carved when the **Bernini** was quite young, age 11 or 12. The monument was commissioned well after the cardinal died in 1592, so **Bernini** carved it from a portrait or death mask. ^{[1] [k]}

The Chapel of St Zeno (19)

History

The next chapel off the right hand aisle is the Chapel of St Zeno. This incredible and rare structure has attracted much recent attention on the part of writers puzzling over it, some genuinely scholarly and some crackpot. It was built by Pope St Paschal I in the early 9th century to house the tomb of his mother Theodora Episcopa, and to hold the remains of the Early Christian priest, Zeno, and two other martyrs, which he had brought from the Roman catacombs. The plan of the chapel actually imitates a cubiculum (small room) in the catacombs. The actual burials have disappeared from the chapel, and the decoration that immediately surrounded them has been destroyed. Nevertheless, the chapel retains its original *opus sectile* floor, its marble revetements and sculptures, and the main part of its mosaics, which cover the main vault and upper walls, as well as the tunnel vaults and lunetts of the three short arms of the cross. ^{[1] [d]}

The original mosaics which completely cover the interior are described as being a Roman take on the Byzantine style, but scholars have pointed out that the symbolisms might not correspond to the standard Byzantine ones. ^{[1] [c] [d]}

The entry for the pope in the *Liber Pontificalis* describes how the pope established an indulgence of freeing a soul from Purgatory for every five Masses celebrated on the altar. For this reason, the chapel was later dedicated to Santa Maria Liberatrix Nostra a Poenis Inferni (Holy Mary Saving Us From the Pains of Hell) and called the Hortus Paradisi, presumably because of the splendour of its mosaics. ^[1]

The present arrangement of three doorways, with two side doors connecting to the Coëtiy and Pillar chapels, is as a result of a later restoration, possibly 15th century. ^[1]

Nowadays, the chapel gets many discerning visitors. As a result, the lighting is pay-on-demand. Insert a one euro coin into the machine outside for five minutes of light. ^[1]

Layout

The little chapel has a very odd layout, and scholars have not been able to make sense of it. The floorplan is square, with a large rectangular niche containing the altar with a rectangular window over it. The side walls have two deep arched niches facing each other (now doorways), and over these are two small, deep rectangular niches described as blocked windows. The oddity is that the large and small niches are displaced from the center of the walls in the direction of the altar, and no one has been able to explain why. ^[1]

Each of the walls is in the form of an equal-sized arch, supporting a little saucer dome with integrated pendentives. The whole structure is slightly out of true, which you can tell from noticing how the lines of mosaic following the arches wander about. ^[1]

Another mystery is why St Zeno was chosen to be enshrined here. Nobody knows who he was, and no popular devotion to him ever developed. The original historical sources confuse several saints having this name, and mistakes by scholars have made the situation worse. ^[1]

Entrance

Pope Paschal's entrance façade is spectacular. Firstly, there is the doorway which is assembled from ancient spolia. Two small ancient columns, one in serpentine (the ancient lapis Lacedaemonius, from Sparta in Greece) and one in black granite (an extremely valuable item in ancient times), have intricately carved bases and Ionic capitals. They support a cornice formed from a fragment of an entablature, featuring a length of frieze and architrave both intricately carved as well. The lintel of the doorway has a dedicatory inscription: ^[1]

PASCHALIS PRAESULIS OPUS DECOR, FULGIT IN AULA, QUOD
PIA OPTULIT, VOTA STUDUIT REDDARA D[E]O.

("The beautiful work of the prelate Paschal, gleaming as a divine dwelling;
the pious oaths which he made, he took care to discharge to God.").

Above the entrance, there is a large round-headed window into the chapel. On the cornice in front of this is a cantharus or ancient vase used in pagan ceremonies, decorated with strigillations. This is thought to be the original funerary urn that may have contained her bones, although restored in the 18th century. ^[1] ^[d]

The aperture inserts into a large mosaic dominated by blue and gold. Around the aperture are eleven clipei or tondi in a golden horseshoe. At the top is the Blessed Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child in front of her, and ten saints of uncertain identity (the top two pointed out as Zeno and Valentine). The blue arch surrounding this has thirteen tondi showing Christ and the apostles, and the last two tondi in the upper corners are thought to be Moses and Elijah. The rectangular panels at the bottom corners are Popes Paschal and his successor Eugene II (?); the garish colors give away that these belong to the 19th century. ^[1] ^[d]

Floor to ceiling

On entering, you are overwhelmed by the glitter of gold. The tesserae of the golden mosaic are made out of clear glass with gold leaf on their backs, and are set at slightly different angles to create a glitter instead of a sheen. ^[1]

The *opus sectile* floor has a porphyry roundel in the middle, and each corner has a grey granite column with a gilded Corinthian capital supporting a plinth. The bases of the columns are intricately carved. This arrangement is a trompe-l'oeil, because it looks as if the four mosaic angels in the ceiling mosaic are standing on them. They support a tondo showing Christ Pantokrator on a starry blue background. This is the very first example to survive of such a placement of Christ's image, instead of the image of the Lamb of God. ^[1] ^[d]

Altar and apse

The altar is not original. It supports a gilded wooden shrine of the 17th century, framing a round-headed niche, containing a mosaic of the *Madonna and the Divine Child* being venerated by *Sts Pudentiana and Praxedis*. Christ holds a scroll with the words EGO SUM LUX, "I am the light (of the

world)" (John 8:12). This work dates to about 1275. ^[1] ^[d] ^[e]

Two spirally fluted alabaster columns support a horizontal entablature. Behind the entablature, and damaged by its installation, is an original lunette mosaic depiction of the *Transfiguration*. Christ is with Moses and Elijah, accompanied by the apostles (left to right) Peter, John and James (the latter only has a hand surviving). ^[1] ^[d]

Above the apse is a large window, and the original mosaic around this features *Our Lady* and *St John the Baptist* venerating it. This is fascinating theologically, as the light from the window is equated with Christ. The intrados of the apse niche features vine scrolls with flowers and little animals; many visitors miss this. ^[1] ^[d]

Left hand wall

The main mosaic panel to the left feature *Sts Agnes, Pudenciana* and *Praxedis* (they are labelled), dressed as Byzantine princesses processing with offerings to the altar over a meadow with flowering shrubs. The tympanum mosaic in the doorway niche features the *Lamb of God* presiding over the Rivers of Paradise, from which drink four deer (in allusion to Psalm 42:1). Below this is a mosaic, damaged by the later and rather brutally created doorway, featuring, from left to right, *Theodora* the mother of Paschal, *St Praxedis*, the *Blessed Virgin Mary* and *St Pudenciana*. Theodora is depicted with a square halo, indicating that the image was made when she was alive. It is inscribed *Theodora Episcopa*, literally "Bishopess Theodora" but here indicating that she was the bishop's mother. ^[1] ^[5] ^[d]

On the intrados of the niche arch is a depiction of *The Harrowing of Hell*. Christ is breaking down the gates of Hell to rescue Adam and Eve and other Old Testament figures waiting for him. This is a motif fit for a funerary chapel, as it symbolises not only death as the beginning of a new life, but also the hope of salvation through the endless mercy of Christ. It first appears in the 7th century, and became very popular in Rome in the next two centuries. ^[1] ^[d]

Right hand wall

The right hand wall features the apostles John, Andrew and James also on a flowery meadow. Here they are not processing towards the altar but towards the small niche, which gives scholars pause for thought. In the tympanum of the doorway niche below is Christ flanked by two saints, traditionally described as Zeno and Valentine but not labelled as such. ^[1] ^[d]

Counterfaçade

The wall above the entrance features *Sts Peter* and *Paul* on a third meadow and acclaiming an empty throne with a purple cushion, on which is a cross. This alludes to Christ absent in his visible body, but about to return to take his place as ruler of the universe in the Second Coming. The iconographic device is called a *hetoimasia* in Greek, meaning "preparation". The inscription below the mosaic refers to the restoration in 1775 by Cardinal Carlo Vittorio Amedeo, who was titular from 1763-1783. ^[1] ^[3] ^[d]

Chapel of the Pillar

From St Zeno's chapel, you can enter the little sanctuary chapel of the Pillar of the Scourging. This relic was brought from the Holy Land in 1223 by Giovanni Cardinal Colonna after he served as Papal legate in Syria during the Fifth Crusade. It is venerated as the pillar to which Christ was tied when he was whipped before his crucifixion, but it is unlikely that it is authentic. The material used, and the execution of the carving, is of too high a quality for use in punishing criminals, and there is another Pillar of the Scourging, of a more realistic form, in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. ^[1]

The pillar is damaged, and you need to refer to the painting in the Coëtivy chapel to appreciate its original form. It used to have a vertical iron ring attached to its top, and hence its original function seems to have been as a bollard in a very high status assembly area where areas needed to be roped off. The stone used seems otherwise unknown in Rome, and looks like a white marble with dark crimson inclusions. It has, however, been decribed as a jasper. The base and top have had chunks knocked off to form separate relics, notably in 1585 when Pope Sixtus V gave a bit to the city of Padua. Also, the pillar has been broken in the middle and fixed with cement. The original iron ring was given to King Louis IX of France in exchange for three thorns from the Crown of Thorns (one

of which is at Santa Croce in Gerusalemme). The original home of the column was the sacristy, and St Bridget of Sweden often came here to pray before it. However, in 1699 the little chapel was fitted out for it and subsequently the Flagellation of Christ was solemnly liturgically celebrated on the Fourth Sunday of Lent. ^[1]

The chapel was re-fitted in 1898, and is now rather bare. The pillar itself is enclosed in a large gilded bronze reliquary in the form of a domed kiosk, which was designed by **Duilio Cambellotti**. He was also responsible for the four bronze hanging lamps. ^[1]

In the reign of Pope Nicholas IV (1288-2), the relics of St Valentine were brought from his shrine on the Via Flaminia and enshrined here. ^[1]

Chapel of St Pius X (Cesi Chapel) (20)

The next chapel off the right-hand aisle is now dedicated to Pope St Pius X. Before 1595 there was a chapel here dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows, but in that year it was rebuilt by Duke Federico I Cesi as a funerary chapel for his family. The vault and side walls have paintings by **Guglielmo Cortese, Il Borgognone**. The main vault fresco features *God the Father*, while the lunettes feature *Sts Paschal I, Philip Neri, Frances of Rome and Firminius of Amiens*. The side walls have *The Adoration of the Magi* on the left and *The Future Birth of Mary Revealed to SS Joachim and Anne* on the right. On either sides of the paintings, incerted in the niches, are busts in imitation bronze, dated to the end of the 16th century, of *St. Peter, St. Paul* and two angels. ^{[1] [3] [e]}

The side wall lunettes are by **Ciro Ferri**, with unusual subjects. The left hand one shows *The Frangipani Family Attack Pope Gelasius II*, an event that took place while he was saying Mass in this church in 1118. The right hand one shows *Pulcheria the Empress Erecting a Statue of Our Lady*. This artist also apparently collaborated with **Cortese** in executing the vault. ^[1]

The chapel was re-dedicated to Pope St Pius X in 1955, and vestments and articles of clothing that belonged to him are kept in glass cases below the side paintings. The altarpiece showing *Pope St Pius X*, by **Arnaldo Bartoli**, replaced one showing *The Deposition of Christ* by Giovanni de' Vecchi, which was moved to the sacristy. The altar frontal and the aedicule with its black and white marble columns are original. The stained glass window above has the coat-of-arms of the Cesi family. ^[1]

Chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary (21)

This chapel was consecrated in 1728 and used to be dedicated to St Bernard degli Uberti (1055-1133), who was a monk and abbot of Vallombrosa before becoming a cardinal and bishop of Parma. The frescoes still reflect this dedication. It was rededicated to Our Lady of the Rosary of Pompeii in 1886 and its vault re-done, but the altarpiece by **Filippo Luzzi** has been left alone. It shows *St Bernard preventing the River Po from flooding the city* by giving a blessing. The Madonna and Child look on from heaven, which is probably why the work was kept here. The artist painted in a very realistic style. On the altar, in front of the altarpiece is a painting of *Our Lady of Pompeii*. ^[1]

The left hand wall depicts *San Pietro Igneo Aldobrandini*, an early Vallombrosan monk and disciple of St John Gualbert, who allegedly proved that the bishop of Florence was a simoniac by walking through a fire unharmed. The work is by **Angelo Soccorsi**. ^{[1] [2]}

The painting on the right hand wall shows the *Execution of Tesauro Beccaria*, a Vallombrosan monk and cardinal who was beheaded in Florence for favoring the Ghibelline (pro-papal) party. He used to be regarded by the Vallumbrosans as a martyr, but without official sanction. The artist was **Domenico Pestrini**. ^{[1] [e]}

The altar frontal shows fine pietra dura work, amounting to marquetry in stone. On the altar is a copy of *Our Lady of Pompeii*. ^[1]

On the wall at the end of the aisle outside this chapel is a tomb and monument for Silvio Santacroce, Archbishop of Arles (1574-1598). The mannerist monument was dedicated in 1603 by his nephew Batolomeo Santacroce. ^{[1] [e]}

Location:

Address: Via Santa Prassede 9/A, 00184 Roma

Telephone: 06-48.82.456

Normally open daily 07.30-12.00 and 16.00-18.30

Coordinates: [41°53'46"N](#) [12°29'55"E](#)

Artists and Architects:

Agostino [Ciampelli](#) (1565-1630), Italian painter of the Baroque period, from Florence
Andrea [Bregno](#) (1418-1506), Italian sculptor and architect of the Early Renaissance
Angelo Soccorsi (18 cent.), Italian painter
Antonio [Bicchierai](#) (1688-1766), Italian painter
Antonio [Muñoz](#) (1884-1960), Italian architect
Antonio Raffaele [Calliano](#) (1785-1824), Italian painter
Arnaldo [Bartoli](#) (1900-1993), Italian painter
Arnolfo [di Cambio](#) (1240-1310), Italian architect and sculptor
B. Fazzini (16th cent?), Italian painter
Baldassare [Croce](#) (1558-1628), Italian painter of the late-Mannerist period
Ciro [Ferri](#) (1634-1689), Italian Baroque painter and sculptor
[Cosmati](#) family (12th-14th centuries), workers in decorative geometric mosaic
Domenico Maria [Muratori](#) (1661-1744), Italian painter of the Baroque period
Duilio [Cambellotti](#) (1876-1960), Italian applied artist, illustrator, painter, sculptor and designer
Ernesto Leschiutta (20th cent), Italian architect
Étienne [Parrocel](#) [aka *Stefano Parrocel*] (1696-1776), France painter
Federico [Zuccari](#) (1541-1609), Italian Mannerist painter and architect
Filippo [Luzzi](#) (1665-1722), Italian painter
Filippo [Tronci](#) (1848-1918), Italian organ maker
Francesco [Ferrari](#) (d. 1744), Italian architect
Francesco [Gai](#) (1835-1917), Italian painter [also see [here](#)]
Gian Lorenzo [Bernini](#) (1598-1680), Italian Baroque sculptor and architect [also see [here](#)]
Giovanni [Balducci](#) [aka *Il Cosci*] (1560-1631), Italian painter, from Florence
Giovanni [de' Vecchi](#) [aka *dal Borgo*] (1536-1614), Italian painter of the Renaissance period
Giovanni Domenico [Petrini](#) (1680-1740), Italian painter
Giovanni [Tamburini](#) di Crema (1857-1942), Italian organ maker
Girolamo [Massei](#) (c1540-c.1620), Italian painter
Giulio [Bargellini](#) (1875-1936), Italian painter
Giulio [Romano](#) (1499-1546) Italian painter and architect
Giuseppe [Camporese](#) (1761-1822), Italian architect
Giuseppe [Cesari](#) [aka *Cavaliere d'Arpino*] (1568-1640), Italian Mannerist painter
Giuseppe [Rusconi](#) (1688-1758), Italian sculptor
Giuseppe Severoni (18th cent), Italian painter
Guillaume [Courtois](#) (Cortese) aka *Il Borgognone* (1628-1679), French painter and etcher
Ludovico [Stern](#) (1709-1777), Italian painter of the Rococo or late-Baroque period from Rome
Martino [Longhi](#) the Elder (1534-1591), Italian architect
Paris [Nogari](#) [aka *Roman*] (1536-1601), Italian painter of the Renaissance period
Stefano Pieri (1542-1629), Italian painter

Relics:

Sts Prassede and Pudentiana
St Zeno and St Valentine

Tombs:

P. Saint Urbanus (Urban I) (222- 230)
P. Saint Pontianus (230- 235)
P. Saint Fabian (236- 250)
P. Saint Felix I (269- 274)
P. Saint Siricius (384- 399)
P. Saint Celestine I (422- 432)

Anchero Cardinal [PANTALÉON](#) de Troyes (ca. 1210-1286)

Geoffroy Cardinal [de BAR](#), (?-1287)

Raimond Cardinal [MAIROSE](#), (?-1427)

Alain Cardinal de [COËTIVY](#), (1407-1474)

Jean Cardinal [BALUE](#), (ca. 1421-1491)

Buried in the chapel of the Saints

Gabriele Cardinal de' [GABRIELLI](#), (1445-1511)

Pierdonato Cardinal [CESI](#), *iunior*, (1583-1656) [also see [here](#)]

Lodovico Cardinal [PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA](#), (1668-1743)

Heart only, tomb in Santissimo Nome di Maria al Foro Traiano

Vitaliano Cardinal [BORROMEO](#), (1720-1793)

Antonio Domenico Cardinal [GAMBERINI](#), (1760-1841)

Bishop Giovanni Battista Santoni

Majordomo to Pope Sixtus V from 1590 to 1592

Links and references:

1. [Churches of Rome Wiki](#)
 2. Churching web site (no longer online)
 3. [Info.roma web-page](#)
 4. [Cardinals of the Catholic Church](#)
 5. [Art Travel web site](#)
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Other links:

[The Apse at St. Praxedes, Rome](#)

[Tesori di Rome web site](#)

[English Wikipedia entry](#)

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