

Santi Cosma e Damiano



View of the Temple of Romulus, from the Palatine Hill.

The basilica of **Santi Cosma e Damiano** is one of the ancient churches of Rome. The basilica, devoted to the two Greek brothers from Syria, doctors, martyred under Diocletian, saints Cosmas and Damian, is located in the Forum of Vespasian, also known as the *Forum of Peace*.

History

The body of the church was built by Vespasian (69-79) as the *templum alma urbis* to conserve censorial records, municipal street plans, etc. The circular vestibule opening onto the Forum was constructed by Maxentius, possibly as a mausoleum for his son (the so-called “Temple of Romulus”). Originally, the external wall was clad with about 150 marble slabs incised with a street map of Rome at the time of the Severi (3rd century AD) known as the *Forma Urbis*. [a] [c]

The ancient Roman hall, probably deserted by 520, seems to have served as a medical office in an area which had been settled by doctors in public civil service from the Imperial age onwards. [d]

The hall was Christianized and dedicated to *Sancti Cosma et Damiano* in 527, when Theodoric the Great, king of the Ostrogoths, and his daughter Amalasantha donated the library of the Forum of Peace (*Bibliotheca Pacis*) and a portion of the Temple of Romulus to Pope Felix IV (526-530). The pope united the two buildings to create a basilica devoted to two Greek brothers and saints, Cosmas and Damian, in contrast with the ancient pagan cult of the two brothers Castor and Pollux, who had been worshipped in the nearby temple. The church became, with Santa Maria Antiqua, the first place of Christian worship in the area of the Forums; since it did not have a parish function, it became a real sanctuary where the faithful went to invoke the healing of the two holy doctors and thaumaturges Cosma and Damiano. [2] [3] [c] [e]

The cult of the two doctor saints became very popular in the Middle Ages and later, and the belief grew up that any sick person who slept overnight in the church might be granted a vision of them

leading to a cure. This was an obvious adaptation of the pagan tradition of the asclepeion. Pope Sergius I restored and enriched the furnishings in the late 7th century, and so did Pope Adrian I in the 8th. The latter also enriched the diaconia with landed property, in order for it to have income to feed and bathe poor people and pilgrims. [1]

The apse of the new church was decorated with a mosaic, representing the parousia (coming at the end of time) of Christ. This work was immensely influential, and art historians have been able to trace its inspiration in mosaics in later Roman churches. It stands nowadays as one of the foremost examples of the old Classical style of depiction (see the mosaic at Santa Pudenziana for an example of this) starting to mutate into the (then novel) Byzantine style. [1] [e]

The sacred building was enlarged in 695, under Sergius I and in 772, during the pontificate of Hadrian I, serving as a reception center for the poor and pilgrims. In addition, in 772 it became a cardinal and collegiate deaconate and was assigned land properties to provide for its functions. The interior of the church did not undergo major transformations during the Middle Ages; probably already at the time of Felix IV the room appeared as an apsidal hall, thus requiring minimal intervention to be transformed into a sacred building. In the 12th century a transverse wall supported by columns was built between the third and fourth windows, probably to ensure the statics of the building. For the rest, the interior of the basilica remained substantially unchanged until the sixteenth century. [3]

In 1512 Cardinal Alessandro Farnese (future Pope Paul III) entrusted the complex to the Third Order Regular of St. Francis (TOR), who are still in charge. This was the beginning of the modern era for the church. [1] [2] [3]

The Sack of Rome in 1527 probably seriously damaged the neighborhood, and gave the opportunity for clearance. In 1534 Pope Paul III ordered the demolition of two hundred houses and four churches to create a new processional route from the Arch of Septimius Severus to the Arch of Titus, then a fortified gateway to the domain of the Frangipani family. This passed through the new open space, and was given an avenue of elm trees. The first person to use this in procession was the Emperor Charles V. Unfortunately the area was found convenient for a livestock market, which survived to attract the sensibilities of romantics until the late 19th century, and gave the area the name of Campo Vaccino or the cow-field. [1]

The bodies of Saints Mark and Marcellian were translated, perhaps in the ninth century, to this church, where they were rediscovered in 1583 during the reign of Pope Gregory XIII. [1]

In 1632, Pope Urban VIII Barberini ordered the restoration of the basilica. The works, which were designed by **Orazio Torriani** and directed by **Luigi Arrigucci**, raised the floor level 23 feet, bringing it equal with the *Campo Vaccino*, thus avoiding the infiltration of water. Also, a cloister was added. The old floor of the basilica, with fragments of 12th century Cosmatin mosaics, is still visible in the lower church, which is actually the lower part of the first church. **Arrigucci** also narrowed the Triumphal arch between the apse and nave and added three chapels on each side of the nave. The present carved wooden ceiling was inserted, displaying the arms of Pope Urban, and a new high altar provided. The entrance from the Forum was also raised and given a decorative Baroque pediment, and the circular entrance hall was given a cupola. [1] [d]

In 1873 the church was expropriated and confiscated from the state property of the Kingdom of Italy, then it passed into that of the Italian Republic, which still manages it today through the Fondo Edifici di Culto (FEC). [3]

In 1947, the restorations of the Imperial Forums gave a new structure to the church. The original access, which took place from the ancient "Via Sacra", through the splendid portal of the "Temple of Romulus", was closed and replaced by a new entrance, designed by **Gaetano Rapisardi**, with a travertine arch on via dei Fori Imperiali. At the same time the "Temple of Romulus" was restored in the state of the Roman era. [3]

The basilica is currently a subsidiary place of worship of the Parish of San Marco Evangelista al Campidoglio. [3]

Title of cardinal

The church is the seat of the cardinal title of Santi Cosma e Damiano, established in the eighth century: the current owner is Cardinal Mario Grech. [3]

Exterior

"Temple of Romulus"

This side of the basilica is approached from the Roman Forum. It is a cylindrical brick building, with a shallow octagonal dome having a pitched roof in eight segments. There is a narrow tiled area of roof between the drum of this dome and the roofline, and the drum itself has one step which is also tiled. On the dome is a circular Baroque lantern with eight arched windows forming an arcade and bearing a cupola in lead. [1]

The entrance is impressive, although the architectural elements were originally scavenged from elsewhere. It was lowered back to its original position by the archaeologists, having been raised in the 17th century and put on the major axis of the church (just to the left of the present entrance). A pair of porphyry Corinthian columns on tall plinths support a horizontal entablature with a narrow blank frieze and a projecting dentillate cornice. The decorative marble doorcase has its own cornice. The original bronze double doors are a very rare survival, and incredibly the door lock still works. [1]

To the left and right used to be two narrow apsidal halls, each having a doorway flanked by a pair of cipollino Corinthian columns. Those on the left have gone, but the pair on the right has survived and one of these bears a fragment of entablature. [1]

As a result of the recent re-ordering the bronze doors are usually kept open during visiting hours, so that tourists can admire the mediaeval frescoes or (more usually) shelter from the sun. Hence it is difficult to get a good photo of them, but the "Romeartlover" web-page has an excellent one. [1]

Convent

The adjacent convent is a 17th century building, and important in its own right. It has its original entrance on the Via in Miranda, which is worth looking at. The rusticated Baroque arched doorway is topped with a cornice in curlicues, and within this is a capsule-shaped plaque bearing the emblem of the Tertiaries. You can see the crossed arms of Christ and St Francis bearing wounds on the palms, the Crown of Thorns and the Nails of the Passion. If the main entrance is closed for some reason, this is the entrance to use. [1]

Next to the new entrance to the complex the convent has rooms with the original marble floor of the Forum of Peace, and the wall to the left of the entrance is where the 150 marble slabs of the **Forma Urbis Romae** were originally hung. The approach to the church is from the modern Via dei Fori Imperiali, through the convent attached to it, through a neo-Romanesque arch of white travertine limestone which was added in 1947 by the architect **Gartano Rapisardi**. A pair of gigantic derivative Doric pilasters with exaggerated capitals flank the arch, and above is a blank wall bearing the name of the basilica. [1] [d]

To the left of the entrance, the Baroque campanile can be seen peeping over the convent building. It has three arches for its bells, a small one over two larger ones. The former is in the form of a miniature triumphal arch, with a triangular pediment and sweeping sides. [1]

Cloister

The entrance opens into a long corridor, formerly part of the Franciscan cloister built by **Luigi Arrigucci**. The cloister is a cool spot with simple architecture. The frontages are in pink with vertical and horizontal white bands. The arcade arches have imposts below their intradoses, but no other decoration. The courtyard is paved in cobbles, with an X in irregular paving slabs meeting at a Baroque fountain embellished with sculptures of horses. The basin contains goldfish. [1] [3]

The entrance to the church is in the top left hand corner, and by this are wall frescoes in the cloister walk by **Francesco Allegrini** (first half of the 17th century). These depict *Stories from the life of St. Francis of Assisi and of Blessed Lucchese*. You passed another fresco, of *St Francis receiving the stigmata*, when you entered the cloister. [1] [3]

Main body of church

You can see the right hand outer wall of the church if you visit the Forum, as well as the nave frontage above the "Temple of Romulus" which has a row of three large arched windows. Otherwise the fabric is concealed by the convent, and is invisible from the Via dei Fori Imperiali. The plan is almost square, with the large semi-circular external apse itself concealed within curtain walls of the convent structure. [1]

Interior

Through the cloister, the entrance to the church opens on the side of the single nave.

Nave

The plan of the basilica followed the norms of the Counter-Reformation: a single four-bay nave, with three external chapels on the left hand side and four on the right. These are entered through large arches, above which are fresco panels. The first bay of the nave has the modern entrance on the left hand side, where a chapel would perhaps otherwise be. [3]

Wall decoration over the chapel arches are from the 1632 restoration. The frescoes are eight stories from the life of Sts Cosmas and Damian, and ten figures of Saints and Popes, as well as trophies with instruments of martyrdom, are by **Marco Montagna**, with the assistance of **Simone Lagi**. [3]

The ambo on the left side has the universal symbol of the Franciscans on the front and a wooden statue of St. Francis on top. In the center of the floor is the *opus sectile* tombstone for Giovanni Battista Capilupi (1653-1716), Bishop of Polignano.

The carved gilt wood ceiling of 1632 by **Luigi Arigucci**, with central fresco, *Glory of Sts Cosmas and Damian*, by **Marco Montagna**. It is flanked by a pair of shields showing the Barberini bees, since Pope Urban VIII belonged to that family. [1] [3]

The back of the nave, usually a counterfaçade, has a large window overlooking the rotunda of the ancient temple. On the counterfaçade is the baptismal font, and funeral memorials for two members of the Carandini, Count Fabian (no date) and Count Camillo (d. 1663). On the side walls on either side of the counterfaçade are the pipes for the organ. An epigraph set into the wall next to the window by Pope Urban VIII, dated 1632. Below that is another epigraph, dated 984.

Sanctuary

The sanctuary occupies the apse. To the left, behind the triumphal arch pier, is a short passage leading to the crypt stairs. In the left side of the curved apse wall is a doorway piercing the wall, which leads into the sacristy which is a long, narrow rectangle on a transverse axis. [1]

Mosaics

The 6th century gold-ground mosaics in the large semicircular apse are among the earliest and most beautiful in Rome. The mosaics are masterpieces of 6th-7th century art. The abstract and formal nature of the mosaic marks the first flowering of a truly Byzantine art in Rome. [1] [4]

Over the arch of the tribune, the ancient mosaic repaired by Gregory XIII in 1582, representing the *Mystic Lamb of the Apocalypse* on the throne with the scroll with the seven seals, surmounted by the Cross. The Lamb is flanked by seven jeweled candlesticks (representing the seven spirits of God) and four angels, symbolic images based on chapters 4 and 5 of the Book of Revelation. Next them are two of the symbols of the Evangelists, the angel of St. Matthew and the eagle of St. John. Originally the mosaic had been much larger, having had the other two Evangelists and the twenty-four Elders presenting a crown to our Lord, cut off in the repairs of Urban VIII (R. 1623-1644). The execution of this mosaic dates back to the restoration campaign promoted by Pope Sergius I in 695. The central part of the mosaic decoration underwent extensive reintegrations in the restoration campaign of 1936-1937. In the keystone of the arch is the Franciscan symbol. [1] [3] [e]

There appears to be a thin shadow of the walls on the arch, possibly indicating that the walls cover, but do not obliterate, the mosaic. The original mosaic may still exist behind the walls.

In the interior of the tribune is the figure of Christ appearing in the sky, in a tunic and mantle (marked with a monogram, 'I') of gold, on a carpet of grey-blue and vermilion celestial clouds. He holding in his left hand the sacred scroll, his right hand, replete with stigmata, is raised to indicate the phoenix in a palm tree. The bird which rose from the ashes becomes in Christian art a symbol of the resurrection. At his right St. Paul (who has the same monogram as Christ) guides St. Cosmas, who holds in his hand a crown, the symbol of martyrdom, which he is about to present to the Redeemer. To the rear of St. Cosmas is Pope St. Felix, with the church in his hand; and behind him is a palm tree, over which is a Phoenix, the emblem of Resurrection, directing its flight towards the Savior. The first figure to the left of the Savior is St. Peter, conducting St. Damian to him, behind St. Damian is St. Theodore of Amasea. Under the Savior is the river Jordan, the course of which is marked by blue mosaics. On the band beneath is the Mystic Lamb on a rock, from which issue the four rivers of Paradise, and to the right and left of the Lamb are twelve sheep, issuing from the cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, the former a symbol of the birth, the latter of the death, of our Lord. Beneath are the following distichs: [1] [3] [4] [e]

AVLA DI CLARIS RADIAT SPECIOSA METALLIS
IN QVA PLVS FIDEI LVX PRETIOSA MICAT
MARTYRIBVS MEDICIS POPVLO SPES CERTA SALVTIS
VENIT ET EX SACRO CREVIT HONORE LOCVS
OPTVUT HOC DNO FELIX ANTISTITTE DIGNVM
MVNVS VT AETHERIA VIVAT IN ARCE POLI

"This hall of God shines in its adornment with enamels, a hall where the precious light of faith gleams even more brightly. To the people a sure hope of salvation comes from the martyrs who heal their ills, and the temple before named as sacred has increased in honor. Felix has made to the Lord this offering, worthy of the Lord's servant that he may be granted life in the airy vault of heaven."

The mosaic underwent conspicuous renovations on the occasion of the 17th-century restorations that cut out the edges and the figure of Pope Felix IV is completely redone. [3]

Below the mosaic is a series of Franciscan saints, men on the left and women on the right. They were added c. 1635 after the major renovation. A curiosity is St Bridget of Sweden, who is depicted as a Franciscan. This was caused by a misunderstanding in which her widow's costume was taken for a Franciscan habit. [1]

High Altar

The high altar by **Domenico Castelli**, from c.1637, is a good example of Baroque art. He reused the marble columns of the old altar, within which there is a painting depicting *Madonna with the Infant Jesus* on the throne (last quarter of the 13th century), known as della Salute. The painting originally represented the full-length Virgin Mary, seated and with the blessing Child in her arms. The panel, however, has suffered the curtailment of the lower part, perhaps due to widespread color losses in the lower area. The tabernacle is in the form of a Tempietto. In the tympanum of the altar is a very benign looking *God the Father*. The altar is topped with a couple of stucco angels. [1] [2] [3]

Sacristy

The sacristy preserves some old church plate, notably

- a cosmatesque ambry was donated by Cardinal Guido Pisano in 1150. It is of white marble, with a mosaic of patterned glass set into the wall; the wooden doors are painted in gold leaf.
- an 11th century silver reliquary of St Matthew and
- a medieval chalice.

The altarpiece of the altar here is *The Good Samaritan* by **Speranza**. [1] [6]

In a room in the adjacent convent is the famous Neapolitan Crib, a beautiful 18th-century nativity scene with exquisitely carved statuettes. It was donated to the church in 1939 by Cataldo Perricelli. This is one of the most precious and complete examples of the typical Neapolitan nativity scene, faithful reproduction of the uses and customs of the people. In 1988, some of its elements were robbed, which is why in 1994 the work was restored and integrated by Giulio Strauss, and returned to being exhibited. [1] [3]

Three chapels on the left side of the nave, and four chapels on the right side, with paintings by **Giovanni Baglione** and Baroque frescoes by **Francesco Allegrini da Gubbio**, a follower of **Pietro da Cortona**. Many of the frescoes suffer from a very poor restoration. [3]

Left side Chapels

Chapel of St. Barbara

The first chapel on the left of the entrance has rich stucco decoration. The frescoes are all copies from those in the church of [Santa Maria in Traspontina](#). Over the altar is *St. Barbara grasping a thunderbolt*, which is a copy of the altarpiece by Cavaliere d'Arpino. The lateral paintings represent her martyrdom, all copies from those by Cesare Rossetti. In the center of the vault is *St. Barbara in Glory*. [3]

Chapel of St. Alexander

The altarpiece is a *Crucifixion* in the style of Rubens, but the frescoes on the side walls showing scenes from the saint's martyrdom are by **Francesco Allegrini**. [1]

Chapel of Sts. Rose and Rosalia

The chapel to the left of the sanctuary. The anonymous altarpiece of the early 16th century, oil on canvas showing *St. Rosa da Lima and St. Rosalia*. To the right is *St. Rosalia in time of the plague*, and to the left, *St. Rosa, surprised by her father in conveying bread to the poor, which is converted into roses*. [3]

Right side Chapels

Chapel of St. Francis of Assisi

The chapel to the right of the sanctuary. Over the altar of the chapel is *St. Francis of Assisi in prayer* (late 16th century), oil on canvas by the school of **Girolamo Muziano**. The side walls are frescoed to appear as the sides of a columned temple in a wooded area, with large vases. [3]

Chapel of St. Antony of Padua

The altarpiece is *Saint Anthony of Padua with the Child Jesus* (first half of the 17th century), oil on canvas by **Giovanni Antonio Galli** known as **Lo Spadarino**. To the right are St. Clare and other Saints of the Order, and to the left St. Lewis. [3]

Cappella Baglioni

The next chapel was erected at the expense of the painter **Giovanni Baglioni**, who is buried here. The paintings here are all by **Baglioni**. The altarpiece, which has suffered serious damage from damp, is his large painting of *St. John the Evangelist resuscitating a dead man*. This chapel used to be dedicated to the Bl. Virgin Mary. The rest of the painting reflect that previous dedication. To the right, the *Adoration of the Magi*, the *Presentation* to the left, and the *Virgin in glory* on the vault. [1] [3]

Chapel of the Crucifixion

The last chapel to the right of the counterfaçade. The altarpiece is *Jesus Christ crucified* (13th century), fresco from the Roman school. The work is detached from the lower church, entirely repainted in oil in the 17th century. It is interesting for the Byzantine iconography that portrays Christ dressed in a long tunic. The chapel used to be dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows. The side walls have been scraped clean, during the last restoration. The vault frescoes reflect the previous dedication. Under the altar is a large fluted porphyry vase, found in the subterranean church, and containing relics of Saints, of which a list is suspended in the chapel. In the subterranean church was found the body of St. Felix II, in 1582.

Lower church

The lower church, which is accessed from the cloister, retains traces of the pre-cosmatesque floor of the apse area, perhaps from the 8th century, and the pavonazzetto altar dating from the 6th-7th century. [3]

"Temple of Romulus"

In the area below the Rotunda (accessible from the Roman Forum) commonly known as the

"Temple of Romulus", but now definitively identified by the archaeologist Filippo Coarelli as the Temple of Jupiter Stator, some very degraded mural paintings are preserved. They are traced back to the time of Pope Urban IV in the 13th century. Attributed to an anonymous Roman artist, the frescoes constitute an intermediate moment between the great Byzantine style painting and the new trends that will be expressed at the end of the 13th century with Pietro Cavallini (1240 ca. - 1330 ca.) and Jacopo Torriti (mid 13th century) - early 14th century). They represent: [3] [6]

- *Supper in the house of Simon the Pharisee* (first half of the 13th century): of the work only remains the figure of Saint Mary Magdalene washing Jesus Christ's feet;
- *Pious women at the sepulcher*, Symbols of the Evangelists (first half of the 13th century);
- *Scene from the life of Jesus Christ* (first half of the 13th century-possibly the tomb of Cardinal Guido da Vico);
- *Madonna with Child Jesus between Saints Cosma and Damiano* (first half of the 13th century);
- *Madonna with the Infant Jesus enthroned between Saints Cosmas and Damian* (last quarter of the 13th century).

There is a well beneath the floor, which is thought to be related to the cult of healing associated with the patron saints during the early history of the church. It would have functioned as a holy well, with the water being used for ablutions and drinking in hope of healing. The fascinating thing about this is that it indicates the old temple was taken over as the asclepeion or healing shrine, rather than merely the entrance vestibule to the church. If so it was the most important part of the church in the Dark Ages, and the basilica was simply the liturgical annex where Masses were said. [1]

The access to the circular building from the Forum was closed for many years because of concerns about its stability. In 2015, after a long restoration, it housed an exhibition of the statues of Fonte di Giuturna. It was at last possible to see some of the decoration of the circular building prior to the changes made in the 17th century which turned it into a crypt. [7]

The Basilica and the history of medicine

The importance of this Basilica for the history of medicine is not only related to the fact that the two brothers were physicians and became soon patrons of physicians, surgeons, pharmacists and veterinarians, but also to the tradition according to which Claudius Galen himself lectured in the Library of the Temple of Peace ("Bibliotheca Pacis"). Furthermore, for centuries, in this "medical area" Roman physicians had their meetings.

Relics:

Saints Mark and Marcellian

Burials: [5]

Cardinal Guido da [VICO](#), (c.1050-1150)

Cornelio Cardinal [CAPRARA](#), (1703-1765)

Giovanni [Baglioni](#)

<painter>

Artists and Architects:

Cesare [Rossetti](#) (d. 1627), Italian painter

Domenico [Castelli](#) [aka *Fontanino*] (c.1582-1657), Italian architect

Francesco [Allegrini](#) da Gubbio (1587-1663), Italian painter of the Baroque period

Gaetano [Rapisardi](#) (1893-1988), Italian architect

Giovanni Antonio [Galli](#) [aka *lo Spadarino*] (1585-ca. 1651), Italian Baroque painter

Giovanni [Baglione](#) [aka *il Sordo del Barozzo*] (1566-1643), Italian Late Mannerist and Early Baroque painter

Giovanni Battista [Speranza](#) (ca 1600-1640), Italian Baroque painter

Girolamo [Muziano](#) (1532-1592), Italian painter, active in a late-Renaissance or Mannerism style.

Luigi [Arrigucci](#) (1575-1647), Italian architect

Marco Tullio [Montagna](#) (c.1594-1649), Italian Painter. (also see [here](#))
Orazio [Torriani](#) (or Torrigiani) (1602-1657), Italian architect and sculptor
Simone Lagi (17th cent.), Italian painter

Location:

Coordinates: [41° 53' 30.5" N, 12° 29' 14.4" E](#)

Open: daily 9-13 16-19

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