

San Lorenzo in Panisperna



San Lorenzo in Panisperna, or San Lorenzo in Formosa is a 16th century convent and titular church on Viminal Hill. It was built on the site where St. Lawrence suffered martyrdom.

Name

St. Lawrence was one of the seven deacons of Rome and was martyred in 258, four days after Sixtus II, during the Valerian persecution (253-260). Tradition says that, when ordered by the city prefect to hand over the church's riches, he assembled the poor and sick and presented them to the prefect, saying, "Here is the Church's treasure." Thereupon, he was put to death by being roasted on a grill, where he is said even to have kept his sense of humor, advising his tormentors that it was time to turn him, since he was "done" on that side. Saint Lawrence was one of the early and great martyrs of Rome, being venerated from at least the fourth century, and is the patron of deacons

Panisperna most probably refers to the tradition of the Poor Clares in the adjacent convent of distributing bread and ham (*pane e perna*) on August 10th, Lawrence's feast day, in remembrance of his distributing funds from the church to the poor. Formosa refers to Pope Formosus who built the first attested church here. (1)

There is also a tradition that the name of Panisperna is derived from Perpenna, the wife of a certain Helpidius, whose epitaph was found in the church: (a)

PERPENNA HELPIDI CONJUGI OPTIMAE
PIISSIMAE SEX. AEMILIVS MVRINVS
PERMISSV ATHIETI
L. CLOGLVS P.

History

Tradition claims that the first church here was built during the reign of Emperor Constantine by Pope Sylvester I, the site of the martyr's grill being maintained as a chapel. Pope Pelagius II (R. 579-590) reconstructed the church on the foundations of the earlier Constantinian oratory, then Pope Adrian I (R. 772-795) restored the church. For some time, it was known as San Lorenzo in Formosa, as Pope Formosus (R. 891-896) built a church here. The first written evidence of the church is from 1300, when Pope Boniface VIII (R. 1294-1303) rebuilt the church and annexed an abbey to it. Boniface raised the church in to a higher level; unfortunately, none of the older building is to be seen now. (1) (c)

The abbey was given to the Benedictines in 1451, and then Pope Leo X gave it to the Poor Clares, who took up residence in 1517. The Poor Clares were visited frequently by Saint Bridget of Sweden and her daughter, Saint Catherine of Sweden. (1) (c)

The present church is a result of a rebuilding program from the foundations in 1575-6 by Cardinal Guglielmo Sirleto, titular of the church. The architect is undocumented, but assigned to Daniele da Volterra, based on stylistic grounds. It was at this time it became known as 'in Panisperna' rather than 'in Formosa', and that the present facade was built. During the course of exavations many martyrs' relics were uncovered. The greatest of these were the bodies of SS. Crispino and Crispiniano, uncovered in 1566 under the nave on the right. The apse was rebuilt and redecorated, then reconsecrated in 1590. (c)

The major work of decoration of the building began in 1629 when the then Abbess, Sour Ippolita Cianti, financed the restoration of the church and monastery. Also around this time a new tabernacle was erected over the main altar and a marble balustrade built before the sanctuary. In 1644 the main door of the church was replaced. Also a new outer portico was added. (c)

In the mid-18th century the church received a thorough overhauling. In 1756 the two small rooms, or "coretti", left and right of the main altar, were built, and the church received pictures, marble incrustations, stuccoes and gilding. In the next year the vault of the nave was re-painted and the pictures of the nave chapels were replaced by modern works. (c)

In 1877 the church was expropriated by the government, and the Clares had to leave. When the building was restored to the Church it was given to the Franciscan monks who still retain it. (c)

The church was again restored in 1893-94 by Pope Leo XIII who in 1843 had been ordained bishop in this church. The exterior walls were repaired, and images of *Sts Lawrence* and *Francis of Assisi* were added to the forecourt. Also the double staircase in travertine was added to give the church a more noble entry from the street. (c)

Exterior

From Via Panisperna (1) in front of the church, there is a steep flight of steps, built in 1893, leading to a courtyard lined by trees. The wall behind has various small crest embedded, and has a big, beautiful portal, crowned by a triangular tympanum with Pope Leo XIII's crests. Also a beautiful iron gate leading into the church forecourt. (5)

The outer forecourt (2), from the 17th century, was restored by Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903), who in 1843 was received his episcopal ordination here. A year after the restoration it was decorated with images of *Sts Lawrence* and *Francis of Assisi*. To the left there is a modern bronze statue (3) of *St Bridget of Sweden* here, made in 1964 by the Swedish sculptor **Axel Wallenberg**. To the right of the forecort there is a medieval house (4) with an exterior staircase; this is one of the few such houses that has been preserved in Rome. (1) (5)

The façade (5) is from the 16th century. The facade has two "floors", each divided into three parts of four pilasters. In the middle part, which is crowned by a low triangular tympanum, sits above a round window below an inscription with the date MDLXXIII to remind the Church renovation under Cardinal Guglielmo Sirleto in 1573. Below is the portal which is topped by an arched tympanum. The Church doors (6), from 1664 and is made of wood, were designed by **Carlo Rainaldi**. The renovation in 1893 was allowed to further decorate with reliefs of Saints Lorenzo and

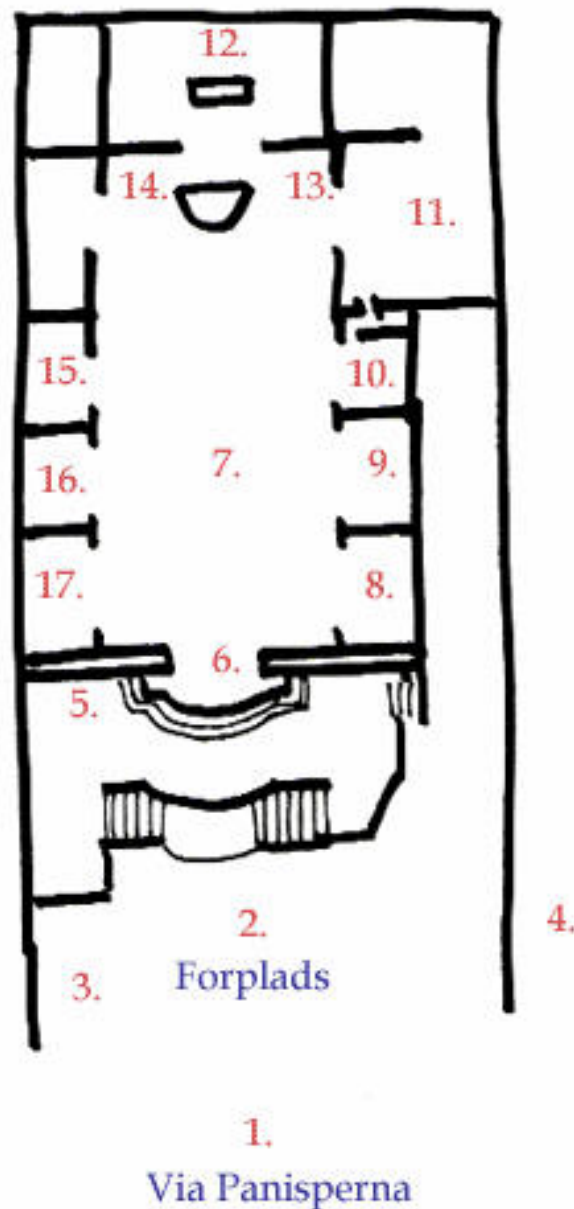
Francesco. Doorstep is made up of two old pilaster from the 8th century. (1) (5)

The brick campanile from the late Renaissance and has two bells from 1525. (1) (5)

To the right of the main entrance is a door leading to the is a chapel in the crypt where an oven believed to be the one on which St Lawrence was roasted alive is kept. (1) (a)

Plan and Layout

The church is rectangular with a single nave with three chapels on each side. The main altar chapel is also rectangular.



Interior

The current appearance dates from 1754. The nave has a barrel-vaulted roof decorated with gilt stucco, with a fresco from 1700 by Antonio Bicchierai: *The Gloria of San Lorenzo*. Many small and large white plaster angels populate the ceiling. (1)

The late 16th century fresco (12) of *Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* behind the high altar is attributed to Pasquale Cati, a pupil of Michelangelo, made in the years 1585-1591 in mannerist style. It was commissioned by Count Wilhelm V of Bavaria and it is his coat-of-arms seen on the side columns

with San Lorenzo's martyrdom symbols, grid and palm. Note how the saint's clothes that are thrown on the ground to the lower left of the painting, as if flowing out of the painting and down over the frame into the viewer's reality. (1) (5)

The crucifix (14) to the left of the high altar is from the 14th century, which according to legend spoke to Santa Brigida. The *Archangel Raphael conducting the young Tobias*, on the wall to the left of the main altar is by **Antonio Bicchierai**. The painting on the right wall (13) over the sacristy door is *St. Michael the Archangel* by **Riccio Bianchini** in 1602. (1) (a)

The ceiling of the apse is a decoration of gilded stucco in a white plaster frame, supported by great stucco angels. The content is a *Gloria di San Lorenzo* from the second half of the 18th century. It may also be by **Antonio Bicchierai** like the fresco in the main nave ceiling. (5)

Above the entrance on the counterfacade is a choir in Baroque style from around the 1757. (5)

In the floor in the middle of the nave is a 14th century incised slab over the grave of Matteo di Oddo di Colonna. (d)

The chapels will be described clockwise from the left rear:

Chappella di S. Francesco (17) (first chapel left)

This chapel was originally dedicated to the Madonna, but rededicated to St. Francis of Assis in the 18th century. The altarpiece from 18th century, a painting of *The Stigmata of St Francis* by **Niccolò Lapiccola**. (1) (5) (c)

Chappella di S. Brigida (16) (second chapel left)

This chapel was built by Suor Stefania Savelli in 1584. St [Bridget of Vadstena](#) was buried here before her body was moved to Sweden where she was buried in Vadstena. Bridget was particularly attached to San Lorenzo in Panisperna, where she often came, and she was on friendly terms with nuns who inhabited the monastery next to the Church. She used to beg for alms for the poor outside this church, and prayed before the crucifix by the high altar. Now, a martyr named Victoria lies underneath the altar in the chapel. The painting on canvas of *St Bridget Praying before the Crucifix* is by **Giuseppe Montesanti**, and was painted in 1757. The beautiful antique sarcophagus is from the 3rd century, decorated with pagan figures representing the seasons. (1) (5)

The last chapel on the left (15) has an 18th century painting of the *Crucifixion* of the Roman school. (1)

To the right of the high altar is the entrance to the sacristy (11), where there is a marble shrine for storing the holy oils. It originated in 1625. In here is also a fresco of *The Annunciation* from the 18th century. (5)

Cappella dell'Immacolata Concezione (10) (third chapel right)

In the last chapel on the right side is a painting of an *Immaculate Conception* by **Giuseppe Ranucci** from 1757. (1) (5)

Cappella di SS. Crispino e Crispiniano (9) (second chapel right)

After the discovery of the bodies of the saints in 1566 this chapel was dedicated to the martyrs. Above the altar is the painting *San Crispino e San Crispiniano*, attributed to **Giovanni Francesco Romanelli** and his nephew **Pietro Paolo**. To the left is a recent statue of the *The Holy Anna with the Virgin Mary as a child*. The brothers St Crispin and St Crispinianus are buried here. On the altar in the oval frame a Madonna called *Refugium peccatorum*. (1) (5) (a) (c)

Cappella di S. Chiara (8) (first chapel right)

The altarpiece is a painting of *The Miracle St Clare of Assisi* by **Antonio Nessi**, made in 1756. On the ceiling is a fresco depicting the *Glory of St Lawrence* by **Antonio Bicchierai**. On the right wall there is a tomb of Cardinal Guglielmo Sirleto who died in 1585. (1) (5)

If you ask to be admitted to the presbytery, you can see a dramatic painting of St Lawrence's

martyrdom. (1)

The crypt encloses the place where Saint Lawrence is said to have suffered. Under the porch is a chapel where an oven believed to be the one on which St. Lawrence was roasted alive is kept. Ask the sacristan if you wish to see it. Also here are the crucifix which spoke to Saint Bridget and relics of Saint Lawrence, Bridget, Crispin and Crispinian (patrons of shoemakers). There are also other relics displayed there. In the room there is a tombstone from 1410 to Nicola di Culm, who served as pastor at the church for 44 years. (1)

Artists and Architects:

Antonio Bicchierai (1688-1766), Italian painter
Antonio Nessi (1739-1773), Italian painter
Axel Wallenberg (1898-1996), Swedish sculptor
Daniele Ricciarelli *da Volterra* (1509-1566), Italian Mannerist painter, sculptor and architect
Giovanni Francesco [Romanelli](#) (1610-1662), Italian Baroque painter from Viterbo
Giuseppe Montesanti (18th cent), Italian painter
Giuseppe Ranucci (18th cent), Italian painter
Niccolò [Lapiccola](#) (1730-1790), Italian painter
Pasquale [Cati](#) (c. 1520-c. 1620), Italian Mannerist painter
Pietro Paolo Romanelli (18th cent), Italian painter
Riccio Bianchini (17th cent), Italian painter

Burials:

[St Crispin and St Crispinianus](#)

Victoria <martyr>

Guglielmo Cardinal [SIRLETO](#), (1514-1585)
Valentino Cardinal [MASTROZZI](#), (1729-1809)
Lorenzo Cardinal [SIMONETTI](#), (1789-1855)

Location:

Addr: Via Panisperna, 90, 00184 Rome
Coordinates: [41°53'50"N 12°29'35"E](#)

Info:

Telephone: 0039 06483667 - 06 46535573 - 06 46535574

Opening times

Every days before the celebration of the masses

Mass Schedule:

Weekdays: 7.45 am;

Holidays: 11.00 am and 6.00 pm;

Saturdays and Eves of Public Holidays: 6.00 pm;

Links and References:

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
2. [English Wikipedia page](#)
3. [Info Roma page](#)
4. [tourist Info](#)
5. [Annas Rome Guide](#)
6. [Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church](#)
7. [Rome Art Lover web page](#)

8. [When In Rome blog](#)

a. Donovan, Jeremiah; ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS; 1842; Vol. I, pg. 529

b. Sharp. Mary; A GUIDE TO THE CHURCHES OF ROME; 1966; pg. 115

c. Lewine, Milton; THE ROMAN CHURCH INTERIOR, 1527-1580; 1963; Pg. 286

d. Davies, Gerald S.; RENASCENCE: THE SCULPTURED TOMBS OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY IN ROME; 1916; Pg. 237

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