

Santi Quattro Coronati



Santi Quattro Coronati is an ancient basilica in Rome. The church dates back to the 4th (or 5th) century, but rebuilt in the 12th century, located on the summit of the Coelian Hill, between the Colosseum and St. John in Lateran. The dedication is to four anonymous saints and martyrs. The complex of the basilica with its two courtyards, the fortified Cardinal Palace with the St. Silvester chapel, and the Monastery with its cosmatesque cloister is built in a silent and green part of Rome, between the Colosseum and San Giovanni in Laterano, in an out-of-time setting. [1] [b]

Conflicting stories exist with regard to the identity of the martyrs in whose honor this church was built. "Santi Quattro Coronati" means the Four Holy Crowned Ones [i.e. martyrs], originally celebrated the acts of faith of four Roman soldiers named Secundus (or Severus), Severianus, Carpoforus (Carpophorus) and Victorinus (Vittorinus), martyred in one of the persecutions by Diocletian for refusing to sacrifice to the god Aesculapius, the Roman name for the Greek god of healing, Asclepius. [1] [a] [c]

In the ninth-century, Pope Leo IV (847-855) collected the martyrs' relics from a cemetery outside Rome and interred them in the basilica along with the relics of five other martyrs from the same period, five sculptors (Claudius, Nicostratus, Castor, Sempronianus and Simplicius) from Pannonia (modern Hungary), who were martyred for refusing to sculpt a statue of the same god Asclepius. The bodies of the martyrs are kept in four ancient sarcophagi in the crypt. [1] [a] [b]

History

Tradition holds the first church was begun by Pope Miltiades, in the 4th century on the north side of the Coelian Hill. One of the first churches of Rome, it bore the *Titulus Aemilianae*, referring to the early Christian family who owned the original property and allowed its use for worship and assembly. The first documentary reference is in the minutes of a synod held in 499. Some time later, but which at least before 595, the church was dedicated to the Santi Quattro Coronati. From this period,

a large circular baptismal basin, dating back to around 450, has recently been found in excavations in today's monastery. The size of the basin, which is only surpassed by the corresponding one at the Church of San Giovanni in Laterano, tells something about the significance of the old Church. [1] [4] [b]

The original church construction was probably in a rectangular apsed hall, dating from the 4th century judging by the masonry technique, remains of which were uncovered in 1957 underneath today's basilica, during a restoration project. The fabric of the church incorporates an original unaisled apsidal basilica in brick. Substantial amounts of its fabric are incorporated into the present apse of the church. [1] [c]

The Liber Pontificalis records restorations by Pope Honorius I (625-638), Pope Adrian I (772-795) and Leo III (795-816). Pope St Leo IV (847-855) rebuilt the hall as an aisled basilica. This was a large building (95 by 50 meters) of which the present church is only a part. The side walls of the hall were demolished, leaving the apse, and the foundations used for colonnaded arcades separating the central nave from the side aisles. The nave had thirteen Ionic columns in the colonnade on either side (five on each side of these survive embedded in the side walls of the present church). [1] [d]

A confessio or devotional crypt was provided, semi-annular in form and with a shrine-chamber which survives intact. Also, the basilica had three external chapels. That dedicated to St Barbara was off the left hand aisle (this survives as a detached chapel off the cloister), that to St Nicholas off the right hand aisle (fabric belonging to this survives in the north block of the convent, behind the enclosure). [1] [f]

In the Carolingian era, presumably at the time of Leo IV's rule, a massive square tower was built on to the east, with a loggia in the upper section facing outwards with four arched bays on each side (except for the rebuilt south side) and an arched doorway leading into the first courtyard. [c] [f]

In July 855, after the death of Leo IV, there were fierce battles in connection with the new pope's election, and in Santi Quattro Coronati the Roman priests, who against Emperor Ludwig's will had chosen Roman Benedict, cardinal of the church of Santa Cecilia, as pope. After several clashes, the priests won and Benedict III became pope. [4]

This church, however, was burned to the ground by Robert Guiscard's troops during the Norman Sack of Rome (1084). Instead of rebuilding the basilica to scale of the original, Pope Paschal II (1099-1118) built a smaller basilica, using what was left of the walls, with a two courtyards, one in front of the other; the first corresponding to the original 9th century courtyard, while the second was sited over the initial part of the nave. The two aisles were included in the Cardinal Palace (right) and in the Benedictine Monastery founded by Paschal himself (left). The original apse of the basilica, however, was preserved, and seems oversized for the new church, whose nave was divided into three parts by means of columns that are now still in place. He also constructed the matronea, or enclosed women's galleries above the nave columns. The new church was consecrated on 20 January 1116. [1] [3] [b] [c]

In 1138, monastery became a priory for the Benedictine abbey of Santa Croce di Sassovivo near the town of Foligno. [1] [2]

From the 12th to the 16th century, the church belonged to the Benedictines. In the 13th century the left nave is destroyed to make room for the Cosmatesque cloister and then the right nave of the primitive basilica was transformed into a refectory (14). The Cardinal Palace was enlarged by Cardinal Stefano Conti, a nephew of Pope Innocent III. Cardinal Conti also transformed the palace into a fortress, to shelter Popes in the Lateran during the conflict with the Hohenstaufen emperors, and as a protected hospice for important visitors to the papal court. [1] [c]

In 1247, the chapel of St Sylvester, on the ground floor of the fortress, was consecrated; it contains frescoes depicting the stories of Pope Sylvester I and Emperor Constantine I, among which the unhistorical baptism of the emperor. Painted in the backdrop of political struggles between Pope Innocent IV and the freshly excommunicated holy Roman emperor Frederick II, the frescoes are meant to underscore the desired sovereignty of the Church (Pope Sylvester) over the Empire (Constantine). [1] [3]

When the Popes moved to Avignon (14th century), the Cardinal Palace fell into ruin. Thus, upon the return of the Popes to Rome, Card. Alfonso Carillo sponsored a new restoration on the basilica, in the time of Martin V (1430), as is recorded by an inscription in its inner vestibule. However, when the Papal residence moved from the Lateran to the Vatican palace, this basilica lost importance. [3] [c] [d]

In 1560, Pope Pius IV entrusted the basilica and the surrounding buildings to the Augustinian nuns as an orphanage for girls. The buildings needed alterations and repairs to make them fit for that purpose, so initially the old cardinal's palace was renovated in 1570 for the orphan girls. The larger halls were converted to dormitories, and some smaller rooms knocked through for this purpose too. Mediaeval frescoes were whitewashed (paradoxically preserving them), and windows re-located higher up in the walls to remove views into the outside. The Augustinian nuns still serve the basilica. [1] [e]

The church was given a carved wooden roof in 1580 by King Henry of Portugal, who had earlier been the basilica's titular Cardinal. Another titular cardinal, Giovanni Garcia Mellini redecorated the apse in the early 17th century (paintings by **Giovanni da San Giovanni** from 1621-23) and built an altar to house the skull of Saint Sebastian (now kept in the Vatican Museum), which he discovered while verifying the martyrs' relics in the crypt. [1] [b]

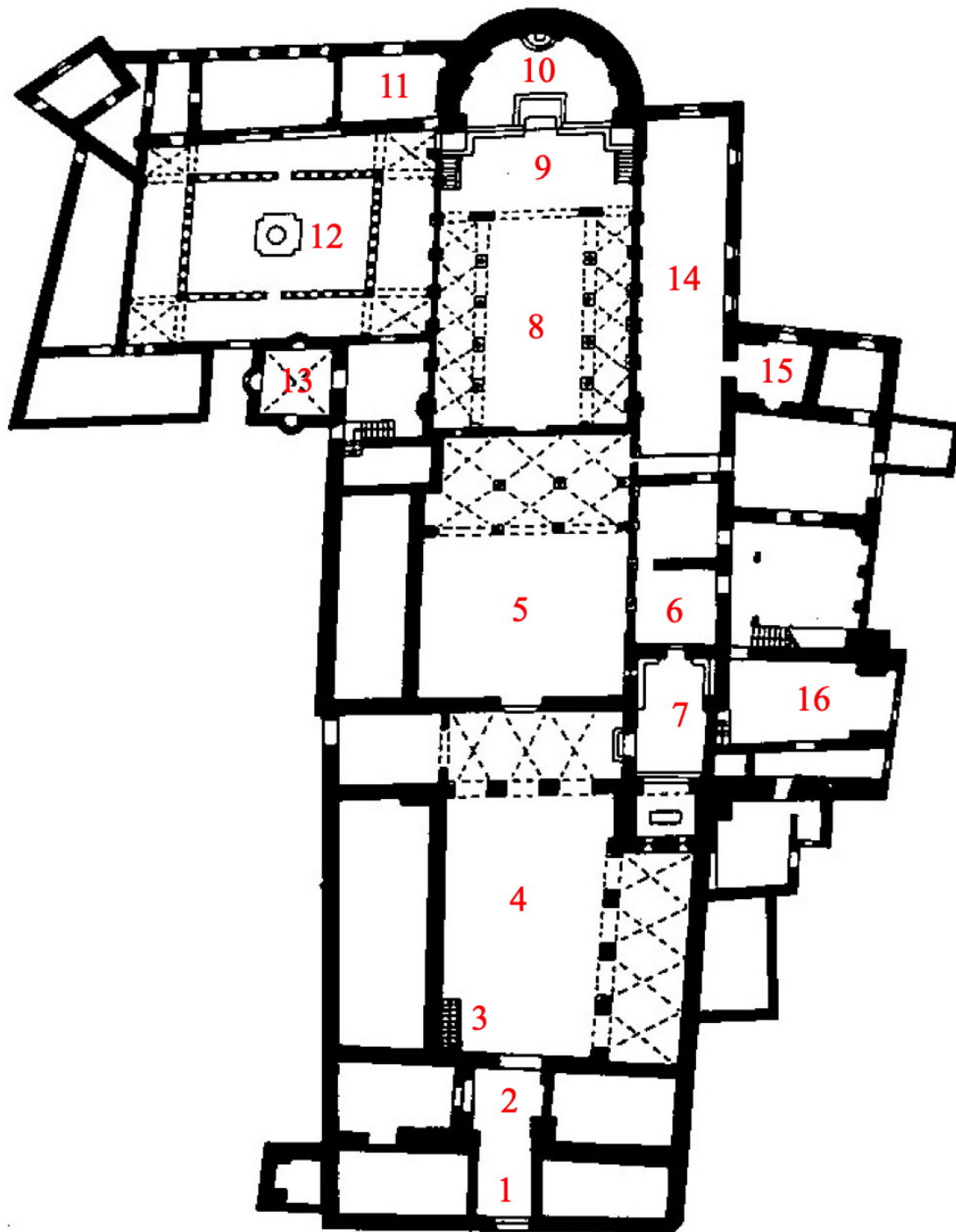
The orphanage had no use for the Cappella di San Silvestro, and in 1570 it was granted to the Università dei Marmorari. This was a guild for workers in marble (including sculptors), which had been founded in 1406. The interest of the sculptors in the chapel here arose because their patrons were the Four Crowned Martyrs as having been sculptors themselves. The guild fitted out a small sanctuary in a former side room, and had it frescoed by **Raffaellino**. Unfortunately they also installed choir-stalls for themselves on the nave side walls, which damaged the frescoes. There was a restoration in 1728, when a new altar was consecrated, and another one in 1794. [1]

The orphanage was a great success in the 17th century, and in response the confraternity built a new dormitory as a second storey on the north side of the church in 1616. Also, the sister were provided with a gallery above the entrance loggia of the church, and open loggias over the cloister walks. The latter work required the walks to be vaulted. In 1672 a new orphanage wing was built on the south side of the first courtyard. Through the 18th and early 19th centuries the institution at Santi Quattro Coronati evolved from being a busy orphanage served by Augustinian sisters, to being an Augustinian nunnery looking after a few orphans. [1]

The orphanage was finally closed in 1872, when the Italian government sequestered the property together with almost all the other convents of the city. Fortunately, an agreement was reached in 1879 whereby the nuns leased the part of the complex north and south of the church (including the cloister) and so could continue conventual life. [1]

In the year after 1913 the city supervised a thorough restoration of the church and monastery by the Fine Arts Superintendent **Antonio Muñoz**. In addition, **Muñoz** collected some 300 artifacts during the restoration project, including notable funerary inscriptions, stones carved with poetry by Pope Damasus, and sculpture dating from the Roman period through the Middle Ages, which he had affixed to the cloister's perimeter walls. Among the most important finds he recovered was an eleventh-century marble *cantharus*, or fountain for ablutions, which still graces the center of the cloister garden today. [1]

In 1957 there was a restoration of the church and some archaeological investigation. The columns on view in the second courtyard were revealed then. [1]



Exterior

Street frontages

The complex looks almost like a fortress, towering above the streets to the north and west. The western entrance faces the Via dei Querceti, and here is the impressive church apse. It is obvious that its red brick fabric was erected at different times, and in fact the rougher lower courses are 4th century. This old work extends upwards at the right to touch the central window. The neater upper work, with put-log holes for wooden scaffolding is from the rebuilding by Pope Paschal in the 12th century, except for a small area to the right of the central window which dates back to Pope Paschal in the 9th. The two visible windows of three are now rectangular but you can tell that they once had round tops. [1]

To the left of the apse, the rough walling is the end of the right hand side aisle of Pope Leo's

basilica. The domestic accommodation incorporated into this was added by the orphanage in 1616. [1]

The monastery block to the right of the apse was originally put up in the 12th century, but has been massively altered since. The odd diagonally-placed tower-like edifice to the far right is at the south-west corner of the cloister. [1]

The street frontage to the left of the apse and around the corner into the Via dei Santi Quattro is occupied by 19th century commercial buildings, but then comes the towering frontage of the old Cardinal's Palace, a result of its 1246 rebuilding. You can see how the orphanage blocked up many of the old windows in order that the orphan girls couldn't see out, and left the stone frames in the walls. [1]

The street here is interesting in itself. It is a relic of the times before the 19th century when the surroundings were all countryside, and the narrow country lanes squeezed between walled vineyards. It is thought to be on an ancient street route (the Via Tuscalana), but was just a donkey track in the Middle Ages. [1]

Gateway façade

This is a flight of steps from the steeply sloping street to reach the monastery's piazza which is itself an ancient monument. This has a mediaeval revetting wall creating a level platform, and was provided in the 12th century as a mustering ground. Men bearing arms were not allowed into monasteries in the early Middle Ages. [1]

The nuns in the convent have had a long-standing practice of dispensing charity to poor people from their entrance, a tradition that goes back several centuries. For this reason, you may find beggars around here who might ask you for money. [1]

The gateway façade (1) of the monastery is originally 9th century but altered several times up to the 17th century. In places the ochre-colored render is falling off in patches, leaving the brickwork exposed, exposing how some of the brickwork incorporates scavenged stone blocks. The entrance itself is through an unadorned archway with a large tympanum, which is now bare but had a fresco of the four martyrs being crowned by an angel in the early 19th century. [1]

Campanile (2)

The squat 9th century brick campanile above is claimed to be the oldest surviving in Rome, although its present appearance dates from 1914. It is in red brick, with a projecting cornice having stone modillions (little brackets). The south face is obscured by a convent building butting against it, but the other three each have an arcade of four arched sound-holes, with double brick archivolts and with the outer pair slightly larger than the inner two. [1]

Before the restoration by Muñoz in 1914, these apertures were blocked up. Muñoz got rid of the existing clock and the Baroque details, re-opened the arcades and provided them with separating piers in marble. These are in the form of baluster pins having a square cross-section, and are his own invention. [1]

First courtyard (3)

Once through the entrance, you traverse a passageway through the gateway block of the convent. The egress portal is, interestingly, in the form of a pointed Gothic arch which does not align with the campanile above it. [1]

In the wall above is the coat-of-arms of a cardinal, and a inscription in Gothic lettering. The cardinal was Alonso Carrillo de Albornoz, titular here from 1423 to 1434 under Pope Martin V. The inscription reads: [1]

"Whatever you see was fallen and ruined by age, broken and brought down by boughs of ivy and thorn bushes. The Spaniard Alfonso Carillo, radiant with the honor of the cardinalate, did not accept this but carefully took in hand the proper work and, thus inspired, repaired the great palace in the time of the reign of Pope Martin V, the schism having been ended".

The first courtyard is on the site of the atrium of the Leonine basilica. Much of it now has a 17th century appearance owing to building work for the orphanage, and has arcades on the north and west sides. These have Doric pilasters and imposts. The west arcade opens onto a vaulted loggia and the way through to the second courtyard, while the north side has five arches opening into what used to be the main entrance vaulted loggia of the orphanage proper. The far (western) arch of this latter loggia is blind, because behind it is the ancient chapel dedicated to S. Sylvester, and now belonging to the Confraternity of Sculptors. The old public entrance to the chapel is in the far right hand end of the western loggia, and has a simple molded doorcase with a triangular pediment supported on posts bearing triglyphs. In between the posts is an epigraph: [1] [a]

"The body of statue-carvers and stone-workers, 1570".

Above the pediment is a fresco of the *Four Crowned Martyrs*.

This western loggia has frescoes painted in 1588. The wall to the right of the entrance has a pair of large frescoes separated by depictions of twisted Solomonic columns, the left hand one showing *The Nativity* and the smaller right hand one *The Visitation*. [1]

On the left side is fairly featureless architecturally, and has a small staircase in the south-east corner leading to the entrance (3) for the convent of the Little Sisters of the Lamb. (They are not the nuns responsible for the church!) [1]

The courtyard is trapezoidal, with the right hand block at an angle to the major axis. The western loggia's far wall, the one with the two frescoes mentioned, is actually on the foundations of the façade of the Leonine basilica so the door here into the second courtyard is on the site of the main entrance to the 9th century church. [1]

Second courtyard (5)

The second courtyard occupies what used to be the near end of the central nave of the Leonine basilica. It has the entrance to the present church on the far side, and to the right as you enter are three ancient columns embedded in the wall of the convent of the Augustinian nuns. These columns are a survival of the colonnades that separated the central nave of the old basilica from its side aisles. They have ancient bases and Ionic capitals, which do not match. One is in white marble and is fluted with no base, and the other two are in grey marble (bigio antico). The columns support an arcade of brick archivolt, and on the intrados of one of these was found traces of original 9th century decoration consisting of acanthus scrolls in red on a white background. [1]

The church has a loggia, entered through three open arches springing from two ancient marble Corinthian columns. This loggia is two bays deep, and behind the arcade columns are two more columns, these ones Ionic, which are embedded in piers. Above the loggia is a 17th century enclosed gallery connecting the convent premises north and south of the church, and this column-and-pier arrangement indicates that the 16th century work was a rebuilding of a previously existing loggia dating from the 12th century. The gallery frontage is very simple, with three rectangular windows having sober Baroque frames. [1]

Over the actual church entrance is a late 16th century fresco showing the sisters and orphan girls venerating the *Four Crowned Martyrs* holding palms. [1]

Capella de San Silvestro

On the right side of the second courtyard is a door that leads to the calendar room (6), a square-shaped room that acts as a parlor of the Convent of the Augustinians. On the west wall there is still the wheel for the exchange of objects and the opening of the grate which allowed the exchange between the outside and the cloistered nuns. This room was built from the right nave of the Leonine basilica in the 13th century. In the room is a cycle of frescoes that have been greatly reworked. At the top there were 12 figures, of which only two remain headless on the south wall. The figures hold scrolls of parchment with the liturgical calendar. The writing is typically Gothic with black and red letters. [5]

Access to the Chapel of St. Sylvester (7) is through this room. On the mandate of Cardinal Stefano Normandis it was built in 1246 and subsequently decorated by Byzantine masters in 1248. In 1570, according to an inscription over the entrance, it was taken over by the Marble Craftsmen's Guild (sculptors and stonemasons). In the 16th century the small raised three-step presbytery was added.

The frescoes that decorate it refer to the martyrdom of the saints Quattro Coronati and are attributed to **Raffaellino da Reggio**. [4] [5]

The chapel is simple architecturally. The nave is rectangular and is basically in the form of a tunnel, having a barrel vault incorporated into the side walls with smooth curves. There is one round-headed window near the main entrance on the right, with an embrasure which cuts into the vault, and a side entrance further down on the same side. This exits into the loggia opposite the entrance to the convent complex in the first courtyard. [1]

The central part of the nave floor is high-quality original Cosmatesque work. However, the side zones by the walls are in geometric tiling in black, white and grey marble and look 18th century. The choir-stalls of the confraternity of marble-carvers would have occupied these locations when the chapel was re-fitted by them in the 16th century. The ceiling vault is frescoed in white, with a regular pattern of crosses in red and eight-pointed stars in grey. However, do not miss the unusual central feature which comprises five inset majolica pottery bowls of Islamic provenance, arranged in the form of a cross. The base of the vault is decorated with a leaf frieze. [1]

The chapel is famous for its fresco cycle painted around 1246, the year it was consecrated as the private chapel of the Cardinal's Palace. This cycle is political propaganda (in the secular sense), and depicts the unhistorical legend of Pope Sylvester I and Emperor Constantine I, including the fictional baptism of the emperor by the pope and (importantly) a depiction of the Donation of Constantine which was based on a forged mediaeval document. The work was painted in the context of the confrontation between Pope Innocent IV and the newly excommunicated Holy Roman emperor Frederick II, and was intended to illustrate the alleged sovereignty of the Church (Pope Sylvester) over the Empire (Constantine). [1]

The three panels on the right hand wall depict scenes from other legends concerning the pope, including a very odd one that the pope got rid of a dragon inhabiting the Roman Forum which was being a nuisance to the citizens. [1]

The cycle starts on the entrance wall. In the vault lunette is a Deesis, featuring *Christ in majesty with Our Lady, St John the Baptist and the Apostles*. [1]

Entrance wall below, left to right:

- The Emperor Constantine Refuses to Bathe in Children's Blood to Cure Leprosy;
- The Emperor Dreams of SS Peter and Paul Advising Him to Contact Pope St Sylvester in Exile and
- The Envoys of the Emperor Ride Out to the Pope on Mount Soratte.

Left wall:

- The Envoys Ascend Mount Soratte to the Pope;
- The Pope Returns to Rome and Shows the Emperor an Icon of SS Peter and Paul;
- The Pope Baptizes the Emperor;
- The Emperor Grants Temporal Sovereignty to the Pope Enthroned;
- The Pope in Procession Accompanied by the Emperor.

Right wall:

- The Pope Revives a Bull Killed by a Jew;
- St Helena, Mother of the Emperor, Discovers the True Cross;
- The Pope Frees the City from a Dragon (this scene is badly damaged).

The fresco panels are framed in brightly colored vegetative decoration, and below them is another register comprising tondi depicting prophets and patriarchs. Unfortunately, these have been damaged by the former installation of choir stalls in the 16th century. In the upper strip of vegetation on the right hand side is the odd detail of a fluted white pottery vase inserted into the wall in place of one of the roundels. [1]

The attractive little sanctuary preserves its 16th century fresco work by **Raffaellino**. This is overshadowed by the mediaeval frescoes, but is interesting in its own right. The floor is Cosmatesque like that of the nave, and is accessed by three steps. The altar is late Baroque, 1728 as

its inscription will tell you, and has a polychrome marble frontal. The anonymous altarpiece is about 1700, and depicts *Calvary*. There is no aedicule, but instead a molded marble frame topped by an epigraph *Regnavit a ligno Deus*, and a segmental pediment broken at the top. [1]

The left hand side wall fresco shows the *Four Crowned Martyrs being condemned by the emperor*, and the right hand one shows the *Four Crowned Martyrs being placed in lead boxes before being thrown into the river*. Above the altar is an *Annunciation* either side of the oculus, the dish of which is embellished in grotesque work. [1]

The vault is provided with very wide double ribs, forming narrow panels containing frescoes of rather pretty angels. The central panel depicts *Christ the King*, and the four side panels show *The Evangelists*. The pendentives feature the martyrs again, each with his name in a label. [1]

The sides of the entrance arch show the emperor *Constantine and Pope St Sylvester*, and the intrados has a tondo showing *Our Lady as Queen*. She is flanked by more grotesque work, including two oval monochrome tondi containing the tools of the marble-carver's craft. [1]

There is one grave-slab, to Matteo Anno a carver from Como 1577. His son who provided the monument, Giuseppe Pietro Anno, has a wall monument of his own to the left 1594. Today, local stonecutters, or *marmorari*, of which there are very few left, meet each November 8 in Santi Quattro's chapel of St. Sylvester to pray for inspiration. [1] [f]

Church fabric

The actual church fabric is invisible from inside the convent complex, except for the south end of the transept which you can see from the cloister. The gallery mentioned above has a flat roof, and behind that is a third-storey church frontage with three rectangular windows which cannot be seen from the courtyard. [1]

The church itself has three pitched and tiled roofs, one for the nave which has a hip at the entrance end, one for the transept with a hip at both ends and one for the apse which has six sectors. [1]

Cloister (12)

Ring the small bell in the basilica's left aisle and a discreet Augustinian nun will open a wooden door to the Romanesque cloister. Here is an unexpected world of silence and tranquility: the smell of mint and soft tinkling of water; a four-sided portico of arches and double columns around a green garden; and in the middle a stone fountain carved with friendly lions' faces. [b]

The cloister was built around 1220 by a famous Roman stonecutter, **Pietro de Maria**, in honor of his martyred patrons. It was built in the area previously occupied by the left nave of the ancient church. The fountain, from one century earlier, originally stood in the church courtyard. All the walls are covered with paleo-Christian graffiti and sarcophagus fragments. [5] [b]

The spiritual harmony of this place is deeply grounded in the contemplative life of the cloistered Augustinian nuns, who reside in the convent and have administered the basilica since Pius IV (1559-65) gave it into their keeping in the mid-fifteenth century. One sister, who repeatedly pleaded not to be identified, told us she had been a missionary in Mozambique before entering the convent. The eighteen enclosed nuns, she said, divide their time between three activities: work for the convent and basilica; contemplation and prayer; and study: Bible studies, Augustinian philosophy, and liturgical chant. Once a nun enters the convent, she will not leave, even for errands or visits, until her death. The order is famous for its beautiful singing, and on Sundays at 11:00 a Mass with music is open to the public. The nuns still dispense charity to the poor from their doorstep, a tradition that goes back several centuries. [1] [b]

The cloister has a slightly trapezoidal plan with a length of 23 meters and a width of 16 and the corridor covered by a wooden roof was originally built on one floor with a garden area in the center. The courtyard is made up of perforated walls that rest on 96 paired columns and 10 marble pillars placed at the corners of the courtyard and also in the center of each side (the two extra pillars form the two access openings to the garden). The spans are made up of a series of eight arches on the long sides and six on the short ones. All the arches have a double ring and are supported by paired columns, with capitals and bases that have leaves. The arches have been restored, like the whole

cloister according to the tastes of the time (1912-16) by the archaeologist **Antonio Muñoz**, imitating the remains of the original coloring. In the center of the garden is a 12th century fountain or *cantaro*, now in a pool in the shape of the cross-section of one of the garth entrance piers, but which was once in the second courtyard. [1] [5]

In the ambulatories are to be found many pieces of carved stonework of various dates, ancient and mediaeval, most of which were found by **Muñoz** in his restoration and collected here. Among the epigraphs, a fragment of the poem written by Pope Damasus I (366-384) in honor of the martyrs Peter and Marcellinus should be highlighted. Near the entrance on the marble base that supports the columns there is also a *tabula lusoria*. [1] [5]

Chapel of St. Barbara (13)

From the cloisters you reach the *Chapel of St Barbara*. It belonged to the first church here, and the sculptured corbels are from the 4th or 5th century. Traces of frescoes from the 9th and 13th centuries survive in the chapel. [b]

The plan of the chapel is approximately square, although the walls are of slightly different lengths. The north wall (to the left on entering) used to contain the entrance from the church, and now abuts onto a chamber once used by the nuns to hear private Masses said on the Annunciation altar in the church. The other three walls contain narrow, tall apses with conchs, and the western one has had the cloister entrance knocked through it. All the interior walling is in brick. There is a cross-vault, supported by deep square marble corbels with several bands of intricately decorated moldings. These are possibly 4th or 5th century. The rectangular window over the eastern apse preserves its originally pierced marble screen or transenna. The corresponding window over the entrance apse has been provided with a copy. On the walls have been placed fragments of 9th century marble screen-slabs or *plutei* from the Leonine basilica. [1]

The walls used to be entirely frescoed, but the work has deteriorated seriously and is now only in fragments. Traces of original 9th century work survive over the south apse. The rest is 14th century. The vault shows the four symbols of the Evangelists, the eastern apse contains a Madonna and Child with saints above and the northern wall has a fragment depicting a bishop. The other panels show scenes from the legend of St Barbara. [1]

Interior

The church is actually quite small, and is dominated by the proportionally very large apse (the disproportion being because it belonged to the much larger Leonine basilica). The nave has five bays with side aisles, and then comes a transept which is now the choir of the nuns. The sanctuary apse follows. The church itself has no attached side chapels. There is a *confessio* or devotional crypt under the sanctuary. [1]

Nave (8)

The nave is separated from the narrow side aisles by arcades with five Corinthian columns each. Above the aisles are galleries or *matronea*, each having two arcades of three arches each separated by Ionic columns and with a pier in between the two. The nave walls above the arcades are undecorated, as is the completely simple triumphal arch leading into the transept. These *matronea* would have been for the sisters and orphan girls, but the nuns now worship in their choir in front of the high altar. [1]

The nave ceiling is in carved and varnished but unpainted wood, and bears the coat-of-arms of the future King Henry I of Portugal when he was cardinal here. He had the ceiling installed in 1580. The ceiling has dentillated coffers, the central one with the heraldry being oval and two other focal ones being octagonal and containing the cross. [1]

The floor is Cosmatesque, laid in 1084 by **Magister Paulus**, is unlike most others in the city as it was unrestored in the later centuries. However, it has been patched with fragments of early funerary epitaphs which have their own interest. [1]

The counterfaçade has three storeys. The second one has grilled apertures looking into the

connecting gallery above the entrance loggia, and the third one has three windows which give much of the natural light in the church. [1]

The two piers of the transept's triumphal arch are graced with a pair of side altars. The one on the right has a rather poor anonymous 17th century fresco of the *Crucifixion*, showing Our Lady with SS John the Evangelist and Mary Magdalen, together with a Doctor of the Church holding a book and sporting a monk's tonsure (St Augustine?) and a holy bishop (St Thomas of Villanova?). The altar frontal now has Cosmatesque inlay, the visibility (or the placement) of which dates from the 20th century. Beforehand, both pier altars had matching frontals featuring gilded vine-scroll patterning springing from a central oval starburst tondo, on a white background. [1]

The left hand pier altar has a fine 15th century marble tabernacle in the form of a pedimented aedicule, with the actual home for the Blessed Sacrament being venerated by a four standing angels. The door is in gilded bronze, with a relief of *Jesus the Nazarene* with his cross and column of flagellation. The Grotesque relief detailing is gilded. The work is ascribed to Luigi Capponi or Antonio Bregno. This tabernacle was re-located here in the early 17th century, and provided with flanking frescoes of *SS Peter and Paul*. *God the Father* is depicted above, being infested by a swarm of putti. [1]

Transept

The transept (9) now contains the choir of the Augustinian nuns, and so has been sequestered by a modern steel railings. It is entered through an unadorned triumphal arch, springing from a pair of equally unadorned piers which are actually set at a slight angle to the major axis. [1]

There is a separate ceiling provided at the end of the 16th century by Cardinal Giovanni Antonio Facchinetti de Nuce, in the same style as that of the nave but with the central coffer showing the *Four Crowned Martyrs*. There is also a separate Cosmatesque floor, separated from the nave by an area of scavenged marble slabs. [1]

At either end of the transept is a staircase down to the confessio. The side walls here show fabric from the arcades of the Leonine basilica, and also display some old epigraphs including a 4th century one from the catacombs of Sant'Ermite on the Via Salaria. [1]

The left hand staircase has over it a little 17th century shrine to Our Lady of Sorrows, with a fresco of her in an arched niche. This is flanked by a pair of mediaeval epigraphs, one giving a list of relics provided by Pope Leo IV and the other recording the rebuilding by Pope Paschal II in 1111. Below the fresco is a slab of marble which used to belong to the high altar consecrated by Pope Paschal, as the inscription on it points out: [1]

"This old stone was put in place on the bodies of the holy brethren in the great altar"

Sanctuary and Apse

The sanctuary (10) comprises the apse, and is slightly raised above the main floor level by two steps. It is sequestered by a 17th century marble balustrade either side of the free-standing high altar, having a gap in each side for ingress and also some polychrome marble panelling. [1]

The altar itself faces down the church, and has two storeys. The lower, 17th century, also has simple polychrome marble panelling around an ovoid fenestra confessionis or aperture looking into a little shaft connecting with the shrine of the martyrs in the confessio below. The upper part is modern, in grey-streaked white marble with a red cross. [1]

The apse itself is richly decorated with frescoes and stucco work, the latter being gold on white. The pilasters of the triumphal arch have exaggerated imposts bearing fronded modillions over dentillation and egg-and-dart molding, and these decorative features are continued below the apse conch as a defective entablature (no frieze). This entablature is supported by six ribbed Corinthian pilasters.

The curved apse wall has frescoes in two registers, seven panels at the bottom and four at the top which depict scenes from the legend of the martyrdom of the Four Crowned Martyrs. The top register contains three large rectangular windows, with curtains to obscure the fact that the left hand one is blocked by the adjacent monastery block. [1]

The apse conch is wholly taken up by a large fresco of *The Glory of Heaven*. The *Trinity* (Father, Son and the Dove of the Holy Spirit) is at the top, being venerated in the first instance by Our Lady and St John the Baptist. These are surrounded by a host of angels, and below is a large crowd of saints many of whom are identifiable by the attributes (symbols) with them. [1]

All this fresco work was executed in 1630 by **Giovanni da San Giovanni**, who also provided depictions of the *Four Crowned Martyrs* on the outward faces of the pilasters and two female allegories (*Religion* to the left and *Fortitude* to the right) on the triumphal arch spandrels. The sides of the pilasters have stucco angels of high quality. [1]

Confessio

The confessio is a semi-annular (U-shaped) passage running round the curve of the apse from one staircase to another. At the far end of its curve is a little chapel, and over the altar of this is an aperture with a diapered grating. Through this you can see another little chamber leading into a low barrel-vaulted niche with four ancient capsule-shaped sarcophagi containing the relics of the martyrs. There are remnants of 17th century frescoes, including leafy branches on the vault in front of the niche. The fabric is 9th century, belonging to the Leonine basilica. [1]

The aisles have cross-vaults, and are floored with scavenged marble slabs. [1]

Right hand aisle

In the right hand aisle several columns of the arcade of the 9th century Leonine basilica, embedded in the church wall in the rebuilding by Pope Paschal but revealed by **Muñoz** in 1913 when he removed some of the concealing fabric. [1]

Also here are some frescoes dating to about 1400: [1]

- St Anthony the Great (?) between two unidentifiable saints near the entrance, then two sets of heraldry (not identified).
- An early form of the Pietà between SS Peter and Paul is next;
- Christ is depicted at the point of being taken down from the cross, not being held by Our Lady.
- The next panel shows St Bartholomew holding his flayed skin and accompanied by an unidentified bishop, and
- then comes St Bernard (?) being venerated by a monk and accompanied by St Basil (?), and finally
- the holy deacons SS Stephen and Lawrence. The former has his gridiron, and the latter stones about to strike his head.

This aisle has a side-altar dedicated to the Nativity, with an anonymous 16th century altarpiece showing *The Adoration of the Shepherds*. There is no proper aedicule, but the painting has a very elaborate Baroque marble frame with an incut pediment and several winged putto's heads in the carving. This is now the Blessed Sacrament altar, and on the altar itself is a free-standing patinated bronze tabernacle. This interesting modern work is cylindrical with nail-head decoration, a little fish-scale cupola and a relief of *The Last Supper*. It is the best modern work of art in the church. [1]

Near the transept is a fine Baroque memorial to Luigi D'Aquino 1679. It is in polychrome stonework, with a backing in red marble, an epitaph in black framed in yellow Siena marble and with a funerary urn in a pink and black brecciated marble over this. Two chilled-out lions are slumped on the urn, and at the top is a good portrait bust in an oval tondo. [1]

Left hand side aisle

The bottom left hand corner of the church has more 14th century frescoes: [1]

- On the arcade pier is a saintly pope (St Leo?) being venerated by two monks, one in a white habit (Cistercian?) and one in black (Benedictine?); the latter is given the name Magister Rainaldus.
- Then comes St Augustine of Hippo (?),
- then three seated saints on the other side of a small round-headed window. The central one is an early monastic.
- Then comes a pope and two saints in a sailing boat on water full of fish, which is a depiction of the Barque of St Peter.

- Finally there is another unidentifiable bishop.
- One fragmentary scene survives of a lower register, which looks like a martyrdom with a sword.

The left hand aisle has two altars. The first, unusually with a very small polygonal mensa, has a painting by **Giovanni da San Giovanni** of *The Annunciation* in an elaborate gilded Baroque wall-frame over a grille. The idea here is that a private Mass could be said for a small number of nuns in the chamber on the other side. To the right of the altar is an access door (now permanently closed), over which is a 17th century fresco of two putti. [1]

The next altar on the left-hand side is dedicated to St Sebastian, and the relic of his skull is venerated here. Two thin and tapered red marble Ionic columns support a split and separated triangular pediment, and flank an altarpiece by **Giovanni Baglione** depicting *SS Irene and Lucina Tend the Wounds of St Sebastian*. Below this is a diapered grating flanked by curlicues and black marble, through which you can see the little Baroque shrine containing the skull. In between the grille and the altarpiece is an epigraph describing the enshrinement in 1632. [1]

There follows the exit to the cloisters. Near the transept is a pair of monumental epitaphs, one above the other, to Cardinal Pietro Respighi 1913 and his nephew Carlo. The cardinal sponsored the restoration by **Muñoz**. Standing on the floor below these is a short marble column with a crude Corinthian capital, thought to have come from the altar screen of the 9th century Leonine basilica.

Aula Gotica (Gothic Hall) (16)

In 1996, a room which the nuns were using for their ironing was found to have spectacular 13th century frescoes on the walls under whitewash applied when the palace became part of the orphanage in the 16th century. These were restored by 2006, but for several years were not viewable by the public because the location is inside the enclosure of the nunnery. However, this policy has been changed and from May 2015 you can visit by joining a guided tour. Details of how to do this are here. [1]

This chamber is considered to have functioned as the primary reception room of the palace, and was also the location of a court of law. As such, it was a highly prestigious location. It has two bays, with cross-vaults springing from corbels, and both the vaulting and walls were frescoed. The work is tentatively ascribed to the so-called Third Master of Anagni, and to be of the 1240's (SS Francis and Dominic are depicted as saints, recently canonized). The frescoes turned out to be the most important cycle of medieval secular paintings to have survived in Rome. [1] [6]

The southern bay has three registers showing allegories the Earthly Life:

- the mediaeval university course of studies (Trivium and Quadrivium),
- the Seasons month by month and
- the Vices.

In the northern bay is the Spiritual Life, featuring

- allegorical Virtues,
- figures from both Old and New Testaments and
- also saints.

The central depiction seems to be King Solomon dispensing justice, an allusion to one of the functions of the chamber in the Middle Ages. [1]

Artists and Architects:

Antonio [Muñoz](#) (1884-1960), Italian architect

Giovanni [Baglione](#) [aka *il Sordo del Barozzo*] (1566-1643), Italian Late Mannerist and Early Baroque painter

Giovanni [Carbonara](#) (1942-), Roman restoration architect

Giovanni [da San Giovanni](#) [aka *Giovanni Mannozzi*] (1592-1636), Italian painter of the early Baroque period.

Magister Paulus (11th cent), Italian sculptor, mosaic floor maker
Pietro de Maria (13th cent), stonecutter
Raffaellino [del Garbo](#) (1476-1524), Florentine painter of the early Renaissance
Raffaele [Motta](#) [aka *Raffaellino da Reggìo*] (1550-1578), Italian Mannerist painter

Location:

Addr: 20 Piazza dei Santi Quattro Coronati, 00184 Roma

Coord: [41° 53' 17.5" N, 12° 29' 54.8" E](#)

Info:

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Fax: +39 06 77262545

Web site: www.monacheagostinianesantiquattrocoronati.it

Email: monachess4@gmail.com

Opening times

09:30am-12:00pm 04:30pm-06:00pm

The cloister is open from 3.30pm to 6.15pm

Masses:

Sundays: 11:00am (summer)

Weekdays: 07:30am (summer)

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 6. [Walks in Rome website](#)
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 - c. Information plaques in the Basilica
 - d. Donovan, Jeremiah; **ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS**; 1842; Pg. V1:631/V2:253
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Chapel of Saint Sylvester

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