

San Pietro in Vincoli

St Peter in Chains



The **Basilica of St. Peter in Chains** is a 5th century basilica, conventual and titular church at Piazza di San Pietro in Vincoli in the rione Monti. The dedication is to St Peter the Apostle. Access to the piazza is through a stairway and tunnel, called Salita dei Borgia, off of via Cavour, near via dei Serpenti.

The relic for which the basilica is famous is the chain used on St Peter during his imprisonment. The traditions of the chains can be read at the end.

History

Excavations carried out beneath the existing church in the 1950s discovered the remains of a 2nd century bathhouse and a 3rd century mansion, which was possibly *titulus*. [d]

According to tradition in 109AD Theodora, a pious Roman lady who was a sister of Hermes, a prefect of Rome, built a chapel on the Esquiline Hill as a shrine for the chains of St Peter. Both Theodora and Hermes were converted by Pope Saint Alexander I (105-115). [1]

There was a church here before the present one, which we know because pilgrims in the "Dark Ages" copied down epigraphs which referred to a rebuilding. This old church was erected on the foundations of the building there previously, probably in the mid 4th century, and was dedicated to the Twelve Apostles. The first definitive documentary evidence of the church is the signature of a Roman priest called Philippus at the Council of Ephesus in 431, described as "presbyter ecclesiae Apostolorum", presbyter of the Congregation of the Apostles. [1] [h]

According to transcribed epigraph evidence, the priest Philippus just mentioned and Licinia Eudoxia, wife of the Western emperor Valentinian III, together in 442 (or possibly 439) sponsored the rebuilding of the original church on the present site, which had suffered damage during the Gothic sack of AD 410. In consequence, it is also known as the *Titulus Eudoxiae*. The dedication was changed from the Twelve Apostles to SS Peter and Paul by Pope Sixtus III in the latter year. [1] [f]

The name "Saint Peter in Chains" first appears in the time of Summachus (498-514), and by the

eleventh century this name became the customary reference to the basilica, which has been a station church since the time of Pope Gregory the Great (590-604). [1]

In the reign of Pope Pelagius I (556-61), the alleged relics of the Maccabean Martyrs were enshrined here. These are described in the Second Book of the Maccabees as Jews tortured to death for being faithful to the Torah in the 2nd century BC. The source of the relics was allegedly Antioch in Syria. An archaeological investigation of the Maccabean relics was made in the 1930's. When the ancient sarcophagus was opened, it was established that the remains were not human. [1]

In 680, a magnificent mosaic of St Sebastian was erected as an ex voto in gratitude for the cessation of an epidemic. [1]

The church became a very important pilgrimage destination in the Dark Ages. As a result, it was restored and embellished by Pope Adrian I (772-795), Leo III (795-816), Stephen IV (816-7) and Gregory IV (827-44). Because of its size, it was sometimes used for councils and conclaves and Pope Gregory VII was elected here in 1073. It was he who changed the dedication from SS Peter and Paul to St Peter in Chains, although the latter name had already been in use for centuries. [1]

During the Babylonian Captivity of the popes at Avignon in France, the church fell into ruins. As a result, Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (actually, Nikolaus von Kues) took it in hand in 1448 and began a massive restoration. He died in 1464, but left a fund which paid for the continuation of the work overseen by Pope Sixtus IV (1471-1484) and Pope Julius II (1503-1513). The present portico is one result, erected in 1475, and the adjacent monastery was another. The church was served by Canons Regular of the Lateran, who are still in charge, and the monastery contained a community of them from then on. [1]

Pope Julius was cardinal here, Giuliano della Rovere, and he had his palace next door to the left. Part of it survives, and the family emblem of an oak tree or leaf occurs in the church decoration (robur is Latin for oak timber; quercus is the tree). [1]

The failure of the project for a tomb in St Peter's for Pope Julius II finally led to the completed sculptures being put here 1545, including the famous Moses by Michelangelo.

There was a restoration at the end of the 17th century by Francesco Fontana, which resulted in the present ceiling and much of the decoration. [1]

The monastery was sequestered by the Italian government in 1873, and turned into a college of engineering. This it remains, but fortunately the beautiful cloisters have been preserved. [1]

A massive re-ordering of the sanctuary took place in 1875-77. Before then, the chain was kept in the sacristy and only brought out on important days. To allow permanent veneration, the floor under the main altar was dug out to create an open confessio and the chain put in a glass box over its own altar below the main one. Further, a second confessio was excavated behind the chain altar, amounting to a little crypt, and the ancient sarcophagus containing the alleged relics of the Maccabean Martyrs was put here. Above, a large baldacchino was erected over the main altar. [1]

There was another major restoration in the mid 20th century. When it was finished, the present marble floor was laid. [1]

The church was one of the tituli, Rome's first parish churches, which arose in the 4th century. As one of the tituli, the church would have counted as titular from its foundation. The present titular is Donald William Wuerl, archbishop of Washington DC, USA, who was appointed in 2010. [1]

The church is served by the Canons Regular of the Lateran. Since 1970, it has been the property of the Italian state. [1]

The present basilica is slightly trapezoidal rather than rectangular in plan, and this is witness to its re-used foundations. [1]

Exterior

The basilica is in brick and the nave and transept are covered by a pitched and tiled roof in the form of a T, and the large apse has its own roof which is only slightly lower than the main one. The large monastic cloister is to the south of the church, and the north range of this covers the right hand aisle. The left hand aisle is also impinged upon by a row of domestic buildings on a very narrow plot on the south side of the Vicolo delle Sette Sale. The portico range is approached by a shallow but wide flight of steps, and hides the original frontage. [1]

Despite later restorations and refittings, the fabric that of the church is essentially 5th century and so this is one of the oldest church buildings in Rome. If you go down the Vicolo delle Sette Sale you will get a good view of the ancient apse. It is in brick with a crowning cornice in stone with modillions, and there are also two stone string courses inserted into the fabric. [1]

Portico

The portico (2) and the range above amounts to a separate architectural unit, added on to the ancient frontage. It was built during the pontificate of Sixtus IV (1471-1484) by Baccio Pontelli, and would originally have had a sloping tiled roof. However, the upper storey was added in 1578, on the orders of Cardinal Antoine de Granville, to hide the old façade. Under Pope Clement XI (1700-12) there was a redecoration and a provision of guard railings. [1]

The loggia frontage consists of five arches with molded archivolt, separated by four travertine columns which have a chamfered square as their cross-section (a square with its corners cut off to form an irregular octagon). The capitals of these are non-classical, with a motif claimed to include oak leaves (hence alluding to the Rovere family). If so, they are rather stylized and could be interpreted as acanthus leaves. Above the arcade is an entablature supported on strap corbels, with a molded architrave. The second storey is very simple, and sits on a shallow plinth set on the cornice of the entablature. It has five small rectangular windows with floating cornices, and a main cornice just below the actual roofline. The roof is flat. [1]

The iron railings were added in the same project as the upper storey. The blacksmithing is intricate, and over the central gate the chain reappears. These railings were to keep beggars and sheep out during the night, the latter because the countryside started here until the 19th century. [1]

The loggia itself is divided into five bays by transverse arches running from the arcade columns to engaged pilasters of the same style in the church frontage. The central ceiling panel has a good Baroque motif in stucco, featuring the chain and keys of St Peter within palm branches. [1]

The entrance to the Roman remains beneath the church is in the right corner of the portico. [d]

The marble entrance portal is from the 15th century restoration, and the lintel bears the arms of the Della Rovere family repeated three times. If you look closely, you will see that the central shield has a papal tiara, and the two others a cardinal's hat. Pope Sixtus IV and his nephew Giuliano della Rovere are thus being commemorated. The basilica is unusual in only having the single entrance. [1]

Cloister

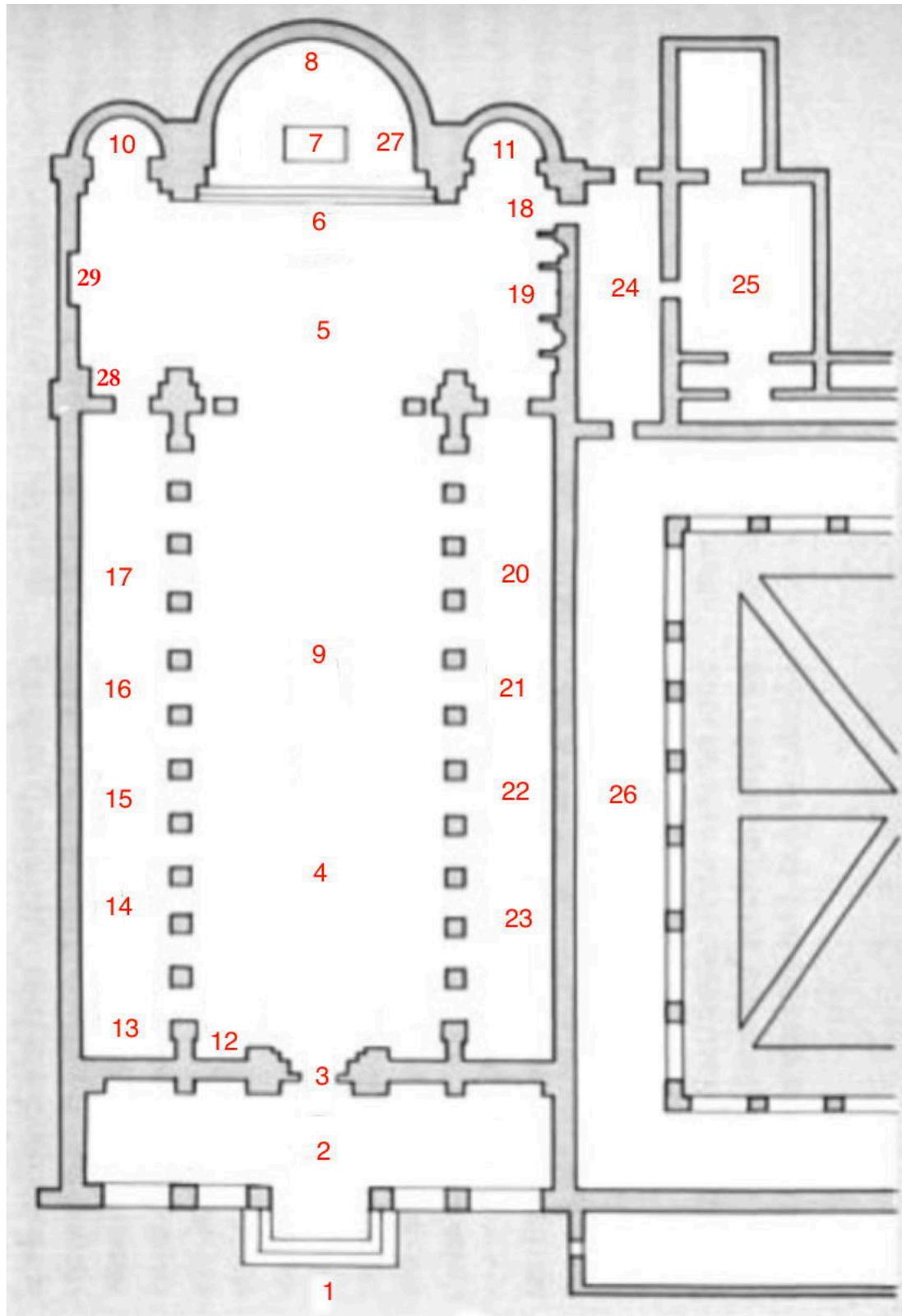
The monastic cloister (26), which was designed by Giuliano da Sangallo, is now part of Faculty of Engineering (Università di Roma). Since the architect was also a military engineer, this is somewhat appropriate. The cloister has the original colonnaded arcades, but the central garth garden is now paved over. In the garth are a well and a fountain. [1]

The octagonal central well-head (c.1517) is by Simone Mosca, a Florentine colleague of Michelangelo, and is a very fine piece of sculpture. The Della Rovere coat-of-arms is prominent, as well as stylized water-monsters with their bodies forming loops like handles. The little basin-on-a-pedestal fountain to one side was added by Cardinal Antonio Barberini in 1642. The entrance to the cloister is at Via Eudossiana 16. [1]

Interior

The church has a straightforward layout, of a nave with aisles, transept and apse. There is a pair of chapels flanking the apse in the far corners of the transept, and these have their own little apses. Apart from these, there are no external chapels but only two altars in each side aisle. The Tomb of

Plan



Nave (4)

The arcades are made up of twenty ancient columns in the Doric style, an order of architecture which is rare in Roman church arcades. Here, the columns are fluted and are in what is described as "Greek" marble. It is white with grey streaks, and if it is cipollino it is from Euboea. The set of columns must have come from a very high-status ancient building, probably a temple. The tops of the columns have square stone plates called abaci which here act as impostes supporting the archivolts. The nave walls above the arcades now have three large windows instead of the original

eleven little ones, a result of the 15th century restoration. [1]

Proportionally, the ceiling appears too low for the width of the aisle. Originally the nave had an open timber roof. A ceiling was inserted in the work overseen by Pope Julius II (1503-1513), but the present segmental barrel vault is by Francesco Fontana and was erected over the nave in 1705. The timber roof is preserved above the present vault. An inscription at the triumphal arch, dated 1706, expressed the thanks of the abbot and his congregation to Prince G. B. Panfili for having the ceiling constructed and to Cardinal Marcello Durazzo, title cardinal of the church from 1686 to 1710, for having it painted. [1] [h]

The large central panel has a fresco by Giovanni Battista Parodi, *The Miracle of the Chains*, which painted in 1706. It refers to a miracle that a Count in the court of Emperor Otto I in 969 was freed for his devil occupation by means of the chains. [1] [5]

Part of the floor of the ancient church is apparently still visible, but the unpatterned and highly polished travertine floor that you see now was laid in 1960. Its bland characterlessness infects the entire interior. [1] [e]

The counterfaçade was stripped of its plaster in the mid 20th century restoration, and so you can see the blocked remains of the original five entrance arches. On the counterfaçade, to the right of the the entrance portal, is a monument (12) to the Florentine artists Antonio Pollaiuolo and his younger brother Piero, the work of Luigi Capponi (c.1500). Antonio Pollaiuolo (Antonio di Jacopo d'Antonio Benci, (c. 1432-1498) and his brother Pietro (c.1441-c. 1496) worked as painters, sculptors, and goldsmiths in Florence. The greater artist of the two, Antonio made the figures of Romulus and Remus beneath the Lupa Capitolina, long assigned to the 5th century BC but now dated to the age of Charlemagne. [1] [f]

Above the tomb is a fresco (in poor condition) showing a penitential procession during the plague of 1476 by an anonymous artist in the 15th century. To the left is an early mediaeval fresco fragment, behind glass, showing the head of Christ. [1] [5]

Sanctuary

The transept (5) is separated from the nave by a wide triumphal arch, flanked by a pair of ancient pink granite Corinthian columns originally sourced from Aswan in Egypt. Above the arch is a large tablet extolling Pope Clement XI. [1]

The high altar (7) and confessio is the result of a project finished in 1877, but including older elements. The work was begun by Andrea Busiri Vici, responsible for the chain reliquary, and was finished by Virginio Vespignani who erected the baldacchino. [1]

The bronze doors of the niche shrine containing the reliquary are by Caradosso, were cast in 1477 and preserved in the 19th century restoration. They depict the *Condemnation of Peter by Herod*, and the *Angel Liberating St Peter from Prison*. Since the chains are permanently exposed for veneration, it will not usually be possible to see the doors. At present, they are only closed on the first day of August and this is the only time that Caradosso's work is visible. [1]

The baldacchino is in a mediaeval style, having four pink granite Corinthian columns and lots of gilded decoration. [1]

Confessio and Crypt

In front of the high altar is a sunken area or confessio (6), bounded by a richly decorated polychrome marble screen which is extended on each side to delimit the apse choir. This is by Vespignani. There are two staircases going down, so you can venerate the chain of St Peter in its gilded bronze and glass reliquary made in 1856. This is in a niche in the main altar, and is flanked by a pair of statues: *St Peter* on the left, and *the angel who released him from prison in Jerusalem* on the right. There is a second, subsidiary altar in the confessio under the chain. [1]

On either side of the chain altar is a small door, which leads into a little crypt behind the shrine. In here is an ancient Christian sarcophagus, dating to the 4th century. It was used to contain the alleged relics of the Holy Maccabees, seven Jewish brothers who died of torture with their mother in the

1st century BC war in defense of the Mosaic Law. The carving on the sarcophagus is very good. Depicted are: *Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes*, *Resurrection of Lazarus*, *Samaritan Woman at the Well*, *Peter Refuting Christ's Prophecy of Denial* and *The Giving of the Law*. [1]

In the nave floor in front of the Confessio, with a bishop's chair on it, is the tomb and inscription for Card. Gaetano Fantuzzi (1708-1778).

Apse

The apse (8) is very large, and belongs to the original 5th century basilica. However, the two large rectangular windows are 15th century. The frescoes on the apse wall were executed in 1577 by **Jacopo Coppi, Il Meglio** with 18th century additions or alterations by **Giacomo Carboni**. From left to right, they depict: *St Peter Liberated from Prison*, *Bishop Juvenal Presents the Chains to Empress Eudoxia* and *Eudoxia Presents the Chains to the Pope*. Below these frescoes are the choir stalls of the canons, following the curve of the wall. To the right is the tomb of Don Giulio Gorio (27), one of the Canons, and an eminent miniature painter. [1] [b]

The apse conch is also frescoed by **Coppi**, and has a cycle of scenes concerning the legend of the *Crucifix of Beirut*, which allegedly bled miraculously when profaned by Jews. It is not at all clear why this theme was chosen, but **Coppi** also did a cycle in the church of Santissimo Salvatore in Bologna on the same subject. [1]

Cenotaph of Pope Julius II

The monumental Tomb of Pope Julius II (19) is squeezed into the right hand end of the transept in 1545 where it is completely out of scale. To be fair, it was never intended to be here but beneath the dome in the new St Peter's Basilica. Further, the present wall monument was a massively downgraded version of an original freestanding tomb project which, when originally designed in 1505, would have had about forty statues by **Michelangelo**. Elsewhere, there are two sculptures of Slaves at the Louvre in Paris, France, four unfinished Slaves at the Accademia Gallery in Florence and an unfinished Victory at the Palazzo Vecchio also in Florence that were intended for the original tomb design. [1] [b] [k]

Here, there are only seven full-figure statues, plus four bearded hero-caryatids, and scholarly argument is continuous about how much of them are the result of the master's own chisel. The most famous work of art here is obviously **Michelangelo's Moses** (c.1513-15), in the central position. The patriarch is shown having just sat down to teach after bringing the Tablets of the Law down from his interview with God on Mount Sinai. The little horns on his head are a result of an early mistranslation of the Hebrew, in which the word for "rays of light" was rendered as "horns". For centuries after it was erected, members of the Jewish community used to come here in great numbers to venerate the statue. It is said that in good light and from the correct angle, it is possible to see portraits of **Michelangelo** and **Julius II** in **Moses' beard**. [1] [b] [k]

There is dispute about the full authorship of the other statues. To the left of **Moses** is *Rachel*, wrapped in devout thought, the emblem of the contemplative life, and to the right *Leah*, holding a mirror in her hand, said to be the symbol of active life. These can also be seen in the light of religious discussions going on at the time, as representative of good works and faith. The general consensus is that they are by the master himself. [1] [2] [e] [k]

Above, in the second storey, **Pope Julius** is depicted reclining on a sarcophagus in the Etruscan funerary style with the *Madonna and Child* above him, a *Sibyl* to the left and a *Prophet* to the right. The youthfulness of the prophet hints at **Daniel**, and this statue and the *Sibyl* are ascribed to **Raffaello da Montelupo**, one of **Michelangelo's** assistants. The *Madonna* is ascribed to **Alessandro Scherano di Settignano** following a model made by **Michelangelo**. The pope's effigy was the subject of a debate in 1999, when the tomb was restored. Before then it was ascribed to **Tommaso di Pietro Boscoli**, but the face may have been carved by **Michelangelo**. [1] [b]

The body of **Pope Julius** rests where it was originally deposited in a simple sarcophagus in St. Peter's Basilica. A simple plaque marks the spot in front of the tomb of **Clement X** where **Julius** rests with his uncle **Pope Sixtus IV**, who died in 1484. []

The description of the aisles starts at the bottom of the left hand one, and proceeds clockwise to

the bottom of the right hand one:

Left Aisle

Near the counterfaçade is the tomb of Cardinal Nicholas de Cusa (13), who was the titular cardinal of the church from 1449 until his death in 1464. The marble relief carving, embellished with gilding, depicts Cardinal Nicholas before St Peter Enthroned and is attributed to Andrea Bregno. The angel on the right is the one that released St Peter from prison. It is dated 1465. Below is the cardinal's shield showing a lobster. [1] [5]

The first altar on the left (14) is dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows, and the altarpiece showing *The Deposition* is by Pomarancio (Cristoforo Roncalli). [1]

Next to this altar is the tomb of (15) Cinzio Cardinal Aldobrandini. He was titular cardinal from 1605 - 1610. It is a splendid piece of early Baroque theatre with a charming winged skeleton holding a scythe and wearing a veil. [1] [4]

A 7th century Byzantine-style mosaic icon (16) of St Sebastian is found over the second altar in the left aisle. In the early 7th century, with increasing influence from the East, icons became a common feature of church decoration in Rome, but very few have survived. This is one of four that still exist in Rome. The saint is usually depicted as nude and clean-shaven, but here he is heavily bearded and dressed as a tribune in the Roman army. The epigraph describes how the mosaic was offered in thanksgiving for a cessation of a plague epidemic in 672. Above is a fresco of the *Madonna and Child* in a tondo. [1] [5] [d] [h]

Around the middle of the church, on the left hand aisle wall, is an inscription from the pontificate of Pope John II, dated 532, which is the oldest monument in the church. [1]

Then, at the far end of the arcade, is the funeral memorial of Cardinal Odoardo Vecchiarelli, 1667, (17) with his effigy supported by a pair of skeletons. The floor slab showing his family coat-of-arms is a splendid piece of polychrome marble pietra dura work. [1]

In a niche in the left transept are the memorials for two cardinals. Cardinal Lorenzo Casoni (1643-1720) is buried near the main altar, but his memorial (28) has been moved against the west wall of the niche. Just before the chapel is the memorial (29) to Cardinal Antonio Andrea Galli of 1767.

The church organ has a spectacular neo-Baroque case and is raised in a special cantor. The instrument was built by Giacomo Alari between 1686 and 1687, and restored and extended in 1884 by Attilio Priori. In 1924, the instrument was restored by Paolo Quaresima. In the second half of the twentieth century, the organ fell in disrepair, becoming unplayable. An important restoration work of the instrument began in 2012, by the organist Michel Formentelli. The inaugural concert took place on 11 October 2014 and was held by the organizers Francesco Saverio Colamarino and Giandomenico Piermarini. [1] [3]

The left side apsed chapel (10) in the far left hand corner of the transept is dedicated to Our Lady, but is used as the Blessed Sacrament Chapel and is where Mass is normally celebrated. The altarpiece of the *Immaculate Conception* by Luigi Bravi. [1] [2]

Here also are memorials for two titular cardinals who are buried elsewhere. On the left wall is a memorial for Cardinal Bernardino Spada, titular 1642-1646. On the right wall is a memorial for Cardinal Antonio Barberini, titular 1637-1642. [4]

Right Aisle

The little apsed chapel in the right side (11), left of the Cenotaph of Julius II, is dedicated to St Margaret, and the altarpiece (18) is a depiction of her by Guercino from 1744. The polychrome marble altar is a fine piece of Baroque design, fitted into the curve of the apse. [1]

To the right of the Cenotaph of Julius II is the tomb of Girolamo Cardinal Agucchi (20), 1605, by

Domenichino. [1]

Next is an altar (21) dedicated to St Peter, and the altarpiece depicting *The Liberation of St Peter* is a copy of a work by Domenichino. The original painting is in the sacristy. [1] [b]

In the wall is a copy of the dedication plaque by Pope Sixtus III. The inscription was mounted in 1931 to commemorate the sesquimillenary of the Council of Ephesus. [f]

Then the tomb of Lanfranco Cardinal Margotti (22), 1611, and the small portrait of the cardinal over the monument is by Domenichino. [1] [b]

The painting of *St Augustine* over the last altar (23) on the right has been attributed to Guercino. [1]

Sacristy

There is a souvenir shop (24) through a door to the left of the statue of Moses, in an antechamber to the sacristy. In the shop, you may ask for permission to enter the sacristy (25) - it has a fresco from 1604 of the *Liberation of Peter* by Domenichino. [1]

Location

On the Esquiline Hill (or “Colle Oppio” near the Colosseum) at the Piazza San Pietro in Vincoli, up from Via Cavours through the Via di San Francesco da Paola (once the site of the [Vicus Sceleratus](#) and later the “Salita dei Borgia”)

Coordinates: [41° 53' 37"N](#) [12° 29' 35"E](#)

Artists and Architects:

Alessandro Scherano di Settignano (16th cent), Italian sculptor
Andrea [Bregno](#) (1418–1506), Italian sculptor and architect of the Early Renaissance
Andrea [Busiri Vici](#) (1817-1911), Italian architect
Baccio [Pontelli](#) (c.1450-1492), Italian architect from Florence
[Caradosso](#) (1452-1527), Italian sculptor
Cristoforo [Roncalli](#) aka *Il Pomerancio* (1552-1626), Italian Mannerist painter
Domenico Zampieri, aka [Domenichino](#) (1581-1641), Italian Baroque painter of the Bolognese School, or Carracci School
Francesco [Fontana](#) (1668-1708), Italian architect
Giacomo Alari (17th cent), Italian organ maker
Giacomo Carboni (18th cent), Italian painter
Giovanni Battista [Parodi](#) (1674-1730), Italian painter
Giovanni Francesco Barbieri [aka *Il Guercino*] (1591-1666), Italian Baroque painter
Giuliano [da Sangallo](#) (c. 1443-1516), Italian architect of the High Renaissance
Jacopo [Coppi](#), [aka *il Meglio*] (1546-1591), Italian Mannerist painter
Luigi Bravi, Italian painter
Luigi [Capponi](#) (1445-1515), Italian sculptor
Michel Formentelli (21st cent), Italian organist
Michelangelo di Lodovico [Buonarroti](#) Simoni [aka Michelangelo] (1475-1564), Italian sculptor, painter, architect, poet, and engineer of the High Renaissance who exerted an unparalleled influence on the development of Western art
Paolo Quaresima (19th cent), Italian organ maker
Raffaello [da Montelupo](#) (1505-1567), Italian Renaissance sculptor and architect
Tommaso [Boscoli](#) called *Maso del Bosco*, (1503-1574), Florentine painter
Simone [Mosca](#) (1492-1554), Italian sculptor from Florence
Virginio [Vespignani](#) (1808-1882), Italian architect

Relics:

Saints Aurelius, Emerziana, and Constanza

Buried:

Nikolaus Cardinal von [CUSA](#), (1400/1401-1464)
 Sisto Cardinal [GARA DELLA ROVERE](#), (1473-1517)
 Girolamo Cardinal [DELLA ROVERE](#), (1528-1592)
 Girolamo Cardinal [AGUCCHI](#), (1555-1605)
 Cinzio Cardinal [PASSERI ALDOBRANDINI](#), (1551-1610)
 Lanfranco Cardinal [MARGOTTI](#), (1558-1611)
 Odoardo Cardinal [VECCHIARELLI](#), (1613-1667)
 Buried in the tomb of his uncle
 Lorenzo Cardinal [CASONI](#), (1643-1720)
 Buried near the main altar uncle
 Antonio Andrea Cardinal [GALLI](#), C.R.S.S., (1697-1767)
 His tomb is in front of the altar of *SS. Sacramento*
 The canons erected a monument to his memory in front of the statue of Moses
 Gaetano Cardinal [FANTUZZI](#), (1708-1778)
 Castruccio Cardinal [CASTRACANE DEGLI ANTELMINELLI](#), (1779-1852)
 Buried in the tomb that Pope Julius II had built for himself

Don Giulio Gorio
[Antonio](#) (d. 1498) and [Piero](#) (d. 1496) Pollaiuolo
 <painters, brothers>
 Hugh [O'Neill](#), Earl of Tyrone (d. 1616)

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Chains of St Peter

The Chain

The relic for which the basilica is famous is the chain used on St Peter during his imprisonment. It is in one length, just under two meters long, with a fixing ring at one end. You can examine it, as it is

visible in a glass box under the main altar. In the Middle Ages, its presence here made the church one of the most important pilgrimage venues in Rome and it is a small puzzle as to why it was not counted equal to the Seven Churches later.

The tradition behind it has two distinct strands, which later commentators intertwined, and appropriately two chains are involved.

Jerusalem

One tradition claims that the chains (two of them) fastened St Peter when he was imprisoned by Herod Agrippa in Jerusalem (Acts of the Apostles ch. 12; two chains are mentioned). The pair of relics seems to have first appeared in that city in 439, and the developed story is as follows: In that year Juvenal, the bishop there, gave two chains to the Empress Aelia Eudocia, wife of Emperor Theodosius II, during her residence in the Holy Land. She sent one chain home to Constantinople, where it was enshrined in the mausoleum church of the emperor Constantine, the Church of the Holy Apostles (now destroyed). A surviving homily of St John Chrysostom (Homily 8 on Ephesians 3:1) contains a panegyric of it, and was obviously given in the relic's presence. The other chain she sent to her daughter, called Licinia Eudoxia, who was married to the Western Emperor Valentinian III (the Empire being divided between two emperors at the time).

Rome

The Roman tradition is that one or both of the chains were used on St Peter during his imprisonment at Rome before his execution. One or both would then have been taken eastwards, and so ended up in Constantinople or (somehow) in Jerusalem.

Later tradition at Rome concerning St Peter's imprisonment placed it at the Mamertine Prison. This was the place where the ancient Roman government put very important malefactors, including captured barbarian rulers. Since Peter was the first pope, so the argument would have run, he must have been important enough for this "courtesy". Unfortunately, historically this is incorrect. Peter was a leader of a trouble-making messianic Jewish sect of no status, and he himself had no standing in Roman society. He would not have been in the Mamertine, but the prison of the nearby Praefectura Urbis might well have been the place of his captivity. This would have been remembered by the early Church, and the construction of the first basilica next to the Praefectura (the prison of which was still in use in the 4th century) could have been an acknowledgement of the tradition.

A tradition associating the chain with St Balbina and Pope St Alexander at the start of the 2nd century is mentioned by St Bede the Venerable in his *Patres Latini*. The surviving version of the legend is unhistorical, but the older tradition hiding behind it is that the pope built the basilica after St Balbina located the chain in Rome.

Conflation of traditions

The two traditions concerning the chain, locating it at Rome and Jerusalem, were conflated early on. For example, in the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae* written in the 12th century, it is claimed that Eudoxia (here erroneously identified as the wife of Emperor Arcadius and who probably never set foot in Rome) brought the chain to Rome after it had been given to her by a Jew in Jerusalem (Juvenal would have objected seriously to that description).

Alternatively it was claimed that there was one chain always in Rome, and that the second chain from Jerusalem was later forwarded to Rome from Constantinople. The nave ceiling of the basilica shows the alleged miracle that took place when they were brought together, in that they joined up to form one chain. In the Middle Ages it was claimed that this happened either in the reign of Pope Leo the Great or Pope Sixtus III, mid 5th century.

Source: [Roman Churches Wiki](#)