

# San Nicola da Tolentino agli Orti Sallustiani



**St Nicholas of Tolentino in the Gardens of Sallust** is a 17<sup>th</sup> century collegiate and former conventual church in the rione Trevi. It belongs to the Armenian Catholic Church, one of the Eastern Catholic Churches in communion with the Holy See. The Pontifical Armenian College, the Armenian seminary in Rome, is located next to the church and is in charge of it. [1]

The dedication is to St Nicholas of Tolentino (1245/1305), a 13<sup>th</sup> century Augustinian friar. According to a legend his birth was a result of prayers, but most of all a pilgrimage of his elderly parents to Bari, to the tomb of St. Nicholas of Myra, which was recommended to them by an angel. The boy who was born, was named Nicholas, in honor of the patron of his miraculous birth and was destined to serve God. That is why the teenage Nicholas joined the Order of St. Augustine. He was considered an ascetic who supported the poor and the needy, but also the man behind numerous miracles and cures. Since he often refused meals, giving the bread which he got in the monastery to the poor, this bread, or more appropriately rolls, were known as the bread of St. Nicholas and they became his attribute and an ever present element of his cult.. He was canonized in 1325. [4] [5]

The church is situated within an area that was part of the Gardens of Sallust, an ancient Roman estate including a landscaped pleasure garden developed by the historian Sallust in the 1st century BC.

## History

The church and convent were founded on a country site here by a group of Discalced Augustinians in 1599. This was originally a reform movement within the Augustinian friars, which wished to return to a stricter and more eremitic form of religious life (the title "discalced" means "without

shoes" not "barefoot", because they wore sandals). The community bought the property in 1604 and built a tiny chapel with two altars, one dedicated to St Nicholas of Tolentino and the other to Our Lady of the Rosary. However, in 1610 the Discalced were established as a separate religious order and so in 1615 built a new central headquarters at Gesù e Maria. It was decided to make the convent here into the novitiate house. [1] [4]

A rebuilding project was begun in 1620, originally by **Bonaventura Cherubino**, architect from Spoleto, and **Carlo Buzzi** (whose name is also given as Buti). Enough construction was done for the church to be opened in 1624. [1] [4] [c]

However, money was very short and work continued slowly until Camillo Pamphilj, the nephew of Pope Innocent X, and his wife Olimpia Aldobrandini assumed responsibility for the reconstruction of the church. The prince selected **Alessandro Algardi** to supervise, although he was more of a sculptor than an architect. He was involved until going to Spain in 1650. [1] [4]

In that year, **Martino Longhi the Younger** did some work on the almost completed church, including on the sacristy, choir and decorative elements. Finally, in 1651, **Giovanni Maria Baratta** finished the structure, including the impressive façade. [1]

Progress on the decoration of the interior slowed down, but **Baratta** continued with the assistance of **Ercole Ferrata** and **Domenico Guidi**. In 1670 **Francesco Buzio** from Milan altered the façade and high altar. The church was only consecrated in 1685. [1] [4]

In 1775 the complex was granted to the Monache Battistine, also known as the Romite di San Giovanni Battista. This very penitential order of contemplative nuns was founded at Genoa by Giovanna Battista Solimani in 1730. The nuns took a formal fourth vow of seclusion. [1]

The convent was requisitioned by the French military in 1798 for the duration of the Napoleonic period, but the nuns received it back afterwards. However, in 1883 they moved out and the complex was granted to the Armenians as a seminary college. So the Armenians removed any artwork that could be transported. This has been their headquarters in Rome since then. [1] [4]

The old convent was demolished in 1939 to make way for one of Mussolini's roads, the present Via Leonida Bissolati. The present college buildings are on the site of the former gardens. [1]

## Exterior

The building which we see today is in a deteriorating state. The fabric is in brick with architectural details, including the entire façade, in travertine limestone. The tiled roof has separate pitches for the nave, ends of the transept and apse, and there is a separate, slightly lower roof for the choir. The side chapels have individual roofing arrangements. [1] [5]

The dome has an octagonal drum without windows, and is a segment of a sphere in lead. The octagonal lantern has a tall arched window on each face, and an ogee cupola in lead with a ball finial. The campanile is very understated, being a pair of arches set side by side on the far roofline of the right hand end of the transept. [1]

### Façade (1)

The Baroque façade was designed by **Baratta** in 1670, and is approached by a flight of stairs because the church is on a crypt. It is in travertine limestone, which is now dirty and in need of attention. There are two storeys, and three vertical zones because the side aisle frontages are slightly set back. [1]

The first storey is dominated by a pair of free-standing Corinthian columns at the corners of the central zone, which are attached to the entablature dividing the storeys by a pair of deep posts above the capitals. The central section of the entablature thus delineated is supported by a pair of Corinthian pilasters in shallow relief, themselves flanking the single entrance. The door has a double molded doorcase with an inscription recording the founder on the upper lintel: Camillus Princeps Pamphilus. Above is a segmental pediment with a pair of small cornice wings. [1]

The side aisle frontages are each bounded by a pair of Corinthian columns (making a total of six on the façade), and these frame an empty round-headed niche in a molded frame topped by a triangular pediment. In the spandrels of the frame you can see the emblem of the Pamphilj family - a dove with an olive twig in its beak. [1]

The dividing entablature has a dedicatory inscription:

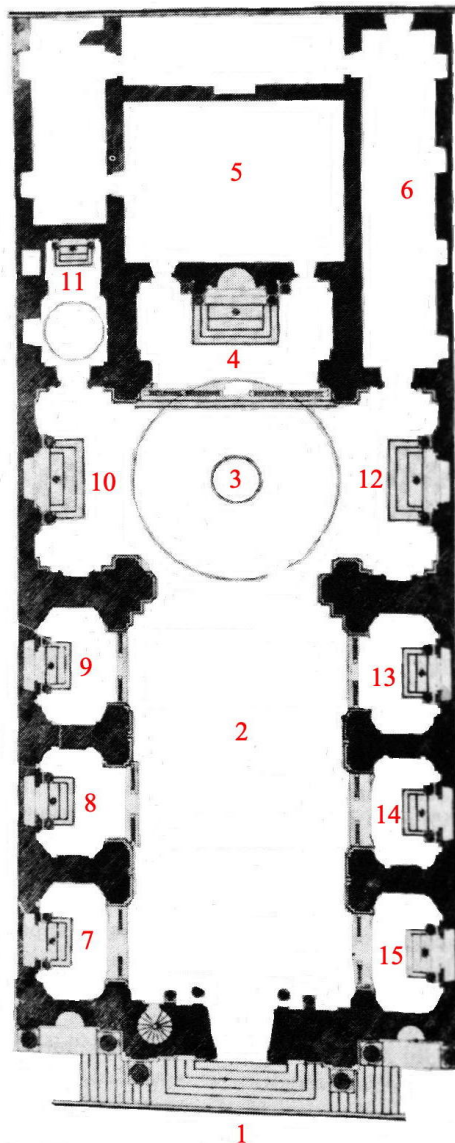
In honorem D[ivi] Nicolai Tolentinatis

(the right hand end is eroded, and gives the year of construction). Above the entablature is an attic plinth with a pair of flaming urn finials on its ends. [1]

The second storey has a pair of free-standing Composite columns matching those flanking the entrance. These also have deep posts, and support the ends of a segmental pediment which is recessed in between. The tympanum of this contains a relief coat-of-arms, now badly eroded. The corners of this storey have another pair of Composite columns in front of simple arc sweeps, and these support posts projecting either side of the pediment. A pair of Composite pilasters flank the large rectangular central window, which has a Baroque frame, two vertical steps on each side and a crowning triangular pediment. Below this is a table with an epigraph which has now eroded away. [1]

The entrance to the old convent to the left of the façade, now the portal of the college, is worth a look. Above a segmental pediment is a vertical elliptical tondo in a wreath supported by putti, and this contains a relief of *The Glory of St Nicholas of Tolentino*. The work is by Giovanni Francesco de Rossi. [1] [4]

## Plan



This is a large and expensive church. The church has a Latin cross plan, with three chapels on each side of the nave, a transept with a central dome and a shallow rectangular apse. The conventual choir is behind the apse. It is 35 meters long, 20 meters wide and 25 meters high at the cupola. [1]

## Interior

There is not much that shows that this is an Oriental Catholic church, apart from the curtain which is drawn across the sanctuary at certain times during Mass, serving a purpose similar to the iconostasis in the Byzantine liturgy. [1]

In the dome, nave and left transept there are cracks, the result of an earth tremor in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The church has been thoroughly checked, and is considered completely safe despite the damage. [1] [5]

The decoration is lush, with lavish use of polychrome marble and gilded stucco. The organ, over the door of entrance, is sustained by four composite columns of porta santa. [1] [a]

### Nave (2)

The three bays of the nave are separated on each side by two pairs of Corinthian pilasters set close together, and these support an entablature with a dentillated cornice which runs around the interior. The near and far pairs of side chapels are entered through archways, but the middle two lack an arch. [1]

The barrel vault is set on the entablature, and has three sections corresponding to the nave bays. Each of these is decorated with diapered coffering containing lilies, and a central panel with an allegorical scene in stucco relief. A window in a shallow lunette is at each end, with a scallop shell in the lunette. The sections are separated by double transverse archivolt embellished with rosettes and caterpillar garlands. Gilding is lavishly applied, so that the vault is more gold than white. [1]

In the sections, starting from the entrance:

- *St. William of Aquitaine* (1663) by **Pietro Paolo Naldini**;
- *Bl Clare of Montefalco* (1664) by **Giovanni Francesco De Rossi**;
- *St. Augustine, St. Thomas of Villanova* and *St. Agnes* (1661) by **Pietro Sassi**;
- *St. Nicholas of Tolentino* (1656) by **G.B. Ferrabosco**.

Stuccos in the vault by **Stefano Roncaglia** and **Pietro Sassi**. [4]

Above the entrance is a gallery bearing the organ in its original gilded case and supported by four marble columns. According to Corsi writing in 1833, the marble is fior di pesco which the ancient Romans sourced from the island of Euboea in Greece -this sample is probably from Lucca.

Flanking the window above are two stucco allegorical figures *Religion* and *Charity* (1665) by **Andrea Baratta**. [1] [4]

Several tombstones are set in the marble floor, which was laid in 1950. It replaced the original brick one. [1]

The triumphal arch has a triple archivolt in the same style as the transverse arches of the nave ceiling, and these are supported by a pair of clustered Composite pilasters. The sanctuary and transept side chapel arches have single archivolt in the same style. [1]

The dome (3) is octagonal, with eight windows. The pendentives of the dome are decorated with four female figures symbolizing the four fundamental virtues of the Order of the Discalced Augustinians: *Chastity, Humility, Poverty* and *Obedience*. They were executed by **Pietro Paolo Baldini** in 1643. The surface of the dome itself is completely covered by a fresco depicting *The Apotheosis of St Nicholas of Tolentino* by **Giovanni Coli** and **Filippo Gherardi**, the first Roman work of these two inseparable friends from Lucca. The figure of the saint is a little difficult to spot amidst the host of heavenly beings, but he is the one next to a book which reads *Præcepta patris mei servavi* ("I have

kept the commands of my father"). [1] [4] [c]

#### Sanctuary (4)

The high altar was built by **Giovanni Maria Baratta** in 1651/55, designed by **Alessandro Algardi**, and has a towering Baroque aedicule. This features four fluted Corinthian columns in marmor bigio, in other words "grey marble". The original source for this stone is the island of Lesbos in Greece. The front pair stand on plinths embellished with coats-of-arms of the Pamphilj family executed in relief by **Algardi**. [1] [4] [d]

The altarpiece marble sculpture group of the *Madonna with Child, with SS Augustine and Monica, Offering Miraculous Bread to St Nicholas of Tolentino*, is by two sculptors. Our Lady and SS Augustine and Monica are by **Ercole Ferrata**, but St Nicholas is by **Domenico Guidi**. The front columns support two fragments of a split segmental pediment, on which recline two angels by **Francesco Baratta**. Into this pediment is introduced a marble bas-relief panel of *The Eternal Father* by **Ferrata**, which has its own segmental pediment. The gilded stucco in the apse (1656/57) is by **G.B. Ferrabosco**. [1] [4] [d]

A visible sign of the Armenian Rite is a curtain found in the main altar, drawn during services, which serves the same function as the iconostas in the Orthodox liturgy. [5]

#### Choir (5)

The conventual choir of the friars, and later the nuns, is behind the high altar. It is accessed by a pair of flanking doors with grated windows above them. The altarpiece of *Our Lady* was noted at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as being of the school of Raphael. [1]

#### Side chapels

As with churches belonging to friaries elsewhere in Rome, here the side chapels were patronized by noble families in return for funerary rights. The side chapels are described clockwise, beginning to the left of the entrance.

#### Chapel of the Holy Sepulcher (7)

The first chapel on the left was fitted out in 1728 dedicated to St Philip Neri, with an altarpiece depicting *St. Filippo Neri in ecstasy in the Church of Minerva* by **Cristoforo Creo**. However, it now contains the Easter Sepulcher brought from the church of Santa Maria Egiziaca and moved here in 1921 when it was closed. This is of plaster, painted to resemble marble, and was made in 1679. It is an important copy because the original in Jerusalem was destroyed by fire in 1808 and rebuilt two years later in a different style. [1] [4]

The gilded angels here used to be in the sacristy, and are thought to be part of a large candelabrum known to have been made in 1679 by Fra Cosimo, one of friars. [1]

The inscription above the entrance arch reads: "True form of the sepulcher of Our Lord Jesus Christ conform is found in Jerusalem year 1679"

#### Chapel of Our Lady of Mercy (8) or Cappella Gavotti

The second chapel on the left was designed by **Pietro da Cortona**, and completed by his pupil **Ciro Ferri** and fitted out in 1668. It considered to be a masterpiece of Roman Baroque. It was founded by the Gavotti family, and is dedicated to the Madonna of Savona, whose shrine is near Savona.

The aedicule above the altar has two large Corinthian columns in verde antico marble. The relief sculpture altarpiece in marble is a depiction of the *Apparition of the Blessed Virgin to Blessed Anthony Botta* by **Cosimo Fancelli**. It is a reference to the miracle which was witnessed in 1536, in the area of the town of Savona in Liguria.

Here also are statues of *St Joseph* by **Ercole Ferrata**, and *St John the Baptist* by **Antonio Raggi**. The medallion in the upper part *St. Charles Borromeo* by **Raggi**. Fresco in the dome *Glory of Angels* begun

by Cortona and finished by Ferri after the master's death. It was his last work prior to his death.

The side walls have matching memorials to members of the Gavotti family. The one on the right is to Giovanni Battista Gavotti, 1661 and is by Fancelli, but the one on the left to Carlo Gavotti was a deliberate imitation executed in 1706. The giveaway seems to be that the pair of columns of the left hand one are not genuine verde antico, unlike in the monument opposite. [1] [4] [5] [a]

#### Chapel of Our Lady of Good Counsel (9)

The third chapel on the left side was fitted out by Giuseppe Cades. The altar was designed by Pietro Camporese the Elder. The altarpiece is a copy of the miraculous icon enshrined at the town of Genazzano, executed by Cristoph Unterberger, and inserted into a gilded stucco glory, by Vincenzo Pacetti. To the left is an *Annunciation* by Father Raffaele Minossi, a Capuchin friar, and to the right is *The Holy Family* by Cades. In the lunettes *Sibyls* in monochrome and in the dome *God the Father in Glory* by Ermenegildo Costantini, in 1790. [1] [4]

#### Chapel of Blessed Gomidas Keumurjian (10)

The altar in the left end of the transept is dedicated to the Blessed Gomidas Keumurjian, an Armenian priest who was martyred at Constantinople in 1707 for accepting the authority of the Pope. The altar aedicule matches the one opposite, and both were designed by Algardi. On the altar *Preaching of the blessed Gomidas* (1929) by Mario Barberis. The stucco on the vault and *St. Agnes* in the octagon by Ercole Ferrata. [1] [4]

On the left wall is the tomb and monument for Cardinal Agagianian (1971).

#### The Chapel of Sts Matthew and Cecilia or Cappella Buratti (11)

There is a tiny chapel through a door to the right of the above-mentioned altar. It was designed by Giovan Battista Mola, and is thought to be a survival of the original little church founded by the friars in 1604. Above the altar *Apparition of the Virgin Mary to Sts. Matthew and Cecilia*, and the frescoes in the rest of the chapel with *Stories of Sts. Matthew and Cecilia* (1638/40) are by Baldini again. The canvas on the sides *Agony of St. Cecilia* and *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* are by Giovanni Francesco Romanelli. [1] [4]

#### Chapel of St John the Baptist (12) or Cappella Oraggi

In the right arm of the transept is the altar of St John the Baptist. It matches the one in the opposite arm, and the altar aedicule has a pair of fluted Corinthian marmor bigio columns supporting a segmental pediment with a recessed central section and on which two allegorical figures sit. *Faith* is on the right, and *Abundance* on the left. The altarpiece depicting *St John the Baptist in the Wilderness* is by Giovanni Battista Gaulli (1670). [1] [4]

The aedicule is flanked by a pair of matching memorials, to Giuseppe Oreggi, 1669 to the left and Nicola Oreggi, 1672 to the right. At the center of the vault, stucco *St. Thomas of Villanova* by Ercole Ferrata. [1] [4]

#### Chapel of Sts Lucretia and Gertrude (13) or Cappella Lante delle Rovere

The third chapel on the right hand side was built in mid-17th century and closed off with an iron grate. In the past the chapel belonged to the Lante della Rovere family. This is visible by the decorative coat of arms at the base of the arch leading into the chapel, flanked by two allegories. The chapel is dedicated to St Lucretia (a virgin martyr of Mérida in Spain) and St Gertrude the Great, an odd combination. It was fitted out in 1648. The polychrome marble work, including the floor, is rich and the altar aedicule has two Corinthian columns of red, grey and white Camposanto marble. The altarpiece is an old copy from the original by Giovanni Francesco Barbieri now at the Savoy Gallery in Turin, and shows the two saints (a helpful label is in between the halves of the split segmental pediment). The is also by him, and shows their *Apotheosis*. [1] [4] [5]

Walls, with *Stories of the Sts. Lucretia and Gertrude*, and the cupola fresco, *Apotheosis of the two Saints*, are by Pietro Paolo Baldini (1645/48). To the left is the sepulchral monument of Cardinal Federico

Lante delle Rovere, who had the chapel built. The monument is by [Virginio Bracci](#) (1775). [1] [2] [3]  
[4]

### Chapel of St Gregory the Illuminator (14)

The Chapel of St [Gregory the Illuminator](#) is the second on the right hand side. St Gregory was the Apostle of the Armenians in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and this chapel was dedicated to him in 1908. The present altarpiece is by **Giovanni Gagliardi** in 1908, and shows the legendary *Meeting of St Gregory and Pope Sylvester I at Rome*. The two background figures are the emperor Constantine to the left and King Tiridates I of Armenia to the right, which is to show unity between the two Churches – Roman and Armenian. [1] [5]

Cardinal Andon Bedros IX Hassoun, founder of the College who was the Patriarch of Cilicia of the Armenians until his death in 1884, has a memorial to the right. The best way to find the monument is to look for his cardinal's hat hanging from the vault. This is a tradition in the Catholic church - when a cardinal dies, his hat is hung by his tomb or in the church of his choice where it will hang until it has decayed so much that it falls down. [1]

To the left is a memorial to Grégoire-Pierre XV Aghajanian, 1971. He also was a cardinal-patriarch of the Catholic Armenians. [4]

### Chapel of St Nicholas of Bari (15) or Cappella Monini

The first chapel on the right is the Cappella Monini, and is dedicated to St Nicholas of Bari. The altarpiece is a depiction of *A Miracle of St Nicholas of Bari who Resurrected a Child* by **Filippo Laurenzi**, executed in 1710 as part of a re-fitting of the chapel. The Corinthian columns are in alabaster. The side walls have two pictures by **Giovanni Ventura Borghesi**, *The Coronation of Our Lady* on the left and *The Birth of Our Lady* on the right, both from 1680. [1] [4]

## Liturgy

The liturgy is that of the Armenian rite, and the Armenian language is used. The rite is Antiochene in origin, but has been influenced by both the Byzantine and the Latin liturgy.

The Feast of St Nicholas of Tolentino is celebrated on 10 September.

## Burials:

Marcello Cardinal [LANTE](#), (1561-1652)

Buried in the chapel of Ss. Lucrezia e Gertrude that he had built

Federico Marcello Cardinal [LANTE delle Rovere](#), (1695-1773)

Antonio Cardinal [LANTE](#), (1737-1817)

Buried in his family's chapel

Andon Bedros IX [Hassoun](#) (1809-1884)

Patriarch of Cilicia of the Armenians

Grégoire-Pierre XV [AGAGIANIAN](#), (1895-1971)

Patriarch of Cilicia of the Armenians

Lyda [Borelli](#), (1884-1959)

Italian silent film star. Sister of actress Alda Borelli

Giovanni Battista Gavotti

Buried in his family's chapel

Carlo Gavotti

Buried in his family's chapel

Giuseppe Oreggi (1669)

Buried in his family's chapel

Nicola Oreggi (1672)

Buried in his family's chapel

## Artists and Architects:

Alessandro [Algardi](#) (1598-1654), Italian high- Baroque sculptor, architect (also see [here](#))

Andrea [Baratta](#) (active 1657-1700), Italian sculptor

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

Bonaventura Cherubino (17<sup>th</sup> cent.), Italian architect  
 Carlo [Buzzi](#) or Buti (c.1605-1659), Italian painter and architect of the Lombard Baroque school  
 Cristoph [Unterberger](#) (1732-1798), Italian painter of the early-Neoclassical period.  
 Ciro [Ferri](#) (1634-1689), Italian Baroque painter and sculptor  
 Cosimo [Fancelli](#) (1618-1688), Italian sculptor of the Baroque period from Rome (also see [here](#))  
 Cristoforo Creo (18<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian painter  
 Domenico [Guidi](#) (1625-1701), Italian sculptor of the Baroque period. (also see [here](#))  
 Ercole [Ferrata](#) (1610-1686), Italian sculptor of the Baroque period (also see [here](#))  
 Ermenegildo [Costantini](#) (1731-1791), Italian painter of the late-Baroque (also see [here](#))  
 Filippo [Gherardi](#) (1643-1704), Italian painter of the Baroque period from Lucca  
 Filippo Laurenzi (18<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian painter  
 Francesco [Baratta](#) (1590-1666), Italian sculptor  
 Giovanni Battista Ferrabosco (17<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian engraver  
 Giovanni Battista [Gaulli](#) [aka *Baciccio*] (1639-1709), Italian painter of the High Baroque(also see [here](#))  
 Giovanni Battista [Mola](#) (1586-1665), Italian architect  
 Giovanni [Coli](#) (1636-1691), Italian painter from Lucca, active in the Baroque style  
 Giovanni Francesco Barbieri [aka *il Guercino*] (1591-1666), Italian Baroque painter  
 Giovanni Francesco [de Rossi](#) [aka *La Vecchiotta*] (active 1640-1677), Italian sculptor  
 Giovanni Francesco [Romanelli](#) (1610-1662), Italian Baroque painter from Viterbo  
 Giovanni [Gagliardi](#) (1838-1924), Italian painter  
 Giovanni Maria [Baratta](#) (1617-1680), Italian architect from Carrara  
 Giovanni Ventura [Borghesi](#) (1640-1709), Italian painter of the Baroque period  
 Giuseppe [Cades](#) (1750-1799), Italian painter  
 Mario [Barberis](#) (1893-1960), Italian painter  
 Martino [Longhi](#) the Younger (1602-1660), Italian architect of the Baroque period  
 Pietro Berrettini [da Cortona](#) (1597-1669), Italian Baroque painter and architect (also see [here](#))  
 Pietro [Camporese](#) the Elder (1726-1781), Italian architect  
 Pietro Paolo [Baldini](#) [or Ubaldini] (17<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian artist of the late Baroque period  
 Pietro Paolo [Naldini](#) (1619-1691), Italian painter, sculptor  
 Pietro Sassi (17<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian sculptor and stuccoist  
 Raffaele Minossi (1732-1805), Italian painter [a Capuchin friar]  
 Stefano Roncaglia (17<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian sculptor and stuccoist  
 Vincenzo [Pacetti](#) (1746-1820), Italian Neoclassical sculptor  
 Virginio [Bracci](#) (1737-1815), Italian architect

### Location:

Address: 17 Salita S Nicola da Tolentino, 00187 Roma

Coordinates: [41°54'18"N 12°29'29"E](#)

### Info:

The church is only open for liturgical functions. However, if you visit around 9:30 on Sundays you should find the church open in preparation for a choir practice at 10:00, and for the Eucharist an hour later. It is well worth making the effort to visit -and to attend the Eucharist.

### Links:

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
2. [Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church](#)
3. [Info Roma.web site](#)
4. [ROMAPEDIA blog](#)
5. [Roma non per Tutti web site](#)

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



- a. Donovan, Jeremiah; ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS; 1842; Pg. V2:208
- b. Sharp, Mary; A GUIDE TO THE CHURCHES OF ROME; 1966; Pg. 167
- c. Villani, Marcello; L'ARCHITETTURA DELLE CUPSOLE AROMA 1580-1670; 2009, Note 141, pg 181
- d. Montagu, Jennifer; "Alessandro Algardi's Altar of S. Nicola da Tolentino, and Some Related Models"; *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 112, No. 806 (May, 1970), pp. 282-291 (jstor 876305)