

# Santa Dorotea



**Santa Dorotea** is an 18<sup>th</sup> century Baroque parish and conventual church in the northern part of Trastevere near the Ponte Sisto, dedicated to St. [Dorothy](#) of Caesarea, 4<sup>th</sup> century virgin martyr. The full name of the church is **Santi Silvestro e Dorotea a Porta Settimiana**.

## History:

An ancient memory recall, here, a chapel was built with donations of Pope Sylvester (314-335), known in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. This ancient church is first attested to in a Papal bull of Pope Callistus II in 1123, and in the "Liber Censuum" of 1192, being referred to under its first dedication of San Silvestro alla Porta Settimiana. The name comes from the nearby Porta Settimiana a simple arch of the Baths of Septimius Severus (146-211), incorporated in 271, in the Aurelian walls. Remnants of these structures are still observed under the floor of the apse. [1] [4]

The church was known in the 14<sup>th</sup> century with the name of San Silvestro della Malva. In 1445 it was recorded under the double dedication of SS Silvestro e Dorotea, the latter being an obscure martyr of Caesarea in Cappadocia (modern Kayseri in Turkey) who might have been killed in 305 under Diocletian. [1] [6] [a]

On the occasion of the Holy Year of 1475 the medieval church was destroyed and a new one was built, dedicated only to Saint Dorotea, and given full parochial status. The relics of St Dorothy were enshrined here, in the urn beneath the high altar, by Giuliano De Datis, the parish priest, in 1500. [4] [6]

Here, in 1513, the Genovese notary Hector Vemazza founded the Society of the Divine Love

(Compagnia del Divino Amore) which he started with Giovanni Maria Giberti, Card. Gaspare Contarini, the humanist Giacomo Sadoletto, S. Gaetano Thiene and Pietro Carafa (Paul IV), with the aim to solidify the Catholic Reformation, which ended with the Council of Trent. The Company was dispersed after the Sack of Rome (1527). In this church in 1517 Saint Gaetano of Thiene (St. [Cajetan](#)), with Pietro Carafa, developed the foundation of the Teatini. [1] [4]

In 1597, St. Joseph Calasanz, the founder of the Pious Schools, opened the first free public school in Europe in an adjacent house. In 1617, Pope Paul V approved the Congregation of the Pious Schools, the first religious institute dedicated essentially to teaching. [1] [4] [5]

In 1727 the parish was suppressed, and in 1738 the church and surroundings were purchased by the Friars Minor Conventual. They demolished it again, and rebuilt it as the chapel of their new convent on the site. In 1750 the rebuilding was entrusted to **Giovanni Battista Nolli** by Giovanni Carlo Viperà, Minister-General of the Conventuals. The church was completed in 1756. They both have sepulchral monuments in the church. Nolli is buried at the base of the main altar. [1] [2] [26]

The parish was re-erected in 1824, and the church restored and re-consecrated in 1879. [1]

## Exterior

The church is incorporated into the convent buildings, and is joined onto domestic accommodation on both sides. So, only the façade is visible from the street. [1]

There is a transversely double-pitched and tiled section of roof just behind the façade, and then another longitudinal double pitch running back to the integral semi-circular apse which is pitched in sectors. Underneath the roof in the middle is a false saucer dome, and the tall cylindrical lantern of this protrudes. It has four large rectangular windows in round-headed niches, and a shallow tiled cupola. [1]

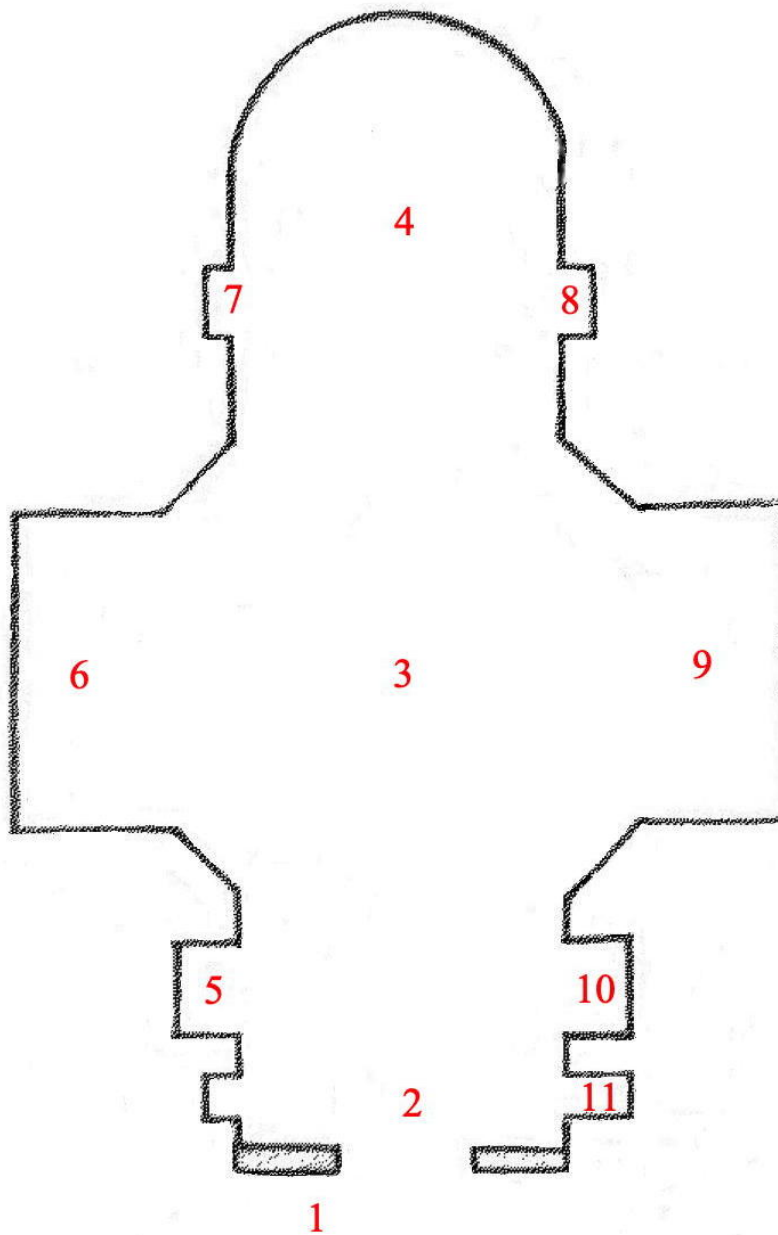
The campanile is over the right hand side of the apse. It is a plain rectangular block with a tiled pyramidal cupola and a single round-headed sound hole on each side. To see the lantern and cupola, albeit from a distance, you need to go along the Lungotevere Farnesiana north-west of the Ponte Sisto, and catch a glimpse over the garden wall of the Villa Farnesiana. [1]

### Façade. (1)

The restrained and simple façade is coved (concave), and is rendered in a very pale orange with the architectural details in white. Four gigantic rectangular Composite pilasters dominate the design, rising from the ground to the entablature. The outer ones are tripletted, looking as if there are two other pilasters half-hidden behind each. [1] [6]

The entrance portal fits snugly in between the inner pair, and has a segmental pediment containing the emblem of the Franciscan order (two crossed arms with a cross above). Above this is a large tablet with a dedicatory inscription ("To Almighty God in honor of Saints Sylvester Pope and Dorothea virgin and martyr"), and between this and the entablature is a large window with a shallow arched top. Squeezed between the top of the window and the entablature is a pair of crossed palm fronds in honor of the martyrdom of St Dorothy. Then there is a pair of little square windows in the frieze below the pediment. The composition has no other decoration. [1]. [6]

## Plan



## Interior

The interior has a single nave with six side altars and deep apse, with vault and octagonal skylight . First comes a short nave with two chapels on either side, and a barrel-vaulted ceiling. Then comes the transept, which has a frescoed saucer dome with an oculus and with the pendentives incorporated. The short arms of the transept contain two further chapels. The presbyterium has a short barrel vault with a fresco, leading into the apse. [1]. [4]

The interior is typically richly decorated with faux marbling. The arches of the nave, transept and presbyterium spring from very wide, diagonally facing piers under the dome which contain cantoria or opera-boxes for solo musicians and singers. From these piers spring four wide ribs containing rosettes, which meet at the oculus and divide the dome into four frescoed panels. [1] [a]

The frescoes in the dome, presbyterium and nave vaults (3) depict scenes from the life of St Dorothy as well as Franciscan saints (among them are the Blessed Andrea Conti, and Blessed Bonaventure of Potenza), and are by **Gaetano Bocchetti**, completed in 1931. Although better known as an impressionist painter, he was certainly capable of figurative work in a realistic style as can be seen here. [1] [2] [4]

In the entablature around the church is an interesting motif of the heads of putti within garland swirls on a background of light blue-gray.

The polychrome marble floor under the dome, with the Franciscan emblem of the two crossed arms showing the stigmata in the palms, is of the 19<sup>th</sup> century restoration. While the confessionals in walnut are also from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. [1] [4]

### Sanctuary (4)

The high altar of polychrome marble is against the far wall of the apse, which has a conch, and is flanked by a pair of Corinthian pilasters revetted with what looks like red marble. Under the altar is a 19<sup>th</sup> century marble reliquary containing the remains of St Dorothy. The altar is adorned with bronze candlesticks from 1834. The "funeral medallion", on the right, was built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, commissioned by Giuliano De Datis, in memory of the translation of the relics of the martyr Dorothea. The modern altar is in front of the balustrade. [1] [4]

Above the altar is a round-headed altarpiece *showing SS Dorothy and Sylvester Venerating an Icon of Our Lady* by **Michele Bucci**, late 17<sup>th</sup> century. His pictures in this church are the only ones of his in Rome. The work incorporates an earlier icon of *Our Lady of Divine Love (Madonna del Divino Amore)*, of about 1600, which recalls the confraternity that was a forerunner of the Theatine order. [1]

The new fresco in the conch depicting *The Martyrdom of St Dorothy* is by **Gino Terreni**. [1]

The parish has provided an altar "pro populo" in front of the sanctuary rails, which is just a table. To its right is a cippus or marble stone in the form of an ancient altar, which has an inscription recording the enshrinement of St Dorothy in 1500. On it is now a crucifix. [1]

An inscription on the left side commemorates Fr. Maximilian Kolbe, founder of the Militia Immaculatae (Army of the Immaculate One), who celebrated Mass here in 1918.

### Sacristy

Quiet and intimate space, dominated by the "*Vision of St. John the Evangelist*" (mid-18<sup>th</sup> century) by an unknown Roman painter, and banded wooden cabinets of the third decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the sink is the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. [4]

### Side chapels

The side chapels are described in clockwise order, starting from the back left:

#### Chapel of St Joseph of Cupertino (5)

The first chapel on the left is dedicated to St Joseph of Cupertino, and the altarpiece of him is an oil on canvas by **Vincenzo Meucci** of Florence, 1753. [1] [2] [4]

#### Chapel of St Francis of Assisi (6)

The second chapel on the left is dedicated to St Francis of Assisi, and the altarpiece depicting *The Musical Ecstasy of St Francis* is an oil on canvas by **Liborio Mormorelli**, late 18<sup>th</sup> century. A band of angels is serenading the swooning saint. [1] [2] [4]

(When I visited the church in 2019 the painting was covered with a cloth, possibly being restored) In the lunette below the barrel vault is a modern stain glass window of *St. Francis and the Infant Jesus*. In the center of the barrel vault is a fresco of *St. Barbara with the palm branch of martyrdom*. On either side are paintings of Franciscan saints. The arch soffit and sides of the lunette have the motif of the heads of putti within garland swirls on a background of light blue-gray, that is in the entablature of the church.

#### Chapel of the Crucifixion (7)

The third chapel on the left is dedicated to the Crucifixion, and the altarpiece showing *Crucifixion with Saints Rosalia, Margaret of Cortona, Bonaventure and Nicholas* is an oil on canvas, the second work by **Bucci** in the church. [1] [2] [4]

#### Chapel of the Immaculate Conception (8)

The third chapel on the right is dedicated to the Immaculate Conception, and the altarpiece is an oil on canvas by **Giorgio Gaspare von Prenner** of Vienna, 1763, commissioned by Monsignor Filippo Maria Pirelli. [1] [2] [4]

### Chapel of St Anthony of Padua (9)

The second chapel on the right is dedicated to St Anthony of Padua, and the altarpiece showing *Our Lady Appearing in a Vision to St Anthony* is an oil on canvas by **Lorenzo Gramiccia** of Rome, 1756. [1] [2] [4]

In the lunette below the barrel vault is a modern stain glass window of *St. Anthony*. To the right of the altar is a large wooden Crucifix. On the right wall, in an alcove is a statue of *Our Lady of Sorrows*. The door to the sacristy is on the left wall. Hanging from the barrel vault is a silver chandelier.

On the wall to the left of the altar is a memorial inscription for Giovanni Battista Nolli, an Italian architect and surveyor. Nolli is buried at the base of the main altar. To the right of the altar is a painted wooden Crucifix. In the right wall of the chapel is an alcove with a statue of Our Lady of Sorrows.

### Chapel of St Joseph Calasanz (10)

The first chapel on the right is dedicated to St Joseph Calasanz, and the altarpiece depicting *The Apparition of St Cajetan to St Joseph Calasanz* is an oil on canvas by **Gioacchino Martorana**, 1782. [1] [2] [4]

One the entrance is a modern choir with the pipe organ of the church, built by the **Ruffatti Brothers** during the pontificate of Paul VI. The instrument has an electric transmission, with display, without a case, composed of main barrels arranged in a palisade with miter mouths, and has a console, having two keyboards of 61 notes each and a concave-radial pedal of 32 notes, in the choir. [6]

In a small room just to the right of the entrance, behind an ornate wrought iron gate is a Christman Crèche. On the back wall is an old fresco of Christ child with a lamb.

#### **Burial:**

Giovanni Battista [Nolli](#)  
Italian architect and surveyor

#### **Artists and Architects:**

Gaetano [Bocchetti](#) (1888-1990), Italian painter  
Gino [Terreni](#) (1925-2015), Italian painter and sculptor from Empoli in Tuscany  
Giorgio Gaspare von Prenner (1720-1766), painter from Vienna  
Gioacchino [Martorana](#) (1735-1779), Italian painter from Palermo  
Giovanni Battista [Nolli](#) (1701-1756), Italian architect and surveyor.  
Liborio Mormorelli († 1794), Italian painter  
Lorenzo [Gramiccia](#) (1702-1795), Italian Baroque painter  
Michele Bucci (17<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian painter  
[Ruffatti Brothers](#), Italian organ makers (also see [here](#))  
Vincenzo [Meucci](#) (1694-1766), Italian painter of the late-Baroque period, from Florence

#### **Info:** [3]

Telephone: 0039 06 5806205  
Fax: 0039 06 5806205  
Web site: [www.parcchiasantadorotea.com](http://www.parcchiasantadorotea.com)  
Email: [fraumberto@tiscali.it](mailto:fraumberto@tiscali.it)  
Email: [santadorotea@vicariatusurbis.org](mailto:santadorotea@vicariatusurbis.org)  
Opening times: 07:30am-12:00pm 04:00pm-07:30pm  
Mass schedule:  
Weekdays: 8:00 to 18:00  
Holidays: 9.00-10.30-12.00-18.00  
Eves: 18.00

**Links and References:**

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)

2. [Info.Roma web page](#)

3. [060608 web page](#)

4. [Parish web page](#)

5. [Wiki page on Joseph Calazanz](#)

6. [Italian Wikipedia page](#)

a. Erwee, Michael; **THE CHURCHES OF ROME, 1527-1870**; Pinder Press, 2013; pp 143-144

b. Sullivan, George H.; **NOT BUILT IN A DAY: Exploring the Architecture of Rome**; Carroll & Graf Publishers; 2006; pp. 75-84

---

© [Skip Conde](#)  
[Churches of Rome.info](#)