

# Santa Maria Madre della Famiglia

## Santa Marta



**Santa Maria Madre della Famiglia** is the 20<sup>th</sup> century church of the Governorate in Vatican City, and is in the gardens west of St Peter's, adjacent to the Palace of the Governorate. (1) (2)

### History

This church was begun in 1928 as the chapel for a new seminary for the Diocese of Rome. The new chapel's large size was intended to accommodate all the putative seminarians of the Pontificio Seminario Romano Maggiore to be moved here. However, as a result of the Concordat agreed between Mussolini and the Church in 1929, giving territorial sovereignty to the Vatican City, the new main building was converted before completion into the Palazzo di Governatorio or the Palace of the Governor of Vatican City. The seminary was established at a site near San Giovanni in Laterano instead. The church was completed in 1931. (1) (2)

The architect was **Giuseppe Momo**, who also designed the railway station just to the south, by Pope Pius XI. In order to give access to the station the work entailed the demolition of the 16<sup>th</sup> century church of Santa Marta in Vaticano, hence the new seminary chapel was dedicated as a church in honor of the same saint and had several artworks transferred to it in 1930. (1) (2)

There was a restoration in 1966, and the church was re-consecrated in honor of Our Lady, Mother of the Family in 2007. (1) (3)

### Exterior

The church has a single nave of three bays, with very narrow lower structural side aisles divided internally into side chapels. The nave has a pitched and tiled roof with eaves that overhang substantially, except at the façade. The aisle roofs are flat. There is a three-sided external apse with

its own tiled roof in three sectors. The fabric is in red brick, with architectural details in limestone. (1)

The façade has a single storey, slightly narrower than the nave. A pair of gigantic brick pilasters with limestone Corinthian capitals occupy the corners, and support a brick entablature with shallow posts above the capitals. Above this is an oversized and projecting triangular pediment, the same width as the nave. The tympanum contains an ornately carved Baroque coat-of-arms embellished with festoons, which displays the heraldry of Pope Pius XI. (1)

Two very narrow side zones, set back, are under the ends of the pediment and mark the corners of the nave side walls. The central zone of the façade, in between the pilasters, has a plain brick frame within which is a gigantic molded arch with its keystone touching the top of the frame. The arch is occupied by an enormous window fenestrated with squares of yellow translucent selenite. (1)

The entrance, which is approached by a flight of steps, has a molded doorcase with a raised segmental pediment broken at the top and with the breaks curlicued. This pediment intrudes into the window. Into the break is inserted another carved Baroque coat-of-arms representing the Eucharist, again looking as if it from the old church. The zones in between the doorcase and the sides of the arch are occupied by a pair of recessed panels with stepped frames, rendered in an off-white. (1)

The door in the façade is closed. Access to the church is through a enclosed passageway from the Governorate palazzo..

## **Interior**

The nave has three bays, with three side chapels to the left and two to the right. The sanctuary occupies a semi-circular apse. The missing central chapel to the right is occupied by the entrance to the covered passageway leading into the palazzo. (1)

The overall paint scheme is in an off-white, with details in white and light grey. The stucco decorations in the single nave and the side chapels are by the school of Bernini.

### Nave

There are no arcades, but the side chapels are trabeated which means that their entrances have horizontal lintels. Each of these is supported by a pair of Ionic columns with swagged capitals, and forms part of an entablature with a plain frieze which runs around the interior. The pairs of columns stand very close to matching pairs of side pilasters supporting the ends of the trabeations. In between each pair of chapels is a blind pilaster, and in front of this is another column which supports nothing but an entablature post and an empty curlicued pedestal. (1)

The barrel-vaulted ceiling springs from the entablature, and has three large lunette windows on each side. On the entablature in front of each window is a blank lute-back tablet with fronded curlicues and a molded arc cornice. The ceiling lunettes, bordered with molded ribs, do not meet but touch a curvaceous central fiddle-back panel outlined with molding but containing no fresco. There are stucco frond and scallop details where the lunettes touch this, in the corners where the lunette ribs meet and on the lunette window archivolts. (1)

The rear entrance has a very shallow bay, over which the entablature runs. The latter is supported by a pair of the Ionic columns. In the rear corners of the nave is another pair of the columns supporting posts, from which springs a wide dished archivolt with a single curve of trapezoidal coffering. This encloses the organ gallery, tucked in over the entrance bay and which has a pin balustrade. The archivolt fits into the curve of the ceiling vault. The organ was built by organ maker from Cremona Daniele Giani in 2007. (1) (2) (4)

### Sanctuary

The triumphal arch is semi-circular, springing from a length of entablature on each side supported by a square pilaster and free-standing column in the same style as those of the nave. The archivolt is

substantially lower than the curve of the ceiling vault, and the space in between contains fronded incurves meeting at a crowning curlicued Papal heraldic shield displaying an eagle. This is untinged so the attribution is not obvious, but the eagle was the emblem of Pope Leo XII (1823-9). (1)

The sanctuary has a very shallow bay before the apse proper. The entablature is doubled by the addition of a sub-entablature, posted over a set of six blind pilasters which are painted in white to contrast with the light grey of the wall. The main entablature has matching posts, which are fronded, and the conch has ribs springing from these. The ribs have each a single leafy pendant festoon, and meet at a stucco glory containing the *Dove of the Holy Spirit* within a triangle. The very short bay vault in front of the conch contains a large stucco rosette. (1)

In 2007 the recently restored icon (from 1516) of *The Madonna and Child with SS Joachim and Anne*, by **Francesco Melanzio**, presented to the church by Pope Benedict XVI, was hung on the wall over the high altar. This replaced an altarpiece of St Martha by Giovanni Baglione, which came from the old church. The same must apply to the fine polychrome marble tabernacle on the high altar. The altar pro populo (for Mass celebrated facing the congregation), installed in 1982, consists of a mensa sitting on a Composite column capital which came from Castel Gandolfo. (1) (2) (3) (a)

### Side chapels

The five side chapels are identically treated. They are bare-walled cuboidal spaces, with matching altars. Each of the latter has a mensa corbelled out on a pair of incurved brackets, which flank a grey marble wall panel into which a yellow Greek cross is set. Above, the altarpiece painting is within an elliptical tondo in a completely gilded wide neo-Baroque frame with curlicues. (1)

The five paintings on the side altars were painted in 1928 by **Antonio Soranzo**. The dedications have been given as, counter-clockwise from the rear entrance: *St Joseph, Our Lady of Guadalupe* (with a more ornate frame than the others), *St Martha*, *St John the Baptist*, and *The Sacred Heart*. (1) (2) (a)

### **Special notes**

The feast of St Martha is celebrated on 29 July. As the church is in the Vatican, it is not open to the general public.

### **Location:**

Coordinates: [41° 54' 8" N](#) [12° 27' 3" E](#)

### **Artists and Architects:**

Antonio Soranzo (1873-1946), Italian painter  
Francesco [Melanzio](#) (1465-1526), Italian painter of the Umbrian school, from Montefalco  
Daniele Giani (21<sup>st</sup> cent), Italian organ-maker from Cremona  
Giuseppe [Momo](#) (1875-1940), Italian architect from Vercelli

### **Links and References:**

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
  2. [Italian Wikipedia article](#)
  3. <http://www.zenit.org/it/articles/la-cappella-del-governatorato-vaticano-altoparlante-per-la-santita-della-famiglia> (no longer online)
  4. [Article on the organ](#)
- a. Information provided by Vatican Governorate employee

