

# Santa Maria della Pietà in Camposanto Teutonico in Vaticano



**Our Lady of Mercy in the German Cemetery.** The church dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The church is located to the left of the Vatican basilica, in a complex, surrounded by a high wall, which includes the church, the German cemetery (Camposanto Teutonico), a college (Schola Francorum), and a hospice for German-speaking pilgrims which was the oldest German institution in Rome.

## History

In 799 a Schola Francorum was spoken of for the first time. For this reason, on the wall of the building there is a ceramic depiction of Charlemagne as the founder.

The cemetery and the church were in bad shape at the time of the 1450 Holy Year, but both were soon rebuilt. In 1454 the German members of the Curia under Pope Nicholas V, gathered together as a confraternity which still exists today in a different form and is owner of the foundation. In the last quarter of the 15th century the current structure of the church was built according to a style widely used in Germany at the time. In 1597 the confraternity was promoted to the "Archconfraternity of Our Lady" at the German Cemetery next to St. Peter's. In 1876 a residence was built for priests studying Christian archaeology, church history and other similar fields. In 1888 the Roman Institute of the Goerres Society took up residence there with a library of around 35,000 books.

During World War II, it was damaged by a bomb. The bomb was dropped by an Italian plane painted with German identification marks, as part of a scheme the fascists had cooked up. It was intended for San Pietro in Vaticano, but for some reason - either an error made by the bombardier or reluctance to bomb the world's greatest cathedral - it hit this church in the shadow of the basilica

instead. The church has been reconstructed, which will be obvious to the visitor.

Further restoration was carried out in 1972, when it was largely returned to its original form.

The church is served by German clergy.

## Exterior

The main point of interest here is the German cemetery. It was established so that Germans who died in Rome could rest among the martyrs. Dignitaries from other countries in northern Europe are also buried here.

In the Piazza dei Protomartiri Cristiani in front of the cemetery there is a bronze plaque marking the original site of the obelisk in Piazza San Pietro. Be careful if you look for it - there is quite a lot of traffic in and out of the Vatican at times.

The church is connected to the German College.

The entryway was designed by Elmar Hillebrand (Cologne, Germany) and donated in 1957 by the President of the Republic of Germany Theodor Heuss. On the left door is a *Madonna and Child* underneath the Archconfraternity's coat of arms, a mix of a two-headed eagle with the Pietà. The *Resurrection* is depicted on the right side.

## Interior

The entrance to the church is in the loggia on the west side of the cemetery. The bronze doors were made by Elmar Hillebrandt. Funds for this and the stained glass windows were donated by the President of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1957. The figurative panels in the doors depict the *Madonna and Child* to the left, and the *Resurrection* to the right. Also shown is the heraldic device of the confraternity, involving the Pietà and the double-headed eagle of the Holy Roman Empire.

The little church is on a square plan, with cross-vaulting supported by four clustered piers each in the form of a cross with chamfered corners. These piers support four arches dividing the vault compartments. The bottom pair of piers stand free, but the top pair have blocking walls between them and the far wall in order to create a sanctuary and a pair of side chapels. The sanctuary has a semi-circular apse with its own arch. The side chapels are entered through smaller arches supporting screen walls.

Since the restoration of 1975, the interior has been rather stark. The piers and the archivolt are in naked pink brick, with molded limestone impost capitals. The walls and vaults are in creamy white, except in the left hand chapel which preserves its Baroque decoration.

The stained glass windows were made by Georg Meistermann.

The piers flanking the sanctuary have a pair of Baroque funerary monuments in a style recalling Bernini, featuring skeletons attending to cameo portraits of the deceased.

The right hand one is of Georg Meisel 1710 by Lorenzo Ottoni, and is in white black and yellow marbles with a gilded cameo. A skeleton holding an hour-glass is modelling a rumpled shroud, and is accompanied by four putti. All these are in white marble. Above and behind the skeleton is a bunched velvet backdrop in black marble, with a bishop's hat on top sheltering the heraldic shield. The composition stands on a yellow marble shelf, below which is the epigraph accompanied by two winged skulls.

The left hand one is even more ornate, and is to the Tyrolese engraver Lorenzo Rues 1690 by Giovanni Battista Giorgi. The smoking torches at the top, in red and grey marbles, are unusual. A winged skeleton is sitting on a sarcophagus and holding the cameo, accompanied by three grief-stricken putti and having a rumpled black marble backdrop. The epitaph below has two heads of

cadavers.

### Sanctuary

The restored apse now has a small round window, flanked by two round-headed ones each having two Gothic lights separated by a colonnette mullion with a roundel at the top. These now contain more glass by **Meistermann**. The altar itself has a white marble frontal carved in shallow relief, which is thought to have been part of an early mediaeval sanctuary screen.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century altarpiece is now in the form of a stand-alone screen behind the altar, having five panels. The work is now attributed to **Macrino d'Alba**, and has a *Pietà* as the large central panel. It has a *Pietà* as the large central panel. There are four side panels. The left panels are *Christ and St James* and *Sts Peter and John the Baptist*. On the right panels *Christ and St Paul* and *St Anne with Our Lady*. Above is hanging a large painted wooden crucifix which looks 18th century.

### Blessed Sacrament chapel

The right hand side chapel is now the Blessed Sacrament Chapel. It is now very stark, with a simple free-standing altar formed of a marble slab on an ornately carved ancient column capital. The far wall has a blocked two-light window in the same style as those in the apse.

The former 19th century decoration of this chapel was by an artist given as **Giacomo von Hase**, who also had paintings in the sanctuary and who was buried in the cemetery. Further frescoes were added here in 1900 by **Gerolamo Robert da Francoforte**.

### Swiss Guards chapel

The left hand side chapel, in contrast, is decorated in the Baroque style. It is a memorial to the Swiss Guards killed in the Sack of Rome in 1527. The side wall frescoes are by **Polidoro da Caravaggio**.

The polychrome marble altar aedicule has a pair of black marble Corinthian columns with gilded capitals supporting a split and outwardly rotated segmental pediment. A pair of angels sit on the two pediment halves, venerating a fresco of *Christ Triumphant* in the gap. The altarpiece is a white marble bas-relief of *The Resurrection*.

The cross-vault ceiling preserves its 16th century fresco, in a grotesque style. The four side panels have putti with the *Instruments of the Passion*, and the central tondo has a *Dove of the Holy Spirit*, which is unusually not given a glory, accompanied by more putti. The panels are separated by very attractive garland strips in green herbage with white lilies.

The Swiss Chapel served as a burial place for the 147 fallen guards after the Sack of Rome. The frescoed walls were painted by **Polidoro Caldara**, a disciple of **Raffaello**, and are of very high quality.

The windows were made by **Georg Meistermann**, who was also famous for his stained glass windows in the whole of Europe.

### **Special notes**

It is possible to visit the church, but it is probably best to make arrangements ahead of your visit. As it is inside the Vatican City, you can't simply walk in. I've only been there in the company of a priest who knew what to say to the Swiss Guards so that they would let us in right away, but it might be more difficult under other circumstances.

Given its special location, the Teutonic Cemetery has always received many requests for burial. According to the statutes, those who have a right to be buried here include members of the Archconfraternity, members of many religious houses of German origin and members of the two German colleges in Rome (the *Anima* and the *Germanico*). Prayer is open to all although visitors most often come to find the graves of famous people of ecclesiastical, artistic, political or diplomatic backgrounds:

Josef Anton Koch, landscape painter (d. 1839)

Ludwig Curtius, archaeologist (d. 1954)

Johann Baptist Anzer, first missionary bishop of the Divine Word Missionaries (d. 1903)

Joseph Spithöver, key promoter of German culture in Rome during the 19th century  
(d. 1870)  
Stefan Andrei, writer (d. 1970)  
Johann Martin von Wagner, archaeologist and artist (d. 1858)  
Anton de Waal, first rector of the College (d. 1917)  
Engelbert Kirschbaum, S.J., Archaeologist, key colleague in the discovery of Peter's tomb  
(d. 1970)  
Augustin Theiner, Prefect of the Vatican Secret Archives (d. 1874)  
Hubert Jedin, historian of the church, scholar of the history of the Council of Trent  
(d. 1980)  
Gustav Adolf Cardinal von [HOHENLOHE-SCHILLINGSFÜRST](#), (1823-1896)  
Charlotte Frederikke [Von Mecklenburg-Schwerin](#) (1784-1840)  
<Danish Royalty>  
(List of burials from Find-a-Grave, [here](#))

### Artists and Architects:

Georg [Miestermann](#) (1911-1990), German painter and draftsman  
Macrino [d'Alba](#) (c. 1465- c. 1520), Italian painter of the Renaissance period  
Polidoro [Caldara](#) (c. 1499-1543), Italian painter of the Mannerist period  
Elmar [Hillebrandt](#) (1925-2016), German sculptor  
Lorenzo [Ottoni](#) (1658-1736), Italian sculptor  
Giovanni Battista Giorgi (17th cent), Italian sculptor  
Giacomo von Hase (19th cent), German painter  
Gerolamo Robert da Francoforte (20th cent), painter  
Polidoro [da Caravaggio](#) (1499-1543), Italian painter of the Mannerist period

### Location:

Piazza del S. Uffizio (Camposanto Teutonico) 00193 Roma (C. di Vaticano)  
Coord: [41° 54' 4.4"N 12° 27' 17.5"E](#)

### Links:

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[English Wikipedia](#)

[Article in the The Catholic Telegraph](#) of March 10, 2015

[YouTube tour](#)

[Tertonic Cemetery](#), from German Wikipedia

### References:

(a) Donovan, Jeremiah; [Rome Ancient and Modern and its Environs](#); 1842