

Santa Maria della Luce

(San Salvatore in Corte)



Santa Maria della Luce is an 18th century convent church incorporating 12th century fabric in Trastevere. The dedication is the Blessed Virgin Mary, under the title of Our Lady of the Light. The church has two names. The more familiar one is Santa Maria della Luce, but the older name of **San Salvatore in Corte** is used also and both names are recognized by the Diocese. [1]

History

The church was built in the 12th century, and was originally called San Salvatore in Corte. According to some sources, there was an even older church consecrated by Pope Julius I, a Roman hall dedicated to St. Bonosa, on the site from the 3rd or 4th century. Documents prove there was a small church here in the reign of Pope John XV (985-996). [1]

The first documentary reference is from the reign of Pope John XV, about the year 990. A Papal Bull of Callisto II in 1121 mentioned this church as already functioning "for the soldiers" ("coorte" meaning "cohortes", the Roman squadrons).

The name Corte has been a puzzle for centuries. Mediaeval documents variously have Curti or Curtibus, indicating that the Latin scribes who wrote them were puzzled as well. A plausible hypothesis only emerged with the discovery of the headquarters or Excubitorium of the Seventh Cohort of the Vigiles just to the west in 1866; the identification of Corte with the Latin cohortis ("of the cohort") is attractive. However, proof is completely lacking. [1]

The church's name of Santa Maria della Luce comes from a miracle that took place nearby on

March 28th 1730. A young man, depressed because he was unable to find a job, was about to commit suicide by throwing himself off the bridge into the Tiber when he saw a bright image of the Blessed Virgin on a wall. He changed his mind, and found a job within days. Later, a blind man got the use of his eyes back thanks to the same image, which was named Our Lady of the Light. [1]

The image was transferred to the church, which as a result was rebuilt and rededicated. The architect of the restoration was **Gabriele Valvassori**, but he was not able to finish the façade. Hope for a completion was eventually abandoned in the early 19th century, and the present façade was patched up in 1821. This partial rebuilding left the original campanile, and also some fabric of the transept and apse belong to the old 12th century church. [1]

In 1873 the convent complex was sequestered by the state, which still owns the church. It is, however, in the care of the Diocese. In 1891 **Valvassori's** dome was in danger of collapse, and was replaced by a skylight. [1]

There was a restoration in 1970. The church is presently administered by the Scalabriniani. This religious order established it as a mission centre to Latin American migrants in 1996, and as a result the edifice was fully restored in 2003 after being in a bad state. The side chapels are dedicated to devotions from the various Latin American countries, and the liturgy is in Spanish and Portuguese. [1]

Exterior

The church has the exterior plan of a Latin cross, with a short nave with aisles, a transept with a crossing dome and an apsidal presbyterium. The convent of the Minims is attached transversely to the presbyterium, like the crossbar of a T. The nave is under two pitched roofs, the one nearer the entrance being slightly higher. [1]

The façade is at a considerable angle to the major axis of the church, owing to the constraints of the street plan. This is not obvious from outside, but if you enter the church and look back at the counterfaçade you will see that the left hand nave side wall is shorter than the right. [1]

To examine the 12th century brick apse, go down the Vicolo del Buco which runs to the south of the church between Via della Luce and Piazza del Drago. [1]

Campanile

The campanile is from the 12th century, and is a squat (19 meters high) Romanesque structure attached to the right of the nave. The width is greater than is normal among medieval campaniles, and there is only one story above the nave roofline. Each side has an arcade of three arched soundholes, and there is a tiled pyramidal cap. [1] [c]

This campanile is impossible to see from the street, but is allegedly viewable from the back yard of one of the houses in Via della Lungretta if you know where to go and who to ask. You can see it in the views from the Aventine or Janiculum, again if you know where to look. [1]

The fabric of the tower is decorated with inset monochrome glazed bowls of different colors, allegedly having an Islamic provenance. They used to number about forty, but the 1970 restoration only left seventeen. [1] [c]

Façade

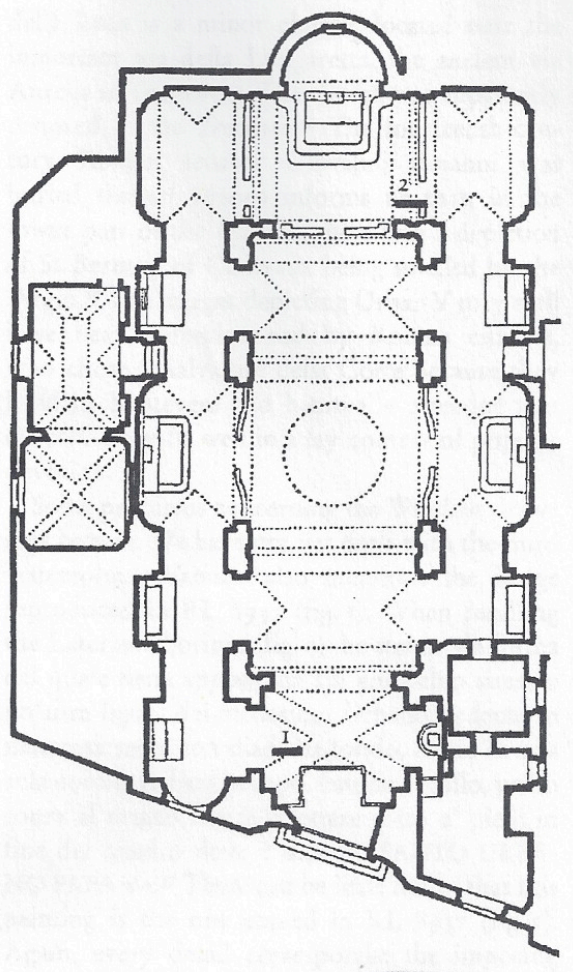
A façade was designed by **Gabriele Valvassori**, but money ran out before it could be finished. What is seen now is plain and stark, being a very cheap job by **Giuseppe Valadier** in 1832. There are two storeys, rendered in pinkish orange. The central section of both storeys is recessed below the gable end of the nave roof, and they are separated by a stone string course. This forms an arc over a horizontal elliptical window over the entrance, and in between the string course and the window is a little marble tablet commemorating the completion of the façade. It reads: [1]

Deo Salvatore de Curte ac B[eata] V[irgo] M[aria], Bartolomeus Gandussi frontem templi huius perfecit A[nn]o MDCCCXXI. ("To God the Savior of Curte and the Blessed Virgin Mary,

Bartholomew Gandussi finished the front of this temple in the year 1821")

A large vertical rectangular window is in the second story, below the gable, and this story has sweeping curves on either side which imply that the original design would have had a pair of gigantic volutes. The first story has a pair of vertical rectangular windows flanking the recessed portion. That is all. [1]

Plan



Interior

The interior was rebuilt in the late Baroque style after 1730, when the miraculous image was transferred here. The color scheme is muted, being dominated by white and light grey. The stucco decorations are of high quality, but restrained in a way which heralds the neo-Classical style. They are worth examining, and overall the church has a restful and dignified feel to it. [1]

The interior plan is based on a Greek cross having equal arms, with the latter part of the nave, the nearer part of the presbyterium and the arms of the transept forming these arms. Each of the arms has a barrel-vaulted ceiling pierced by lunette windows; two pairs each for the transept arms, one pair each for the presbyterium and nave. The vaults of the transept arms have stucco decorations, but the other two are plain. [1]

Eight monumental Composite pilasters occupy the corners of the crossing of the transept, each pair aligned parallel to the major axis and having ribbing on their sides facing inwards and what looks like pavonazzetto marble revetting on the sides facing into the transept. These pilasters support an entablature with a heavy cornice, and above this spring four arches bounding the crossing. These in turn support a dome of an interesting design. Instead of proper pendentives, there is a false dome formed geometrically by bringing the pendentives together, and the actual dome is now an octagonal

glass skylight. The false dome has delicate vine and scroll stucco decoration in white on a light grey background. The skylight replaced a proper dome in 1891. [1]

The nearer part of the nave is treated as a pronaos. A pair of ribbed Composite pilasters support a semi-circular arch which bounds the near end of the nave barrel vault. Into this arch is inserted another, horizontally elliptical arch on corbels which supports a gallery above the pronaos. Looking back above this latter arch you can see the rectangular stained glass window in the façade; the ceiling in between the main nave barrel vault and the counterfaçade has its own vault, plainly rendered in pink. The architect did nothing about disguising the angle between this and the façade itself. The window shows the *Resurrection*, and on the gallery arch is a plaque saying *Domus mea domus orationis* ("My house is a house of prayer"). [1]

The presbyterium has an identical arrangement; Composite pilasters supporting an arch bounding the far side of the main presbyterium barrel vault. On the other side of this arch, the presbyterium is continued with a false dome similar in geometric design to the main one, except with no skylight. This has a very attractive and finely made starburst design in stucco. Below it is the word *Caritas* (Charity) in a stucco glory, and below that again is the actual apse. [1]

The transepts have galleries along the sides, the space for which are made by lifting up the entablature in a very Baroque way, with upflick curves at the ends. [1]

The side chapels are dedicated to devotions from the various Latin American countries, and the liturgy is in Spanish and Portuguese. There are a total of eight side chapels. [1]

Sanctuary

One of the most notable artworks in the church is the fresco in the conch of the apse, depicting *God the Father with Angels*. It is by **Sebastiano Conca**. Unfortunately, neglect of the church's fabric before the recent restoration meant that the roof leaked, and the fresco has been seriously damaged. Not much of the Father is left.

The miraculous icon is enthroned in a glory over the high altar, set directly into the wall of the apse, and was touched up by Conca. Hence the altar has no canopy but does have a grille in its frontal which shows the reliquary of three obscure martyrs from the catacombs of Ponziano, named Miles, Pigmenius and Pollio. The tabernacle on this altar has a charming little painting by **Conca** of the *Risen Christ*, which inspired the modern stained glass window previously mentioned.

Side chapels

To the right of the sanctuary, off the transept, is the chapel of the Crucifix (which is 18th century).

The corresponding chapel to the left of the sanctuary has a statue of Our Lady of Sorrows by Stufflesser & Co of Ortosei, 1934. The firm is still in business. In front of the altar here is enshrined a life-sized 18th century wooden statue of Christ in the tomb.

On the right is the chapel of St Joseph, and the altarpiece showing the *Death of St Joseph* is by Giovanni Conso of 1754.

On the left is the chapel of St Francis of Paola, the founder of the Minims, and the altarpiece by Conca of 1752 shows him with SS Francis de Sales and John of Valois who were associated with the Minims.

The other chapels have modern artworks mostly showing Latin American devotions, but that dedicated to SS Joachim and Anne on the right has an altarpiece by Pietro Labruzzi of 1753. St Anne is shown with Our Lady as a child, and St Joachim is sitting rather grumpily in the background.

Another chapel has an 18th century altarpiece showing the archangel Raphael with Tobias and a fish in a vision being seen by St Lucian of Antioch (not your usual saint, but perhaps the choice was influenced by the name of the church). If you want to know what the fish is doing there, read the Bible story.

There is also an interesting painting by Onofrio Avellino of 1700, showing St Francis of Paola about to walk miraculously across the Straits of Messina. Note his wooden platform sandals, as he is usually depicted with them.

Finally, there is a fragment of an 18th century painting showing Our Lady at the Annunciation; some vandal had cut out this head of hers from a larger canvas.

Location

Addr. Via della Luce, 5, Trastevere

coord: [41° 53' 20.9" N, 12° 28' 31.8" E](#)

Info

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Open Times:

Every day 8.00am-12.00am 4.00pm-8.00pm

Sunday 8.00am-8.00pm

Masses

Holidays 6.20pm

The day before a Holiday 6.00pm

Links & References

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[Wiki Commons photos](#)

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Nolli map](#) (look for 1146)

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

[Info.roma web-page](#)

[www.060608 web page](#)

[Roma SPQR web-page with gallery](#)

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["Trastevere.romeverywhere" web-page with gallery](#)

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[Youtube video on the mission](#)

