

# Santo Stefano Rotondo al Celio

St. Stephen in the Round on the Celian Hill



**Santo Stefano Rotondo al Celio** is the 5th century Hungarian national church, which is titular and has the status of a minor basilica. It is located on the summit of the Caelian Hill in the rione Monti (I). The primary dedication is to St Stephen the Deacon, but there is an apparently informal secondary dedication to St Stephen of Hungary. [1]

Santo Stefano Rotondo is the station church for Friday of the 5th week of Lent. [5]

## History

The actual site of the church was occupied by the *Castra Peregrina*, which was the set of barracks housing Roman soldiers detached from provincial legions for special service in the city. They were originally used for supply and postal duties, but by the 2nd century were also a police force. The camp was excavated next to the church in 1902, and also beneath the church from 1969 to 1975. Two 2nd century buildings were uncovered, and very interestingly the one under the church had a *Mithraeum*. This shrine, dating back to the 2nd century, consists of a rectangular room with two counters on the sides and an aedicule at the back. Probably at the beginning of the 3rd century the building was enlarged and a larger aedicule was built. The walls are decorated with frescoes; among these, the one with the personification of the Moon stands out, belonging to the first phase of the building. [1] [3]

The camp is known to have still functioned in the 4th century, and its clearance for the church would have needed the special authorization of the emperor. This is thought to have been given by Valentinian III (425-55). [1]

### Foundation of the church

The first church was considered to have been consecrated in the time of Pope St Simplicius (468-483) to hold the relics of St Stephen, deacon and protomartyr of the Church. His alleged tomb had been discovered at Kafr Gamala in the Holy Land in 415, where the monastery of Beit Jimal

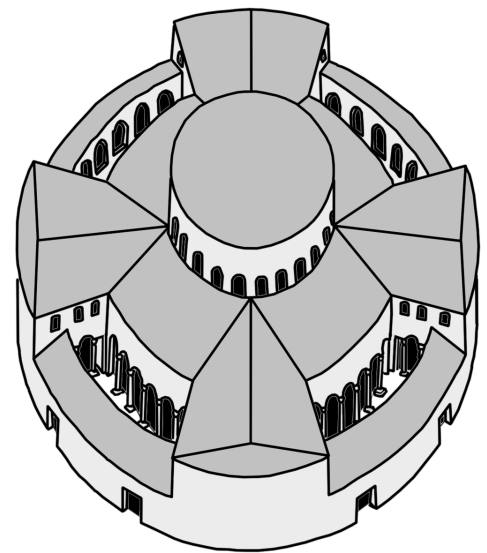
now is. However, recent dendrochronology dating on surviving original roof timbers indicates that the trees they came from were felled in 455. Hence the project was probably initiated by Pope St Leo the Great (440-61), who certainly founded another church dedicated to St Stephen, Santo Stefano Protomartire a Via Latina. In the foundations were found two coins of the emperor Libius Severus (461-5), indicating the start of actual construction in the early 460's. [1] [2] [4] [d]

The documentary evidence for the church's foundation is very poor, and we don't know why it had such a strange plan. It was the first circular church in Rome, and so it has been thought that it was modeled on the Anastasis of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. This is not as straightforward as first appears. The diameter of Santo Stefano now is almost exactly the same as that of the Anastasis, but the former used to be a larger and more complex building. [1]

The church appears among the tituli in the synod list of 499 as Sancti Stephani in Coelio Monte with a priest named Marcellus, and this is the first documentary reference. It has also been thought (though undocumented) that it may have been financed by the patrician Valeriani family, whose estates covered large parts of the Caelian Hill. St Melania the Elder, a member of this family, was a frequent pilgrim to Jerusalem and died there, so the family had connections to the Holy Land. [1]

### Original layout and form

The original plan and architectural form were amazingly complex, and raise many unanswered questions about the building's original function. Its original measurements counts as one of the largest Early Christian churches, such as San Pietro or San Paolo fuori le mura. The plan was based on four nested circles, on which was superimposed a Greek cross with wide arms. These arms ran from the second to the outermost circles. Proceeding from the center outwards, firstly there was the extant circle of twenty-two Ionic columns supporting a trabeation (no arcade) and having an ambulatory behind them. This colonnade supported in turn the central drum, of brick and having a low and light conical tiled roof. A dome would have been impossible, as the colonnade would have been too weak to support it. The drum originally had a run of twenty-two arched windows immediately above the roofline of the adjacent ambulatory. [1] [b]



The second circle was occupied by a second colonnade, of thirty-six columns and eight piers, which marked the outer limit of the inner ambulatory and which supported an arcade. This colonnade is now occupied by the outer wall of the church, in which the columns are still embedded. From this circle, the cross-arms ran north-east, north-west, south-east and south-west to the fourth, outer circle which was occupied by the original outer wall. Each of these cross-arms had its own pitched and tiled roof, joined onto the roof of the inner ambulatory mentioned. The columns of the second colonnade which formed the four entrance portals of these cross-arms are taller than the rest, as can still be seen. [1]

The third circle, just within the outer wall, was marked by barrel-vaulted arcades forming outer ambulatories running just within the outer wall in between the cross arms. Another interpretation has these arcades as solid walls. In between these arcades (or walls) and the second colonnade further in were either four open courts, the favored interpretation, or four unlit roofed chambers. Whatever these were, they were each entered through the second colonnade, or through two triple side-entrances from the flanking cross-arms. [1]

When the building was first conceived, each section of outer wall in between the cross-arms had two entrance doorways, eight in all. Before or just after it was finished, however, six doors were blocked up and only the two flanking the north-east cross arms were left. There was originally no entrance vestibule outside the outer wall. [1] [2]

The original decoration was rich. The original flooring of the rotunda has been excavated, and was of precious cipollino marble slabs laid in a pattern which included a cross radiating out to the cross-arms. Evidence of the use of opus sectile and of marble wall revetting was also found. [1]

On the other hand, the recent restoration revealed that the original building standards were rather poor. As a result, the edifice has had a long history of instability and disrepair which affected how it was treated in subsequent centuries. [1]

How the building was originally used is an even greater mystery. Historians of Roman liturgy have failed to come up with any sensible suggestion as to how it could have functioned as a church, so perhaps it was not originally intended as one but as a large pilgrimage venue for the veneration of relics instead. The suggestion that the building design focused on a shrine of St Stephen in the center is a reasonable one, but this begs the question as to what the cross arms were for. [1]

The blocking of six of the eight original entrance doors indicates that the project aims were reviewed very early on. This alteration destroyed the eightfold symmetry that the first scheme had, and introduced a major axis passing through two cross-arms and flanked by the two surviving doors. Since the church had a priest in 499 it must have had an altar by then, and this may originally have been in the cross-arm opposite the entrances. [1]

According to a now lost epigraph, between 523 and 529, during the pontificates of John I and Felix IV, the interior of was richly decorated with mosaics and marble slabs inlaid with porphyry, serpentine and mother-of-pearl; in the center a tribune was inserted for the schola cantorum and for the chair, the so-called Chair of Saint Gregory the Great, an ancient marble seat from the Roman imperial era from which, according to tradition, the famous pontiff delivered some of his homilies and to which, in 13th century, the backrest and armrests were removed (today it is located to the left of the entrance). [1] [4]

In the mid 7th century Pope Theodore I (642-9), from Jerusalem and probably a Greek, fitted out the north-eastern cross arm as a shrine-chapel for the martyrs SS Primus and Felician. This is the first recorded example of the relics of martyrs being transferred from their original burial place (in this case, on the Via Nomentana fourteen miles from Rome) to within the city walls. He commissioned a mosaic, which survives, and buried his father here. He had been a bishop in the Holy Land. [1]

By the 8th century Santo Stefano 'had been in decay for a long time', according to the *Liber pontificalis*. Restoration works were carried out during the pontificate of Hadrian I (772-795), in particular aimed at repairing the damage to the roof. However, in the 9th century the plundering began, to which was added, in 847, the damage caused by an earthquake and in 1084 that caused by the Sack of Rome by the troops of Robert Guiscard. [4] [d]

### 12th century restoration

Between 1139 and 1143 Pope Innocent II (1130 - 1143) had the church restored, but the external annular nave, left roofless, was no longer rebuilt and finally fell into ruin. Of the four arms of the cross, only the one containing the chapel of Saints Primo and Feliciano remained intact. The median colonnade was closed with bricks and became the external wall; a vaulted atrium was added in front of the entrance from Via del Laterano. The church was covered with low conical roofs. For the central drum part, no sufficiently long beams were found; therefore, to support the roof, a transversal wall was erected high along a diameter (resting on unequal arches supported in turn by the internal colonnade and by two other added granite columns) which ended up dividing the room in two. Of the twenty-two original windows of the drum, fourteen were walled up, to give greater strength to the high cylindrical wall. Due to these radical interventions the church was decidedly smaller; but despite being thus simplified, Santo Stefano Rotondo did not withstand the passage of time: at the beginning of the 15th century the basilica was roofless and in a state of abandonment. [4]

The first religious order to have charge of the complex were the Canons of the Lateran, who must have had very little to do there. The famous Renaissance humanist Flavio Biondo wrote about the church while it was under their charge, about 1430. He mentioned marble-revetted walls and Cosmatesque decoration (both all now gone), and added that the church lacked a roof. It seems that the central drum was open to the sky. So, by the middle of the 15th century the church was ruinous. [1] [a]

### 15th century restoration

By the fifteenth century Santo Stefano was in serious danger of collapsing. A major restoration was ordered by Pope Nicholas V in 1453. The work was carried out by the architect **Bernardo Rosselino**, who was advised by **Leon Battista Alberti**. **Rosselino** redid the roofs and the floor, raising the level, placed a marble altar in the center of the building, definitively eliminated the crumbling external ambulatory and blocked the columns of the second ring with a wall of a robust masonry cylinder corresponding to the current external wall of the building. Of the arms of the Greek cross, only one remained, used as a vestibule in correspondence with the atrium. He also removed the surviving marble revetting. [1] [4] [a] [b] [c]

In the following year, the church and monastery was granted to the Order of St Paul the First Hermit, also known as the Pauline Fathers. This monastic congregation was founded in Hungary in 1250, and had as its patron an Egyptian hermit of the early 4th century (see [St Paul of Thebes](#)). They became popular in eastern Europe in the later Middle Ages, although they are not well known in western Europe. At Rome, they were originally at San Salvatore in Onda before moving here. [1]

During the terrible sacking of Rome in 1527, both the Church and the Monastery suffered great damage. [2]

From 1541 to 1649, most of Hungary was part of the Ottoman Empire. This caused the Pauline Order to decline seriously, and by the mid 16th century the monastery was in decline. In 1579 Pope Gregory XIII granted the complex to Hungarian Jesuits for a seminary to train priests for Hungary. Unfortunately, the new Hungarian College was hopelessly underfunded and lasted only one year before being united, in 1573, with the German College to form the German-Hungarian College (Collegium Germanicum et Hungaricum). [1] [a]

In 1580 the new sacristy door was built and an octagonal stucco enclosure was built around the altar, decorated by **Antonio Tempesta** with the *Stories from the life of Saint Stephen of Hungary*. Furthermore, in 1582 **Niccolò Circignani**, known as **Pomarancio**, received the task of decorating the walls of the church which closed the ambulatory with a cycle of 32 wall paintings, showing the suffering of martyrs in graphic detail. Jesuit seminarians were encouraged to go here to see them, and contemplate the fate that might await them as they went off as missionaries. [1] [4]

There was a restoration in 1735, which involved overpainting some of the martyr frescoes after the damp had got to them. [1]

The status of the church changed radically in 1778, when the Hungarians lost their national church. This used to be a small basilica called Santo Stefano degli Ungheresi built at the end of the 8th century to the south of St Peter's. The location was the east side of Piazza di Santa Marta in the Vatican, but Pope Pius VI had it demolished to make way for his enormous new sacristy. To compensate the Hungarian expatriates the pope declared Santo Stefano to be their national church instead, and arranged for a chapel dedicated to St Stephen of Hungary to be added (the church's main altar remained dedicated to St Stephen the Deacon). This was to remain a focus of Hungarian pilgrimages. [1]

There was another restoration in 1802 but, yet again, the church fell into disrepair as the 19th century progressed. The blocking of the outer arcade was not damp-proof, the problem being accentuated by the old bricks being slightly porous. The inevitable result of this was that the frescoes peeled off the wall in places, and were hence re-painted here and there. [1]

The little monastery attached to the church is now the Generalate of the Suore Missionarie del Sacro Costato. [1]

The problem with damp became very bad in the mid 20th century, and in 1958 a long-term program of restoration was announced. The opportunity was taken to perform archaeological excavations under the church, and in 1973 a Mithraeum was discovered. The restoration process proved very slow, and took just on half a century with the restoration only declared to be completed in 2009. The result has been very good. The floor has been lowered slightly and completely re-laid, the

frescoes consolidated and the roofs of the drum and ambulatory renewed. The floor of the Hungarian chapel has been re-laid by Hungarian craftsmen. The mosaic in the chapel of SS Primus and Felician has been consolidated. [1]

The German-Hungarian College remains in possession of the church, which has no pastoral function. At present, it is part of the Centro Storico marriage circuit and so visitors may find it being used for weddings at weekends. Also, the number of Hungarian pilgrims has risen since the fall of Communism in Hungary and so the church has hence received welcome attention from Hungarian institutions and high-profile individuals. The basilica is currently a subsidiary place of worship of the parish of Santa Maria in Domnica alla Navicella. [1] [4] [a]

### Cardinalate

The title of the church is San Stefano in Monte Celio. Despite the title being ancient, the list of cardinals begins in the 12th century and is here. The current titular of the church is H.E. Cardinal Friedrich Wetter, Archbishop Emeritus of Munich and Freising. [1]

### **Exterior**

The church is hidden away behind trees and a high boundary wall, and surrounded by a large garden. The small, unadorned rectangular gateway to the drive from the street helpfully has the church's name written over it. The thick wall that hides the church building from the passing street, Via di Santo Stefano Rotondo, is actually the remains of the ancient aqueduct, Aqua Claudia, which was built under the emperors Caligula and Claudius in the period 38-52 AD, and later, in the years 54-68, Nero had this branch added, which is the wall facing here. [1] [2]

The church is obviously basically round, but there are large annexed structures to the east. From north going clockwise, these are: the monastery, the entrance loggia, the Chapel of SS Primus and Felician and the Hungarian Chapel. [1]

There is an external wall around the church. This is the remains of the external ring of the original church that was ruined and not rebuilt in the 12th century. Now, except for the portion containing the entrance vestibule and two chapels, the the area between external wall and the church is now a open area.

A little way down the Via di Santo Stefano Rotondo from this gateway is an archway in the wall. The land beyond belongs to a hospital, but if the gate is open you can follow a path to the east of the church. Almost all photos of the exterior of the church are from this spot. [1]

The exterior has had no decorative attention from renovators through the centuries after the 12th century restoration, and hence presents a simple and rather stark aspect. The exterior walling is all in red brick, with no embellishments except a dentillate cornice on the roofline of the drum. The windows of the drum have mullions forming two little arches and an oculus on top in each one, and you can see how most of the original row of windows were blocked up in the 12th century. The rows of little holes in the brickwork of the drum are for scaffolding. The drum itself is 22 meters wide and the same tall. The church is now 42 meters wide, and was 66 meters when first built. [1]

The outer wall of the church shows the colonnaded arcade which used to be here before it was blocked up; the arches of the arcade now contain either little oculi or larger lunettes and these light the church's ambulatory. There are regularly-spaced brick buttresses which mark the locations of the demolished cross arms. [1]

There is a little apse on the west side of the church, and this is the Blessed Sacrament chapel which was built in the 15th century. To the left of the entrance is the Chapel of SS Primus and Felician under its own pitched and hipped roof, and to the left of this is the Hungarian Chapel under a cat-slide roof. [1]

### Monastery

This was built in 1462 for the Paulines. It is an undistinguished building, consisting of two blocks joined at a shallow angle so as roughly to follow the curve of the church. They do not themselves



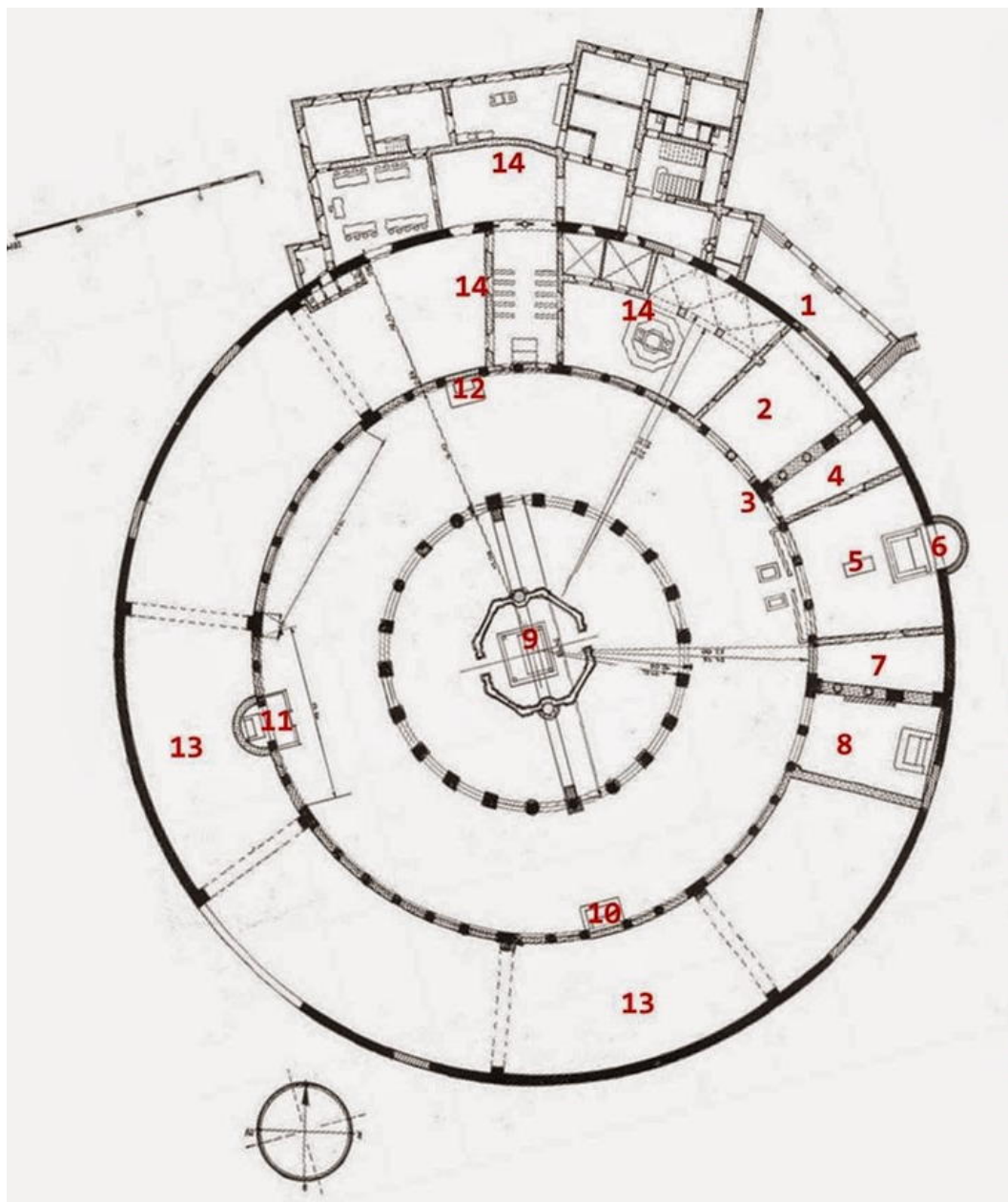
abut on to the church, but an extension joins on to it at the north-east side. Together with the entrance vestibule, this creates a tiny courtyard which has well in it (the entrance to this is via a door immediately on the right inside the vestibule). [1]

Faustino Corsi writing in 1845 listed six ancient columns visible in the courtyard. Two were of grey granite, two of pavonazzetto marble and two of Parian marble. [1]

### Entrance loggia

The entrance loggia was provided in the 12th century restoration. It has an arcade of five open archways, separated by four ancient grey granite columns with imposts but no capitals. Above the loggia is a parvise or large room with four tiny square windows, and this with the loggia is joined to the monastery on the right by a very narrow insert. The far side of this insert supports a bellcote of the 15th century, having two open arches for the bells intruding into a triangular pediment. Apparently the church never had a proper campanile. [1]

The entrance to the vestibule is not central in the loggia, but to the left. There are badly faded fresco panels on the walls to the sides and to the right of the door, in two registers which used to depict events from the *life of St Stephen the Protomartyr* but are now almost obliterated. The doorcase is in marble with the *Keys of St Peter* on the lintel, and above is a lunette enclosed by a matching marble archivolt. This contains a 19th century fresco of the *Pietà*. The door enters into a corner of the vestibule, and you go through the latter to get into the church. [1]



## Plan

### Interior

#### Vestibule

The rather bare vestibule has a whitewashed cross-vault with a fresco depiction of the *Keys of St Peter* within a wreath in the center. The right side wall has two windows, and below them is an inscription, in Hungarian and Italian, that reads:

The Basilica of Santo Stefano Rotondo al Celio is considered by the Hungarians their national church since the 15th century. In 1454 it was entrusted to the Hungarian Paulin order who maintained it until 1579. Between 1570 and 1580 the Basilica was the church of the Hungarian College, from 1580 it belongs to the Germanic-Hungarian College. The epitaph of the tomb of Janox Laszai (d. 1523) Hungarian penitentiars, whose remains are housed within the walls of the church, has proclaimed for half a millennium that Rome and the common homeland. The Basilica between 1946 and 1975 was awarded as a cardinal title to Jozsef Mindszenty, Archbishop of Esztergom, a strong opponent of the Communist dictatorship. This topestone and placed by the Hungarian Government in 2016, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the takeover of the church by Jozsef Mindszenty and the 60th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

The far side has a pair of identical rectangular marble portals placed side by side, and over these is an epigraph commemorating the restoration by Pope Nicholas V. Over this in turn is a little statue of *St Stephen*. The epigraph reads: [1] [2]

"Pope Nicholas V let this church, which is dedicated to the protomartyr Santo Stefano and which had fallen into disrepair, restore completely in 1453".

According to the archaeologists, there is an ancient column immured in the central pier created by the inner sides of the door cases. [1]

#### Layout

When you enter, you see a ring of Ionic columns supporting the drum and surrounding the main altar in the center, the inner ring. Around this ring is an ambulatory which runs round the entire interior, the outer ring. To the left of the entrance is the external Chapel of SS Primus and Felician, flanked by a pair of sacristies, and past that is the Hungarian Chapel. Directly opposite the former chapel, inserted into the outer wall, is a little apse containing the former Blessed Sacrament chapel which is lit by a large oculus. To either side against the wall, at ninety degrees, are two other little side altars. [1]

The columns in the Outer Ambulatory and the Inner Circle/Sanctuary are a combination of "spolia" (materials harvested from ancient Roman temples) and also Late Antiquity elements taken from one of the depots of mass-produced architectural elements that were still around in the 5th century. [c]

#### Outer ring

The outer wall (4) has the former outer arcade embedded in it, with most of the mainly Ionic columns being in view. There are thirty-six in total, including one apparently encased in the entrance pier, two free-standing at the entrance of the Chapel of SS Primus and Felician (these are Corinthian) and one free-standing at the entrance of the Hungarian Chapel. These columns support arcades, with banded archivolts now containing round windows (oculi) mostly with some lunette windows. Interspersed with the columns are eight piers, which you can tell are original by the way the archivolts spring from them. These mark the corners of the former cross-arms, and correspond with buttresses on the exterior wall. The columns are arranged in runs of five (within the former entrances of the cross arms) and six (in between). [1] [d]

The four arches in the far side opposite the chapel of Primus and Felician, flanking the little apse, are taller and their four ribbed columns are Corinthian. [1]

Strangely, different authors of guidebooks and books on Roman churches have given various totals for the number of ancient columns in this arcade. Corsi somehow counted forty-two. The actual visible total is thirty-five, with one invisible. [1]

According to Corsi, the columns are mostly in grey granite with six being in marmo imezio, four in cipollino and six in marmo bigio. Some of the marble ones are fluted. [1]

### Tabernacle (16)

Older depictions before the 20th century show the altar with a fantastic, tall wooden tabernacle which was installed in 1613. The story behind it is that it was carved by a Prussian baker named **Jan Gentner** in response to a vow that he made in the church. It was removed from the altar to the vestibule in the 20th century, and after a period of neglect has been restored and placed on a plinth in the right hand side of the ambulatory. [1]

It is in the form of a Baroque church, but like none existing because it has four storeys like a wedding-cake topped by a dome recalling that of St Peter's. The color scheme is white and pale blue. [1]

### Floor

The floor is modern, laid after the archaeological excavations were finished. It is an interesting design in its own right, formed by fitting together grey-veined marble tiles in various ways. The ones near the altar are closely fitted, but those in the ambulatory are separated by wide strips of cement with some areas in tiles of various shapes. The last style emulated that of the original floor, which the archaeologists have left exposed in some places. This had fragments of different colored marbles laid in a semi-random way. Other areas had black and white geometric mosaic flooring. [1]

### Throne of St Gregory (6)

Just round the corner, to the left of the entrance, is a medieval cathedra or episcopal throne formed by cutting down an ancient marble chair. It is basically a stool embellished with lions' paws, now elevated on a plinth with its separate little footstool underneath. By tradition Pope Gregory the Great gave a homily while sitting on it in this church. The epigraph on the wall above the seat reads: [1] [2]

"In this Church of Santo Stefano on Monte Celio, Pope Gregory I  
read the 4th sermon from the Gospel of Matthew, which begins  
with the words "Dearest brothers, since He is our Redeemer"

On it is visible what seems to be the maker's signature: Mag iohs which stands for Magister Johannes or "Master John". It is now thought that this chair was part of the appurtenances of the central altar when it was installed in the 12th century restoration. With it would have been a schola cantorum or enclosure for the singers and clerics, but the actual layout of this is not known. [1] [2]

### Sacristy. (7)

The door next to the chair gives access to the Church sacristy (8). On the marble doorframe is the text "Gre XIII a MDLXXX" as a reminder of the decoration of the room at the request of Pope Gregory XIII in the year 1580. On the wall above the door is a fresco *The Murder of the Innocents*, which is attributed to **Antonio Tempesta**. Below the fresco is a stone with a longer inscription about the scene on the fresco. [2]

In the sacristy there is a cabinet with an old washbasin from the time of Nicholas V, as can be seen from the inscription "Nicolaus. Papa. V.M. CCCC. LIIII". Under the cabinet is an antique tombstone with the inscription "D.M.Aelius. Iulius Eusebius. et. Ulpia Victorina vibi (f)ecerunt. sibi et. liberis suis. et. libertis. libertabusque. posterisque. eorum". It dates from a time after the Emperors Trajan and Hadrian (98-117 and 117-138 AD). [2]

On the end wall is a mural altar with relief of three arches supported by flat decorated columns under a wide frieze with the text "Christi corpus ave sacra de Virgine natum" ("Hail body of Christ, born of the holy Virgin"). At the top, the work is crowned by a triangular gable field with a relief of the suffering Christ between two angels. In the niches below, to the right stands a statue of [San Paolo I Eremita](#) with the raven that brings him bread, and to the left a statue of Santo Stefano. In the central arch there is an empty square niche in a narrow frame with a triangular gable field, above which flies a dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit. At the top of the curved field there is a relief of a chalice and the host. On the edge of the altar, the year 1510 is indicated and it is believed to have



been done by a student of Andrea Bregno. [2]

### Martyrdom cycle

The outer wall all around its circuit is decorated with a fresco cycle of thirty-two large panels dating from 1572-1585, commissioned by Pope Gregory XIII and depicting *The Sufferings of the Martyrs*. They contain terrifying and realistic depictions of torture and suffering, and each panel has an explanatory epigraph in Latin and Italian. These name the emperors who ordered the executions, as well as giving appropriate quotations from the Bible. [1]

The subject and execution of the frescoes are in accordance with the dictates of the Council of Trent. The image of brutalized bodies, however, soon give way to a much more abstract approach to martyrological representation, one where landscape and its meditational potential came to the fore. This is most clearly expressed at the Jesuit novitiate church of San Vitale which was frescoed with 'landscape martyrdoms' in the closing years of the century. [a]

The cycle begins to the left of the entrance with the *Massacre of the Innocents*, continues with the *Crucifixion of Jesus Christ*, continues with the *Martyrdom of Saint Stephen* and the Apostles, and of some saints in chronological order. The doctrinal point being made in this arrangement is one given by St Paul, which is that the Crucifixion was, in itself, the wholly effective sacrifice for redemption, but that the subsequent suffering of believers for their faith is mysteriously part of it. The squeamish, and families with children, may not appreciate these frescoes. For others, they are a good aid in understanding the sufferings of the martyrs and the great sacrifices they made for the Faith. [1]

Most of the fresco work is by Niccolò Circignani, but Antonio Tempesta painted the *Massacre of the Innocents*. Circignani enlisted the collaboration of the landscape specialist Matteo da Siena to contribute the elaborate pastoral backgrounds. The panels featuring St Polycarp and St Margaret of Antioch were repainted by Marcello Leopardi in the 18th century. [1] [4] [a]

Others of these panels were repainted in the 19th century after damp destroyed the original paintwork. The latest restoration has been a consolidation primarily, so these panels are still mostly wrecked and difficult to work out. [1]

( Detailed description of each fresco [here](#) )

### Side altars

The three side altars in the main body of the church are now derelict. [1]

The left hand one was dedicated to the Crucifix, and has an epigraph now propped up on top mentioning this and which also lists also a large number of saints. There is no crucifix here now, only the dark blue fresco backdrop with golden stars. [1]

The right hand side altar has a damaged fresco of *The Flagellation of Christ*. [1]

The far chapel, in a little apse, apparently used to be the Blessed Sacrament Chapel and was dedicated to Our Lady. The altarpiece has been removed. [1]

### Memorials

The Jesuits viewed the installation of funerary monuments in their churches with some reserve. So, there are none on the walls of the main church. Armellini writing in 1891 noted a medieval memorial slab in the floor near the altar of the Crucifix belonging to Benedict, a priest of Santa Maria in Domnica, and reading Archipr[esbyter] Benedictus Diac[oniae] S[an]c[t]ae Mariae Dom[n]icae. He was in charge of the ancient diaconia or center for charitable activities attached to that church. [1]

Angeli writing in 1900 noted another floor slab of a "bishop called Giovanni Lazo", 1525. He was actually a Hungarian archdeacon called János Lászlai from what is now Lascov in Slovakia, then part of Hungary. He died in Rome as an apostolic penitentiary, that is, sacramental confessor under the direct authority of the Pope with responsibility for Hungarian pilgrims. According to the inscription

he "died on August 17, 1523, in his 75th year." His slab was extracted from the floor by the recent restorers, and now lies loose on the floor, near the altar. It bears his recumbent effigy in shallow relief. [1] [2]

On the left wall, between frescoes 9 and 10 is a tablet recording the burial here of the Irish king Donough O'Brien of Cashel and Thomond, son of Brian Bóruma, who died in Rome in 1064. [1]

### Chapel of Sts Primus and Felician

To the left of the entrance is the chapel of Sts Primus and Felician. In 644 this chapel was commissioned by Pope Theodore I (642-649), who used one of the cross arms of the 5th century edifice. The saints are depicted in a mosaic in the conch of the apse which the pope commissioned, and there are also wall frescoes depicting their martyrdom and burial executed by **Antonio Tempesta** in 1586. [1] [2]

The unreliable legend states that they were brothers from a patrician family, who visited Christians who were being kept for execution in the Roman prisons. They were spotted, arrested and interrogated separately. The judge told Felician that his brother, at the time some eighty years old, had lapsed from the Faith. But they both persevered, and they were thrown to the lions together. At the amphitheater they were miraculously kept safe when the lions refused to eat them, and were taken to Nomentum (present-day Mentana) where they were beheaded and buried. [1]

There used to be a basilica over their shrine at Mentana, but Pope Theodore had their relics transferred to Rome. This is one of the earliest examples of a relocation of relics from the tombs outside the city. The legend obviously tries to take two genuine martyrs of Nomentum, who died at the start of the 4th century, and link them with the city of Rome. [1] [2]

The chapel was shrunk by the insertion of two side walls in the 12th century restoration, and thus two narrow rooms were created, the doors to these rooms are in the side walls. The left hand wall reaches the ceiling and has three round-headed apertures high up, but the right hand wall is only a screen and there is a wide gap between its top and the ceiling. When the monastery was inhabited by Paulinian monks the right hand room was their choir. The left hand room is the church's sacristy. [1]

The mosaic in the conch here is one of the rare examples from the 7th century in Rome (another is to be found in the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Laterano). The work shows the martyrs standing either side of a jeweled cross, on a golden background. They are on a green meadow, which is sprouting red roses. Over the cross is a tondo showing the head of Christ, which may have been a later addition. At the top is a small depiction of the starry heavens, with the hand of God the Father holding a wreath. Below the work is a mosaic epigraph that reads: [1] [2]

**"See this golden ceiling with the heavenly blue and shining stars.  
It comes from the most brilliant light"**

The mosaic, made by very skilled artists, was done under Pope Theodore I (642-649) in connection with the saints' remains being moved to the Church from the area of the Arenarium where they had been buried. It was also at this time that the small apse was built. The anonymous fresco behind the altar, below the mosaic and on the curve of the apse wall, shows *Christ and the Apostles* and other saints. This painting also dates from the late 16th century, but the artist's name is unknown. It is possibly the same person who painted the lunette over the Church's entrance. [2]

In front of the apse stands an altar designed and erected by **Filippo Barigioni** in 1736, after the relics had been examined and re-enshrined. The altar is in peperino marbles and jasper with a round center field of porphyry containing a text about the relics of the martyrs. In each side there is a slab of Cipollino marble. The short sides of the altar are decorated with inlaid pieces of marble in black and gray and at the back there is a coat of arms for Cardinal Antonio Saverio Gentili, who was titular cardinalat that time. [2]

The frescoes by **Tempesta** on the side walls show scenes from the legend of the martyrs, and have kept better than those in the main church. All frescoes are accompanied by painted signs with a description of the subject treated. [1] [2]  
On the end wall are the scenes:

- *San Primo and San Feliciano in prison have their chains loosened by an angel* (top left)
- *San Primo and San Feliciano are whipped with sticks* (top right)
- *San Feliciano resists being nailed to a tree* (bottom left)
- *San Primo is burned alive* (with torches) in a cruel manner (lower right), The saint withstood this torture by singing verses from a hymn.

On the left side of the scene,

- *San Primo is subjected to the test with molten lead* (to the right of the door)
- *San Primo and Feliciano are exposed to lions* (above the door) and
- *San Primo and San Feliciano are buried in the Arenarium* (on Via Nomentana) (to left for the door).

On the right wall

- *San Primo and San Feliciano in the bear's cave* (above the door) and
- *San Primo and San Feliciano are beheaded* (to the left of the door).

On the right wall, you can also see some small angelic children with palm branches painted above the two latticed windows, below which are painted stone inscriptions with texts about the two saints. These long, explanatory texts were addressed both to the congregation and to the student priests from the Collegio Germanico Ungarico, which has been in charge of the Church since 1580. [2]

Between the two chapels is the fresco *Madonna dei Sette Dolori*, painted by **Tempesta**. Mary's seven pains are symbolized by seven swords pointing at her chest. Next to each sword is a round field with the episode in Jesus' life which has caused the pain.

- 1 - *Simeon's prophecy to the pregnant Mary about the trials that her child will undergo,*
- 2 - *The flight into Egypt,*
- 3 - *Jesus' disappearance in Jerusalem,*
- 4 - *Mary's meeting with Jesus while he is carrying the cross on the way to Calvary,*
- 5 - *The crucifixion,*
- 6 - *The taking down of the cross, and*
- 7 - *Jesus is buried.*

Beneath the image are painted stone inscriptions with texts about this Madonna figure. [2]

### Hungarian Chapel

Continue in the outer ring of columns in a clockwise direction, is this chapel, where the arches between the next columns are not walled up like the others, but open and give access to the room, which is built into a part of what was once the outermost ring in the Church. This chapel was built by Hungarian Augustinian monks in honor of the Order's founder San Paolo I Eremita, when Pope Nikolaus V had left the Church to them in May 1454. [2]

However, neither the altar nor the decoration are original, but of more recent date, when in 1776 Pope Pius VI ordered that a new chapel be built in the Church, where the students of the Collegio Germanico Ungarico could celebrate their saint, Santo Stefano d'Ungheria, after the church which had previously been dedicated to him and which had been located by St. Peter's Basilica, was now about to be demolished. It was especially popular among expatriates when Hungary was under the Communists, since the heroic archbishop Josef Mindszenty was the cardinal here. [1] [2]

The project of the new chapel was entrusted to **Pietro Camporese** in 1778, but it apparently never got started, so in the end they had to resort instead to renewing the fresco decorations in the room that had previously been dedicated to San Paolo I Eremita, and re-consecrate the chapel of both saints. [2]

The chapel is on a rectangular plan with three bays, covered by a shallow curved vault with three lunettes on each side and two on each end. The decoration, now deteriorated, is all in paint and is a late Baroque trompe-l'oeil evoking stucco and marble. Panels on the walls and the triangles between the lunettes in the vault are in pink, and contain grotesque motifs. Over the altar is a fake "stucco" group of putti holding a wreath. The central panel is rectangular, enclosing an oval with the *Dove of the Holy Spirit*. All this fresco work was by **Antonio Tempesta**. [2]

The decoration of the walls and ceiling is done in gray on a pink background. Various figures, flowers and leaves, garlands and columns and the like are painted here. In addition, on the side walls there are some paintings of liturgical elements and on the end wall a group of angels with a laurel wreath. The four cardinal virtues can be seen in the lunettes. In the middle of the ceiling is an oval felti in an elongated, decorated frame. Here the Holy Spirit is seen framed by the text:

"In memory of Santo Stefano, King of the Hungarians,  
and San Paolo Primo Eremita"

The several paintings that used to be in this chapel have been removed, leaving empty frames. On the chapel's end wall, there is an altarpiece from the first part of the 18th century made of inlaid marble with Christ's monogram and cross. Recently (2022) this was covered by a painting showing what appears to be several kings and queens with the Madonna and Child. [2]

On the left side of the Chapel there is a funeral monument for Bernardino Cappella. It was executed by **Lorenzo Lotti (Lorenzetto)** of Florence and **Raffaello da Montelupo** sometime after 1524. The monument itself is set between two stout columns with carved capitals carrying a lintel and an arched gable field. In this frame at the bottom stands a golden marble sarcophagus, on which is placed a white marble statue of the deceased, reclining with comfortable pillows under his head. On the wall behind is a marble plaque with a commemorative inscription and on each side stands a statue, also in white marble. The statues are of Santo Stefano and San Bernardino. Bernardino Cappella had bequeathed his entire fortune to the Monastery of Santo Stefano Rotondo and in return received this majestic monument. [2]

The high-quality marble floor has recently been restored by craftsmen from Hungary. [1]

### Inner colonnade

Compared to the outer ring, which is dark, and ancient, the inner ring is bright white.

The inner colonnade originally had 22 ancient grey granite Ionic columns supporting a trabeation (or horizontal entablature). The columns are not a matching set, having differing widths and heights so that the capitals and bases do not match either. The entablature is in marble, and is molded. [1]

The interior of the drum above ends in a flat raftered roof, and contains 22 round-headed windows with vaulted upper edges, 8 of which have been walled up on the side, while the other 14 provide light for the room. The interior wall of the drum is unadorned, and whitewashed. The drum, 22 meters high and has a diameter of 22 meters, actually extends downwards below the roof of the ambulatory, giving an interesting architectural effect. The number 22 was interpreted by contemporary theologians as being symbolic of the relationship between the Old and New testaments. [1] [2] [c]

In the 12th century, two much larger grey granite Corinthian columns were added to support an arcade of three relieving arches installed across the central space to straighten the support for the drum. The outer arches are supported on piers also with Corinthian capitals, in which two of the original colonnade columns are partially encased. The central arch is larger with a single relieving round-headed opening in the screen wall above, while the side arches each have two. [1]

### Main altar

The central altar was installed in 1455 by the Florentine artist **Bernardo Rossellino**, responsible for the 15th century restoration. This is on a raised area enclosed by a low octagonal solid stone screen, executed by **Niccolò Circignani** in 1580, under Pope Gregory XIII, whose heraldic animal, a winged dragon, adorns the arrangement in several places. There are two opposite entrances in the screen, facing the Blessed Sacrament and Sts Primus and Felician chapels, on roughly the church east-west axis. The two middle sides in between these are butted against the arcade columns. [1] [2]

The six sides without entrances each have two monochrome fresco panels showing scenes from the *Life of St Stephen of Hungary*, which are labelled in Latin. The corners of the octagon each have two small relief panels depicting saints, and the two entrances are flanked by two more pairs. The entrance sides have reliefs of little dragons in between the saints. [1] [2]

( Detailed description of each fresco on the altar screen, [here](#) )

In 2009 the altar enclosure was provided with a celebrant's chair, a piece of modern sacred art in sheets of beaten and embossed bronze. [1]

### Access

According to the church's website (2015), the church is open:  
Daily 10:00 to 13:00, 14:00 to 17:00.

In April, May and June the afternoon closure is 18:00. In July, August and September afternoon opening is 15:00 to 18:00.

The church is rather hidden away, up a driveway on the south side of the west end of the Via di Stefano Rotondo.

### Liturgy

The church has no public pastoral ministry, and there is no regular Mass. However, it is available for liturgical events, including weddings, on request to the German-Hungarian College. The contact details are here.

The College reserves the right to refuse permission for events that it considers inappropriate -the norms of worship of the Roman Catholic Church need to be respected.

The patronal Solemnity of St Stephen the Deacon is celebrated on 26 December and this is the station church for that day, meaning that the Holy Father will usually celebrate Mass here.

The feast of St Stephen of Hungary is celebrated as a Solemnity here on 16 August.

SS Primus and Felician have their feast-day on 9 June.

### Artists and Architects

Antonio [Tempesta](#) [aka *Tempesti*] (1555-1630), Italian painter and cartographer  
Bernardo [Rossellino](#) (1409-1464), Italian Renaissance sculptor and architect  
Filippo [Barigioni](#) (1690-1753), Italian sculptor and architect of the Late Baroque tradition  
Jan Gentner (17<sup>th</sup> century), Prussian baker and wood carver  
Leon Battista [Alberti](#) (1404-1472), an Italian humanist author, artist, architect, poet, priest, linguist, philosopher and cryptographer  
Lorenzo Lotti [aka [Lorenzetto](#)] (1490-1541), Italian Renaissance sculptor  
Marcello [Leopardi](#) (1750-1795), Italian painter  
Matteo da Siena (16<sup>th</sup> century), Italian landscape painter  
Niccolò [Circignani](#) [aka *Il Pomarancio*] (1520-1597), Italian late-Renaissance / Mannerist painter  
Pietro [Camporese](#) the Elder (1726-1781), Italian architect  
Raffaello [da Montelupo](#) (1505-1567), Italian Renaissance sculptor and architect

### Relics:

Sts Primus and Felician

### Burials:

Theodore, Bishop from Palestine (7<sup>th</sup> century)  
<father of Pope Theodore I>  
Francesco Cardinal [TIBERI](#), (1773-1839)  
Bernardino Cappella (16<sup>th</sup> cent.), Italian poet  
[Donough O'Brien](#) of Cashel and Thomond (d.1064)  
<11<sup>th</sup> century Irish king>

### Location:

Addr: Via di Santo Stefano Rotondo, 7  
Coord: [41°53'4.7"N 12°29'48"E](#)

Info:



Telephone: 0039 06 421199

Email: [santo.stefano.rotondo@cgu.it](mailto:santo.stefano.rotondo@cgu.it)

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[Youtube video by Luigi Manfredi](#)