

# San Silvestro in Capite



**San Silvestro in Capite** is a 16<sup>th</sup> century conventual, national and titular church dedicated to Pope St Sylvester I (314–335). The Latin words "in capite" refer to a fragment of the head of St. John the Baptist, putatively kept as a relic, enshrined here since the 13th century, in a chapel to the left of the entrance. The church is in rione Colonna (III) and stands on the north side of Piazza di San Silvestro, which today is a large bus station, close to Via del Corso. [1]

The church was declared to be the national church for expatriates from England in 1890. However, the Diocese now refers to it as the National Church - Great Britain (Chiesa Nazionale Gran Bretagna). [1]

## History

In Classical times the area was called the Campus Agrippae and was full of monumental structures which were symbols of the greatness of the Roman Empire. These included the Mausoleum and *Ara Pacts* of Augustus (31 BC-14 AD); the Arch and *Ara Pietatis* of Claudius (41-54); the Temple of Hadrian (117-138); the *Area di Portogallo*; the column of Marcus Aurelius (161-180); and the *Arctis Novus* of Dioclerian (285-305). The church of San Silvestro itself was built within a vast complex of structures which have been identified as Aurelian's Temple of the Sun. [d]

The original document which initiated the building of the church was issued by Pope Paul I in 761. It was built into the family mansion of Pope Paul specifically to receive bones from the catacombs, which were being plundered and destroyed by the Lombard marauders. There are two marble tablets at the entrance to the Church on which are inscribed the names of some of the saints and martyrs who are buried in the Church. [1] [2] [d] [f]

Pope Paul I completed a monastery which had been founded in his family's house by his brother, Pope Stephen II (752-757). Paul I dedicated the monastery to the two popes Saints Stephen (254-257) and Silvester (314-335) and placed their relics in an oratory on the upper floor. Greek monks were given asylum here; they may have brought the relic of John the Baptist with them at that time. [d] [f]

The original Church was built in the style of the ancient basilicas: a central nave and two side aisles with a row of pillars on either side. The style and structure of the Church has changed somewhat throughout the centuries. Also the existing external entrance, the atrium, and inner façade are characteristic of early Christian buildings, as well as Roman villas. [2] [f]

The first church was referred to as *basilica Maior* and then later as *basilica beati Dionysii* after Pope Dionysius (259-268). This latter dedication was given in a document which recorded that the Tiber flooded the church in January 856. At first, the church and cloister was served by Greek monks following the rule of St. Basil. Most expatriate monastics of eastern rites in Rome went home or elsewhere over the course of the late 9th century. As a result, Pope Agapetus II donated the complex to the Benedictines in the mid 10th century. [1] [c] [d] [f]

In March of 1084 the army of Robert Giuscard sacked Rome and caused severe damage to the area around the church, and probably to the church and monastery as well. The church was rebuilt and the campanile with Romanesque arcades added in 1198 during the papacy of Innocent III, and was finished in 1216. [1] [b] [f]

In 1267 the relics of Pope Dionysius and others were transferred to the Altar of Saints Paul and Nicholas. The church then took on the name of the patron saint of the monastery, St. Sylvester. [d]

Unfortunately, the various Benedictine monasteries in the city had become seriously corrupt in this century. The result was that almost all Benedictine monasteries (except San Paolo fuori le Mura) were suppressed in the 13th century. So, in 1286, Pope Honorius IV gave the complex to the Poor Clares, also known as the Second Order of St Francis. They were to remain in residence for almost six hundred years. [1]

The Poor Clares decided to rebuild in the 16th century. They employed **Francesco Capriani da Volterra** to start work on the convent in 1588. Then he focused on the church from 1591 to 1601, being assisted from 1595 by **Carlo Maderno**. Structurally this resulted in the present building, consecrated in 1601. [1]

By 1685, the sisters had begun to focus their attention on the ornamentation of the interior, under the direction, successively, of the architects **Carlo Rainaldi**, **Mattia de' Rossi** and painter **Ludovico Gimignani**, and completed in 1689 giving the church that quality of unity amid variety so representative of the late baroque period. Work on the interior was completed in 1728 when the painting of the ceiling of the inner pouch and under the organ-gallery and nuns' choir was completed. [2] [c] [f]

The façade was reconstructed in 1703 by **Domenico de' Rossi** at the expense of the convent, as is recorded by an inscription inside over the entrance to the atrium, which precedes the church. From 1738 to 1740, the convent had restoration and extension work done on it by **Antonio Tommaso De Marchis**. In the process, the campanile had several of its openings filled in and was provided with a clock. [1] [c] [d]

During the Roman Republic of 1849, the nuns were removed in order that Garibaldi and his volunteers could use the convent as barracks. The nuns returned after the French conquered the city for the pope, and remained until 1876. Then they were finally expropriated, and the convent earmarked as the Central Post Office of the city. [1]

The complex was mostly rebuilt in 1878 on the commission of [Giovanni Domenico Malvezzi](#), although he kept the arcades of the well cloister and these are now incorporated into the 19th century fabric. The nuns remained until 1876, when the monastery was rebuilt as the General Post Office and the church was closed until 1885 when it became the English National Church in Rome. In 1885 the care of the church was granted to the Society of the Catholic Apostolate, better known the Pallottine Fathers, founded by St. Vincent Pallotti. It also serves as a church for the Philippine Community in Rome. The Pallottine Fathers remain in charge to this day. In the same year the city was impressed when the Pallottines set up an electric lighting system for the church, apparently the first for any Roman church edifice. [1] [2] [c] [d]

In 1906, a confessional or devotional crypt was excavated in front of the high altar, and various sculptural fragments discovered in the process are now on the walls of the atrium. The campanile was restored to its original appearance in the early 20th century, losing its clock in the process. Between 1959 and 1964 major conservation work was carried out both to the fabric of the church and to its works of art. [1] [f]

Eight popes are buried in the basilica, including the relics of Pope St Sylvester, Pope St Stephen I and Pope St Dionysius, which were exhumed and re-enshrined beneath the altar in the confession 1908. The church also contains the relics of Saint Tarcisius. [2] [f]

(See appendix below)

### Famous relics

The convent had two especially famous relics. The best-known one, still in the church, is the head of St John the Baptist. By tradition this was brought to Rome by expatriate Greek monks, but in fact it emerges into history here in 1140 when it was venerated in an adjacent little church called San Giovanni in Capite (later Santa Maria in San Giovannino). The nuns got hold of it at or soon after inheriting the monastery in the 13th century. [1]

(See appendix below)

The second relic is a version of the ancient icon of Christ called the Mandylion or Image of Edessa, known as the Holy Face of San Silvestro. The Mandylion was allegedly an imprint on a cloth that Christ made of his face and had sent to King Abgar of Edessa (now Urfa in Turkey). It vanished when the Fourth Crusade sacked Constantinople in 1204, but claims that it is the same as the Shroud of Turin have been made. [1]

The San Silvestro version is first recorded in 1517, when the nuns were forbidden to expose it for veneration in case it caused confusion with the Veil of Veronica at St Peter's. After the final suppression of the convent it was taken to the Vatican, where it was kept in the Matilda Chapel. However, since the latter's remodeling as the Cappella Redemptoris Mater it seems to have dropped out of sight. [1]

(See appendix below)

### Cardinalate

The cardinalate title was established in 1517. The last deceased titular priest of the church was Desmond Connell, Archbishop of Dublin, Ireland. He was appointed on February 21, 2001, and died in 2017. The two previous cardinals were English: John Heenan 1965-75 and Basil Hume 1976-99. [1]

The present incumbent is Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanekhoun, from Laos and appointed in 2017. This is a French-speaking country, and the loss of the cardinalate's connection to the British Isles has raised some comment. The rumor is that friction between various national identities among the English-speaking expatriates here might have had something to do with it. [1]

## **Exterior**

### Street façade

The outer façade (1), which is adorned with Ionic pilasters, was erected by Clement XI after a design left by **de' Rossi**, and at the expense of the convent, as is recorded by an inscription inside over the entrance to the court, which precedes the church.

There are three vertical zones, the central one being slightly recessed. Four gigantic derivative Ionic pilasters are at the corners, doubletted around the angles and with grooved panels below the capital volutes. These support an entablature with a dedicatory inscription on the frieze:

**DEO IN HON[OREM] BEAT[ORUM] SILVESTRI . ET STEPHANI . P[A]P[ARUM] . DIC[ATUM]**

(To God, in honor of the blessed Sylvester and Stephen, popes, this [building] is dedicated.) [f]

Between each pair of pilasters are two windows with molded frames, a square one above a vertical rectangular one.

The very large entrance has a molded door case in the same style, with a raised triangular pediment broken at the top. Into the break is inserted an elliptical tondo with garlanded curlicues, and this contains a representation of the 'Edessa' image of the *Holy Face*, as if imprinted upon a cloth held aloft by two hovering cherubs. The image was venerated in this church until 1870 when it

was moved to the Vatican for safe keeping before the Italian troops entered Rome. [1] [a] [f]

The four baroque statues on the atrium façade, viewed from the piazza, are, from left to right:

*Saint Francis of Assisi* by **Vincenzo Felice**,

*Pope St Sylvester* by **Lorenzo Ottoni**,

*Pope St Stephen* by **Michel Maille**, and

*Saint Clare of Assisi* by **Giuseppe Mazzoni**.

In the center, on the base of the pedestal of the metal cross surmounting the entire façade, there is a carving in stone representing the *Head of Saint John the Baptist on a Dish*. Both this and the Mandylicon above the door are by **Felice**. [2] [f]

Part of the adjacent convent buildings are now used by the Post Office, since 1878. [1]

### Campanile. (4)

In 1198, during the reconstruction of the church by the Benedictines, a tall campanile was added next to the top left hand corner of the atrium. This tower is a familiar local landmark, and consists of seven storeys in brick separated by projecting cornices. The first storey has two separate arched openings, the second one has arcades of three brick arches while the top five have a pair of arches on each face separated by a limestone column with impost. These arches have double archivolt in brick. The brick fabric of the campanile is embellished by plaques of purple porphyry and green serpentine, and at the top is a molded cornice with dentillations. There is a tiled pyramidal cap.

[1] [b] [f]

### Atrium (2)

The church is approached through a high-ceilinged passageway to the atrium (2), which isolates it somewhat from the life and noise of the world outside. There is a jet of drinking water on the left as you enter. The courtyard floor is in red brick decorated with a large white diagonal cross, which extends to each corner of the vacant space. [1] [2] [d] [f]

On the walls surrounding this and in the loggia are fragments of early Christian and pagan monuments, as well as other interesting bits of sculpture with dates up to the 18th century. These derive from excavations in the church around the start of the 20th century, the erection of the Post Office and also from restorations in the church itself. Note the ancient sarcophagus to the left, and several ancient columns re-erected to the right. There are some mediaeval grave-slabs, including one belonging to a bishop. In the loggia is a mediaeval tablet listing the feast-days of the saints whose relics were enshrined in the church. [1] [2] [f]

One very important epigraph which at least used to be here was a record of the restoration of the Basilica e Catacomba di San Valentino by one of the Benedictine abbots in the 11th century. [1]

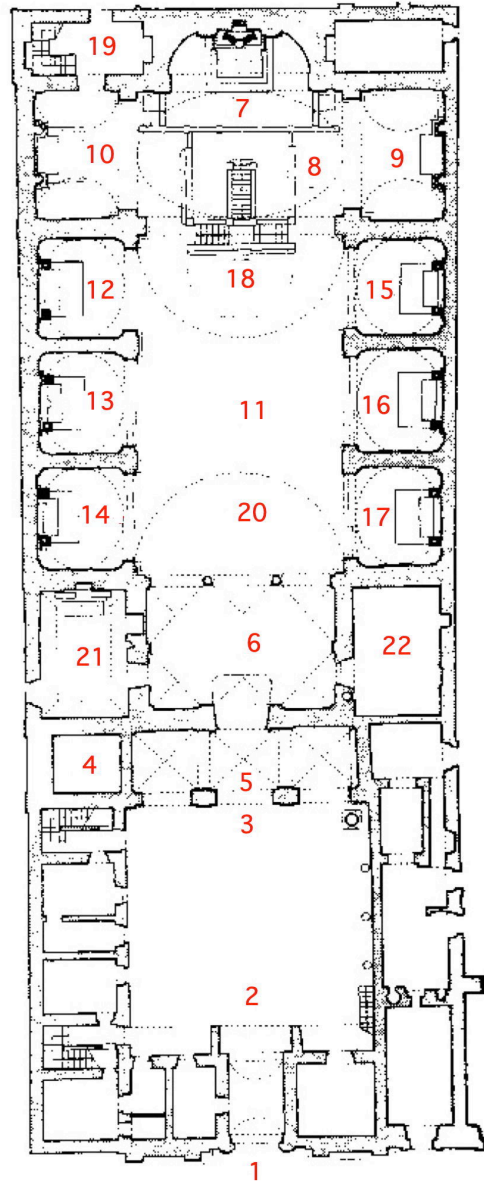
### Church façade and portico

The actual church façade (3) is of two storeys, and is very simple. The first storey has an internal portico (5) entered through three arches, separated by Doric pilasters supporting an entablature. The second storey has matching Ionic pilasters with tiny volutes, supporting a triangular pediment. There are no decorative elements. The windows light a chamber above the portico. [1]

The walls of the portico have more fragmentary inscriptions, and some ancient tombstones embedded in them. There are two interesting inscriptions which date to the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century. One is a list of the female saints and the other of the male saints whose relics were transferred to the church. The inscriptions also list their feast days.

Over the church entrance is a very worn, weathered bas-relief of the *Image of Edessa*, held up by putti over an altar table.

## Plan



## Interior

The church is on a rectangular plan, of five bays. The first bay is an entrance vestibule, with two chambers on either side. Then comes a single nave with three identically sized chapels on each side. Then comes a transept with a dome over the crossing, and finally a semi-circular apse. The present structure dates to 1593-1601 and is the work of **Francesco Capriani da Volterra**, and **Carlo Maderno** who built the dome in 1595. The rich decoration dates from 1680-1696, and is by **Carlo Rainaldi**, completed by **Mattia De Rossi** and **Ludovico Gimignani**. The latter designed all the chapels. The best time to visit the church is around midday, when sunlight lights up the church. [1] [h]

The stucco decoration at the intersection of tribune and transept was done between 1689 and 1691 under the direction of **Mattia De Rossi**, **Camillo Rusconi** and **Michel Maille**. It is one of the most important examples of late-baroque art. [h]

### Vestibule

Inside the church is the entrance vestibule (6) with a richly decorated low vault, four small false domes with six lunettes. On the side-wall is another inscription recording the major work of decoration from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The nuns' choir and rich organ are above the vestibule. In the center of its ceiling is a painting of *St. Clare in the Glory of Heaven* in a golden stucco frame (1728). Here too are six lunette containing paintings of virtues: *Faith, Hope and Charity, Obedience, Prudence*

and *Chastity*. [f] [h]

There are two life-sized, polychrome statues, *St. Anthony of Padua* on the left, and a *Madonna and Child* on the right.

The door on the right leads to a chapel used as the church office (22). This office contains a 14<sup>th</sup> century (possibly) fresco of the *Madonna*. [f]

### Chapel of the Pietà

The door on the left side of the vestibule leads to the Chapel of the Pietà (21), where relic of St. John the Baptist is kept. On the left wall is a modern polychrome stature of *The Pietà at the foot of the Cross*. The right side of the of the room is closed off by a wrought iron gate. Here is an altar, above which is the relic of the head of St. John the Baptist, within an ornate reliquary. The reliquary of the head of St. John is a silver shrine, in which the skull of the saint is preserved in an oval space draped with swags of laurel leaves. This room also has a side entrance to the church. Over this entrance are two stain-glass windows with images of the *Head of John the Baptist*, and the *Image of Edessa*. These are a common theme throughout the church. [2] [f]

(On the relic and reliquary see appendix below)

### Nave

The vault of the nave (11) has an *Assumption of Mary with Saints with St. John the Baptist and St. Sylvester, and a glory of Saints and Angels* frescoed (1680) by **Giacinto Brandi**. On the counterfaçade is a fresco of the apostles gathered around Mary's empty tomb, and looking up at the Assumption in the vault. The four *Sibyls* at the corners of the vault were modeled by the sculptor **Girolamo Gramignoli**. [1] [2] [f]

The coat-of-arms on a large circular piece of gray, peperino, marble in the center of the floor, and on the bases of the columns of the altars in the transepts, belong to Cardinal Franz von Dietrichstein. He was titular of the church from 1599-1623 and helped pay for the church reconstruction. [f]

The organ (20) and gallery of carved wood is from the 17<sup>th</sup> century according to a plaque in the gallery. The present organ carries a label of the organ-builder Jules Annessens of Belgium, from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. [f]

The finely carved wooden pulpit has the Head of John the Baptist on one side, and the Image of Edessa on front. On the pilaster next to the pulpit is an inscription about the two relics. Above the inscription are sculptured images of the relics.

### Sanctuary

In the conch over the altar is the *Baptism of Constantine by Pope Sylvester*, by **Ludovico Gimignani**, painted about 1688. Canvasses on the sides, painted in 'chiaroscuro' are attributed to **Orazio Borgianni**. They depict *Messengers from Constantine seeking Pope Sylvester at Monte Soratte* (left side) and the *Martyrdom of Pope Stephen* (right side). All three of these paintings are based on legends that did not actually happen. The stucco angels sitting on the archivolt are by **Michel Maille**. There are two square grilles to the sides of the altar, which opened onto the nuns' choir behind the apse. [1] [2] [f]

It is believed that the high altar (7), which predates the present church from 1522, was probably designed by Michelangelo. **Piero Soderini**, who was the patron of the church and friend of Michelangelo, commissioned the piece in 1518. A series of letters has been discovered which indicates that Michelangelo and Soderini were at least in contact about the subject of the altar. The actual construction of the altar and tabernacle was accomplished by **Pietro Rosselli**. [1] [g] [h]

The present arrangement is by **Carlo Rainaldi**, who designed it in 1667. The altar aedicule, against the far side of the apse, is nine meters tall and is a large sculpted slab in grey with gilded details which look Renaissance. A pair of thin Corinthian pilasters support an entablature and triangular pediment, and on the frieze is the inscription from the second verse of Psalm 45: *Speciosus forma prae filiis hominum* ("You are the fairest among the sons of men"). Below this is a large tympanum bounded by an archivolt, with angels in the spandrels and containing a niche with a statue of *St. John the Baptist*. The statue niche is flanked with faces within six wings, which are seraphim. Just below the statue niche is the recess where the reliquary of the Baptist used to be kept. The upper part of reliquary was stolen during the Sack of Rome in 1527. The tympanum of the pediment has a little fresco of the *Mandyllion*, venerated by two angels. [1] [2] (6) [f]

Just above the altar table is a Baroque shrine containing the relics, obviously by **Rainaldi** and differing in style from the main aedicule. A pair of angels dressed in gold flank four fluted Corinthian columns in yellow marble with bronze capitals, supporting a bowed entablature and an

incurved and five-pointed triangular pediment. This shrine encloses a bronze grille decorated with a gilded glory, in front of which is a large painting of the *Mandylion*. [1]

#### APSE VAULT:

- **Gimignani**, *St. Sylvester baptizes Constantine* (1688)

#### RIGHT WALL:

- **Borgianni** (?), *The Martyrdom of St. Stephen* (1609-10)

#### LEFT WALL:

- **Borgianni** (?), *Pope Sylvester called by the Messengers of Constantine* (1609-10)

A low bronze screen with garlands and angels separates the sanctuary from the confessio.

#### Transept and Confessio

The transept has a false dome (it doesn't feature in the exterior), and a confessio or devotional crypt below it in front of the sanctuary. In front of this in turn is the altar pro populo for Masses facing the congregation; the older arrangement confined the sanctuary to the apse. [1]

The slightly elliptical dome (8), best seen from in front of the confessio, was designed by **Francesco da Volterra**. The fresco, *Glory of the Father*, by **Cristoforo Roncalli**, from 1605. An illusion of added height is given by the balustrade painted along the side, leading the viewer's gaze upwards. The dome sits on pendentives defined by the triumphal arch at the end of the nave and the three arches of the apse and the two transept chapels. The pilasters supporting these are revetted with a pinkish-grey marble. In the pendentives are frescoes of the *Four Evangelists*, also painted by **Roncalli**.

[1] [i]

The confessio (18), directly in front of the main altar, is a late addition, made in 1906, and supported by rather thin Ionic columns in a pink-blush marble. It holds relics from the suburban catacombs, brought to the first church that was built here in the 8th century. A medieval list of the saints whose relics were brought here is in the loggia by the entrance door. You may be able to enter the crypt, where you will find huge blocks of ancient masonry possibly of Republican date. It is thought that they are connected to the ancestral property of the two brothers who built the church in the 8th century. There is a Roman mosaic of birds at a bath on the wall. There are also frescoes, much damaged by moisture, by **Virginio Monti**. [1] [h]

#### Side chapels

There are six side-chapels, three opening on either side of the nave. In his role as overseer of the church's decoration, **Ludovico Gimignani** gave to these chapels a notable decorative unity, in which the altars, the marble balustrades, the gilded stucco garlands in the archivolt, and the arrangement and framing of the paintings in the interiors all play their part. Yet each chapel is in itself a unit, with its own iconography and individual artist's work. [f]

The altars of all six chapels are similar, in that the frontals are embedded with precious, golden-colored garble and carry an inscription to the effect that they were commissioned in 1734 by the abbess of the time, Sister Angela Reginalda Incoronate. [f]

#### **Left side chapels:**

##### Chapel of the Crucifixion (14)

In the first chapel to the left in the nave is dedicated to the Passion of Christ and is renowned for its collection of works by **Francesco Trevisani**. The altarpiece is considered to be this artist's masterpiece. Other moments of the Passion are depicted on the side walls. These paintings were completed from 1696, and are considered some of the best work by this artist. **Trevisani** traveled from Florence to Rome in order to work on the paintings. Having been a minor figure in the art world until that point, **Trevisani** was launched into the public eye, and became well known from his frescos. [1] [2] [f] [h]

An inscription set into the pavement says that the chapel belonged to the Timotei-Salvetti family, an obscure branch of the Salvetti family which originated in Pistoia and which came to Rome by way of Florence and Urbino in 1695. [e] [f] [h]

ALTAR :

- Trevisani, *The Crucifixion*

RIGHT WALL :

- (LUNETTE) Trevisani, *The Agony in the Garden*
- Trevisani, *Christ falling under the weight of the Cross*

LEFT WALL :

- (LUNETTE) Trevisani, *The Mocking of Christ*
- Trevisani, *Scourging at the Pillar*

VAULT :

- Trevisani, *The Exaltation of the Holy Cross*

### Chapel of Holy Family (13)

The second chapel is dedicated to the Pope Saint Marcellus and Saint Joseph. The altarpiece was painted in 1705 by Luigi Garzi. This chapel also contains two masterpieces by Ludovico Gimignani, painted in 1696 on the side walls. The vault frescoes are by Gimignani, and the group of stucco angels over the altar is by Lorenzo Ottoni. [2] [f] [h]

In the floor is a tombstone for Marcello Odesco, dated 1603.

ALTAR:

- Garzi, *The Appearance of the Holy Family to Pope St. Marcellus* (1705)

RIGHT WALL:

- Gimignani, *Holy Family with St. Elizabeth* (1695)

LEFT WALL:

- Gimignani, *The Death of Saint Joseph* (1695)

VAULT:

- Gimignani, *Angels and cherubini* (1695)

### Chapel of the Immaculate Conception (12)

The altarpiece in the third chapel on the left is by Gimignani, which dates from 1696. The frescos on the spandrels, the ceiling vault and in the lunettes are also by Gimignani. On the walls are frescoes by the Milanese Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli known as il Morazzone, the only example of his work in Rome. They date from about 1596. Note that the Morazzone frescoes are 100 years older than the Gimignani decorations. Gimignani decided to decorate the chapel in the themes and colors of the older frescoes. The stucco cherubs on the pediment of the altar are by Lorenzo Ottoni.

The floor is inlaid with 'cosmatesque' work, and also contains the tomb of Antonio Maria Manzoli, bishop of Gravina, dated 1596. [2] [e] [f]

ALTAR:

- Gimignani, *The Immaculate Conception* (1695-96)

RIGHT WALL:

- Mazzucchelli, *Adoration of the Magi* (ca. 1596)
- (LUNETTE) Gimignani, (1695-1696)

LEFT WALL:

- Mazzucchelli, *The Visitation* (ca. 1596)
- (LUNETTE) Gimignani, *The Annunciation* (1695-1696)



## VAULT

- **Gimignani**, *The Eternal Father in Glory* (1695-1696)

### Left transept chapel (10)

The altar was built in 1601-02 and the altarpiece commissioned around 1617 by the noblewoman Dionora Clararia, whose coat-of-arms is in the lower right-hand corner. The altar table and frontal are medieval with 'cosmatesque' mosaic inserts. There is 'cosmatesque' work set into the predella as well.

The altarpiece is by **Terenzio Terenzi**, who was a great imitator of Raphael. This painting is considered his best. The fresco of the vault is part of the vast reconstruction of the interior which took place at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and is the work of **Ludovico Gimignani**. The two large oil on canvas paintings on the walls are by **Virginio Monti**. [2] [f] [h]

#### ALTAR

- **Terenzi**, *Madonna & child with St. Paul and St. Nicholas bishop*, beneath which are *Mary Magdalen* and *St. Catharine of Alexandria* (ca. 1617)

#### VAULT

- **Gimignani**, *Pope St. Stephen refusing to Sacrifice to Idols, John the Baptist preaching* (1588-1590)

#### RIGHT WALL

- **Monti**, *Attack on Pope Leo III*, which actually occurred in 799. (1908-1909)

#### LEFT WALL

- **Monti**, *Martyrdom of the Young Acolyte, St. Tarsisius*. (1908-1909)

### Sacristy (19)

The door to the sacristy is in the left transept. In the sacristy is a cupboard dated 1630, the doors of which are painted with the images of the three popes whose relics are venerated here: St. Antheros, St. Denis and St. Stephen. Above is a semi-circular oil on canvas painting, dated 1721 by an unknown painter of *The 'Edessa Image' and the head of St. John the Baptist with St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi*. [f]

On the walls of a staircase adjoining the sacristy are arranged some fragments of 14<sup>th</sup> century frescoes detached from the walls of the former convent before it became the central post office. [f]

### **Right side chapels:**

#### Right transept chapel (9)

The right hand transept end is the Cappella Colonna, and is richly decorated in polychrome marble with an impressive altar aedicule designed by **Maderno**. The altar is dedicated to St. Pope Dionysius (Denis). Similar to the left transept altar, the altar table and frontal are medieval with 'cosmatesque' mosaic inserts, and there is 'cosmatesque' work set into the predella as well. [1] [f]

The oil on canvas altarpiece has been attributed to **Baccio Ciarpi**. The person on the extreme right without a halo has been identified by some experts as a portrait of St Philip Neri. Others believe the figure to represent Pope Stephen II, who was probably co-founder of the church. The haloed figure standing on the far left wearing a crown and carrying a royal scepter is identified as Saint Louis of Toulouse.

Before the 16<sup>th</sup> century rebuilding this chapel was under the patronage of the Colona family. The convent here was were Vittoria Colonna, great friend of Michelangelo, resided when she was in Rome. The family coat-of-arms can still be seen in several locations in the walls. In the lower foreground of the altarpiece is the coat-of-arms of Lucrezia Tomacelli-Colonna, indicating that it was she who commissioned the piece, in about 1617. [f] [g]

Also in this transept are two large paintings in oil on canvas by **Virginio Monti**. The vault frescoes here are by **Gimignani**, with the stucco work by **Rusconi** including the four angels disporting themselves in the central garland. [1] [f]

On the altar is a painting in an oval frame, possibly by **Ernst Platner**. [f]

ALTAR:

- **Ciarpi**, *Madonna with child with Saint John and Saint Dionysius* (1617)
- **Platner**, *Sacred Heart of Jesus*

RIGHT WALL:

- **Monti**, *Salome presents the decapitated head of St. John the Baptist to King Herod*

LEFT WALL:

- **Monti**, *Procession with the Relic of St. John the Baptist*

VAULT:

- **Gimignani**

### Chapel of the Holy Spirit (15)

The first chapel on the right was decorated in its entirety (1695-96) by **Giuseppe Ghezzi**. He treated the whole chapel as a single unit with the one theme of the Descent of the Holy Spirit. [2] [e] [f] [h]

In the table of the altar is an inscription that the relics of St. Sylvester, as well as relics of the Blessed Margaret Colonna, Poor Clare nun and abbess, were placed in the altar. In the floor is the tomb inscription of Mathew Laurenlius Belzas. [f]

ALTAR:

- **Ghezzi**, *Pentecost*

RIGHT WALL:

- (LUNETTE) **Ghezzi**, *Saint Gregory the Great*.
- **Ghezzi**, *St. John baptizes the Crowds*

LEFT WALL:

- (LUNETTE) **Ghezzi**, *An Angel Inspires Paul I to Build the Church of Saint Sylvester*
- **Ghezzi**, *The Baptism of Christ*

VAULT:

- **Ghezzi**, *God the Father*

### Chapel of St. Francis of Assisi (16)

The second chapel was originally under the patronage of the Palombara family, related to the Colonnas, and whose coats-of-arms is set into the sidewalls. The burial inscription is for the burial vault of the Savelli di Palombara family. It was this family who commissioned the altarpiece. [2] [e] [f]

On the pier separating this chapel from the next is a monument to one of the titular cardinals, Card. Aloysius Bottiglia Savoulz, who died in 1836, and is buried in the church. The portrait head of the cardinal on the monument was carved by **Alessandro Massimiliano Laboureur**, the French sculptor who worked in Rome in the Neo-Classical style in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and is signed and dated. [1] [f]

ALTAR:

- **Gentileschi**, *Saint Francis receives the Stigmata* (1610)

RIGHT WALL

- **Garzi**, *St Francis renounces his Possessions* (1686)

LEFT WALL:

- **Garzi**, *St Francis preaching* (1686)

VAULT

- **Garzi**, *Apotheosis of St. Francis* (1686)

### Chapel of St. Anthony of Padua and Pope St. Stephen I (17)

The first chapel on the right is dedicated to St Anthony of Padua, and is the Cappella Tedallini Bentivoglio. The aedicule has two Corinthian columns in red Sicilian jasper, supporting a split segmental pediment. The paintings are all by **Giuseppe Chiari** from 1696. The altarpiece, in oil on canvas, is one the the artist's masterpieces. The ceiling has a flat oval panel supported by pendentives. [1] [2] [e] [f]

This chapel was under the patronage of the Tadallini family, whose coat-of-arms can be seen carved onto the lower part of the walls, and on a commemorative slab in the floor. The inscription is in memory of Jerome di Tedallini, who lived to be over 100 years old. The memorial dates from 1498. [f]

#### ALTAR:

- **Chiari**, *The Virgin and Child with Sts. Anthony and Stephen I.* (1695-96)

#### RIGHT WALL

- (LUNETTE) **Chiari**, *St Anthony predicts the Martyrdom of one of the faithful.* (1695-96)
- **Chiari**, *St Anthony of Padua raises a man from the dead.* (1695-96)

#### LEFT WALL:

- (LUNETTE) **Chiari**, *The Martyrdom of Pope St. Stephen I* (1695-1696)
- **Chiari**, *Pope St Stephen I and the Destruction of the Idols* (1695-96)

#### VAULT

- **Chiari**, *Musician angels* (1595 - 96)

### Notes

The aspect of the present church is that of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century rebuilding. There are few remaining 8<sup>th</sup> century features of what was originally a simple basilica. In the northern part of the two side bays of the crypt it is possible to see the 8<sup>th</sup> century foundations of the end walls of the original aisles. These foundations are made of reused blocks from the Servian city walls, an early example of a building technique which later became characteristic of Carolingian church construction in Rome. A granite column in the aisle wall adjoining the relic chapel at the left rear is part of the 8<sup>th</sup> century aisle colonnade, other columns of which are now inside the 16<sup>th</sup> century piers of the left hand side of the nave. [d]

Two recurring themes in the church are the head of St John the Baptist on a plate and the face of Christ on a veil. One of the best examples can be seen on the pulpit. The head refers to the relic of St John the Baptist that is kept here, in a chapel to the left by the entrance. Parts of the reliquary are from the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century, but has been restored. The authenticity is uncertain, as St John's head is also venerated in other places. Nonetheless, it has given the church its name, 'in capite'. The image on a veil refers to the tradition that a portrait of Christ was made for a King of Edessa. It is said to have been preserved here, but it is now lost. [2]

### **Special notes**

As this is the English national church, Mass is regularly celebrated in English here.

### **Artists and Architects:**

Alessandro Massimiliano [Laboureur](#) (1794-1861), Italian sculptor  
Antonio Tommaso [de Marchis](#) (1692-1759), architect  
Baccio [Ciampi](#) (1574-1654), Italian painter of the late-Mannerism and early-Baroque style  
Camillo [Rusconi](#) (1658-1728), Italian sculptor of the late Baroque  
Carlo [Maderno](#) (1556-1629), Swiss-Italian architect  
Carlo [Rainaldi](#) (1611-1691), Italian architect of the Baroque period  
Cristoforo [Roncalli](#) [aka *Il Pomerancio*] (1552-1626), Italian Mannerist painter  
Domenico [de Rossi](#), (1659-1730) Italian sculptor and engraver.  
Ernst Zacharias [Platner](#) (1773- 1855), German painter, writer, and diplomat  
Francesco [Capriani](#) da Volterra (1535-1594), Italian architect

Francesco [Trevisani](#) (1656-1746), Italian painter of the early Rococo or late Baroque  
Giacinto [Brandi](#) (1621-1691), Italian painter of the Baroque period  
Girolamo Gramignoli (active ca. 1683-1716), Italian sculptor  
Giuseppe Bartolomeo [Chiari](#) (1654-1727), Italian painter  
Giuseppe [Ghezzi](#) (1634-1721), Italian painter of the Baroque period  
Giuseppe Mazzoni (18th cent.), Italian sculptor  
Jules Annessens (20th cent), Belgian organ maker  
Lorenzo [Ottoni](#) [aka *Il Lorenzone*] (1658-1736), Italian sculptor  
Ludovico [Gimignani](#) (1643-1697), Italian painter during the Baroque period  
Luigi [Garzi](#) (1638-1721), Italian painter of the Baroque period  
Mattia [de Rossi](#) (1637-1695), Italian architect of the Baroque period  
Michel [Maille](#) [aka *Michele Maglia*] (1643-1703), French sculptor  
Orazio [Borgianni](#) (1575-1616), Italian painter and etcher of the Mannerist and early-Baroque periods  
Orazio Lomi [Gentileschi](#) (1563-1639), Italian late-Mannerist/early-Baroque painter  
Pier Francesco [Mazzucchelli](#) [aka *il Morazzone*] (1573-1626), Italian painter of the early Baroque  
Pietro [Rosselli](#) (1474-1521), Italian architect  
Terenzio [Terenzi](#) [aka *da Urbino* or *Il Rondolino*] (1575-1621), Italian painter of the late-Renaissance or Mannerist period  
Vincenzo [Felice](#) (c.1657-1715), Italian sculptor  
Virginio [Monti](#) (1852-1942), Italian painter

### Relica:

St John the Baptist  
Saint [Tarcisius](#) (3<sup>rd</sup> century)  
[P. Saint Zephyrinus](#) (R.199- 217)  
[P. Saint Anterus](#) (R.235- 236)  
[P. Saint Stephen I](#) (R.254- 257)  
[P. Saint Dionysius](#) (R.259- 268)  
[P. Saint Gaius \(Caius\)](#) (R.283- 296)  
[P. Saint Miltiades](#) (R.311- 314)  
[P. Saint Sylvester](#) (R.314- 335)  
[P. Saint Zosimus](#) (R.417- 418)  
Bl. [Margaret Colonna](#) († 1284)

### Burials:

Jerome diTedallini (15<sup>th</sup> cent)  
<Roman Magistrate>  
Antonio Cardinal [PALLOTTA](#), (1770-1834)  
Francesco Cardinal [CARRARA](#) (1716-1793)  
Aloysius (Luigi) [BOTTEGLIA SAVOULX](#), (1752-1836)  
  
Bishop Antonio Maria Manzoli († 1603)  
<Bishop of Gravina di Puglia>  
  
Faustino de' Crispolti († 1728)  
Marzio Mauro († 1661)  
Mathew Laurenlius Belzas

### Location:

Addr: Piazza San Silvestro 17/A, Rome 00187, Italy  
Coord: [41° 54' 11.2" N, 12° 28' 50.3" E](#)

### Info:

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E-mail : [sansilvestro17@netscape.net](mailto:sansilvestro17@netscape.net)

Opening hours:

Monday to Saturday 7.00am-7.00pm  
Sunday 9.00am-12.45pm 3.30pm-6.30pm  
Masses: (per church web site)  
Monday to Friday 12.00pm (Ital), 6.00pm (Ital)  
Saturday 12.00pm (Ital), 5:30 pm (Ital)  
Sunday 10.00am(English) 5.30pm(English)

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## Appendix

### The Relic of the Head of St. John the Baptist, and the Reliquary

#### The Relic

The relic of the head of St. John the Baptist has been venerated in San Silvestro in Capite since at least the end of the twelfth century, the year 1192 or 1194 being probably the earliest date at which the words 'de Capo' or 'de Capite' are found added to the church's name. How it came to be here has not been recorded, nor can its previous history or provenance be, at present, ascertained.

Tradition holds that John was executed in the prison of the fortress of Machaerus, near the Dead Sea. It is said that Herodias, who prompted her daughter to ask King Herod Antipas for his head, afraid that if his body and his head were buried together he might come back to life, had the head hidden in Herod's palace in Jerusalem, while John's disciples removed the body to Sebaste in Samaria.

There are two differing accounts of how the head was found in Jerusalem and made its long journey to Constantinople, but it is known with certainty that it was being venerated as the principal treasure of the monastery church of Saint John Baptist of Stoudios within the walls of that city in 873. It is not known if the head was entire at this time, or whether it had been broken into different fragments.

The relic in San Silvestro is not a full head, but the top part of a skull, which has been set into a wax skull. There is another relic in the Cathedral of Amiens in northern France, which is only the front part of a head, from the forehead down to the upper jaw, excluding the teeth.

The relic now venerated in San Silvestro as the head of Saint John the Baptist has been for centuries the focus of much devotion and prayer. It is located in the chapel of the 'Pietà', accessible through a doorway immediately to the left on entering the church from the courtyard, or directly from Via del Gambero which runs along the side of the church.

#### The Reliquary

The ornamental reliquary is composed of parts from different historical periods. The more ancient part is the central gold-colored section, which sits on a silver base and is crowned by a golden spired section, both of the latter dating to 1888, when the relic was being kept in the Vatican. The silver base was made as a gift from the Chapter and Clergy of the Vatican Basilica, Rome January 1, 1888, for Pope Leo XIII in honor of his golden jubilee of priesthood (he was in fact ordained priest on the Feast of San Silvestro, December 31st, in 1837) and is inscribed with some of Leo's own verses. The top section is in the form of a gothic spire containing a small statue of the Baptist, and was crafted by the goldsmith Pietro Quadroli from a design by the painter Ludovico Seitz, who was at the time head of the Vatican Pinacoteca (art gallery). This replaced the original top piece which had been stolen from San Silvestro during the sack of Rome in 1527, the nuns there fortunately having managed to hide the central and most precious part of the reliquary containing the relic itself.

The outer part of this older central section consists of a six-sided Gothic-style shrine, commissioned by Cardinal Angelo Acciaiuoli, Archbishop of Florence (the Baptist is the city's patron saint) in the time of Pope Boniface IX (1389-1404). It may have been commissioned for the jubilee years of 1390 or 1400 to enrich the solemn procession on August 29th, the feast of the Beheading, in which the relic was carried, until 1411, every year. The feet of the shrine consist of a small lion at each corner of the hexagon, each of which supports a statuette of a saint within a tiny shrine against a background of dark blue enamel. The saints are, alternately, St. George killing the dragon and St. Christopher carrying the Child Jesus, with a small balustrade running between them forming the outer wall of this lower outer hexagonal section. Just above this is an inner hexagonal section, with a slender spire rising at each corner up the remaining height of this central section. Each of the six inner sides of this inner hexagon is adorned with a translucent enamel panel featuring scenes of the life of the Baptist: the first three panels each contain two scenes ("Gabriel

announces John's birth to Zechariah" and "John's Birth"; "The child John goes to the desert" and "John indicates Christ to his Disciples"; "The Baptism of Christ" and "John rebukes Herod") while the last three each contain just one scene ("John's Beheading", "Herod's Banquet", "Herodias receives John's head from her daughter"). The scene of the beheading naturally takes pride of place in the front centre and is depicted as already having been completed, in order to give maximum prominence to the detached head and the mounted soldiers waiting to receive it.

Just above these panels sits the part containing the relic itself. Above the latter, the slender spires are each joined to their neighbors by a consisting of a decorative pointed arch with an identical rosette on each side of it. The rosette contains a coat of arms surmounted by an episcopal mitre and a stylized flower. In every second arched panel, the rosettes contain the coat of arms and colours of Cardinal Acciaiuoli who commissioned the work (silver lion in blue field), while the alternate ones contain those of the Tomacelli family to which Pope Boniface IX belonged (red, with a chequered band of silver and blue) respectively. Above the arches and rosettes is another small balustrade, above which the slender pillars are each crowned by a small statue of a saint, possibly alternately St. Paul (with a sword) and St. Peter (perhaps with keys).

Inside the Acciaiuoli reliquary sits another older silver reliquary locked into the newer structure, with six sides. While the base, roof and frame of this reliquary are silver, the six walls were each originally made up of a rock crystal slab of which only three remain, which are of great purity and perfection.

The relic itself is a skull which is missing the jaw, remodeled and mostly filled with wax and stucco. The back of the skull is protected by a rigid silver half-cap which continues into a kind of silver "chin guard" under the bottom of the skull. This replaces the missing jaw and is secured by two lateral brackets to another rigid cap decorated with lilies, which covers the top of the skull. The outer ring of this is adorned with alternating red and dark blue precious stones, probably a variety of rubies and sapphires. This cap is joined to the rear half-cap by a hook and it has a ring attached to it, which allowed the relic to be easily extracted from the display case. Above this "half-cap" sits a real, golden crown, consisting of a series of 18 articulated plates, joined by hinges, and also decorated with lilies. The plates and the lilies are each decorated by a cabochon stone alternately red or green, and pearls.

In 1999, the reliquary was taken to the Central Institute for Restoration (Istituto Centrale per il Restauro), in Rome for restoration for about 13 years, returning to San Silvestro in June 2012. It is back in its normal place of display in the Pietà Chapel, but now in a special temperature-controlled enclosure in order to help better preserve the priceless relic.

## **Popes buried in San Silvestro**

### Pope Saint Sylvester I

January 314 - December 335

His entire Pontificate took place during the reign of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, beginning within a year of the signing of the Edict of Milan (February 313) through which Christianity went from being a persecuted faith to the official religion of the Roman Empire. Great new churches built in Rome during this time, endowed with splendid gifts by the Emperor and consecrated by Pope Sylvester, include the basilica and the baptistery of Saint John Lateran, Saint Peter's, Saint Laurence-outside-the-walls and Santa Croce in Gerusalemme. Contrary to popular legend, he did not baptize Constantine. Buried originally in a cemetery-church he had built over the catacomb of Priscilla.

### Pope Saint Stephen I

May 254 - 2 August 257

Famous for insisting that those who had denied their Christian faith in the face of persecution could be readmitted to the Eucharist through repentance. Buried originally in the Crypt of the Popes in the catacomb of Callixtus on the Via Appia.

### Pope Saint Dionysius or Denis

22 July 260 - 26 December 268

Probably of Greek origin, he was the immediate successor of the martyred Pope Sixtus II. He is

mentioned in the Liber Pontificalis, in the biography of Pope Leo III, as being the titular patron of the public church attached to the monastery of San Silvestro. Not a martyr, but originally buried next to his predecessor in the Crypt of the Popes in the catacomb of Callixtus.

Pope Saint Antheros or Anterus

21 November 235 - 3 January 236

A Greek, he was pope during the persecution of the Emperor Maximinus. Buried originally in the Crypt of the Popes in the catacomb of Callixtus, the first Pope to be buried there.

Pope Saint Miltiades or Melchiades

2 July 311 - 10 January 314

A north African, probably a Roman citizen, he was the immediate predecessor of Pope Saint Sylvester, being Pope when the Edict of Milan was signed. He was originally buried in the catacomb of Callixtus.

Pope Saint Lucius I

25 June 253 - 5 March 254

A Roman, he was sent into exile during persecutions at the beginning of his pontificate, but was later able to return to Rome. Buried originally in the Crypt of the Popes in the catacomb of Callixtus.

Pope Saint Gaius or Caius

17 December 283 - 22 April 296

Little is known for certain about him. Buried originally near the Crypt of the Popes in the catacomb of Callixtus.

Pope Saint Zepherinus

198/9 - 217

During his pontificate, the archdeacon at Rome was Callixtus, who had charge of the catacomb on the Via Appia which has since been called after him. Buried originally in a catacomb on the Via Appia, probably that of Callixtus.

Source:

[Church Web Site](#)