

# Santa Maria dei Miracoli



The "twin" churches of Santa Maria in Montesanto (left) and Santa Maria dei Miracoli (right), seen from Piazza del Popolo. Between the two churches Via del Corso starts. Although very similar, differences can be seen in this image in the two small belfrys and in the two domes.

**Santa Maria dei Miracoli** and **Santa Maria in Montesanto** are two churches located on the Piazza del Popolo, facing the northern gate of the Aurelian Walls, at the entrance of Via del Corso on the square. The churches are often cited as "twin", due to their similar external appearance: they have indeed some differences, in both plant and exterior details. [3]

Looking from the square, the two churches define the so-called "trident" of streets departing from Piazza del Popolo: starting from the left, Via del Babuino, Via del Corso and Via di Ripetta. The first two are separated by Santa Maria in Montesanto, the latter by Santa Maria dei Miracoli. [3]

## History

On the site where Santa Maria dei Miracoli and Santa Maria di Montesanto stand today, two pyramid-shaped funerary monuments were located, the remains of which, similar in shape and size, to the tomb of Caius Cestius and like this one belonging to the Augustan period, have been identified under the two churches during renovations conducted around 1970. [3]

The origin of the two churches traces back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century restoration of what was the main entrance to the Middle Ages and Renaissance Rome, from the Via Flaminia (known as *Via Lata* and *Via del Corso* in its urban trait). Pope Alexander VII Chigi commissioned the monumental design of the entrance of Via del Corso to architect **Carlo Rainaldi**. This included two churches with central plan, but the different shapes of the two areas available forced deep modifications to the projects. Both were financed by Cardinal Girolamo Gastaldi, whose crest is present in the two churches. [1] [3]

# Santa Maria dei Miracoli



**Santa Maria dei Miracoli** is one of the twin 17th century churches on the Piazza del Popolo. The dedication is to Our Lady, who is venerated here as "Our Lady of the Miracles" because of a miraculous icon of her over the high altar. Unlike its twin, this church is not a minor basilica. <sup>[1]</sup>

## History

This church had a predecessor chapel, arising from the veneration of its icon. This apparently was originally located in an arched niche near the river west of the Porta Flaminia, when that gateway was still an ancient ruin. The story is that, in 1325, a woman accidentally dropped her baby into the river and prayed to an image of the Madonna painted on the walls along the river for help. The baby was miraculously saved, and as a result of the ensuing devotion the chapel was built next to the river at about the present west end of the Via Angelo Brunetti. The icon, called Our Lady of Miracles, was moved into it. <sup>[1]</sup> <sup>[2]</sup> <sup>[3]</sup>

In September 1515, Pope Clement VII Medici (1523-1534) entrusted the chapel to the nearby hospital of San Giacomo degli Incurabili, so that the offerings left to the Madonna dei Miracoli could be used to cover the expenses of the institute. <sup>[3]</sup>

The chapel was subject to continual flooding so, in 1590 the original icon was transferred to the church of San Giacomo and replaced with a copy. Hence, there are two versions of the original miraculous icon now available for veneration, one here and one in San Giacomo. <sup>[1]</sup> <sup>[3]</sup>

In 1661, when Pope Alexander VII Chigi ordered the reconstruction of the area, he provided that a building had to receive the Icon of the Virgin of the Miracles. The foundation stones of the two churches were laid in 1662 by Cardinal Girolamo Gastaldi, who put up a large sum of money in return for being commemorated in the churches' decorations. The first architect was **Carlo Rainaldi**, and he planned two exactly identical round edifices. Unfortunately, Pope Alexander died in 1667 and his successors had little interest in the project. Work stopped for eight years. There is a charming story that

a poor old woman living nearby was upset by this, so saved all the money that she could. When she died, her will left 150 scudi to be spent finishing the church. Touched, Cardinal Gastaldi obtained the approval of Pope Clement X Altieri to complete the church to mark the Jubilee year of 1675. Rainaldi continued with his interrupted work here until 1677, but it was left to **Carlo Fontana** to finish it off. The church was finally finished in 1678 and consecrated in 1681. <sup>[1]</sup> <sup>[2]</sup>

In 1793, it was taken over by the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament attached to the parish of the nearby Santa Maria del Popolo, and hence became in effect an oratory. However, in 1815 it passed to the Confraternity of St Gregory Thaumaturgus, to whom the first chapel to the right is dedicated. In 1825, both churches had their domes re-covered in grey fish-scale slates. <sup>[1]</sup> <sup>[2]</sup>

Finally, in 1915 the church obtained a pastoral function when it passed to the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of Bétharram. Priests of the Society are still in charge <sup>[1]</sup>

## **Exterior**

At first glance the church seems identical to its twin sister, but there are differences. This church has a circular plan, while the other has an elliptical one. Actually, the plan here resembles a keyhole since the church has a deep U-shaped apse as well as four side chapels. <sup>[1]</sup>

The fabric is in brick, rendered in a very light tan color, with architectural details in travertine limestone. The external apse walls, invisible from the street, are bare brick and the apse itself has a normal pitched and tiled roof. The side walls have two planes, separated by a slight angle. <sup>[1]</sup>

### Dome

The shapes of the domes also differ. This one has an octagonal dome. Both are covered by grey fish-scale slates, a feature that is unusual in Rome. The octagonal drum has a large, almost square window on each face, and these windows provide most of the light for the church. The corners have tripletted blind pilasters supporting a projecting cornice on which the dome sits. The eight sectors of the dome are separated by slated ribs matching the pilasters in form. The dome itself is not hemispherical, but looks as if it has a parabolic curve. <sup>[1]</sup>

### Lantern

The lantern on the top of the dome has a cog-wheel entablature on which are eight flaming torch finials. On this is a round tempietto with eight tall arched windows, separated by little tripletted Corinthian pilasters supporting a second cog-wheel entablature with a dentillated cornice. Then comes a very low drum with a third cornice bearing strap modillions, then a tiled trumpet cupola and finally a ball finial. <sup>[1]</sup>

The dome and lantern were by **Fontana**. <sup>[1]</sup>

### Campanile

The bell-tower is a good example of the Baroque style, the design is clearly inspired by Borromini. On a square plinth stands a kiosk with three Corinthian columns at each corner, hugging a central blind pillar. The rectangular openings of the kiosk have balustrades. The pillars support an entablature with a projecting post at each corner, and these posts have very unusual finials which are spheres sprouting flames. The basically pyramidal Baroque spire is in lead, and is embellished with an archivolt on each face and an outline curlicue at each corner above these. Fronds cluster around the tip, which has a ball finial. The design is attributed to **Girolamo Theodoli**. <sup>[1]</sup>

### Façade (1)

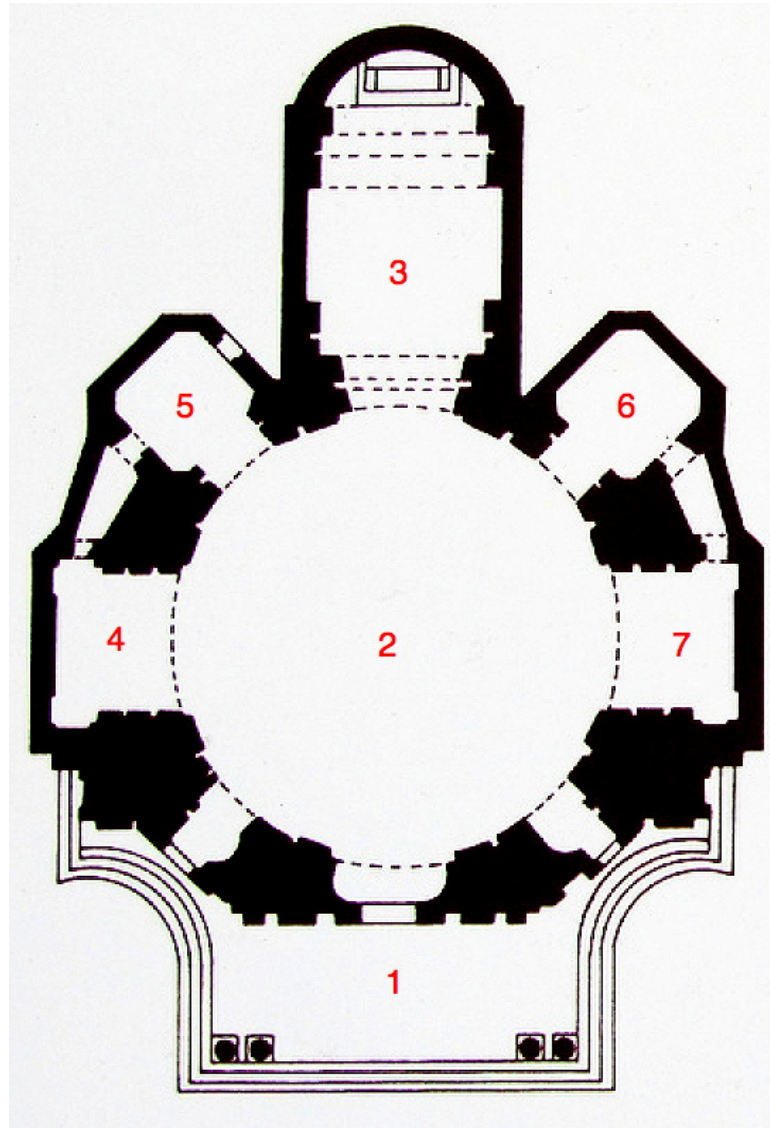
The façade is dominated by the portico, but to each side is a concave zone with a side door having a square panel above with a molded frame. The doors have raised triangular pediments, and these side zones are each bounded by a pair of columns in the same style as those of the portico. The far members of each pair are in front of two conjoined pilasters. Above is a balustraded entablature. <sup>[1]</sup>

The portico is, in Classical terms, a pentastyle but the central column is missing leaving only four Composite columns with a wide gap in the middle. The volutes of the capitals are exaggerated. The columns support an entablature with an inscription on the frieze (not easy to see) commemorating

Cardinal Gastaldi's involvement. Then comes a dentillated pediment with a blank tympanum; it looks as if some sort of sculpture was intended for the latter. There is a story that the portico columns were originally intended for an abortive campanile project for the new St Peter's. The frontage behind the portico has four pilasters matching the columns. The main doorway has a raised segmental pediment, over a lintel giving the year 1678. [1]

There are ten statues on the roofline of the façade, which depict various saints. Eight of these are Franciscans, recalling the Tertiaries who used to run the church. Two flank the pediment, two are over the corners of the entrance frontage, four are over the far ends of the curved side frontages and two are set well back over the side walls and are easy to overlook. These statues are by **Ercole Ferrata**, **Cosimo Fancelli**, **Filippo Carcani**, **Lazzaro Morelli** and **Michel Maille**, the school of Bernini all working under the direction of Rainaldi. [1]

## Plan



## Interior

On entering, you are immediately in a circular space (2) dominated by the dome. At bottom left and right are the side entrances, to each side is a large square chapel and either side of the sanctuary is a smaller square chapel. The larger chapels are actually within the thickness of the wall, here structurally making four enormous piers to support the dome. [1]

On the counterfaçade over the entrance is a tablet with an epigraph commemorating the construction, and over that a relief coat-of-arms of Cardinal Gastaldi inserted into a broken segmental pediment. [1]

The cardinal side zones (entrance, sanctuary, major side chapels) are flanked by pairs of gigantic

Corinthian pilasters which support the entablature on which the dome sits. The cornice of this entablature has strap modillions interspersed with rosettes (one of the titles of Our Lady is *rosa mystica*). At the entrance and the sanctuary the entablature is interrupted, and the gap is bridged by an archivolt which, in the case of the sanctuary, leads into the sanctuary vault. This sanctuary archivolt has on it the coat-of-arms of Cardinal Gastaldi again, in stucco with supporting angels, a work by **Antonio Raggi** who was also responsible for the other decorative elements in the church. <sup>[1]</sup>

The pilasters flanking the sanctuary are ribbed, with gilding on the ribs and capitals. On the entablature frieze above these are winged putto's heads, and above the major side chapels are two triangular pediments. <sup>[1]</sup>

The dome is simply rendered, having eight wide ribs with central gilded stripes focusing on an oculus with a gilded garland. The drum the dome sits on has six windows, and the lantern has 8 windows. Inside the lantern is a fresco of the *Dove of the Holy Spirit*. <sup>[1]</sup>

The smaller side chapels and side entrances are arched niches, over which are cantoria or opera-boxes for solo singers and musicians. The side entrance arches have tympani which depict angels holding onto the shield of Gastaldi. The design here has an unusual feature, as the doors are undersized and inserted to one side of the niche. The angels are typical of **Raggi**; laid-back with their legs dangling. The two larger chapels have bigger arches, and each has a large lunette window in the back wall over the altar. The chapels are connected by little doors. <sup>[1]</sup>

The nave was by **Rainaldi**, the dome and sanctuary by **Fontana**. At the center of the floor it is inlaid a circular plaque with the arms of Cardinal Gastaldi, patron and benefactor of the church. <sup>[1] [2]</sup>

Overall, the paint scheme is very straightforward, based on a cream color, and the effect is chromatically cool. There is a notable lack of polychrome in this church, either marble or fresco. <sup>[1]</sup>

### Sanctuary (3)

The sanctuary is a deep and high barrel-vaulted apse with a conch. The dome entablature runs round the inside, but here it has stucco decorations of vegetative curlicues. The conch of the apse has its own triumphal arch, supported by a pair of pilasters in the same style as those at the sanctuary entrance, and the conch itself has a stucco *Dove of the Holy Spirit in a glory* (ungilded, but lit by side windows). The archvolts of the two arches are embellished with flowers, and the conch one has a label held by putti and saying *Immaculata est Maria*. The barrel vault has a simple X decoration focusing on a rosette. <sup>[1]</sup>

The altar was commissioned on November 3, 1677, designed by **Fontana**, while the stucco decoration is by **Antonio Raggi**. Over the high altar is the miraculous icon of the *Our lady of the Miracles* which has given the church its name. The icon is a fine copy of the 16<sup>th</sup> century original which is now preserved in the church of San Giacomo in Augusta. The Madonna and Child are crowned with crowns of gold and dates to 1646. <sup>[1] [2]</sup>

It is recessed within the aedicule, and is supported by four stucco angels. The aedicule has four Corinthian columns in black marble with the inner pair recessed as well, and these support a broken and sagging segmental pediment occupied by angels holding up a cross and a putto playing with a flower garland. The sags of the pediment fragments, as if the weight of the angels is pushing them down, is a typical Baroque architectural joke. <sup>[1]</sup>

The modern altar frontal has a bronze relief of *The Last Supper*. <sup>[1]</sup>

The side walls of the sanctuary have monuments to Cardinal Girolamo Gastaldi to the left, and his brother Benedetto Gastaldi to the right. They were designed as a matching pair by **Fontana**, and are located over the sacristy doors and under a pair of cantoria. The busts of the deceased are bronze. Each monument has two seated allegorical Virtues: Girolamo has *Faith* and *Hope*, while Benedetto has *Prudence* and *Temperance*. The busts are by **Girolamo Lucenti**, and the Virtues are by **Raggi** again.

<sup>[1] [3]</sup>

The four side chapels are described in clockwise order, beginning from the entrance:

#### Chapel of St Anthony (4)

The first chapel on the left is dedicated to St Anthony of Padua. Over the altar is the 17<sup>th</sup> century oil on canvas painting by **Henri Gascard**, *The Virgin with Child and St. Anthony of Padua and Anthony the Abbot*, the only work in Rome recognized to be that of the French artist. <sup>[b]</sup>

In the crystal urn under the alter the wax statue of St. Candida is kept, holding the palm of martyrdom in her hand. She was probably martyred in the 4<sup>th</sup> century during the persecutions of Emperor Diocletian. The relics of the saint are kept in a reliquary, which came to light in 1761 in the catacombs of St. Priscilla, in Via Salaria. They were translated in part to the church of Santa Maria in Campitelli. According to some sources, she was tortured with metal rakes and killed in Ponza, where she had refused to renounce her faith. Her body was then taken to the Island of Ventotene where she is still honored as a Patron Saint, and protector of sailors. A procession takes place every September 20<sup>th</sup> in her honor. <sup>[2] [b]</sup>

At the right wall is the tomb monument of the sculptor Antonio d'Este (d. 1837). He was a pupil of Canova, and took over for him in directing the works for the Vatican Museum. The male figure with the hammer and chisel laid on the ground are symbols of the sculptural art of the deceased. <sup>[b]</sup>

#### Chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary (5)

The second chapel on the left contains a large mediaeval wooden crucifix, an object of popular devotion. Note that the arms of the cross end in little icons of Our Lady and St John the Evangelist. A modern statue of *Our Lady of Sorrows* accompanies it to the left. <sup>[1]</sup>

The altarpiece is a 19<sup>th</sup> century copy of the famous painting of 1643 by **Sassoferrato** showing *Our Lady of the Rosary with Saint Dominic of Guzman and Saint Catherine of Siena*. The original painting is preserved in the Basilica of Santa Balbina. Under the altar, behind a marble grate, an urn is kept containing the relics of St. Diodorus who was martyred in Rome in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. <sup>[1] [2] [3] [b]</sup>

The tondi over the doors depict *The Finding of the True Cross* to the left, and *Emperor Heraclius Returns the True Cross of Jerusalem* on the right. These frescos are from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the Roman School. <sup>[1] [b]</sup>

#### Chapel of the Madonna of Bétharram (6)

There is general agreement that the design of this space can be attributed to **Fontana**. The chapel is dedicated to the Madonna of Bétharram, a French village near Lourdes, whose Sanctuary is dedicated to her. <sup>[b]</sup>

The chapel was originally dedicated to St. Joseph. The altarpiece remains, showing *St Joseph with the Christ-Child*. It is an oil on canvas from the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the Roman School. The side walls have two tondi over the doors containing oil on canvas paintings from the 18<sup>th</sup> century; the left hand one showing *Christ in the House of Martha, Mary and Lazarus* and the right hand one depicting *Christ and Mary Magdalene in the House of Simon the Pharisee*. <sup>[1] [3] [b]</sup>

In the center of the chapel is a white marble statue which is an early 20<sup>th</sup> century reproduction by **Gino Mazzini** of the *Madonna of Bétharram* by **Alexander Renoir**. The Marian shrine of Our Lady of Bétharram in the south of France was where the Society of the Sacred Heart was originally founded, and the original statue is in the sanctuary there. <sup>[1] [3] [b]</sup>

“Bétharram” is a French dialect word that means ‘beautiful branch’ and refers to a miraculous event that took place in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A maiden fell into the waters of a river when picking a flower that was blooming on the bank. Swept off in the current, she found the strength to invoke the Madonna, who saved her. Since then, the Madonna, venerated with the sweet epithet “The Virgin of the Beautiful Branch”, is invoked as the protector of maidens. <sup>[b]</sup>

On the pillar that separates the chapel and the presbytery is a modern bronze crucifix by **Pericle Fazzini**, donated by the Ciaretta family in 1994. <sup>[1] [2] [b]</sup>

### Chapel of the Assumption (7)

The first chapel on the right is dedicated to the Assumption of Our Lady. The altarpiece shows, *The Assumption being witnessed by St Gregory Thaumaturgus*. This 3<sup>rd</sup> century saint is the first recorded in history to have a vision of Our Lady. The painting was transported here when the church was entrusted to the Archconfraternity of San Gregorio Taumaturgo. <sup>[1]</sup> <sup>[3]</sup>

The altar with its tabernacle is in white marble with bronze inlays, and is more neo-Classical than Baroque. <sup>[1]</sup>

To the left is a modern statue of St [Michael Garicoïts](#), the founder of the Society of the Sacred Heart. Also on the left wall is an icon with the inscription "this venerable effigy moved into sight of many eyes in 1796".

On the right hand wall is a funerary monument of the Guglielmi delle Rocchette family, 1868 with a female mourner sculpted by **Cesare Benaglia** (not the famous modern artist of the same name). <sup>[1]</sup> <sup>[b]</sup>

### Sacristy (8)

The large sacristy, built at the same time as the church, has decorations made in the 17th century. Inside you can see: <sup>[3]</sup>

- Two commemorative plaques commemorating the former owners of the church;
- Marble bust of Pope Pius VI.

### Location

528 Via del Corso / Piazza del Popolo

Coord: [41° 54' 35.3"N, 12° 28' 35.2"E](#)

### Access

The church is open (unofficial source):

Weekdays 7:00 to 13:00, 16:00 to 19:30,

Sundays 8:00 to 13:00, 16:30 to 19:30.

### Liturgy

Mass is celebrated:

Weekdays 7:30, 12:00, 19:00,

Sundays 10:30, 11:30, 12:30, 19:00.

### **Artists and Architects:**

Joseph-Alexandre [Renoir](#) (1811-1855), French sculptor

Antonio [Raggi](#) [aka *Il Lombardo*] (1624-1686), Italian sculptor of the Baroque (also see [here](#))

Carlo [Fontana](#) (1634-1714), Italian architect of the Late Baroque period

Carlo [Rainaldi](#) (1611-1691), Italian architect of the Baroque period (also see [here](#))

Cesare Benaglia (19<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian sculptor

Cosimo [Fancelli](#) (1618-1688), Italian sculptor of the Baroque period from Rome (also see [here](#))

Ercole [Ferrata](#) (1610-1686), Italian sculptor of the Baroque period (also see [here](#))

Filippo [Carcani](#) [aka *Filippone*] (17<sup>th</sup> century), Italian sculptor

Gino Mazzini (1878-1954), Italian sculptor

Giovanni Battista Salvi da [Sassoferrato](#) (1609-1685), Italian Baroque painter

Girolamo [Lucenti](#) (1627-1692), Italian sculptor of the Baroque period

Girolamo [Theodoli](#) (1677-1766), Italian architect

Henri [Gascard](#) (1635-1701), French painter

Lazzaro [Morelli](#) (1608-1690), Italian sculptor of the Baroque period

Michel [Maille](#) [aka *Michele Maglia*] (1643-1703), French sculptor

Pericle [Fazzini](#) (1913-1987), Italian painter and sculptor

### **Relics:**

St. Candida

St. Diodorus

**Burials:**

Girolamo Cardinal [GASTALDI](#), (1616-1685)  
Buried next to his brother Benedetto's tomb

Benedetto GASTALDI  
Antonio [d'Este](#) (d. 1837), sculptor

**Links and References:**

1. [Roman Churches Wili](#)
2. [Italian Wikipedia page](#)
3. [Catholic.org web site](#)
  - a. Donovan, Jeremiah; ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS; 1842
  - b. Descriptive plaques in the church
  - c. Watkins, Basil, OSB; THE BOOK OF SAINTS; 2002
  - d. Sharp, Mary; A GUIDE TO THE CHURCHES OF ROME; 1966, pg. 142

["De Alvariis" gallery on Flickr](#)

[Nolli map](#) (look for 484)

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[Cardinals of the Catholic Church](#)

[Info.Roma web site](#)

[Tourist info on 060608.it web site](#)

[YouTube video](#)

[English Wikipedia page](#)