

# Santa Brigida a Campo de'Fiori



**Santa Brigida a Campo de'Fiori** is an 18<sup>th</sup> convent church of the [Bridgettine](#) order dedicated to St [Bridget of Sweden](#), patron saint of Europe. It is the Swedish national church. The church is in Piazza Farnese in in the rione VII Regola. [1]

## History

St Bridget (Birgitta Birgersdotter in Swedish) was a Swedish noblewoman and mother of eight children. She founded the monastic Order of the Holy Savior at Vadstena in Sweden after she was widowed in 1344. To obtain papal approval of her new foundation, usually known as the Bridgettines after her, she journeyed to Rome in 1350 with one of her daughters, [St Catherine of Sweden](#). They settled there until St Bridget's death in 1373, and the pair of them became well-known and highly regarded religious personalities in the city. St Bridget was an intense visionary with a hatred of sinful behavior and corruption, but was also very charitable. [1] [2]

To aid her expatriate countrymen and pilgrims she founded a hospice in a private house originally owned by a noble lady called Francesca Papazzurri, who became a close friend of St Bridget during the Holy Year of 1350. It was at that time known as the Palatium Magnum, "The Grand Palace". St Bridget lived there for 19 years, and her rooms have been preserved in the present building. [1] [2]

After St Bridget's death, the palazzo was donated to the Bridgettine order's mother house in Vadstena. The first little church or house-chapel here was dedicated to St Bridget during the pontificate of Boniface IX (1389-1404) after she was canonized in 1391. [1] [3]

By 1507 the institution had fallen into decay and its premises seized by squatters. Peder Månsson, a Bridgettine monk of Vadstena, was sent to Rome to recover the property of the hospice. He succeeded and commissioned a new church, which was completed in 1513. In 1524 he was made

bishop of Västerås in Sweden. [1] [3]

The Reformation brought radical changes; Lutheranism was made the official religion of Sweden in 1536. As a result, the hospice at Rome became a refuge for Swedish Catholics who chose exile rather than conversion. Among those who lived here in this period was Johannes Magnus (1488-1544), the last acting Catholic Archbishop of Uppsala and Primate of Sweden. His brother, a canon of Uppsala called Olaus Magnus and another powerful opponent of the new religion, came as a fellow exile to Rome in 1537 and was made Bishop of Uppsala by Pope Paul III (1534-1549). He took up residence in the old hospice, which became his palazzo. He died in 1557, and the direct Swedish connection was lost. [1] [3]

Virtually all the Northern European Bridgettine monasteries (the bulk of the order) were destroyed during the Reformation. [4]

The complex was then granted to the Convertite di Santa Maddalena by Pope Pius IV. This was a congregation of Franciscan nuns dedicated to the reform of prostitutes, and they were here until 1589. The property was then put in the care of King Sigismund III Vasa of Poland. [1]

Both convent and church were restored in 1614, with a new façade designed by Francesco Peperelli. However, this early Baroque work did not last long because the church and convent were rebuilt at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Pope Clement XI (1700-1721). The project had started in 1695 before he became pope, and was overseen by architect Pietro Giacomo Patriarca. It involved the provision of the present façade, which was begun in 1705. [1] [6]

The convent in Rome was suppressed by the French occupiers, and was left empty after the restoration of Papal government in 1815. In 1828, Pope Leo XII gave the convent and church to the Canons of Santa Maria in Trastevere. They did not have the means to restore it, and did not have any use for it. So they passed it on to the Congregation of the Holy Cross, a French missionary congregation, in 1855. They restored the church, and also the rooms of St Bridget in the convent, in 1857-1858. However, they moved out in 1889. [1] [3]

The next owner was a community of Polish Discalced Carmelite nuns. This order of nuns had been re-established in Poland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the help of Belgian communities, and the Roman outreach was the initiative of Abbess Eugenia Wilorska. She arranged for another restoration by Raffaele Ingami, with much of the funding coming from her personal fortune, and most of the present interior decoration is as a result of this. The campanile was erected in 1894. The Carmelites were here until 1930, when the complex was finally returned to the Bridgettine Order. [1]

The new Order of SS. Savior of Saint Bridget was reestablished in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Elizabeth Hesselblad, Swedish Lutheran, converted to the Catholic faith, with the desire to restore the old order, in the first decade of 1900, visited almost all the bridgettine monasteries existing with the desire to refound the bridgettine charisma with a return to origins adapted to new time. The church and convent were given to the Order in 1930. The old convent became their Generalate. [5]

The paintings in the church were restored for the Bridgettine jubilee of 1991, when the sisters celebrated the eightieth birthday of their congregation. [1] [3]

## **Exterior**

### Façade

The façade was constructed and adorned with statues of *St Brigid* and her daughter *St Catherine* by Andrea Fucigna in 1705, in a late Baroque style with hints of the future neo-Classical. Minor changes, such as to the shapes of the windows, were made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century restorations and it is now rendered in white. [1] [3]

There is a single story, dominated by a pair of gigantic Composite columns at the corners. The single entrance has a Baroque door case, with a pair of hanging and tasseled ribbed dwarf pilasters attached to the sides at the upper corners. The lintel has an inscription in Gothic lettering, which refers to the rebuilding of the church in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Over this is a slightly oversized

segmental pediment with the sections over the pilasters brought forward, a design feature repeated in the upper part of the façade. [1]

In the center of the façade is an enormous oculus or round window, which contains stained glass showing the *Dove of the Holy Spirit* in a complicated glory. [1]

The pair of gigantic columns support an entablature and triangular pediment, both of which are stepped vertically so that the portions over the column capitals are brought forward. The frieze of the entablature has a simple dedicatory inscription:

In honorem S[anctae] Birgittae d[edicata].

The cornice and pediment gable have modillions pointing downwards in both cases, and the tympanum of the pediment has a lunette window containing stained glass showing the monogram of Ave Maria. [1]

The façade continues above the pediment, as there is a connecting corridor running between the two wings of the convent which passes over it. There are a row of six little round windows, and in the middle of these is the heraldic emblem of Pope Clement XI which is a star over three stylized mountains. To either side of these windows are sculptures of *St Brigid* and her daughter *St Catherine*, standing on high plinths. These are by **Andrea Fucina**. [1]

### Campanile

The the neo-romanesque campanile, attributed to the architect **Raffaele Ingami**, is a red brick tower, added in 1894 when the convent was also extended by building on top of the church's apse. It is inserted into the complex just to the left of the apse, and is the only part of the church fabric apart from the façade that is visible. The bell chamber is a kiosk with a large arch on each face, and is decorated with horizontally stripes in red and white at the corners; the arch archivolt is similarly treated. There is a further top storey in the same style, but with a little arcade of three narrow arches on each face. Above this on each face is a gable with a sound hole in the form of a Greek cross, and then comes h [1] [3]

### **Interior**

It is on a rectangular plan, with a nave of three bays. The presbyterium is a rectangular apse. The interior is richly decorated, with much color, but a lot of the decoration is 19<sup>th</sup> century. [1]

The entrance is to a small low-roofed lobby. This has a balustrade gallery above it, roofed by a cupola decorated in blue with golden stars and with the *Dove of the Holy Spirit* in the center, painted in 1894 by **Eugenio Cisterna**. The nave itself is very small, with a domed apse as a presbyterium.

There is an altar on each side of the nave in a shallow arched niche. [1] [6]

In the entrance lobby are two doors. The one on the right leads to the external Chapel of St Richard Reynolds (actually within the convent), and the one on the left to the main sacristy. Both of these were provided in 1894. [1]

### Chapel of St Richard

The chapel was built in 1894 on Neo-Gothic style by **Raffaele Ingami** as part of the major restoration by the Carmelite nuns. It is dedicated to an English Bridgettine monk, [Richard Reynold](#), who was martyred in London in 1535. He is considered the most important martyr of the order. The chapel was originally dedicated to *Our Lady of Sorrows*, and an inscription from this period has been preserved on the altar. On the walls are eight paintings of scenes from the life of the *Blessed Virgin*, made by **Eugenio Cisterna**. The stained glass is German, by **F. X. Zettler**. [1]

### Nave

There are two marble holy water stoups just inside the entrance. On the right-hand one you can see the lily of the Farnese family, placed here when Odoardo Cardinal Farnese was the protector of the convent, 1601-1626. The one on the left hand side has the arms of the Carmelite Order. Another example of a protector's heraldry can be seen on a marble bowl in the sacristy through the door just to the left; here, it comprises the arms of Virgino Cardinal Orsini. [1]

On the right-hand side of the nave is the cenotaph of Nils Karlsson Bielke (died 1765) designed by Pietro Camporese the Elder, sculpted by Tommaso Righi. Bielke was a descendant of one of St Bridget's brothers and, after converting to Catholicism, lived in exile in Rome where he was made a senator. His actual place of burial is unknown. Here a portrait medallion of the deceased is on top of a sarcophagus, with putti having a real struggle with some heavy drapery around it. [1] [6] [a]

Also on the right-hand side is the *Altar of Our Lady*. The painting by Virginio Monti, depicting *Mary and the Holy Child* in a classical landscape scene, was made in the 19th century. It is a copy of a lost original by Annibale Carracci. In the tympanum above is a triangle adored by putti as a symbol of the Trinity. [1]

On the left side, opposite this altar is the *Altar of St Catherine of Sweden*. It was redecorated by the Carmelites in 1894. The diptych painting, made in that year, is by Eugenio Cisterna, a pupil of Virginio Monti. It originally depicted *St Bridget and St Teresa of Avila*, but when the church was given to the Bridgettine Sisters in 1930, the figure of St Teresa was altered to represent St Catherine. This was done by the simple expedient of giving her the characteristic headgear of a Bridgettine nun. In the tondo above is *St Joseph with the Child Jesus*. [1] [6]

Also on the left wall is a picture of *Saint Elisabetta Hesselblad* who refounded the order in 1911.

The church has six paintings by Biagio Puccini, executed between 1702 and 1705. They depict scenes from the life of St Bridget: [1] [6]

On the right

*Madonna and St. Bridget* and

*Madonna crowns St. Bridget*

In the presbytery

*St. Bridget in ecstasy and Madonna* and

*Christ Appearing to St. Bridget*

On the left

*Mystical communion of St. Bridget* and

*Christ and St. Bridget*

*The Glory of St Bridget* in the ceiling, and the *Evangelists* in the corners, is also painted by Puccini, in the years 1709-1711. [1] [6]

There are three recently discovered memorial plaques in the church. They are not in their original positions. Two of them, one by the entrance to the Chapel of St Richard and one by the sacristy door, must have been in Bridget's room, and the third was probably placed on the façade until the new church was built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. [1]

### Presbyterium

The rectangular apse has a little elliptical dome on pendentives, which shows *the Dove of the Holy Spirit* on a blue background with golden stars (matching the gallery dome at the other end of the church). The 19<sup>th</sup> century altar echoes the design of the façade, and has two gigantic free-standing marble Composite columns with gilded bronze capitals; the columns themselves are also embellished with bronze appliqué work. These support a vertically stepped pediment, and the tympanum of this contains a painting of *God the Father*. The altarpiece is a large crucifix, a copy of one before which St Bridget was accustomed to pray and receive visions. [1]

The arched space over the altar, between the pendentives, has a representation of the *Holy Face of St Veronica*, flanked by two little stained glass windows depicting the *Sacred Heart of Jesus* and the *Immaculate Heart of Mary*. [1]

### Chapel of St Catherine

In the crypt is the Chapel of St Catherine, which was dedicated in 1972. It has 70 seats, and is used by the Church of Sweden. Lutheran services are held on Sundays and Thursdays. Scandinavian Lutherans especially like stark simplicity in the interiors of their places of worship, The chapel is low-ceilinged, white-painted with no architectural or artistic decoration. [1]

## Convent

The convent was restored or rebuilt on the orders of Pope Clement XI (1700-1721), at the same time as the church. Since then, only minor changes have been made to the exterior. This is attractive, with rusticated ashlar stonework in two colors (white below, yellow above). The ground-floor windows are arched. If you look at the piazza frontage as a whole, you will see that it is almost, but not quite, symmetrical. The church façade is in the middle, with the two wings of the convent on either side. The left hand corner has quoins, but the right hand one does not and here there is an arched entrance instead of a window. This used to lead through to the convent courtyard. [1]

It is possible to visit the rooms of St Bridget and her daughter St Catherine, first abbess of the Bridgettine Sisters. The rooms contain relics of the two saints, and are decorated with paintings from the lives of the saints. Chapels of St Bridget and St Catherine have been installed in their respective rooms. [1]

In the Oratorio of St. Bridget are tempera paintings on the wall *Stories of St. Bridget* 1856/63 by Edoardo Brandon, in the Oratorio of St. Catherine are two large paintings: *Translation of the body of St. Bridget from Roma to Vastena* (1894) and *St. Catherine stops the flooding of the Tiber* (1895) by Attilio Palombi. [6]

You can stay at the convent, which now amounts to a small hotel run by the nuns. There are 20 double rooms. [1]

## **Notes:**

The best experience of the church can be had if you go for sung Vespers.

## **Artists and Architects:**

Andrea [Fucigna](#) (c.1660-1711), Italian sculptor  
Attilio [Palombi](#) (c. 1860-1913), Italian painter  
Biagio [Puccini](#) (1675-1721), Italian painter  
Jacques Émile Edouard [Brandon](#) (1831-1897), French painter  
Eugenio [Cisterna](#) (1862-1933), Italian painter & mosaic designer  
Francesco [Peparelli](#) († 1641), Italian architect  
Franz Xavier [Zettler](#) (1841-1916), Bavarian Stained Glass artist  
János “Giovanni” [Hajnal](#) (1913-2010), Master glassmaker from Budapest (Stained glass and mosaics)  
Pietro [Camporese](#) the Elder (1726-1781), Italian architect  
Pietro Giacomo Patriarca († 1715), Italian architect  
Raffaele [Ingami](#) (1836-1908), Italian architect  
Tommaso [Righi](#) (1727-1802), Italian sculptor and stuccator  
Virginio [Monti](#) (1852-1942), Italian painter

## **Location:**

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Open hours and liturgical schedule from the Order web site [here](#).

## **Links and References**

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
  2. [Fabio Ciardi blog](#)
  3. [English Wikipedia](#)
  4. [Wikipedia article on Bridgettines](#)
  5. [Brigidine web site](#)
  6. [Romapedia blog](#)
- a. Minor, Vernon Hyde; "Tommaso Righi's Roman Sculpture: A Catalogue"; *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 126, No. 980 (Nov., 1984), pp. 668-675 (jstor 881872)

[Youtube video of the church](#)

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