

Santa Sabina all'Aventino



Santa Sabina all'Aventino is a basilica in Rome. It is attached to the General Curia or headquarters of the Dominican order, and has the dignity of a minor basilica. Santa Sabina lies high on the Aventine Hill, in rione Ripa, next to the Tiber River and close to the headquarters of the Knights of Malta. The dedication is to St Sabina, a legendary 2nd century martyr. [1]

Santa Sabina is an early basilica (5th century), with a classical rectangular plan and columns. The decorations have been restored to their original modesty, mostly white. Together with the light pouring in from the windows, this makes the Santa Sabina an airy and roomy place. Other basilicas, such as Santa Maria Maggiore, are often heavily and gaudily decorated. Because of its simplicity, the Santa Sabina represents the crossover from a roofed Roman forum to the churches of Christendom.

History

The church was built in the 5th century, possibly on the site of the original *Titulus Sabinae*, traditionally the home of St Sabina. The tituli were the first parish churches in Rome, and most of them were originally private residences or commercial meeting-halls in which Christian congregations met (the so-called house-churches). [1]

In the 1st century the Aventine hill was an affluent neighborhood with several important temples and homes of patricians. It is thought that Sabina was a wealthy Christian with a house in the most exclusive part of the neighborhood, on the crest of the hill overlooking the river. This area was probably devastated during the Sack of Rome on 24 August 410 AD by the Visigoths led by their king, Alaric. [1] [g]

According to legend St Sabina was martyred in the year 114 at a place in Umbria called Vindena, which is now Rocca San Zenone. She was denounced by one of her slaves named Serapia. Her relics brought to the new basilica in the 5th century which was on the site of her town house at Rome. [1]

According to a original mosaic script on the wall facing the apse in the central nave, Pope Celestine I

commissioned the church and Petrus of Illyria, a Dalmatian priest of Rome, built the church presumably at the site of the house of the Roman matron Sabina (*Titulus Sabinae*). The church took eight years to complete, and was consecrated under Pope Sixtus III shortly after the year 432. It was originally near to a temple of Juno Regina, which was destroyed by an earthquake in 422. [1]

The original foundation epigraph in mosaic on the counterfaçade above the entrance door, reads:

CULMEN APOSTOLICUM CUM COELESTINUS HABERET
PRIMUS ET IN TOTO FULGERET EPISCOPUS ORBE,
HAEC QUAE MIRARIS FUNDAVIT PRESBYTER URBIS
ILLYRICA DE GENTE PETRUS, VIR NOMINE TANTO
DIGNUS AB EXORTU CRHISTI, NUTRITUS IN AULA,
PAUPERIBUS LOCUPLES, SIBI PAUPER, QUI BONA VITAE
PRAESENTIS FUGIENS MERUIT SPERARE FUTURAM.

("When Celestine had the apostolic summit, and shone out in the whole world as the first bishop, Peter a priest of the City, from the people of Illyria, founded this [church] which you admire, a man worthy of the name at the [second] coming of Christ, who nourished poor people at [his] house, a rich man towards the poor, a poor himself, who fleeing the good things of this present life deserved to hope for the future one."). [1] [d]

The *Liber Pontificalis* mentions a restoration under Pope Leo III (795-816) at the end of the 8th century,

At a later date, Pope Eugenius II (824-7), who was cardinal presbyter of Santa Sabina before his election to the papacy, remodeled the liturgical arrangements, providing a schola cantorum, an iconostasis and a pair of ambones or pulpits, decorated the walls with paintings, and set up a silver altar canopy. In the high altar he placed the relics of Sts. Alexander, Theodulus and Eventius from the Via Nomentana. [1] [3] [e]

In 1219, the church was given by Pope Honorius III to Saint Dominic, for his new order, the Order of Preachers, now commonly known as the Dominicans. Since then, it has been their headquarters. The Pope was of the Savelli family, whose palace was next to the church. St Dominic lived in the adjacent monastery for a period soon before his death in 1221. St Dominic, Pope St Pius V, St Celsus, St Hyacinth and St Thomas Aquinas are among those who have lived in the monastery adjacent to the church. [1]

The Dominicans restored the basilica, equipping it with a cloister with arches and a high bell tower, which was then rebuilt in the 17th century. During the 13th century the church underwent numerous changes and the Cosmatesque floor was also put in place. In 1441 Cardinal Giuliano Cesarini not only renovated the basilica, but he also built a porch (loggia) to shelter a doorway leading into the right aisle at the southwest end of the building. In 1460, during the pontificate of Pius II (1458-1464), the basilica was further restored and equipped with a portico in front of the entrance. [3] [e]

In 1586, Pope Sixtus V commissioned **Domenico Fontana** to bring the interior of the church up to date. The schola cantorum, ambones and iconostasis were demolished, the mosaic in the apse was removed (apparently this was already falling off), the ceiling was ripped out and most of the nave windows blocked up. The main altar was reconstructed with a baldacchino, and several side chapels were added. In the Baroque period Francesco Borromini did work from 1643, and some additions were also made in the 18th century. [1] [3]

After the conquest of Rome by the Kingdom of Italy in 1870, the Dominicans were expelled from their friary and the buildings turned into an isolation hospital for infectious diseases. However, the Dominicans were able to recover possession of part of the friary in the early 20th century. [1]

In the 20th century, most of these post-mediaeval alterations and additions made by **Fontana** were removed to restore the church back to what was believed to be its original state. The radical restoration took place in two phases: 1914-1919 by **Antonio Muñoz**, and 1936-1938 by one **P.**

Berthier. Apart from the Elci Chapel, high-quality Baroque fittings and artworks were treated with contempt. Excavations and archeological investigations produced fragments of mediaeval fittings which were skilfully used by **Muñoz** to replace the nave windows and build the present sanctuary. The overall result looks convincing, but it should be remembered that the present interior aspect is a modern work. [1]

The church is the seat of the cardinal title of Santa Sabina, established by Pope Celestino I in 423. †The current holder is Cardinal Jozef Tomko. [1]

Exterior

The Santa Sabina on the Aventine Hill is best admired from the Giardino degli Aranci (Orange Garden), a lovely park located just north of the church. The park has a terrace near the edge of the hill, which offers a panoramic view of the city, and especially of Trastevere on the other side of the Tiber. You can also clearly see the dome of Saint Peter's Basilica in the distance. [4]

The church looks much from the outside as it did when it was built in the 5th century and is a classic aisled basilica without a separate sanctuary bay or transept. The alignment is south-west to north-east, and there is a piazza between it and the street running parallel to the south. This piazza is named Piazza Pietro d'Illiria after the original founder. The street (Via di Santa Sabina) runs parallel to the church's major axis, which hints that the church respected the original ancient street plan when it was first built. The large external apse is prominent; it is only slightly lower and narrower than the main nave. [1]

At present, there are only two working external side chapels. The one on the right hand or south side, on the piazza, is on a square plan. However, on this side you can see two other chapels which are now disused. Firstly, there is a little semi-circular chapel which occupies the end of the right hand aisle. This now has no access from the interior, as it was walled off in the 20th century restoration but not demolished. [1]

In between the surviving chapel and the entrance loggia is a small square edifice with a vertical elliptical window and a lantern having a tiny conical tiled cupola. This building looks as if it is standing in the footprint of a lost larger edifice; there used to be an entrance range of half the height and with a single pitched roof standing in front of it, but this is now demolished. This addition post-dated the Nolli map of 1748. [1]

To the right of the working chapel used to be another little external chapel with a similar entrance range, now demolished. However, if you look under the roofline here you can see a linear fragment of carved stonework marking its attachment. Next to the aisle to the east of this used to be a rectangular edifice with an entrance from the orange grove to the east (now a public park). [1]

The left hand, north side has always had just the one external chapel, an architecturally separate octagonal structure. [1]

Fabric of the church

The exterior walls are brick throughout, and there is a pitched and tiled roof covering the entire nave. [1]

The external apse reaches almost as high as the nave roofline, and has its own pitched roof as does the little right hand aisle chapel. The aisle windows that survive are narrow arched slits, but the clerestory and apse windows are unusually large. It has been claimed that this demonstrates an Illyrian style of architecture rather than a Roman one, but the real reason is that the builders of the period were still skilled enough to provide such windows, and also walls without buttresses, without endangering the structure's stability. [1]

The window fenestrations are modern, courtesy of **Muñoz**, and the geometrically patterned transennae or glazing bars are based on fragments that he found. The panes are of selenite, not glass. There are thirteen of these windows on each side of the nave, three in the apse and five in a row above the entrance. These last five are only visible from the outside by looking from the rooms on the other side of the monastery's south cloister. [1]

Campanile

The Baroque campanile is attached to the near left hand corner of the nave, and is not easy to see. It replaced the Romanesque campanile provided in the 13th century, which either fell down or was demolished in the 17th century. [1]

The replacement is a narrow rectangular slab of four levels with two open arches in each level (those in the second are blocked). The structure is topped by a little triumphal arch flanked by a pair of Doric pilasters on each face supporting a low pyramidal tiled cap with a damaged finial. The sides of this triumphal arch have sweeping curves leading to a pair of baluster finials. [1]

The three bells date to 1596, 1843 and 1946. [3]

Loggia [1]

The right hand aisle has a side entrance from the piazza, and this is protected by an external loggia or porch occupying the space between the side chapel and the monastery. This side loggia has two tall Corinthian granite columns supporting an arcade of three arches; the outer pilasters in brick also have Corinthian capitals. This structure was built in the 15th century. [1]

In the right side of the loggia is a statue of St. Dominic [a]. On the left side of the loggia is a portal into the narthex. Above this portal is a painting depicting a scene from the life of Saint Dominic. It is said that St. Domenico, returning to the convent of Santa Sabina late at night, was escorted by an angel who also opened the door for him without having to wake up his father porter, who had a small window to guard the entrance to the convent. [2]

Narthex [3]

Unusually for Roman churches, the basilica has no monumental façade or triumphal entrance. This is because the friary, which now has two cloisters north to south, is built right up against what would be the façade and continues down the side of the piazza to the street. The frontage of the friary facing the piazza has an open loggia, and this continues as a large vaulted passage or narthex along the front of the basilica. It is the main entrance to the monastery, and the original front door of the church can be found by walking along it. It is possible to enter from the side porch, but I recommend going through the front door. The right hand aisle has its own door as well, but the left hand one has not because the passage ends in stairs there. [1]

This narthex, dating from the modifications of 1208-1222, is the surviving range of the quadriporticus (a square courtyard surrounded by colonnaded porticoes) which the original mediaeval fortress supplanted. There are eight surviving ancient columns of this in the narthex, four spirally fluted columns in yellow marble and four plain columns in granite. [1] [2] [3]

Embedded in the walls of the portico are archaeological finds and pagan and Christian inscriptions, stone fragments, imperial sarcophagi, and inscriptions. At the left end of the portico are two parallel stairs leading into the monastery. Between the stairs is the large statue of St. Rose of Lima [d] (1668). Over the opening is the Coat-of-Arms of Pope Clement IX (1667-1669). [2]

On the wall are the remains of 7th or 8th century fresco decorations, including that of Theotokos. The Virgin with Child is painted there, flanked by St. Peter and St. Paul, by S.t Sabina and St. Seria who introduce two clients and on the right the reigning pope. While the two clients are accompanied by their names, the archbishop Theodore and the presbyter George (two papal legates to the Council of Constantinople in 680), the figure of the pope is difficult to attribute. The two legates had been accompanied by the deacon John, the future Pope John V, who may be the unidentified figure. The fresco was framed with lapis lazuli blue and verdaccio. Under this painting there are also traces of an older decoration with painted marble mirrors, dating back to the 5th century AD. [2]

The entrances to the liturgical hall were originally three, one was later closed for the construction of the bell tower (13th century). The two surviving doors are different from each other and have marble jambs dating back to the 5th century. [3]

Entrance door [c]

The ancient portal of the main façade has a great historical and artistic value. In fact, this is the only early Christian wooden door that has survived. This dates from between 420 and 450, and is made of cypress wood. About 10 of the original 28 panels are missing, but any wooden object from this period is quite rare. In one of the panels with scenes from the life of Moses, God the Father is depicted as a hand extended from a cloud, the earliest way of representing Him in Christian art. The crucifixion scene in the top left-hand panel may be the earliest preserved representation of Christ crucified between two thieves in Western art. [1] [2]

The panels are recognizably the work of two collaborating artists, one of classical-Hellenistic inspiration, the other of late-ancient popular inspiration. The decorative surrounding of vines and bunches of grapes is later. The present arrangement of the panels is confused, and may be the result of a known restoration that took place in 1836. The restorer then allegedly re-carved the face of the drowning Pharaoh to represent Napoleon. [1] [2]

The eighteen surviving panels have the following representations, left to right and top to bottom:

[1] [b] [c]

1. Crucifixion.
2. Angel announces the Resurrection to the pious women
3. Adoration of the Magi.
4. Meeting of Jesus Christ and the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

5. Christ raising Lazarus, multiplying loaves and turning water into wine.
6. Moses in the Desert, the Quails, the Manna and Moses striking the rock to produce water.
7. Ascension of Christ.
8. Triumph of Jesus Christ and the Church

9. Christ appears to his disciples after the Resurrection, Incredulity of St. Thomas.
10. Christ appears to the women after the Resurrection.
11. Christ predicting Peter's denial.
12. Prophet Habakkuk and the angel taking him to feed those in the lion's den.

13. Moses receiving the Law, removing his sandals, at the Burning Bush and with the sheep.
14. Advent of the Kyrios
15. Exodus of Israelites with pillar of fire, Pharaoh drowning in the Red Sea and Aaron's rod turning into a snake.
16. Elijah ascending into heaven and Elisha catching his cloak.

17. Pilate washing his hands.
18. Christ before Caiaphas.

In the wall opposite the entrance there is an oculus through which you can see the remains of the original quadriportico of access to the basilica and an orange tree which, according to tradition, was brought to Rome by Saint Dominic from Spain and it seems that is the first tree of this citrus fruit introduced in the city. It is considered a symbol of the fecundity of the Dominican Order and, perhaps, the fruits of the candied oranges that Saint Catherine of Siena offered to Urban VI in 1379 were taken from this tree. The tree, of course, cannot be the original one, but tradition has it that this was born miraculously from the ancient one, for this reason it is still very revered. [3]

Friary

The original friary was attached to the bottom left hand corner of the church, and comprised three blocks arranged around an arcaded cloister. The north side of the cloister had an arcaded walkway but no building, so the rooms in the upper levels of the south range had a spectacular view across the river. There was a completely separate block attached to the top left hand corner of the church, running north-westwards with an annex running north-east into the orange grove. The latter is now gone. [1]

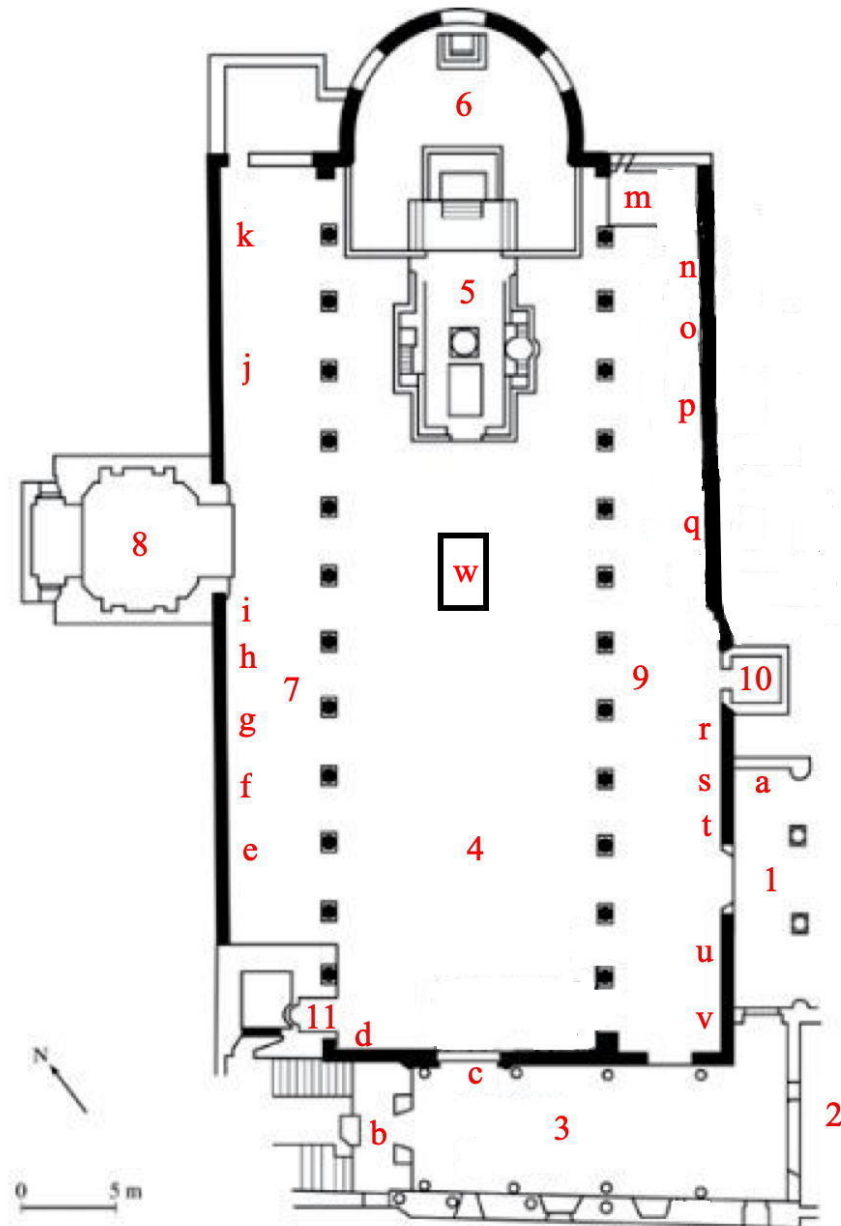
Originally, south of the monastery there was a large garden which occupied the space between it and the street. When the isolation hospital was opened here after 1870, this was converted into a second cloister by building an L-shaped block to the south and west. The friars do not have possession of this part of the complex, which is now an art school. Also, another block was built on the north side

of the old cloister. [1]

The friary also contains St. Dominic's room, which has been converted into a chapel. It is possible to see this, and the room of Pope St Pius V, on application at the friary. [1]

Men can also apply to visit the early 13th century Romanesque main cloister, and the chapter house where St Celsus and St Hyacinth, apostles of Hungary and Bohemia, made their vows as Dominicans. The cloister has 103 columns, and has recently been restored. [1]

Plan



Interior

The church's interior is different from most other early churches because of the way the large windows let in so much light. This was common in ancient and early medieval churches, but we seldom experience it today because the openings have often been walled up or the windows reduced in size. The motivation was usually worries about the stability of ancient buildings. Smaller windows meant stronger walls, especially needed if an old church had its wooden ceiling or open truss roof replaced by a vault. [1]

Nave [3]

The nave is 153.5 ft (46.80 m) long, the apse is 23.6 ft (7.20 m) deep, and the church is 81.4 ft. (24.80 m) wide. The proportions of the church are based on Hellenistic principles, as described by Vitruvius. For instance, the height of the columns equal 9 1/2 times their diameter, and the space between columns equal 5 times their diameter; this is just as Vitruvius describes it. [1] [e] [g]

The geometric glazing bars in the windows are modern but the idea for them came from original fragments found in excavation. These are now kept in the narthex, so you can compare them with what **Muñoz** provided in the 1930's. The panes are of selenite, not glass. [1]

The nave is lined with a fine set of twenty-four 2nd century fluted column shafts of Proconnesian marble with their Corinthian capitals. The carved capitals are of exceptional quality. A good guess is that they were taken from one of the buildings on the Aventine that had fallen into disuse by the mid 5th century. The neighborhood was probably already depopulating by the time of the Sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410. Specifically, Emperor Theodosius the Great had closed all the pagan temples in 395 and these columns may have come from such a redundant temple as that of Juno very near by. However the columns show little signs of re-use, and a theory has been suggested that they came unused from an imperial builders' store. [1] [g]

On the base of the third column on the left is written in graffiti "RUFENO", the name of the one who perhaps materially implemented the project of the basilica. An identical signature is also found on a column shaft in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. [2]

The colonnades support arcades rather than trabeations or straight architraves, and this is one of the earliest example of such a construction in Rome. The fifth-century opus sectile patterns in the spandrels above the capitals, which playfully imitate bare stone masonry and what appear to be military insignia, are competent but not as refined as the columns. Above each column is a large motif in porphyry and green serpentine, looking just like a large face-mirror on a stand. Some of these are elliptical, and some round. Centuries of scholarship have failed to provide a satisfactory theory as to just what this decorative scheme means. They might be stylized representations of the Host and Chalice at the Mass. Above these representations is a polychrome frieze of alternate squares, roundels and lozenges. [1]

The flat coffered wooden ceiling is a simple one, decorated with stars in gilt, and it was provided in 1938. The original basilica may not have had a ceiling at all, as was the case at San Paolo fuori le Mura before the 19th century fire there. There was a ceiling here in the Middle Ages, however. [1]

The surviving panel of mosaic is on the counterfaçade over the main entrance doors, which shows two female figures with the dedicatory inscription mentioned above between them. The one on the left is labelled ECLESIA EX CIRCVMCISIONE, the one on the right has the text ECLESIA EX GENTIBVS. They represent the Christians of Jewish origins and the Christians who were converts from pagan religions. These are similar to the two figures in the late 4th century apse mosaic in the Basilica of Santa Pudenziana. Between the two figures is the text recording the building of the church by Peter the Illyrian, who is described as a Roman priest leading an ascetic life. The first line contains an assertion of the Pope's supreme and universal authority, and is an early example of such a text. [1] [4] [d]

Documentary evidence of lost mosaics indicates that above the windows there used to be the symbols of the four Evangelists, and either side of the windows were representations of SS Peter and Paul. [1]

In a back corner between the counter-façade and the campanile base is a short spirally ribbed stone column with a strange polished black stone on top shaped like a round loaf of bread. This is the *lapis diaboli*, [d] and by tradition the Devil threw it at St Dominic while he was at prayer in the church and smashed the paving slab on which he was kneeling. The stone looks like an ancient Roman scale-weight, examples of which have survived in other Roman churches. [1]

Funeral monuments have also been walled up on the counter-façade: the funeral monument of Cardinal Arcangelo de 'Bianchi (17th century), the funeral monument of Cardinal Simone Pasqua di

Negro (16th century), the funeral monument of Bishop Giovanni Battista Colonna d'Istria (Nineteenth century). [2]

There is also an epigraph on the counter-façade commemorating the 1936 restoration by **Antonio Muñoz**.

The floor, relaid in the 20th century restoration, has several mediaeval tomb-slabs. The most important is that in the middle of the nave floor is a sepulchral plaque for Muñoz de Zamora, [1] seventh Master General of the Dominican Order, who died in 1300. Very unusually the effigy is in mosaic which has been dated to c. 1300 on stylistic grounds, so it seems likely that the identification is correct. The plaque is attributed to **fra Jacopo Torriti**. This is in fact the only surviving tomb slab in Rome on which the deceased is depicted in mosaic. Another interesting floor-slab shows the effigy of Perna Savelli who died in 1215, showing the family crest in mosaic. [1] [2] [4] [a] [f]

In the central nave, in front of the apse, there is the reconstruction of the schola cantorum [5]. As already mentioned, the schola cantorum was eliminated by **Domenico Fontana** in the sixteenth century and then restored in the twentieth century by **Antonio Muñoz**, inspired by the original one of the ninth century. For the reconstruction some ancient plutei were reused, slabs that present ornamental motifs with cosmogonic symbolism: plant motifs, spirals, Lombard crosses, Lombard wheels, Solomon's knots, Trinitarian knots. [2]

The triumphal arch is decorated with seventeen tondi, fifteen of them with saints' busts executed in sepià fresco and two left blank. These were executed by **Eugenio Cisterna** in 1920, and are based on a 17th century description of original mosaics. To left and right are stylized buildings representing *Jerusalem* and *Bethlehem*, and along the roofline are flying doves. [1]

Sanctuary [6]

There is no apse mosaic, which is unusual in Rome for a church of this date. The apse was originally so decorated, as was its triumphal arch, but the mosaics have been lost. Seventeenth century descriptions indicate that much more mosaic survived then, and when the basilica was new the nave walls may have had mosaic decoration too. It is certain that Old and New Testament scenes used to be depicted above the arcades. [1]

The lost apse mosaic was replaced by a fresco by **Taddeo Zuccari**, painted in the Mannerist style in 1560, and was allegedly executed from (now lost) contemporary drawings of the original mosaic. This was repainted by **Vincenzo Camuccini** in 1836, and was left alone by the 20th century restorers because of its alleged provenance. It shows *Christ enthroned in glory*, above the River of Life from which sheep are drinking, and surrounded by apostles and saints. SS Peter and Paul are in front (note the papal tiara on the former), and SS Sabina and Serapia are on the left. The head of Christ is surrounded by winged putto's heads, definitely not a palaeo-Christian motif and indicating that **Zuccari's** interpretation of the original mosaic design was very free. [1] [3]

The stone choir furniture, comprising high altar, bishop's throne, two ambones or pulpits and a schola cantorum or choir enclosure, is modern and dates to the 20th century restoration. However, ninth century fragments recovered in the restoration (mostly from the flooring) are incorporated. These came from the presbyteral furnishings supplied by Pope Eugene II in 824, and notable are the flat marble slabs or transennae in the screen. The reliefs on these are carved with crosses decorated with curlicues and intertwined knots, and are allegedly inspired by a Persian style. They also look somewhat Celtic. [1]

Beneath the high altar, which has a porphyry frontal, are enshrined the relics of St Sabina and and three obscure martyrs called Eventius, Alexander and Theodolus. These were brought in by Pope Eugene II in his re-ordering of the sanctuary, having been originally venerated at a suburban shrine at Sant'Alessandro on Via Nomentana. [1] [3]

Left aisle [7]

Scanty traces of 5th century frescoes can be found at the far end of the left aisle. These were only discovered in 1961, and are not very clear. You can make out depictions of brocaded hangings, and also of vine scrolls. [1]

Built into the base of the bell tower is a small chapel for St Dominic [11]. The image of St Dominic, made on a gold background, is framed by a shrine with Cosmatesque decoration. [2]

Along the wall of the left aisle there are some funeral monuments:

- the funeral monument of Umberto Locati(1503-1587) [e],
- the funeral monument of Pietro Passerino (17th century) [f],
- the funeral monument of Cesare Delfino, philosopher, theologian, Parma doctor - (16th century) [g],
- the funeral monument of Cardinal Filippo Spinola (16th century) [h],
- the funeral monument of Cardinal Pietro Bertani (16th century) [i],
- the funeral monument of Bishop Ignazio Ciantes, O.P. (1594-1667) Bishop of Sant'Angelo dei Lombardi e Bisaccia. and his brother, Bishop Giuseppe Ciantes, O.P. (1602-1670), Bishop of Marsico Nuovo [j],
- the funeral monument of Gurone Bertano (1499-1573), diplomat, and his wife Lucia dall'Oro (1521-1567), Bolognese Poet. Gurone was sent by Pope Paul III to England to propose terms for King Henry VIII's reconciliation to Rome, which were firmly rebuffed [k].

Chapel of St Catherine of Siena [8]

The Cappella d'Elci is off the left aisle at the middle of the length of the nave. It is a lavish, sumptuous and ornate Baroque work dedicated to the famous Dominican mystic St Catherine of Siena, and has an octagonal plan. The architect was **Giovanni Battista Contini**, and the patrons were a family of Tuscan nobles called the Elci. Construction lasted from 1671 to 1688. [1]

The altarpiece is an oil on canvas painting of *Our Lady of the Rosary* (1643) by **Giovanni Battista Salvi da Sassoferrato** in which she is shown flanked by St Dominic and St Catherine. This was not the original altarpiece, which featured the latter saint and which was by an artist called Morandi. The altar has four Corinthian columns in a red, yellow and white breccia. [1] [3]

The dome here is lit by eight oeil-de-boeuf windows in gilt framing, and features a fresco by **Giovanni Odazzi** of *Madonna presents Saint Catherine of Siena to Jesus Christ* also known as *Glory of Saint Catherine of Siena* (1709-1714). [1] [3]

In the pendentives are frescoes by **Odazzi**: [3]

- St Catherine receives communion from Jesus Christ,
- St Catherine exchanges her heart with that of Jesus Christ,
- St Catherine receives the stigmata,
- St Catherine chooses the crown of thorns.

The Elci coat-of-arms is spectacularly rendered on the floor in opus sectile, featuring the double-headed eagle. Buried here are Cardinals Raniero d'Elci (d. 1761), Francesco d'Elci, (d. 1787), Scipione Pannocchieschi d'Elci (d. 1670), and Guillaume-Hugues d'Estaing (d. 1455), whose gravestone is outside of the chapel. [1]

Right aisle [9]

Along the wall of the right aisle are traces of wall paintings, datable between the 5th and 9th centuries. [3]

Description of the aisle will progress from the front to the rear. At the end of the left aisle are the pipes of the organ [m] of the basilica, hidden by a grate. There is also a small altar with a modern sculpture of the Nativity as an altarpiece. [2]

Also in the right aisle is the late 15th century tomb of the Spanish Cardinal Ausiàs Despuig [n], who died in 1484 (note that the Italians render his name as Auxias di Poggio). The artist is unknown, but it is likely that he belonged to the school of **Andrea Bregno**. The inscription says: [1]

Ut moriens viveret, vixit ut moriturus
("To live after death, he lived as one who was going to die").

Continuing along the right aisle, on the wall, there is the funeral monument of Michael Arcangelo

Nannio [o] (dated 1682), with a frame that contains the painting of the deceased, priest and theologian. [2]

Then the tombstone of Pope Innocent IV [p] (1248), who was buried in Naples. The epigraph is in gothic script. Then there are two epigraphs [q], one above the other. The top one announces indulgences by Pope Gregory IX (1238). The plaque below commemorates the consecration of a new high altar by Pope Gregory IX in 1238. [e]

Chapel of St Hyacinth [10]

Off the right-hand aisle is the Chapel of St Hyacinth (Giacinto in Italian), also known as the Bernerio Chapel. St Hyacinth was responsible for bringing the Dominican Order to Poland in 1222. The chapel is on a square plan, built in 1599-1600 by Cardinal Bernerio, commemorating St Hyacinth canonization in 1594. [5] [e]

The altar has four alabaster columns, and an oil on canvas altarpiece by Lavinia Fontana depicting *Vision of San Giacinto Odrovaz* (1599). The wall and vault frescoes by Federico Zuccari are charmingly realistic, depicting people dressed in fashions of the time and allegedly based on real persons: *Triumph of Madonna* (vault), *Canonization of St Hyacinth* (right wall) and the *Investiture of St Hyacinth* (left wall). [1] [2] [3]

To the right of the chapel is a niche [r] containing an ancient column from the 4th century pertaining to the substructures of the pre-existing building, which traditionally came from the original house owned by St Sabina. [1] [3]

To the right of the chapel (after the aforementioned column belonging to the domus on which the basilica was built), there is the tombstone of Antonio Ferracuti [s] (1497), doctor of law, originally from Mallorca. For this slab, the architrave of a door of the house of Theodora, wife of Teofilatto, father of Marozia (members of a family that dominated Rome in the 10th century), a dwelling next to the church, was used. [2]

Near the beginning of the right aisle, there is the funeral monument of Alessandro and Celio Bichi [t] (17th century), a niche monument with marble mirrors and portrait busts of the two deceased. The monument in Baroque style was erected by the two brothers, one cardinal of S. Sabina and the other consultor of the Sacra Rota. Their burial slabs are in the floor in front of the monument. [2]

Next is tombstone of Fabio Basiolo [u] (1590). At the back of the right aisle is the memorial plaque for Bishop Giovanni Battista Colonna d'Istria [v] (1758-1835), who is buried in Nice, France.

Underground

Below a grating in the floor is visible an excavated room of an ancient Roman house. This might have been the original Christian "house-church" at the site, the Titulus Sabinae. On the other hand, the original titulus may have been elsewhere nearby, as such a move certainly happened at Santa Prassede and possibly at other ancient churches. [1]

Archaeological research carried out between the 19th and 20th centuries (and in particular in the years 1855-1857 and 1936-1937) under the church and in the vicinity made it possible to identify the remains of Roman buildings, datable from the archaic age to the imperial age: under the first half of the basilica is a domus of the III - IV century; under the second half and the apse there were instead two archaic sanctuaries. Other excavations near the church have then brought to light four short sections of the Servian Walls, which were built against houses from the Republican age (2nd century BC) and from the Augustan age; in the 2nd century part of the republican buildings were adapted for the cult of Isis. Finally, excavations under the four-sided portico of the church revealed that it was built on a thermal plant from the 2nd century, restored in the 4th century. [3]

Special notes

There is a shop in the monastery that sells postcards, including cards showing the panels in the front door, and religious objects and literature. It is of special interest to those interested in Dominican spirituality. [1]

Santa Sabina is the station church on Ash Wednesday. Since the time of Pope John XXIII, it is custom for the Holy Father to assist in person in the afternoon Mass on that day, when ashes are distributed. [1]

It is possible to see the rooms of Pope St Pius V and St Dominic at the monastery. Men can visit the Romanesque cloister and the chapter house where St Celsus and St Hyacinth, apostles of Hungary and Bohemia, gave their vows as Dominicans. To visit these places, apply at the monastery. [1]

Artists and Architects:

Andrea [Bregno](#) (1418-1506), Italian sculptor and architect of the Early Renaissance
Antonio [Muñoz](#) (1884-1960), Italian architect
Domenico [Fontana](#) (1543-1607), Swiss-born Italian architect and engineer of the late Renaissance.
Eugenio [Cisterna](#) (1862-1933), Italian painter & mosaic designer
Federico [Zuccari](#) (1541-1609), Italian Mannerist painter and architect
Giovanni Battista [Contini](#) (1641-1723), Italian architect of the Late Baroque period
Giovanni Battista Salvi da [Sassoferrato](#) (1609-1685), Italian Baroque painter
Giovanni [Odazzi](#) (1663-1731), Italian painter and etcher of the Baroque period
Jacopo [Torriti](#) (13th century), Italian mosaicmaker and a Franciscan monk
Lavinia [Fontana](#) (1552-1614), Italian painter from Bologna
P. Berthier (20th cent.), French architect
Taddeo [Zuccari](#) (or Zuccaro) (1529-1566), Italian painter of the Roman Mannerist School
Vincenzo [Camuccini](#) (1771-1844), Italian Neoclassic painter

Relics:

St Sabina
St. Eventius
St. Theodulus
Pope St. Alexander

Burials:

Hugues Cardinal [AYCELIN DE BILLOM](#), O.P., (ca. 1230-1297) {also [here](#)}
Buried in front of the main altar
Guillaume-Hugues Cardinal [d'ESTAING](#), O.S.B., (?-1455) {also [here](#)}
Buried in the chapel of the Rosary
Ausias Cardinal [DESPUIG](#), (1423-1483) {also [here](#)}
Buried in a sepulchre done by Andrea Bregno
Giovanni Cardinal [d'ARAGONA](#), (1456-1485) {also [here](#)}
Pietro Cardinal [BERTANI](#), O.P., (1501-1558)
Buried next to the chapel *del Crocifisso*
Archangelo Cardinal de' [BIANCHI](#), O.P., (1516-1580) {also [here](#)}
Filippo Cardinal [SPINOLA](#) (1535-1593) {also [here](#)}
Girolamo Cardinal [BERNERIO](#), O.P., (1540-1611) {also [here](#)}
Buried in the chapel of S. Giacinto, which he had founded
Alessandro Cardinal [BICHI](#), (1596-1657) {also [here](#)}
Vincenzo Cardinal [MACULANI](#), O.P., (1578-1667) {also [here](#)}
Scipione Cardinal [PANNOCCHIESCHI D'ELCI](#), (1598-1670) {also [here](#)}
Buried in his family's chapel, S. Caterina da Siena
Tommaso Maria Cardinal [FERRARI](#), O.P., (1649-1716)
Raniero Cardinal [D'ELCI](#), (1670-1761) {also [here](#)}
Buried in the chapel of his family dedicated to S. Caterina da Siena
Francesco Cardinal [D'ELCI](#), (1707-1787)
Buried in his family's tomb
Luigi Cardinal [PANDOLFI](#), (1751-1824)

Bartolomeo Odescalchi, (1526-1566)
From the minor nobility of Como, relative of Pope Innocent XI

Location:

On the Aventine hill, at the Piazza Pietro d'Iliria on the Via di Santa Sabina.

Coord: [41° 53' 4.2"N, 12° 28' 47.3"E](#)

Info:

Telephone: +39 06 579401 - 06 57940600

Fax: 0039 06 5750675

Open Times:

Open 08:15am-12:30pm 03:30pm-06:00pm

Masses:

Holidays: 08:00am-10:30am-11:30am

Weekdays: 07:15am

During the mass it is not possible to visit the church

Links and References

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
2. [I Viaggi di Raffaella blog](#)
3. [Cathopedia](#)
4. [Corvinus](#)
5. [Roma non per Tutti blog](#)
6. [Rome101](#) (Door panels)
 - a. Gardner, Julian; "Arnolfo di Cambio and Roman Tomb Design", *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 115, No. 844 (Jul., 1973), pp. 420+422-439 [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/877354>]
 - b. Kantorowicz, Ernst H.; "The "King's Advent": And The Enigmatic Panels in the Doors of Santa Sabina"; *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Dec., 1944), pp. 207-231 [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3046963>]
 - c. Delbrueck, Richard; "Notes on the Wooden Doors of Santa Sabina"; *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Jun., 1952), pp. 139-145. [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3047407>]
 - d. Erik Thunø: "Looking at Letters: 'Living Writing' in S. Sabina in Rome"; *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft*, 34. Bd. (2007), pp. 19-41 [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40027371>]
 - e. Lloyd, Joan Barclay; "Medieval Dominican Architecture at Santa Sabina in Rome, c. 1219–c. 1320"; *Papers of the British School at Rome*, Vol. 72 (2004), pp. 231-292 [<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40311082>]
 - f. Davies, Gerald S.; RENASCENCE THE SCULPTURED TOMBS OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY IN ROME; E. P. Button and Co., 1916; Pp. 357-362
 - g. Kinney, Dale; "Expanding the Christian Footprint: Church Building in the City and the Suburbium"; *The Fifth Century in Rome: Art, Liturgy, Patronage*; Viella s.r.l. 2017, pp. 75, 76

Other links

[Wikipedia page](#)

[info.roma web site](#)

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[RomeArtLover. web site](#)

[www.italyguides.it](#)

[youtube](#)

[sightsofrome blog](#)