

Santa Susanna



Santa Susanna is an 15th century monastic and titular church. It is on the Piazza San Bernardo, on the Via XX Settembre just north-west of the Piazza della Repubblica and its metro station in the rione Trevi. The dedication is to St Susanna, and the full official title is **Santa Susanna alle Terme di Diocleziano**. (1)

History

A church at Santa Susanna commemorates the place where, according to St. Jerome, a young Christian woman was martyred for refusing to worship Rome's pagan gods. Around the year 290 Susanna was residing with her father, Christian presbyter Gabinus, right next door to her saintly uncle Pope Caius (283-296), and in the shadows of the Emperor Diocletian's (284-305) immense baths. After refusing to break a vow of virginity to marry her insistent suitor Maximianus Galerius (none other than the Emperor's adopted son and heir), Susanna also balked at offering a pagan sacrifice, and was beheaded in her own home.

The church of Santa Susanna is one of the oldest titles of Rome. The first Christian place of worship was built here in the 4th century. It was probably the *titulus* of Pope Caius (283-296). The early Christian church was built on the remains of three Roman villas, and was located immediately outside the fence of the Baths of Diocletian and close to the Servian walls. (8)

First church

By tradition, the church was built in 330, and named *San Caio* after the owner of the first chapel. In 590, the church was rededicated to St Susan because of her growing popularity. Susanna's and Gabinus' remains were eventually moved from catacombs outside the city walls and re-buried in the crypt below the main altar, where they still remain.

The *Liber Pontificalis* mentioned that Pope Sergius I embellished it, and that Pope Adrian I restored it

between 772 and 795.

Second basilica

Pope Leo III (795-816) had the church entirely rebuilt. It used to be thought that his work was a mere restoration, but recent archaeological investigations have proved otherwise. The result was a large three-aisled basilica, with a transept and an aisled nave with twelve columns in each arcade. Above the arcades were galleries for women, and behind the altar was an apse. Pope Leo convened an important Council, probably in the presence of Charlemagne in the church. In fact, a Vatican Library drawing of Santa Susanna's 9th century apse mosaic (destroyed in the work of 1595) shows the Emperor beside Pope Leo, both with square haloes indicating that they were alive when the work was executed, who holds a little model of the church. (1) (2) (8)

Middle ages

After the 8th century, the city of Rome abandoned its hills which became mostly vineyards. The church was the only original building left on the Quirinal Hill, in a location so isolated as to be dangerous because of bandits. It is mentioned in the *Catalogue of Turin* in c1320 as a titular church for a presbyterial cardinal, and was served by six clerics at the time. (1)

There was another rebuilding under Sixtus IV (1471-1484). The church was drastically cut down, with the aisles being demolished and the arcades walled up. The pope also gave custody of the complex to the hermits of St. Augustine. (1) (2)

The medieval church of S. Susanna, which had been abandoned by the Hermits of St. Augustine in 1575, was in a poor state of repair. In 1586, Camilla Peretti, the sister of Pope Sixtus V, convinced the pope to cede the abandoned church of S. Susanna to a newly reformed group of Cistercian nuns called the Fogliante. The name derives from the French Cistercian Abbey of Feuillant where, in the 1570s, Jean de la Barriere had begun his radical reform of the Order, a reform encouraged by Sixtus V who approved new Rules for the group in 1586, the year in which the female branch was also established. Soon after the nuns took possession of it they began rebuilding it and the adjacent cloister. Camilla's patronage, which covers the years 1586-92, pre-dates the more famous intervention of Cardinal Girolamo Rusticucci which began ca. 1593. She contributed to the rebuilding, provided an endowment for young girls of poor families who wished to enter the convent, and built a sumptuous new chapel dedicated to San Lorenzo in the church. (a)

Cardinal Girolamo Rusticucci, Cardinal Protector of the Cistercian Order, had the church rebuilt yet again for them between 1593 and 1603 under the supervision of Sixtus' favorite architect, **Domenico Fontana**. The much admired façade was designed by **Carlo Maderno** in 1603, right before he did his main work on St. Peter's. **Matteo Castelli** supervised the construction of the façade, completed in 1603. (2) (8)

Modern times

The nuns were expelled by the French under Napoleon between 1811 and 1814. They were again dispossessed by the Italian government after 1870, but were allowed to occupy a small portion of their original monastery. (1)

Since 1921, the church has been served by Paulist Fathers, although it still belongs to the Cistercian nuns. Since 1922 (*de facto*; formally since 1924), it has been the national church of the USA.

In 1924, Cardinal Oreste Giorgi started a legal challenge against the government, claiming that the church and monastery originally belonged to the cardinalate and not the monastic community and hence that the seizure after 1870 was illegal. This challenge was successful, and full transfer of the property to the nuns was granted by Cardinal Richard Cushing in 1968. (1)

Today the vestiges of imperial-age walled structures can be seen beneath a glass floor in Santa Susanna's sacristy. These came to light in 1830, during renovations to lay down a new marble floor. The simple mosaics and tiles, as well as the layout of walls and pavements, could very well represent rooms where Susanna and her brave relations lived and died. (4)

Archaeological investigations at the end of the 19th century and in the 1930's were supplemented by interesting discoveries made in 1991. (1)

In 2013 a portion of the ceiling came loose and fell, so the church is now closed for restoration. (3)

Exterior

This church is short in length, with an un-aisled nave of three bays, two large side-chapels flanking the triumphal arch and an almost square sanctuary with a semi-circular apse. There is no proper transept. (1)

Behind the apse is the choir of the nuns, a separate although conjoined building not on the same major axis as the church. To the left of the apse is the campanile, which has a large arched sound-hole on each face and is crowned by a low onion-domed cupola. (1)

The façade is false, being much higher than the nave behind. (1)

The convent was rather irregularly laid out, and never had a proper cloister. There is a garden between the church and an arcaded block running parallel to it to the west, but the main edifice is on the street to the left of the façade. This has a frontage in yellow brick. (1)

Façade

This early and influential Baroque façade is by **Carlo Maderno** and was completed in 1603, five years before he started on the façade of San Pietro in Vaticano. It is considered his masterpiece. This is one of the finest examples of a fully developed **Baroque** style, marking that the transition from **Renaissance** via **Mannerism** to the new style is complete. (1)

It is in travertine and has two storeys, the lower with five vertical zones and the upper having three. These elements are arranged so that they point to the center, this being done by their being slightly set back in turn. In other words, the façade is stepped vertically. The first storey has six attached Corinthian columns, four paired either side of the entrance where the façade sets back and the other two on the corner where it sets back again. The actual outer corners of the storey are marked by a pair of Corinthian pilasters. (1)

These columns and pilasters support an entablature the frieze of which has a Latin inscription:

HIER[ONYMUS] EPIS[COPUS] PORT[UENSIS] CARD[INALIS]
RUSTICUCIUS PAPAE VICAR[IUS] AD MDCIII

("Girolamo Rusticucci, Cardinal, Bishop of Porto and Papal Vicar, AD 1603")

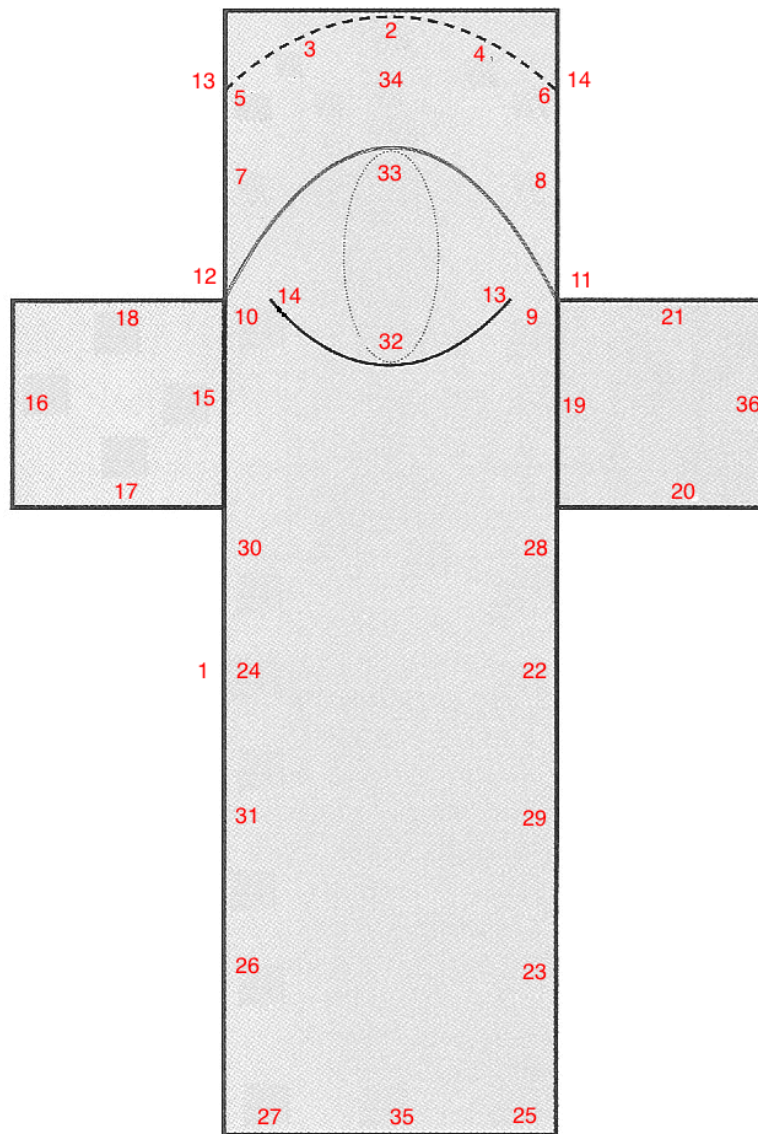
This commemorates the cardinal of the church who oversaw the beginning of the building project, although he died in 1597 before the façade was begun. (1)

The large entrance has a finely decorated doorcase, with a raised segmental pediment having a winged putto's head in its tympanum. This pediment is surrounded by volutes, swags of flowers and two more heads of putti and above the entablature is a second, triangular pediment. Beyond the paired columns on either side is a pair of statues in arched niches having their own triangular pediments; *St Susanna* is to the left, and *St Felicity of Rome* to the right. These statues are possibly by **Stefano Maderno**, although this is uncertain as is his relationship to the architect (traditionally they were brothers). The conchs of the niches have scallop-shell decoration. (1)

The upper level has six Composite pilasters corresponding to the columns below, and these support a blank entablature with a dentillate cornice and a crowning triangular pediment with a fine coat-of-arms in its tympanum. Unusually, the pediment gable is balustraded. In the center of this upper storey is an arched balcony also with a balustrade. The arch of this has a tympanum with a sunrise motif, and is framed by a pair of swaged Ionic columns supporting a segmental pediment. (1)

There is another pair of statues in this level, above the pair mentioned, depicting *St Caius* and *St Genesius*. They are by **Giovanni Antonio Paracca**, nicknamed **Il Valsoldo**. Their niches are richly decorated with swags and putto's heads, and a playful detail is that their segmental pediments are broken and have tiny triangular pediments inserted. (1)

Plan



Interior

The interior is by Carlo Maderno, in a bright Renaissance style. The church today is a splendid all-of-a piece showcase of late Renaissance art and architecture. The contrast with Maderno's Baroque work at Santa Maria della Vittoria, across the street, is immense. The style was a bridge between Renaissance classicism and Baroque exuberance, called "Mannerism" (emphasis on style rather than representations of reality), and characterized by a light palette, distorted figures, and unorthodox perspectives. (4)

The church as we see it today is a splendid all-of-a piece showcase of late Renaissance art and architecture. In fact, the interior is so different from most Roman churches that we start to rub our eyes in surprise and disbelief. (4)

Nave

The nave has three bays, with a pair of large side chapels opening off the third one. The sanctuary is on an almost square plan, with a triumphal arch, and has an apse with a conch enclosed by its own arch. (1) (2)

The frescoes of the central nave by **Baldassare Croce** represent six scenes from the life of Susanna found in the Book of Daniel. According to the story she was a Jewish woman who was a victim of false charges of impurity, but who was saved by the prophet Daniel. (1)

The nave frescoes are delightfully painted as imitation tapestries fluttering in the wind, and separated

by massive trompe-l'oeil spiral columns. The scenes are: (4)

- Susanna in the bath is being spied upon by elders (22)
- Susanna is falsely accused of impurity (23)
- The prophet Daniel comes to her aid (24)
- Daniel questions the elders separately (25)
- For making false accusations the elders are stoned to death (26)
- Susanna gives thanks to God for being saved. (27)

The four Doric pilasters support statues on plinths, which depict the Major Prophets: *Isaiah* (28), *Jeremiah* (29), *Daniel* (30) and *Ezekiel* (31). These are by Giovanni Antonio Paracca, known as Il Valsoldo. (4)

The flat wooden ceiling of the nave is attributed also to **Baldassare Croce**. It is finely carved, coffered and gilded and features *Our Lady* with the Rusticucci coat-of-arms. The design is thought to have been by **Maderno**. (1)

The coat of arms of Cardinal Rusticucci (35) was a winged horse rampant under the crest of a cardinal's hat, which can be seen in many locations in the church. (c)

To the right on entering the nave is the small monument of the Florentine sculptor, Filippo della Valle. (b)

Sanctuary

The sanctuary is raised above a confessio or devotional crypt, the entrance to which is protected by a D-shaped balustrade surrounding the crypt (32), with the semi-circular portion intruding into the nave.

The frescoes in the apse depicting scenes from the legendary life of St Susanna are by **Cesare Nebbia**. To the left (3), *Santa Susanna is being accosted by Maximian the son of the emperor Diocletian, with an angel intervening*, and to the right (4), *Santa Susanna is refusing to sacrifice to idols*. The four panels in the apse show her *Apotheosis*; she is in the middle, angels with period 16th century instruments flank her and Christ holding a crown is waiting at the top. (1)

The stucco decoration was by **Matteo Zoccolini**, who was a Theatine priest. It involves garlands, fruit, scrollwork and little putti all gilded. (1)

The aedicule of the altar (34) is against the far wall of the apse. It has two Ionic columns of green marble supporting a split triangular pediment the fragments of which enclose two angels holding a cross.

The altarpiece (2) is an oil painting by **Tommaso Laureti** of *The Martyrdom of Santa Susanna*, which occurred in 293 A.D. Above the dark and dismal scene, coming from the light, is an *angel bringing to Susanna the green palm of martyrdom*. Above the Laureti painting is *Santa Susanna being carried into heaven, receiving the crown of glory from Jesus*. Surrounding them are groups of angels playing different musical instruments. Below the altarpiece it is a grille for the nuns to attend Mass unobserved. (1)

In the arch of the apse are found frescoes of *St. Claudius* with his son *St. Alexander* on the right (13), and on the left (14) his wife *St. Prepedigna* with his daughter *St. Cuzia*. In the middle of the arch is the coat-of-arms of Cardinal Girolamo Rusticucci. Flanking the pilasters of the apse arch are two statues by **Paracca**, of *St Peter* (5) and *St Paul* (6), with doors beneath leading into the nuns' choir. In the spandrel on the left is *St. John the Evangelist*, and on the right, *St. Matthew*. (1)

The left wall of the presbyterium has a large fresco (7) of the *Martyrdom of St Gabinius* by Croce. Saint Gabinus, said to be the father of Saint Susanna and brother of Pope Caius (283-296), and, though a relative of Emperor Diocletian to have been beheaded in 296 for refusing to sacrifice to the pagan gods. The corresponding one on the right wall (8) shows the *Martyrdom of St Felicity and her Seven Sons* which is by **Paris Nogari**. (1)

The Triumphal Arch divides the New Testament frescoes in the sanctuary from the Old Testament

frescoes in the nave. The fresco of *St. Catherine of Alexandria* is on the right face of the arch (9), and *St. Helena*, the mother of Constantine, is on the left face of the arch (10). In the middle of the arch is the name, Girolamo Rusticucci, Vicar-General of Pope Sixtus V and Cardinal priest of St. Susanna. The date, 1595 in Roman numerals, is the date of completion of the church. Behind the arch is a fresco of *Pope St. Leo III* and next to him is *Charlemagne* holding the scepter (11). Opposite, in the mirror image position (12) is *Pope St. Caius* and his brother, *St. Maximus*.

Crypt

In the crypt the relics of St. Susanna, St. Gabinus and St. Felicity are buried. The Eucharist has been celebrated there since 285 A.D. In the altar fresco *Santa Susanna* is on the left, *St. Gabinus* in the center and *St. Felicity* on the right. The ceiling frescoes (33) in the crypt is of seven angels representing the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, shown as a Dove in the center. The frescoes in the crypt were also by **Croce**. In the terracotta floor is the tomb of Cardinal Jerome Rusticucci, who died three months after the work was finished. He was buried in 1603.

Chapel of St Lawrence (15)

The chapel on the left was commissioned by Camilla Peretti, sister of Pope Sixtus V. It was begun in 1587, designed by **Domenico Fontana**, and frescoed by the Milanese artist **Giovanni Battista Pozzo**. The altar is adorned with two columns of verde antique. The altar painting (16) by **Nebbia** depicts the *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*. (1) (a) (b)

The Chapel was built to enshrine the recently discovered relics of the Early Christian saints, Eleutherius and Genesius, which were transferred to Santa Susanna in 1591 from the small church of San Giovanni della Pigna where they had been unearthed. The relics had come to light in 1585 when Sixtus V had given the church to the Compagnia dell'Pieta. In the spiritual climate of late sixteenth-century Rome, relics of the early martyrs were both prized and coveted, and Camilla doubtlessly used her influence with her brother to acquire these precious relics for her chapel in Santa Susanna. (a)

St Genesius of Arles, also known as Genesius the Comedian, was a martyr and is the patron saint of actors. The picture on the left wall (17) is of the *Baptism of St Genesius* is by **Croce** again. To the right is a shrine to Pope St Eleutherius (175-189). His body was moved here from San Giovanni della Pigna by Camilla Peretti in 1591. The fresco on the right depicting his martyrdom (18) is by **Pozzo**. It shows *Pope St. Eleutherius being dragged by horses and burned over a grill while Emperor Commodus watches*. (1)

St Felicity and one of her seven martyred sons are also enshrined here, under the altar. Their relics were brought to safety from the Catacombs of Maximus on the Via Salaria by Pope Leo when he rebuilt the church. These catacombs were also named after her, and are somewhere around the junction of the Via Salaria and the Via Metauro. (1)

Chapel of Blessed Mother Mediatrix of Graces (19)

The chapel to the right is dedicated to Our Lady of Graces. The icon above the altar (36) is one of several copies in Roman churches of an ancient Byzantine icon which used to be at Santa Maria della Consolazione before it was stolen. (1)

On the walls are two modern frescoes of patrons of the Cistercian order that replaced two pictures by Avanzino Nucci now in the choir. On the right wall (20) is *St Benedict*, patron of Europe, founder of the monastic life and the rule of St. Benedict in the 5th century. On the opposite wall (21) is *St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, Doctor of the Church and mystic of the Cistercian order in the 12th century. In the window above the altarpiece is the coat-of-arms of Cardinal Richard Cushing, Cardinal-Priest of the church from 1958-1970.

Nuns' Choir

The nuns' choir, which was built with the church in 1597, is behind the main altar. It is an ample rectangular room with a flat coffered wooden ceiling of the period, bearing the coat-of-arms of Cardinal Rusticucci. The choir stalls were provided by Pope Pius V, and the ensemble is considered one of the best surviving conventual choirs in Rome. (1)

The wall-frescoes by Francesco Mezzetti depict scenes from the Old Testament. Also here are four depictions by Nucci of *SS Benedict, Bernard, Susanna* and *Scholastica* (the first two already mentioned above). (1)

Fresco in a sarcophagus

Excavations took place under the nuns' sacristy in 1991, in an area corresponding to the left hand nave aisle of the Leonine basilica. The most important discovery was a 2nd century sarcophagus containing the skeleton of a man, on which layers of detached fresco painting had been carefully placed. The style dates the work to the late 8th century, hence it would have been executed during the restoration ordered by Pope Adrian I. Why it was treated in the way that it was after the Leonine restoration is a mystery. (1)

The restoration of this has been prolonged, but the result is viewable in the sacristy. The main scene is pentagonal, with a gable. It depicts the Madonna and Child flanked by two female saints, identified as Agatha and possibly Susanna. The top side corners contain SS John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, and the gable has the Lamb of God flanked by two Gospel quotations in Latin on a blue background: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God" (St John the Evangelist), and "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (St John the Baptist). Fragments of four other portraits of saints were also recovered. (1)

In the sacristy a glass floor allows a clear view of the excavation (1), ruins of two columns that were part of the left aisle of the original Constantinian church. About 25 feet below the glass floor was the domus ecclesia of St. Susanna and her father St. Gabinus, which was part of a duplex they shared with Pope St. Caius, her uncle. (1)

Special notes

This church was the national church for Catholics from the USA from 1924 until 2017.

The church is presently closed for restoration. (3)

Artists and Architects:

Avanzino [Nucci](#) (1552-1629), Italian painter of the late-Renaissance period
Baldassare [Croce](#) (1558-1628), Italian painter of the late-Mannerist period
Carlo [Maderno](#) (1556-1629), Swiss-Italian Baroque architect
Cesare [Nebbia](#) (c. 1536-c. 1614), Italian painter in a Mannerist style
Domenico [Fontana](#), (1543-1607), Swiss-born Italian architect of the late Renaissance
Flaminio [Vacca](#) or Vacchi (1538-1605), Italian sculptor
Francesco Mezzetti (1676-1702), Italian painter
Giovanni Antonio [Paracca](#) [aka *Il Valsoldo*] (1546-1597), Italian sculptor
Giovanni Battista Pozzo (1563-1591), Milanese painter
Giovanni [Guerra](#) (1544–1618), Italian draughtsman, painter and **stucco** artist
Matteo [Castelli](#) de Melide (1555-1632), Italian architect
Matteo [Zoccolini](#) (1574-1630), Italian painter, stucco artist, Theatine priest of the late Mannerist and early Baroque periods
Paris [Nogari](#) (c. 1536–1601), Italian painter of the Renaissance period,
Stefano [Maderno](#) (1576-1636), Italian sculptor
Tommaso [Laureti](#) (c. 1530-1602), Italian painter

Relics:

Sts Susanna and Gabinus
buried in the crypt below the main altar
St Genesis of Arles
<also known as Genesis the Comedian, martyr and patron saint of actors>
Buried in the Chapel of San Lorenzo
St Eleutarius
Buried in the Chapel of San Lorenzo
St Felicity and one of her seven martyred sons
Buried in the Chapel of San Lorenzo
Pope St [Eleutherius](#) (175-189)

Burials:

- Girolamo Cardinal [RUSTICUCCI](#), (1537-1603) [also see [here](#)]
Buried in front of the main altar of the church which he had restored
Scipione Cardinal [COBELLUZZI](#), (1564-1626)
Giuseppe Bartolomeo [Chiari](#) (1654-1727)
Italian painter of the late Baroque period
Filippo [della Valle](#) (1698–1768)
Italian late-Baroque or early Neoclassic sculptor

Location :

Addr : 14 Via XX Settembre (Piazza San Bernardo), 00187 Rome
Coord : [41° 54' 15.3" N, 12° 29' 37.1" E](#)

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