

Santa Maria dei Sette Dolori



Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows is a 17th century convent church located on the slopes of the Gianicolo in the Trastevere district.

History

The church was begun in 1643 by **Francesco Borromini**, as part of a project by the Augustinian oblates community, whose order was founded around 1640, by Camilla Virginia Savelli Farnese, Duchess of Latera, on the advice of her cousin Giacinta Marescotti. The monastery admitted to religious life the young of noble family but of poor health: the oblates, in fact, observed a mitigated rule, approved by Pope Alexander VII on June 16, 1663. (2)

Unfortunately, after twelve years in 1655 the Duchess lost her patrimony in the vicissitudes suffered by the Farnese family, the money ran out and the church was never finished as **Borromini** intended. **Francesco Contini** attended to finishing the interior from 1659 to 1665. The foundress, as a widow herself, lived the rest of her life in poverty in a small room next to the church which is now the sacristy. (1)

The convent lost its rental income when its property was expropriated during the Napoleonic period at the end of the 18th century, and as a result it sold most of its artworks. However, it arranged a restoration by **Gaspare Salvi** in 1845 which resulted in the present polychrome interior. (1) (2)

During the Roman Republic of 1849 the convent buildings were confiscated and used as a military hospital, and they were seriously damaged in a bombardment when Rome was conquered by the Kingdom of Italy in 1870. Unlike most other monasteries in Rome subsequently, this one was not confiscated by the government in 1873. One oddity during the life of the community was that the church was within the enclosure. This meant that only women were allowed to visit it, no men. This prohibition apparently persisted until the later 20th century. (1) (2)

In 1929 there was a major restoration. (1)

During the Nazi occupation of Rome in the Second World War, the monastery of the Augustinian Oblates was one of the main places of refuge for Roman Jews; here the nuns welcomed 103 Jews. (2)

In 2007 there was another major restoration of the church wing, at the instigation of the municipality because the sisters had allowed the fabric to run down. (1)

The church is now in the care of the Suore Oblate del Santo Bambino Gesù who are based at the church of Bambin Gesù all'Esquilino. (1)

Hotel

In the later 20th century the convent suffered a lack of vocations, and so leased most of their convent to form a hotel, the Hotel Donna Camilla Savelli. This presents itself (possibly correctly) as the best hotel in Trastevere. (1)

Exterior

The church is accessed by a large gate that looks onto an internal courtyard. The entrance gateway has a Baroque doorframe supporting a segmental pediment over a short dedicatory inscription. The ironwork in the gates themselves are intricate, and might have been designed by Borromini himself. (1) (5)

The church is an integral part of the convent buildings, which occupy the city block between the Via Garibaldi and the Via dei Panieri, and are rather irregularly laid out in three separate wings. There is a large entrance courtyard, with the church and the main convent/hotel entrances in a large L-shaped wing on two sides of the courtyard. Behind the church is a large main courtyard or cloister, which has never been arcaded and which has a second wing down its south-west (Via Garibaldi) side. To the south-east of this is a third block which is a rather messy set of buildings around two small courtyards. (1)

The church itself is on the ground floor of the entrance block, with its axis perpendicular to the entrance. Thus, you have to turn left in the vestibule after entering. (1)

The present main courtyard now includes what used to be the garden of the sisters, on the Via dei Panieri side. Given that the nuns were never allowed out, this garden was very small. (1)

There is no obvious campanile. (1)

Façade

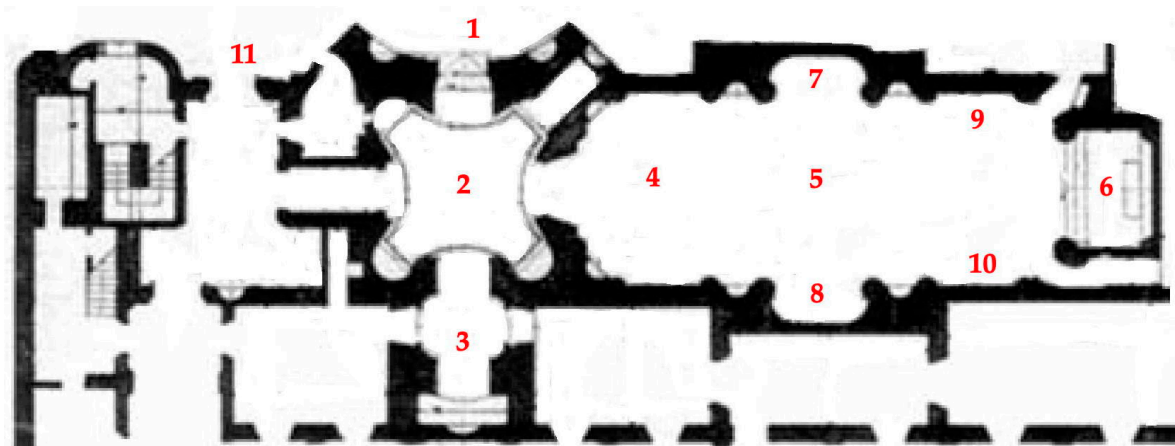
The entrance façade (1) of the church was never completed, and as a result is in unadorned brick. (1)

The geometrical plan is that of a coved arc inserted into a flat plane, and according to architectural historians Borromini took the idea from the Villa of Hadrian at Tivoli. The façade has six gigantic Doric pilasters rising to the roofline, the outer pair of which contain the coved curve only in the lower half. The upper half of the façade has this curve confined to the inner pair of pilasters, with the walls between the inner and outer pilasters sweeping back. (1) (2)

The only stonework in the façade is the entrance doorcase. This has a large Baroque trapezoidal transom window, over which is an arc cornice with a head of *Our Lady*. This cornice is supported by two stylized lilies, symbols of the Farnese. (1)

The doorway to the right (11) leads directly into the convent. (1)

Plan



Interior

Vestibule (2)

The entrance leads into a vestibule that has a plan based on an irregular octagon, with the short sides having little apses and incurved long sides for doorways. Directly across from the entrance is an extension into the Chapel of the Assumption. To the left is the entrance into the church nave, and to the right is the entrance into the convent.

Chapel of the Assumption (3)

From the vestibule the chapel has its own small cross-shaped vestibule. There is a small saucer dome on pendentives and with stucco decoration, having the *Dove of the Holy Spirit* in a glory on a cloud and within a wreath. The pendentives display the emblems of the Evangelists. The stucco is not gilded or colored.

The chapel has a Baroque altar with a polychrome marble frontal and a pretty statue of *Our Lady* being lifted into heaven by putti. This has a round-headed gilded frame, and a blue background. (1)

Nave (5)

The nave is a long, narrow rectangular space with rounded corners. Tall, regularly spaced Corinthian columns in pink marble are embedded in the walls, with two flanking the entrance, side chapels and triumphal arch and two in each length of wall in between. Hence there are a total of sixteen of these. (1)

In the middle of the nave side walls on each side is a chapel.

These columns carry an entablature, which masterfully follows the lines of the semicircular arches over the little rectangular apse and the two side chapels, and so form their archivolts. However, over the entrance the cornice forms a arch, but the architrave rears up on either side to cut off the frieze and to touch the cornice with a pair of curlicues. In the gap thus created is a window in the shape of an inverted funnel. Between this and the door is a large tablet with an inscription commemorating the 1929 restoration. (1)

The frieze of the entablature is in green marble, and the walls in between the columns are revetted in colored stone including alabaster. This is not Borromini, but 19th century. In between the columns flanking the entrance and triumphal arch are four depictions of angels holding instruments of the Passion, and executed to resemble statues standing in round-headed scalloped niches. On the columns is a very interesting set of *Stations of the Cross*. (1)

The shallow barrel-vaulted ceiling does not spring from the main entablature, but from a super-cornice running at the level of the tops of the arches. This also runs over four rectangular windows in the side walls which give natural light, and four round-headed windows in the corners which look into convent premises. The vault is coffered in squares arranged in a diamond pattern, with a large rectangular central panel which was intended for a fresco but which is blank. There is a stucco floral decoration over the triumphal arch. (1)

The far end of the nave is occupied by the wooden choir stalls (4) of the nuns. Since the church was within the enclosure, the nuns could worship here and not in a hidden-away choir behind a grille as in other enclosed nunneries in Rome. (1)

Sanctuary (6)

The sanctuary is a rectangle transverse to the nave. There is no altar aedicule, but two further columns in the same style as those in the nave occupy the far corners. The barrel vault is richly decorated, including 19th century frescoes depicting putti and gilded stucco work. Interestingly, the lunette above the altarpiece is executed in a trompe-l'oeil or optical illusion so as to resemble a curved apse conch. (1)

The altar is in bronze and rich polychrome stonework, with a bronze frontal grille bordered by pietra

dura work and a bronze tabernacle backed by an alabaster panel bordered with verde antic. Behind the grille are the relics of a martyr called St Caesarius. The altarpiece featuring the *Deposition* by Giovanni Antonio de'Sacchis is hung above, in a gilded frame. (1)

The side walls have relics displayed in wall-cases. (1)

Side Chapels

The two side chapels are shallow barrel-vaulted niches with curved corners. The vaults are richly decorated and the walls revetted in polychrome, but there are no aedicules. The matching frontals are made of alabaster and verde antico. (1)

Chapel of St Augustine (7)

The left hand chapel is dedicated to St Augustine of Hippo, and the altarpiece depicts *Tolle, Lege*, "take up and read". This an early work by **Carlo Maratta**, and shows the saint as a monk contemplating an infant. The scene depicts an event which the saint recorded in his autobiography, whereby he heard a child chanting "tolle, lege" ("take, read") while in a garden. He picked up the Scriptures, and what he read converted him to a fully Christian life. (1) (2)

Chapel of the Annunciation (8)

The right hand chapel is dedicated to the Annunciation, and has a copy of a 15th century Florentine altarpiece. (1)

Other items of interest

The rose-marble wall sarcophagus (9) of the foundress is to the left in the nave, just before the sanctuary. It is an attractive piece, with yellow marble trim and bearing a miniature portrait of her, giving the impression of a very strong-willed lady. The floor slab states that she was buried here with her husband. (1)

A depiction of *The Death of St Joseph* is in a rectangular niche (10) in the wall opposite. (1)

In the convent there is a canvas of *Our Lady of Sorrows with angels and symbols of the Passion* (1721) by **Marco Benefial**. (3) (4)

There is a crypt by Borromini, which is apparently being used as a wine-cellar by the hotel. (1)

Access

The church is in a rather remote corner of Trastevere, at the top end of the lower part of the Via Garibaldi as it climbs from the Porta Settimiana (the house number is 27). This section of the road used to be called the Via delle Fornaci, and the church is hidden away in a courtyard next to the junction with the Via dei Panieri. (1)

At the end of the 20th century, the church was only open for Mass at 7:15 on weekdays, and 8:00 Sundays. (1)

However, now the complex is a hotel it seems that individual visitors are welcome to come and look at the church during working hours when the reception is open (groups, especially guided ones, need to make previous arrangements). (1)

Location

Address: Via Garibaldi 27, 00153 Roma

Telephone: 06-58.97.327

Coord: [41°53'23.5"N 12°27'58.3"E](#)

Artists and Architects

Carlo [Maratta](#) (1625-1713), Italian Late Baroque Classical painter

Francesco [Borromini](#) (1599-1667), leading figure in the emergence of Roman Baroque

architecture

Francesco [Contini](#) (1599-1669), Italian architect and painter

Gaspare [Salvi](#) (1786-1849), Italian architect

Giovanni Antonio [de'Sacchis](#) [*Il Pordenone*] (c.1484-1539), Italian Mannerist painter

Marco [Benefial](#) (1684-1764), Italian proto-Neoclassical painter

Links and References

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
2. [Italian Wikipedia page](#)
3. [Info.roma web-page](#)
4. [ROMAPEDIA blog](#)
5. [Roma SPQR web-page with gallery](#)

Other links

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

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