

Santa Balbina Vergine



Santa Balbina Vergina is a titular Basilica church dedicated to the 2nd century Roman virgin and martyr St [Balbina](#). The church is located on the slope of the Little Aventine Hill, near the Terme de Caracalla, just above the ruins of the Old Servian Wall, on the Via di S. Balbina. It is flanked on the right by the buildings of a former monastery, under part of which traces of the Servian walls have been found. (1) (c)

History:

The church is ancient, and was probably built in the 4th century by Pope St. Mark (336) above the late 2nd century house of the consul Lucius Fabius Cilo on the Little Aventine Hill in an area rich in Roman remains of the 2nd to 3rd centuries AD. The first reference to it is found in a 6th century document, where it's referred to as "titulus Sanctae Balbinae". However, the masonry and construction of the building have been dated to the late 4th century. It may be that the building was originally a reception hall which had been added to the *domus*, and was later converted into a church. (1)

The first documentary reference is from 595, in the reign of Pope St Gregory the Great. The next documentary mention is in the *Liber Pontificalis* for Leo III (795-816), who is described as having the roof repaired. (1)

The convent of Santa Balbina was the work of Greek monks, possibly in the late 6th century. Because of the barbarian incursion in the Middle Ages, the convent was fortified with towers and

crenellations, and a mediaeval crenellated tower survives as a reminder of this. The Greek monks were replaced by Latin-rite Benedictines in the early 11th century at the latest. (1)

By the 12th century the church became ruinous, and the apse conch with its old mosaic collapsed. A survey of the church fabric reveals that it was restored and rebuilt several times in the Middle Ages. (1)

In 1489 Cardinal Marco Barbo, nephew of Pope [Paul II](#), reconstructed the roof and left an epigraph on one of its beams: *Marcus Barbus, Venetus, epsicopus Praene[stis], card[inalis] S[ancti] Marci, Patriarcha Aquile[nsis], an[no] D[omini] MCCCCLXXXIX*. "Praeneste" is the modern Palestrina. (1)

At some stage before the 16th century doorways were knocked through the side walls into the niches, as can still be discerned because they damaged the medieval frescoes inside. This seems to have been when the niches were converted into store-rooms or barns, and would have had blocking walls or partitions separating them from the church. These have left no traces. (1)

There was a series of restorations in the later 16th century. Firstly, in the reign of Pope Pius V the fabric was strengthened in a way which hints at worries about its stability. Firstly, the six large round-headed windows in the upper nave wall on each side were reduced to three. The four windows in the apse were blocked up. The three windows in the façade were reduced to oculi. The six niches on each side of the nave were blocked up, except one on the north side and two on the south. (1)

The next intervention was in the reign of Pope Sixtus V. Cardinal Pompeo Arrigoni effected a restoration in 1590. The columns of the portico were replaced with Doric pilasters, which was little better than looting because the cardinal then apparently re-used the columns in his villa at Grottaferrata, the Villa Muti. (1)

In 1599, in the reign of Pope Clement VIII, the interior was renewed and the apse was frescoed. This surviving fresco replaced the long-lost mediaeval mosaic and was executed by Anastasio Fontebuoni, a Florentine. (1)

During the French occupation the property was sold off in 1798. When it was reclaimed it was put under the charge of the Chapter of St Peter's, which restored the church in 1813. There was another restoration in 1825. (1)

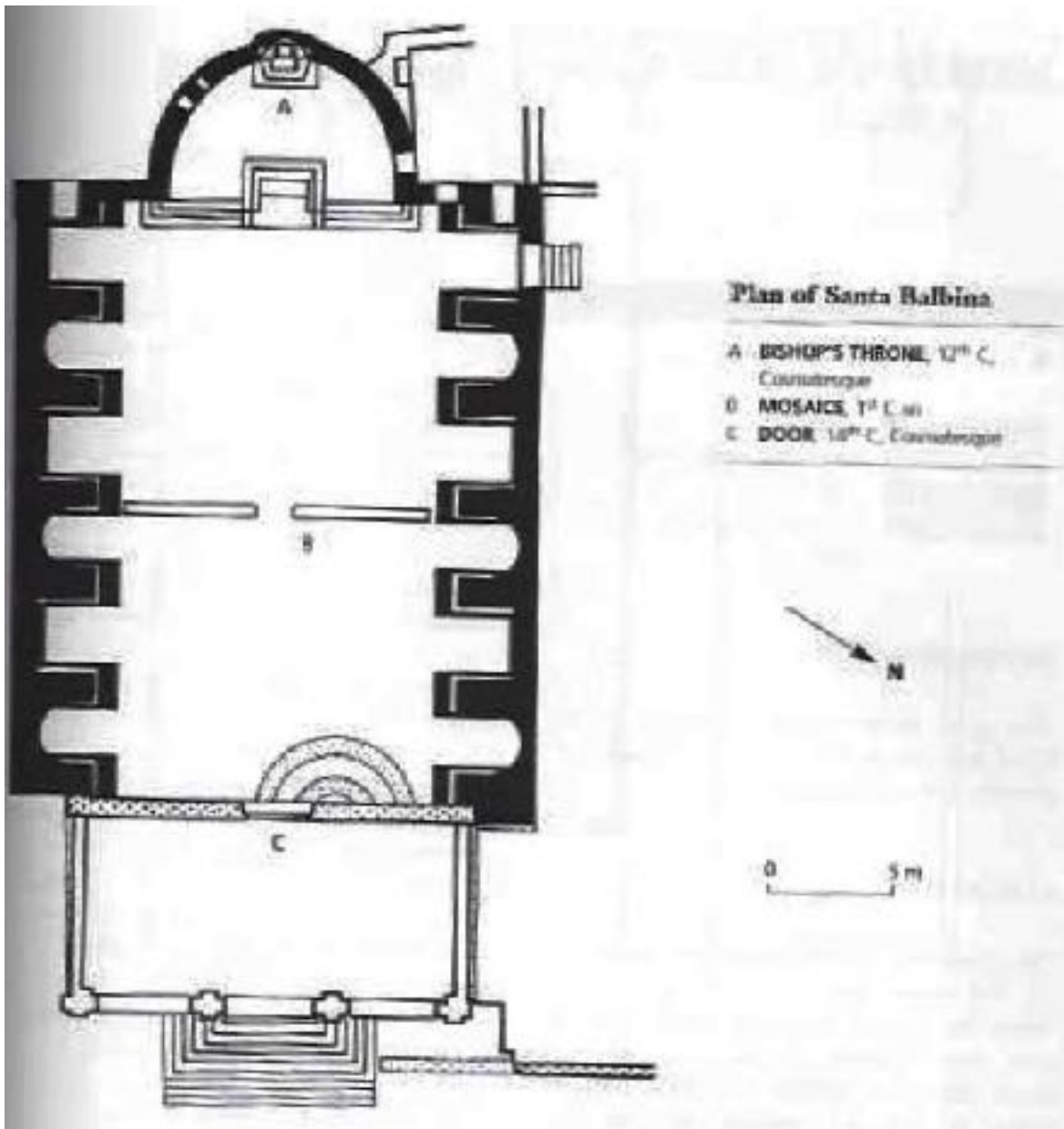
From the 18th century to the present the monastery complex has been expanded and utilized by a number of different institutions. Presently it has become a nursing home for the elderly, and the convent buildings were restored for the purpose at the start of the 21st century. (1)

The present Romanesque look is a result of restoration work carried out 1927-1930 by Antonio Muñoz. He re-opened the upper windows of the church and filled in a series of modern openings in the right wall. During this restoration frescoes were discovered on the side walls from the 9th to 14th centuries. He lowered the pavement to its original level, relaid several fragments of ancient mosaic from elsewhere to form a floor. (1) (c)

From 2009 until 2013, the church was undergoing restoration which was completed in the latter year. (1)

The church is served by diocesan clergy. (1)

Plan:



Exterior:

Structurally, the church is a basilica with a central nave and aisles and this is what it looks like from outside. There is a large external apse, and a large entrance loggia the same width as the central nave. This is accessed by a short flight of stairs. (1)

The fabric is mostly of brick, with a little stone in the ancient courses and some patches of render surviving. The exposed fabric is a very interesting palimpsest of different ages, but if you get around to the south side to look at it be careful of the bee hives that may be here. (1)

Traces of relieving arches of the 3rd century structure can be seen at the base of the outer face of the portico's left wall, and in the lower part of the church façade. (c)

The 19th century convent building joins onto the church to the right of the apse. Here, there is a small slab campanile in brick attached to the top of the edge of the nave roof, which has a tall and narrow arch to hold two bells. The top is gabled, but not properly pedimented. This structure has been claimed as mediaeval, but is probably 19th century. (1)

There are three large round-headed windows over the loggia, six on each side of the nave and four in the apse. All of these have geometric mullions by Muñoz. The false pediment of the façade is formed by a course of bricks forming a projecting cornice supported by little stone brackets. (1)

The large loggia has three arched portals, with the brick archivolts springing from Doric columns with stone capitals. The separating pillars have applied Doric pilasters which reach the roofline, the capital decorations being continued under the latter to form a false entablature. The portals are blocked by ugly pressed steel railing screens. (1)

There is a small heraldic shield over the central portal, featuring a lion rampant bend over all, with a cardinal's hat above. This is the crest of Cardinal Marco Barbo. (1)

The interior of the loggia is bare, but has a collection of tombstones and sculptured slabs on its left hand side wall, collected by Muñoz. Among them are marble slabs, one incised with a cross. On the nave wall at this end of the loggia is a coat of arms of Pope Innocent VIII, preserving its original color. There is also a large tablet with an epigraph commemorating the Muñoz restoration. (1)

Interior:

It is a rare type of church, consisting of a hall with side niches and an apse. There are five large niches on each side which are separated by thick walls; these are alternatively semi-circular and square. These niches are entered through completely undecorated arched portals, and the ends of the blocking walls between them are also undecorated. The walls are all plain, in a very pale ochre, apart from the apse fresco. (1) (c)

In the far left and right hand corners of the nave are two more niches which serve as entrance lobbies; the right hand one is the present church entrance, while the left hand one used to serve as a chapel. (1)

Above the niches on each side is a row of six large windows with Muñoz transennae, which were his trademark; he unblocked three of them in the restoration. (1)

The floor of the nave is fascinating, consisting as it does of several panels of ancient but restored black-and-white mosaics. Flowering plants and birds figure as well as geometric patterns, and there is one famous panel at the right hand side showing the signs of the zodiac. Several of these mosaics were taken by Muñoz from the excavations for the Via dei Fori Imperiali, since he was responsible

for the archaeological surveys before Mussolini's grand parade route was pushed through the Imperial Forums. The laying of these mosaics was completed in 1939. (1)

Further areas of the floor near the sanctuary are laid with bits of ancient marble slabs, including red rosso antico, green verde antico and grey-streaked cipollino. (1)

The trussed roof is the surviving one of 1489. There has never been a ceiling. On the third cross-beam is an inscription, recording the repairs of the church in 1489 by the same Cardinal Barbo, who was bishop of Palestrina, and Patriarch of Aquileia. (1)

An ancient elliptical funerary sarcophagus for a child has been converted into a holy water stoup by the side entrance by putting it on a fragment of an ancient breccia column. It has strigillate decoration, with a portrait of the deceased toddler. Three ancient amphorae are attached to the wall behind it. (1)

On the counterfaçade, just to the right inside the entrance, is the spectacular Cosmatesque tomb of Stefano de Surdis, who was the papal chaplain. There is an inscription by the artist: *Johs filius magis Cosmati fecit hoc opus*; he was Giovanni di Cosma, and he executed this work in 1303, and one of the finest tombs in Rome. The tomb was once in St. Peter's. The deceased is shown recumbent on a catafalque with drapery, itself placed on a tomb chest with intricate geometric mosaic decoration in the typical Cosmatesque style. This has been restored in modern times. (1) (b)

Presbyterium

Muñoz provided a *schola cantorum* which is an enclosure for the church singers in an early church. It is a pair of low screen walls of plain marble slabs, and takes up the last two bays of the six-bay nave. The actual presbyterium begins at the middle section of the last bay, with the marble screen following its boundary. (1)

The apse conch displays the fresco by Anastasio Fontebuoni of 1623, depicting *Christ in Glory with SS Balbina, Quirinus and Felicissimus*. To either side of the apse's triumphal arch are depicted *St Peter* (left) and *St Paul* (right), with painted panels of false polychrome marbelling over the archivolt. (1)

Under the high altar in the apse is a sarcophagus of red Sicilian jasper in the form of an ancient urn containing the relics of St Balbina, her father St [Quirinus](#) and St [Felicissimus](#). The rest of the altar is made up of a green brecciated marble, alabaster and a white marble with grey veins. The altar has always stood away from the apse wall, and there is no altarpiece or canopy. (1)

In its own round-headed niche in the middle of the apse wall is a marble bishop's throne with intricate Cosmatesque work dating to the 13th century, although much restored. It is lit by two little windows in the sides of the niche. (1)

To the left, there is a small square niche with an old frescoed cross on its back wall. This is an aumbry, or former cupboard for the holy oils. Nearby is a red marble table attached to the wall and supported by a pair of baluster legs in white and grey marble, and this is a credence table for preparing the elements for Mass. (1)

The sacristy, on a trapezoidal plan, is to the right of the apse. It seems to have been the site of the mediaeval campanile, which fell down or was demolished at an unknown date. (1)

The chapels are described in clockwise order, starting at the back left hand corner:

The first niche on the left has been partitioned off as a broomcupboard, and is invisible. (1)

The second niche on the left contains an anonymous 18th century picture showing *Our Lady with SS Bernardine of Siena and Francis de Sales*, that used to be in the chapel of St Anthony. The chapel also contains bits of mosaic and architectural fragments left by Muñoz. No signs of frescoes here. (1)

Chapel of Our Lady of Fátima

In the third niche on the left is a 13th century fresco of the *Madonna Enthroned with Four Apostles* which, with *Christ the Redeemer* above in a tondo, is attributed to the school of Pietro Cavallini. The little altar has a Cosmatesque cross on its frontal, and came from a demolished house in the Piazza Venezia. Nowadays it supports statues of *Our Lady of Fátima* with her seers. The fresco also is a palimpsest, and traces of an earlier one can be seen beneath it. (1)

The fourth niche on the left is now used to keep the processional crucifix used in the Good Friday liturgy, and the lower walls show faint remnants of frescos. (1)

Chapel of St Anthony

The fifth niche on the left is now a chapel dedicated to St Anthony of Padua, with a modern statue of the saint standing a neo-Baroque portable altar of better quality than usual. (1)

Chapel of St Peter

The last chapel on the left used to be dedicated to St Peter the Apostle, and the fresco fragments include a fairly intact panel showing him being crucified upside down. Around this are faint traces of an earlier fresco cycle. (1)

There is an unlabeled stone block here which may be the altar where Pope St. Gregory was saying Mass when the crucified Christ appeared to him. The glass case on the floor contains a little lead box thought to have been a reliquary. (1) (c)

To the right of the Presbyterium is the side entrance lobby.

Chapel of St Margaret of Cortona

The fifth niche on the right was a chapel dedicated to St Margaret of Cortona, and the 19th century former altarpiece shows her being invited into heaven by Christ. This picture is also neglected and damaged, but gives a good idea of the penitential character of the saint. The strange object made out of small iron plates is a discipline, with which she used to beat herself. Her pet dog features in the portrait

Chapel of the Crucifixion

The fourth niche on the right-hand side was the only one on this side not blocked up in 1571. It was converted into a chapel dedicated to the Crucifix, and the altarpiece is a marble relief of the Crucifixion dated to 1460. This is attributed to Mino da Fiesole and Giovanni Dalmata. It has an inscription recording its transfer here from Old St Peter's in 1650:

Sanctissima haec imago olim in Vaticano,
in ara Petris Cardinale Barbi, inde e crypta
huc translata fuit anno iubilei MDCL.

The link with the family of Cardinal Marco Barbo was why it was brought here. The Blessed Sacrament is now reserved here; note the twisted spiral stone candlestick on which the votive lamp is kept. (1)

Chapel of Our Lady of Lourdes

The third niche on the right hand side shows another 14th century fresco, very badly faded and perished. It shows two saints venerating somebody formerly in the middle. The modern statue of Our Lady of Lourdes is surrounded by a host of plaster putti stuck to the wall. (1)

Chapel of St John Capistrano

The second niche on the right hand side is dedicated to St John of Capistrano, and the anonymous 18th century altarpiece (in very bad condition) shows him having a vision of Our Lady. (1)

Chapel of Padre Pio

The niche immediately to the right of the main entrance demonstrates clearly how these niches were used as external storage spaces at some stage. The doorway has been hacked through a 14th century fresco of the Madonna and Child; Jesus is holding a cross. Four damaged figures of saints are in attendance, and the donor of the work is shown kneeling by the throne on the left. (1)

The niche has been transformed in recent times into a little chapel dedicated to St Pius of Pietrelcina, by the addition of a portable altar and a statue of Padre Pio. (1)

In 1270 the first known Hungarian cardinal, [István Vánca](#) was buried in the basilica. Another 13th century Hungarian clergyman, Pál, Bishop of Paphos, erected an altar in the church for Saint Nicolas. Both the altar and the grave disappeared during later centuries but a plaque commemorates the offerings of Pál.

Note:

The church has been closed to the public for a period for restoration. If you find it closed, call at the monastery in the building next to it (within reasonable hours) and the nuns may let you in.

Artists and Architects:

Antonio [Muñoz](#) (1884-1960), Italian architect
 Anastasio [Fontebuoni](#) (1571-1626), Italian painter of the Baroque
[Cosmati](#) family (12th-14th centuries), workers in decorative geometric mosaic
 Giovanni [di Cosma](#) (13th cent), mosaics
 Mino [da Fiesole](#) (c.1429-1484), Italian sculptor of the early Renaissance period
 Mino [del Reame](#) (15th cent), Italian (Neapolitan) Renaissance sculptor

Relics:

St Balbina
 St [Quirinus](#)
 St [Felicissimus](#)

Burials:

István Cardinal [BÁNCSA](#), (?-1270)
 Stefano Cardinal [SURDI](#), (?-1303)

Location:

Addr: Piazza di Santa Balbina, 8
 Coord: [41° 52' 50." N 12° 29' 23.1"E](#)

Info:

Telephone: 0039 06 5780207
Open 07:00-18:00

Links and References:

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 2. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Balbina
 3. <http://www.pnac.org/station-churches/week-2/tuesday-santa-balbina/>
 4. <http://seekmeandlive.blogspot.com/2010/03/santa-balbina.html>
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 6. http://www.info.roma.it/monumenti_dettaglio.asp?ID_schede=518
 7. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Santa_Balbina (photos)
 8. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/dealvariis/sets/72157616417990227/> (photos)
 9. <http://www.giovanirinaldi.it/page/rome/santabalbina/index.htm> (more photos)
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 - b. Davies, Gerald S.; RENASCENCE: THE SCULPTURED TOMBS OF THE 15TH CENTURY IN ROME; 1916
 - c. Webb, Matilda; THE CHURCHES AND CATACOMBS OF EARLY CHRISTIAN ROME