

Santo Stefano del Cacco



The ancient church of **Santo Stefano del Cacco** is a heavily restored 9th century (?) monastic church in the rione Pigna. The dedication is to the deacon and protomartyr St Stephen.

The small square in front of the church is almost always crammed with cars.

The name of the church

The present by-name of the church, i.e. "Cacco", was formerly linked to the Roman deity Cacus. A later, more plausible, theory holds, that "Cacco" deals with a statue of the ancient Egyptian god Thoth, which is depicted with a dog's head, which was discovered in the ruins of the neighboring temple of the ancient Egyptian deities Isis and Serapis, the *Iseum Campense*, built in 43 B.C. The head was interpreted as that of a monkey, and in popular speech it was called the "Macaco", of which comes the philological distortion "Cacco". The most ancient name of the church, "Santo Stefano de Pinea", alludes to the fact that the bell-tower is crowned with a small "pigna" (pine-cone), made of white marble.

The "Cacca" in Vatican museum (See [here](#)).

History

The building date of the church is not known for certain, but possibly during the pontificate of Pope Adrian I (772-795). The church was built on the site of the cult chamber of the Temple of Isis and Serapis, also known as the *Iseum Campense* after its location in the Campus Martius. This temple is the source of the twelve columns of the nave.

Certainly the church existed at the time of Pope St. Paschal I (817-824), who embellished it with an apsidal mosaic. This mosaic, unfortunately destroyed in 1607, depicted the pope with a model of the church.

The present church preserves the plan of the original one, although it seems unclear as to how much of the fabric is original. From its present position set back from the street, it seems clear that there was originally an external loggia or narthex and possibly a full atrium.

Under Pope Paschal II (1099-1118) a restoration of the apse took place, involving artists recorded as "Gregorius and Petrolinus". There was some kind of further major restoration in 1160, when a Romanesque campanile was added and the portico rebuilt.

In 1563 pope Pius IV (1559-1565) assigned the church to the Sylvestrine Fathers (who still serve the church), founded in 1231 by Saint [Silvestro Guzzolini](#) (1177-1267). (The Sylvestrines follow a rule akin to that of St. Benedict.) The order soon thereafter had the church restored in 1564 when the monastery was built which incorporates the Romanesque portico.

A more radical restoration took place in 1607, when the apsidal mosaic of the 9th century was destroyed. Then, between 1638 and 1643, the church was given a Baroque makeover resulting in its present appearance. Also, a small façade was added to the convent block in front of the church in about 1640. It is thought that the work was designed by **Paolo Maruscelli**, and executed by **Antonio Canziani**, at least as regards the façade.

The cult of the Holy Name of Mary was introduced here in 1685, after the feast of the same name had been introduced by Pope Innocent XI after a victory over the Turks at Vienna in 1683.

There was a restoration in 1725 by the architect **Ludovico Rusconi Sassi**, who is buried in the church. In 1857 to 1865 there was another restoration, involving the floor which was re-laid with marble salvaged from the burnt-out San Paolo fuori le Mura. The nave ceiling was also frescoed.

In 1870, the convent was confiscated by the State but the monks were allowed to continue in charge of the church. However, in the 1930's an arrangement was entered into whereby the convent became the headquarters (the Curia Generalizia) of the Sylvestrine order. This has the name Sant Stefano Protomartire (not Cacco). The order ceased to exist as such in the mid 20th century, when it joined the Order of St Benedict as a congregation.

The interior was restored in 2007, and the façade finally was cleaned after having been in a dirty state for years.

Holy Face of Jesus

The church has been a center of the devotion to the Holy Face of Jesus since the mid 20th century. In fact, one of the chief promoters of the devotion, Blessed Maria Pierina, had some of her visions concerning it while here.

Exterior

The actual church is completely surrounded by buildings, and is invisible from the street.

The plan is basilical, having a nave of seven bays with arcades on each side. There is no transept, but an external semi-circular apse. Off the left hand side aisle is a block of three external chapels, one for every other bay and separated by very thick walls. The right hand side aisle only has two chapels, off the second and third bays. The first bay of that aisle is intruded into by the Romanesque

campanile.

The edifice is "wonky", in that the front and back walls are not at right angles to the side walls. Neither are the arcades parallel to the side walls, or perpendicular to the end walls.

Campanile

The campanile is very difficult to see, and there is no view of it from the street. It is in an unrestored state, and the main convent block wraps around its east side.

It is in brick, with three levels above the aisle roofline separated by cornices with dentillations and modillions. Each face used to have an arcade of three arches separated by thin stone columns, but these have been blocked up or altered. The tiled pyramdial cap has a stone finial looking like a mushroom, which is allegedly the pinecone of the Pigna.

Façade

The little two-level façade is attached to the frontage of the convent, and is not part of the church. In fact, it is not even on the church's major axis, the corridor (1) leading to the nave from the door is on a slight diagonal.

There are two levels, now (since the recent restoration) rendered in a pale tan with architectural details in white. The first level has two wide panels in white supporting an entablature without an architrave and with a strongly projecting flared cornice, and in front of these panels is a pair of Doric pilasters with the base molding of their capitals extended across the panels as little string courses. There are posts between pilaster capitals and the cornice.

The single doorway has a molded Baroque door case, and a triangular pediment raised on posts with triglyphs. Mounted on the pediment is the coat-of-arms of the Silvestrines. In between the posts is a tablet with a dedicatory epigraph:

D[icatum] Steph[ano] Prot[omartyri], Cong[regatio] Monac[horum] Silvestrinorum

The second level has a pair of Ionic pilasters on much narrower backing panels, and these support a deep entablature with a step-molded architrave and a triangular pediment. There is a little square window in the tympanum of the pediment. This level has a large central rectangular window, with a molded Baroque frame embellished with a pair of thin festoons below a raised segmental pediment.

Interior

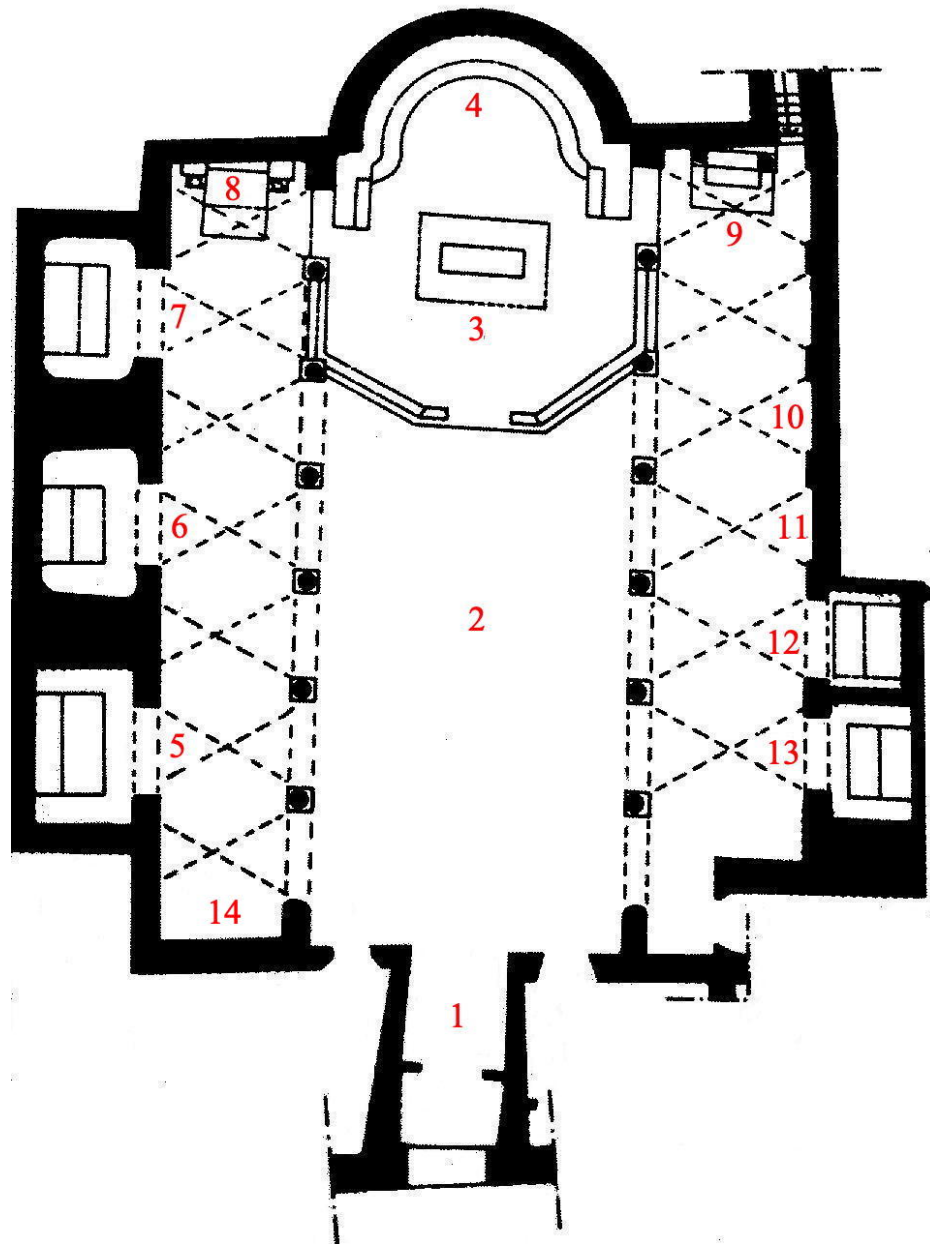
The asymmetrical interior has a basilical plan with lateral aisles and chapels. In total there are seven bays, but the last two bays of the central nave are included in the sanctuary. The second, fourth and sixth bays of the left hand side aisle have external side chapels, as do the second and third bays of the right hand side aisle. Two more chapels occupy the ends of the aisles, flanking the sanctuary, making a total of seven side chapels in all.

Nave (2)

The twelve elaborated columns of the nave come from the temple of Isis and Serapis. Five of the columns are bigio antico, or grey marble from Africa. Two are cipollino from Greece, one is pavonazzetto from Turkey and four are grey granite from Mons Claudianus in the Eastern Desert of Egypt. The columns have matching oversized Ionic capitals supporting arches, on which rest the two side wall entablatures.

Above every other arch is a window. The ceiling is barrel-vaulted, with lunette embrasures over the windows. The decoration of the nave walls and ceiling is mid 19th century, as is the marble floor. The fresco in the central panel of the ceiling shows *The Apotheosis of St Benedict*, and was executed by an unknown artist in 1857.

The side aisles are cross-vaulted. The counterfaçade has a fine balustraded gallery containing a late 17th organ in a gilded wooden case, perched above the entrance.



Sanctuary

The sanctuary (3) is marked off by a three-sided balustrade in polychrome marble work, which projects into the nave. It has an apse with a conch, and the triumphal arch of this forms a crescent lunette under the nave vault. This contains the unusual feature of an elliptical oeil-de-boeuf window.

The free-standing altar was erected in 1620, and has no aedicule or altarpiece because the choir stalls of the monks occupy the curve of the apse behind it. These form an impressive piece, in walnut and dating from 1668.

There is now a crucifix, painted on a flat board, suspended over the altar.

The apse wall (4) above the choir stalls has three frescoes. The central one shows *The Stoning of St Stephen*, and is by **Cesare Nebbia**. The flanking frescoes show *St Charles Borromeo* (left) and *St Francesca Romana* (right), and are by **Cristoforo Casolini**. He also executed the three frescoes in the conch, the central one showing *The Mystery of the Trinity* and the two flanking oval tondi containing angel musicians.

The gilt stucco decoration (1608) of the triumphal arch and the apse is the work of **Rocco Solari**. On the counterfaçade is the fine cantory sculpted in gilt wood by **Paolo Maruscelli**.

The aisles and chapels are described in clockwise order, starting at the left side of the entrance.

At the back of the left aisle is the funeral monument (14) for Architect Ludovico Rusconi Sassi (d. 1736), who was a member of the church community.

Chapel of the Holy Face

The first chapel on the left hand (5) side is now dedicated to the Holy Face. The 20th century icon of the *Veil of Veronica* is a focus of serious devotional attention. It is by **Suor Zeffirina-del-Sacro-Cuore Mariani**, 1945.

The original dedication was to the Holy Name of Mary, and the polychrome marble and stucco fittings are by **Giovanni Battista Ferraboschi**, 1641. The aedicule has two columns in red Sicilian jasper. The central curlicued window is inserted between the two fragments of the split pediment, on which putti are sitting.

The side wall frescoes are original, and are by **Giovanni Baglione**. They depict *Saints Carlo Borromeo and Filippo Neri* (left) and *Saints Stephen and Paul the first Hermit* (right).

Chapel of St Sylvester Gozzolini

The second chapel on the left is (6) dedicated to St Sylvester Gozzolini, the founder of the Silvestrines, and is the Blessed Sacrament chapel. The chapel has rich polychrome marble fittings including a pair of Ionic aedicule columns in black marble and a very good tabernacle in the form of a miniature round temple.

The 18th century altarpiece by **Onofrio Avellino** is described as depicting *St Sylvester Receives the Rule from St Benedict*, but this can be questioned. The putative St Sylvester has no halo. There are two anonymous virgin martyrs in the background. This could be a votive piece in celebration of a young monk's profession, in the style of Carlo Maratta.

On the left side is a 17th century wooden crucifix. The two lateral lunette frescoes in tondi are by **Cesare Mariani** 1870, and depict *Miraculous healing performed by St. Silvestro* (left) and *St. Silvestro receiving the Communion from the hands of the Virgin Mary* (right).

Chapel of St Matthew

The third chapel on the left (7) is dedicated to St Matthew, and has a small oval cupola with a lantern. The cupola has an *Angelic Concert*, and its pendentives are decorated with putti with inscription ribbons by **Cesare Mariani**, a 19th century academic painter of the purist style. **Mariani** also painted *St. Matthew and the Angel* above the altar of the chapel.

This chapel was formerly dedicated to St Nicholas but was re-fitted in 1870 in a rather brightly colored neo-Baroque style.

Chapel of the Crucifix

The chapel at the end of the left hand aisle (8) is dedicated to the Crucifixion. The aedicule is in gilded wood. The altarpiece is a damaged early 17th century fresco showing *SS Lawrence, Anthony the Abbot and Sylvester Gozzolini venerating the crucified Christ*. This might be by Cristoforo Roncalli, Il Pomerancio, or of his school. He was a parishioner here.

The altar frontal is in fine pietra dura work. If you look over the aedicule, you will see that the far aisle wall is crooked.

The 17th century wooden crucifix used to be over the fresco, but this was moved to the chapel of St Sylvester Gozzolini in the last restoration.

Chapel of Our Lady, Consoler of the Afflicted

The chapel at the far end of the right hand aisle (9) is dedicated to Our Lady, Consoler of the Afflicted (*Consolatrix afflictorum*), which is one of the titles given to her in the Litany of Loreto. It has a pair of Corinthian columns in red and cream marble with gilded capitals, supporting a horizontal entablature without any pediment.

The altarpiece is a 17th century wooden figurine, with a silk dress and mantle behind glass in a round-headed niche. Legend has it that this sculpture shedded tears upon the eve of the Napoleonic invasion of Rome in July 1796.

On the aisle wall, after the chapel, are two funeral memorials. The second is a monument (10) for Giovanni Battista Milani (1870).

The Pietà

In the middle of the right aisle is an arched and railed-off niche (11) containing the church's most famous artistic treasure, a *Pietà* by **Perino del Vaga**, a pupil of Raphael (1519). It depicts the Virgin Mary with her dead Son Jesus Christ on her lap. This motif is commonly known as the *Pietà*. Of all the existing works of the artist this *Pietà* is his first independent commission. Later, this fresco was painted over with a larger one, which in the background showed the Golgotha. Unfortunately both frescoes are in a poor state of preservation.

The painting, which is executed with great skillfulness, shows the dead Christ lying on the lap of his Mother, while St. John the Evangelist supports Christ's right side and St. Mary Magdalen kisses His left hand. Behind them an old man, vested in yellow, is standing holding the Nails of the Cross and the Crown of Thorns, two instruments of the Passion, in his hands. The female figure on the lower left looking at the holy scene is probably the noble lady, who commissioned the fresco.

Chapel of St Joseph

The second chapel (12), formerly dedicated to the Nativity of Christ, is now consecrated to St. Joseph and has an elaborated barrel-vault. The painting *The Death of St. Joseph* is by an anonymous 17th century artist.

Chapel of the Guardian Angel

The first chapel on the right (13) is dedicated to the Guardian Angel, and the altarpiece is a rather bad copy of a work by Pietro da Cortona now in the Palazzo Barberini. The *pietra dura* altar frontal is good.

Sacristy

The sacristy dates from 1564. The sacristy houses several interesting paintings, among others *St. Nicholas received in glory by Christ and the Virgin Mary* (1695) by **Giovanni Odazzi**. It was executed for the chapel later dedicated to St. Matthew. There is also the oval painting of *St. Aurea being led to her martyrdom* by **Luigi Garzi** and a refined bozzetto of the *Nativity of the Virgin* attributed to **Sebastiano Conca**.

In a hall in the adjacent motherhouse of the Sylvestrine Fathers there is an *Adoration of the Magi* by the Dutch painter **Jan Miel**.

Artists and Architects:

Antonio Canziani (17th cent.), Italian architect

Cesare [Mariani](#) (1826-1901), Italian painter

Cesare [Nebbia](#) (c.1536-c.1622), Italian Mannerist painter

Cristoforo [Casolani](#) (c. 1582-1630), Italian painter

Cristoforo [Roncalli](#) [aka *Il Pomerancio*] (1552-1626), Italian Mannerist painter

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

Giovanni Battista Ferraboschi (17th cent.). Italian architect

Giovanni [Odazzi](#) (1663-1731), Italian painter and etcher of the Baroque period

Jan [Miel](#) (1599-1663), Flemish painter
Ludovico Rusconi [Sassi](#) (1678-1736), Italian architect of the Rococo period
Luigi [Garzi](#) (1638-1721), Italian painter of the Baroque period
Onofrio [Avellino](#) (1674-1741), Italian painter of the Baroque period
Paolo [Maruscelli](#) [Marucelli] (1594-1649), Italian architect of the Baroque period
Piero Bonaccorsi [aka Perino [del Vaga](#)] (1501-1547), Italian painter of the Late Renaissance/
Mannerism
Rocco Solari (17th cent.), Italian sculptor/stuccoist
Sebastiano [Conca](#) (1680-1764), Italian painter
Suor Zeffirina-del-Sacro-Cuore Mariani (29th cent.), Italian painter, nun

Location

Addr: Via di Santo Stefano del Cacco 26.

Coordinates: [41°53'50.1"N 12°28'45.6"E](#)

Burials

Octavio Antonio Baiardo (d. 1665)
Italian antiquarian, born in parma
Architect Ludovico Rusconi [Sassi](#) (1678-1736)
To the left of the entrance.
Giovanni Battista Milani (1870).
Right aisle

Info

Zone: Rione Pigna (Torre Argentina) (Roma centro)
Telephone: 0039 06 6793860
Fax: 0039 06 6783257

Open Times:

Sunday 11:00am-12:30pm

Orario Messe:

Festivi: 11.30am

Links and References

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[romafelix.com](#)

[ITINERA BARBARAE Blog](#) (copied some photos)

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