

# San Saba



**San Saba** is a 10th century minor basilica, parish and titular church in Rome. The church dedicated to [St. Sabas](#), one of the fathers of Eastern monasticism, and was responsible for founding the lavra or monastery of Mar Saba, east of Bethlehem, in 483. [5]

The church lies on the so-called *Piccolo Aventino*, which is an area close to the ancient Servian Walls next to the Aventine and Caelian Hill. The church was built on a platform and is surrounded by a large wall, parts of which are built with tufa blocks that may have come from these fortifications.

## History

The historic origin of the site goes back to the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century when a large, apsed reception hall was built as an addition to a Roman *domus*. According to the church's foundation tradition, on the site used to be a house that belonged to St Silvia, mother of Pope St Gregory the Great, who in turn exploited a pre-existing Roman building, probably the barracks of the IV Coorte dei Vigili (fighters). [1] [6]

In the year 645, Palestine fugitive monks from the order of Mar Saba (Palestine) who had fled their home country after the Islamic invasion, came to Rome to attend the Lateran council. After the council, these Sabaite monks settled down in an old domus, or noble estate, on the "Piccolo Aventino", which at this time was deserted due to the big decrease in Rome's population numbers. Here, they founded an hermitic cell. The Sabaites introduced the cult of St. Sabas to Rome. In ancient sources, their monastery however goes by the name "cellas novas", "cellanovas" or "cellaenovae", which is in reference to the "cellae" of their mother closter, [Mar Saba](#). [1] [3]

The monks remodeled the hall to create an oratory, which was dedicated to St. Sylvia, whom John the Deacon took as the mother of Pope St. Gregory the Great. They also raised the floor level of the hall and laid out a small cemetery in the space created beneath. These early Christian remains were discovered beneath the north-western half of the nave pavement of the present church during

excavations in 1900-01. [1]

The Sabaite monastery prospered soon and for long. In the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century, San Saba was one of the most prestigious of Rome and among the leading "Greek" monasteries. Its received rich papal donations. Since 680, its abbots held important diplomatic roles in the relationships between Rome and Byzantium, and represented the Roman Church and Pope at several church councils in Constantinople. In 768, Antipope Constantine II was held prisoner in this monastery, before being blinded and probably killed by the Lombards. [1] [3] [4]

However, early in the 10th century the monastery failed in the context of increasing hostility between the churches of Rome and Constantinople, and was granted to the Benedictine abbey of Montecassino. They immediately rebuilt the church in the form in which it now exists. Today's church is assumed built some time between 950 and 994 and rests on the part of the old walls of the chapel below. The new building was, however, twice as long (the old is about the fifth pillar) and twice as wide as that added three aisles. [1] [3]

Pope Lucius II granted the monastery in turn to the Cluniac reform Benedictine congregation in 1145, but they found the church and monastery damaged in the Norman invasion of 1084. In 1205 they completely renovated the church giving it the new portal and decor done by **Cosmati family**, and the most important artists and craftsmen of that time. Two of these have left their signature in the church: **Jacopo di Lorenzo** in the portal lintel and **Petrus Vassalietto** on one of the choir desks that formed the church Schola Cantorum. This is today demolished and fragments are in the right aisle, while portico, portal, the floor, and the bishop ciborium is from that time. [3] [7]

In the next three hundred years there is little information on church and monastery, but in 1464 Pope Pius II gave the complex to Cardinal Francesco Piccolomini. In the 15th century the church and monastery had the title of San Salvatore della Balbina, and as such was thoroughly restored by Cardinal Piccolomini (the future Pope Pius III) in 1463. When this was completed in 1465, he rededicated the church to San Saba and Sant'Ansano. [1] [3]

Pope Julius II entrusted the monastery in 1503 to another monastic order, this time to the Cistercians, who tried and failed to establish an abbey here and settled at Santa Croce instead. So Pope Leo X handed the church over to the Canons Regular of the Lateran in 1513, but they did not want it and so the property ended up belonging to the German-Hungarian College from 1573. Initially, the monastery was used as a summer retreat and quiet place for the students and staff. This institution kept possession until the 20th century, although in 1903 it was reported that there was only one Mass a week and the complex was generally disused. Up until the explosive growth of Rome at the end of the 19th century, the church was one of the most isolated inside the city walls and was only approached by a long dead-end driveway from the Viale Aventino (this is the present Via San Saba). It was the only building on the Little Aventine, being surrounded by farmland.

[1] [3] [6]

There was a major and much-needed restoration at the start of the 20th century, completed in 1909. The restoration involved the removal of Baroque items and a return to what was imagined to have been the appearance of the church in mediaeval times. In this, the schola cantorum was re-erected in front of the sanctuary as at San Clemente, the ciborium was re-set and the floor and bishop's throne restored. The work was done on the basis of a late 16th century description penned by Pompeo Ugonio. Also, in the process the entire nave floor was dug out, archaeological investigations made, and the floor re-laid. [1]

In 1931 the church was made parochial and entrusted to the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), which still administers the parish. There was another restoration in 1943 by the architect **Andrea Busiri Vici**. The restored schola cantorum was proving a nuisance in a parish church, and was demolished again. The authentically mediaeval bit was put back in the right hand aisle. In 2010 the portico was repaired and restored. [1] [6]

### Cardinalate

Pope John XXIII established the church as a Cardinal deaconry in 1959, and there have been five cardinal deacons since then. The current one is Arthur Cardinal Roche (2024). [1] [2]

## Exterior

The plan is typically basilical, with a nave and side aisles. There is a short, unusual second side aisle on the left hand side. The nave and aisles focus on three apses in the Eastern style, a larger central one and two much smaller ones at the ends of the main side aisles. [1]

The fabric is in brick, and it is worth while going round the back of the church to see the three windowless naked brick apses. [1]

Over the near end of the main left hand side aisle is the stumpy square 12th century campanile, with two arched sound-holes on each side and a tiled pyramidal cap. Again unusually, it is butted against by another, more substantial rectangular tower of almost the same height. [1] [c]

The monastery is to the right of the church. The present buildings occupy four sides of a square courtyard which looks like an original monastic cloister, but a study of old maps show that in the 18th century only the north range was then extant. The other wings are modern. [1]

## Gateway

The approach to the church from Via di San Saba is via a flight of stairs leading to an arched gateway which has its barrel-vaulted portal flanked by a surviving marble Ionic column, described as marmo porino. Its companion has been lost (its capital remains embedded in the wall), and the staircase is a modern innovation caused by the lowering of the street level for the suburban development. The inner gate of this gateway has a tympanum with a fresco depicting *St Sabas and St Andrew*. Between the two figures is a papal crest. This fresco was recently well restored. The gateway leads to a small courtyard and a path to the portico. [1] [5]

## Portico

The original church façade from about 950 is preserved, but is hidden by a 15th century portico substantially altered in the 18th century. This original external narthex was added in the 1463 restoration, which used six ancient columns (four of giallo antico and two of Imperial porphyry) with Ionic capitals supporting an enclosed upper storey with a loggia on top. The porphyry columns had lion stylophores (they stood on figurines of lions). [1] [3]

Pope Pius VI pillaged these six columns, allegedly for the Vatican library, and the 18th century rebuilding resulted in five square brick pilasters with chamfered corners, supporting the upper loggia which now has five widely-spaced small rectangular windows. The windows are more modern, replacing the original rectangular ones the frames of which have been left visible in places. [1] [6]

Over the entrance portals is the 15th century arcaded upper loggia, with twelve stumpy columns having derivative Ionic capitals with tiny volutes. The arches of this loggia had been bricked up in the 18th century, but were unblocked in 1909. The roofline is immediately above, and over this can just be seen the tip of the gable of the central nave roof. [1]

## Narthex

The narthex contains a very fine ancient Roman carved sarcophagus, with figurines depicting a wedding and strigillate decoration. Also on the walls are ancient sculptural fragments which are all found in the area, including some from other sarcophagi, and bits of epigraphy. The ancient sarcophagi, some of which date from the days of emperors Vespasian and Titus (69-81 AD), has been reused for burials in the chapel of the Church. Other fragments from the Middle Ages, for example, one showing a rider with a falcon on hand. It dates back to the 700s. Another fragment depicting a man with a stick believed to be from the 500s. [1] [3]

Much of the fabric of the actual church frontage within the narthex is actually a precious survival of the original late 4th century aula which was converted to serve as the first monastic church. It survives to a height of about ten meters. There used to be three entrance doorways within a triple arcade, and the two blocked up arched side entrances can be made out. There are traces of the third arch to either side. Above there used to be three rectangular windows, the central one only surviving. [1]

The main entrance door has a molded doorcase including a strip of beautiful Cosmatesque mosaic decoration, with an inscription dating it to 1205 and signed by Magister Jacopo who was the father of the famous Cosmo. It reads: "This work is performed by a master Jacob in honor of Our Lord Innocent III and Abbot John ". Over the lintel is a damaged fresco showing *Our Lady between two saints* (the right hand one is St Sabas, the left hand one is St Andrew). [1] [3]

Apparently more ancient remains from the excavations under the church are kept in an antica or small museum in the left hand side range. These include several sarcophagi found under the right aisle. [1]

## Interior

The interior is divided into a nave and two aisles by fourteen ancient columns salvaged from ancient buildings. The main interior walls are rendered in a sandy color, and the open roof is in timber with trusses around the base of which runs a fine fresco band depicting Prophets, Coats of Arms, Decorative motifs (1463). The aisle arcades rest on columns salvaged from ancient buildings (*spolia*), most with Ionic capitals. The central nave walls above the arcades (clerestory) have eight windows. [1] [6]

Part of the nave floor is original Cosmatesque perhaps dating from 1205, with five great discs (four of porphyry, one of grey granite) forming a quincunx, and intricate geometric patterning including elements of porphyry, yellow giallo antico and green serpentine. This flooring continues into the little entrance porch, where there is a rectangular slab of grey granite, from a quarry called Mons Claudianus in the Eastern Desert of Egypt (so did the porphyry, from Mons Porphyrites). The floor was restored in 1907, when tomb slabs were removed and replaced with modern work matching the old. [1]

The counterfaçade incorporates much late 4th century fabric from the original aula. The engaged piers at the beginnings of the arcades are actually the corners of the original edifice. Above the entrance portal there is a fine painting depicting the *Apparition of the Madonna and Child Jesus to St. Ignatius of Loyola* (18th century), oil on canvas by a Roman artist. [1] [6]

## Columns

The fourteen nave arcade columns are very mixed, and are of different lengths. Some are cracked, and so have metal jackets. Three of the columns are of pink granite from Aswan in Egypt, three are marmor imezio which is from Mount Hymettus near Athens, three are grey bigio antico marble from Algeria, three are grey granite from Egypt, one is pink marmor chium from Chios in Greece, and one is cipollino marble from Euboea in Greece. The ancient Romans sourced their decorative stonework from all over. The near and far columns in the left hand arcade have capitals that are not Ionic; one is Corinthian, and the other Composite. [1] [a]

## Sanctuary

The sanctuary occupies the last bay of the nave, and has an external apse. It is raised, and had a semi-circular crypt below it which was joined onto the void under the nave when the archaeologists dug it out. [1]

Above the arch of the apse, tucked into the roof gable, is a painting of the *Annunciation*. The work, together with the decorative band in the central nave, was executed in 1463 for Cardinal Piccolomini by **Antoniazio Romano**. [1] [5] [6]

The painting in the central apse conch was made for the Jubilee of 1575 by an unknown artist, and is possibly a reproduction of a lost 8th century mosaic. It depicts *Christ Triumphant, flanked by SS Andrew and Sabas*. Below is the *Lamb of God*, flanked by twelve sheep representing the Apostles. [1] [5]

The apse wall has two registers of frescoes. This work is older, of the 14th century, although much touched-up. The upper register has the *Madonna and Child flanked by the apostles*, and the lower one has a fresco of the *Crucifixion* flanked by saints. [1]

The ciborium, restored in the early 20th century, has an open square cornice supported by four Corinthian columns. Two of these are in black granite, and two in black and white marble. The latter

have capitals made of serpentine marble, a very unusual feature. On the cornice, little Ionic columns support an octagonal conical canopy with a little lantern aedicule having its own cupola. [1]

A relic of St Sabas is preserved under the altar, which you can examine through a circular oculus. It looks like an arm bone. The rest of him is now back in his monastery of Mar Saba in the Holy Land. [1]

In the apse behind the altar is an episcopal throne on two carved lions, with a Cosmatesque roundel for its back. This has very fine mosaic inlay, original although restored. [1]

The lectern is formed from what is thought to be a carved marble lintel or architrave from the original 7th century monastic oratory. This used to be in the loggia. The Paschal candlestick is a twisted marble column without a capital. [1]

### Right Aisle

The outer wall of the right-hand aisle used to have small windows, which are blocked up.

A further piece of Cosmatesque work, by **Pietro Vassalotto**, can be seen attached to the wall in the right-hand aisle. This came from a former schola cantorum, such as the one surviving at San Clemente, and is thought to have been the frontal. What survives are two solid marble plutei (screen slabs) with two sets of eight rectangular panels, four of porphyry and four of green serpentine, and four twisted columns. There is an inscription: *Magister Bassallectus me fecit, qui sit benedictu[s]* ("Master Vassalotto made me, he will be blessed"), with a little face having black stones for eyes.

[1] [3]

The chapel at the end of this aisle is dedicated to Our Lady, and is also the baptistry. The apse contains a modern polychrome statue of the *Madonna and Child*. The tulip-bowl font has a little bronze sculpture of the *Baptism of Christ* on its cover, very like that at Santa Prisca nearby. The baptismal candlestick is a twisted stone column. [1]

At the opposite end of the aisle is a small altar. Under the altar there are what appears to be two Corinthian capitals. On the wall above the altar is an unusual painting. It appears to be an old man holding a baby.

There are two doors in the aisle. The door near the Blessed Sacrament Chapel leads to the sacristy, the other door opens to the cloister of the monastery.

### Left Aisle

The chapel at the end of the left hand aisle is dedicated to the Sacred Heart, and is also the Blessed Sacrament chapel. It has a modern statue. [1]

There is a grating in the floor here, which looks down into an excavated 8th century side chapel belonging to the original monastic church (which the archaeologists called the "oratory"). [1]

### "Fourth" nave

The outer left-hand aisle is called, in Italian, the *quarta navata*. The architectural historical interpretation of this part of the church is that it was originally an 11th century portico linking the church to the Benedictine monastery (which at the start of the Middle Ages seems to have been on the left side of the church). The far side of the portico was walled up in the 13th century, and painted with frescoes. [1] [5]

The "fourth nave" has three bays, and an arcade supported by a pair of ribbed white marble columns with imposts instead of capitals. The three damaged frescoes depict: *The Madonna and Child with SS Andrew and Sabas*, *St Gregory the Great with St Benedict and a Bishop Saint*, and *St Nicholas Giving a Donny to Three Poor Girls*. These are now dated to 1296, and are considered to be the work of **Jacopo Torriti** who is known as the *Maestro di San Saba*. [1]

The scene from the life of St Nicholas is especially interesting, since it has a depiction of three girls in bed. The story is that they were too poor to marry and stayed in bed because they had no clothes,

until the saint provided a bag of gold as a dowry. Those gold coins are the original source of the traditional pawnbroker's sign. [1]

## Campanile

The campanile occupies the end of the left hand aisle by the entrance, where the first storey has a very narrow doorway with a carved mediaeval doorframe. Remains of a window belonging to the late 4th century aula can be made out above it. [1]

The main way to this chamber is via the second storey loggia over the entrance, but there is no public access. It contains a further fresco cycle by **Torriti**, apparently a pictorial calendar. Five tondi depict allegories of the months August to December, one depicts a king on his throne and two depict angels. Below the work is painted hanging drapery like that under the girls in bed in the "fourth nave". [1]

## Fresco fragments

In the sacristy and the corridor leading to it are several fresco fragments. Most of these were transferred here after from the 7th century oratory after it was excavated, and are of the highest interest. There are fragments from two separate decorative schemes, one 7th century and the other, 10th century. [1]

The oldest fragments date from between the foundation of the monastery in 645, and the reign of Pope John VII (705-7), and are Byzantine in style. A procession of saints above a painted hanging curtain was originally discernible, with seven heads recovered which are identified as *SS Sebastian, Lawrence, Stephen, Peter of Alexandria, two priests and a bishop*. In the same decorative scheme were a probable total of twenty-four panels depicting New Testament and allied apocryphal scenes. Those tentatively identified are: *SS Joachim and Anne in the Temple, The Wedding of Our Lady, The Presentation of Our Lady, The Baptism of Christ, The Miraculous Catch of Fish, The Healing of the Paralytic, The Calming of the Storm, Peter Walks on the Water, The Transfiguration and The Entry into Jerusalem*. The paintings were discovered by chance in the early twentieth century during excavations inside the building. According to recent studies, the Christological cycle to which they belonged can be dated back to the first half of the eighth century and they are universally considered to be the work of oriental painters. [1] [b]

Also found was a Benedictine fresco cycle of the 9th to 10th century, depicting a curtain above which were a procession of apostles and saints, including monastic figures, done on a large scale. The building of the present church destroyed the upper walls of the oratory, and only the feet of these could be seen. However, there were labels: Sabas, Benedict, Lawrence, Peter, Gregorius. One fragment of this scheme shows a group of monks in black hoods, and (most interestingly) a single monk in tunic and scapular identified as Martinus monachus magister. He is depicted holding what looks like a brush, and is thought to have been the artist of the work. [1]

One fresco here which did not come from underground is a *Dormition of Our Lady*, which is early 14th century and is ascribed to **Pietro Cavallini**. This used to be in a lunette in the left hand exterior wall of the church, before being brought indoors to preserve it. [1]

## Crypt

The crypt now comprises the original semi-circular crypt under the sanctuary, and the void dug out under the nave by the archaeologists in order to uncover the remains of the original 7th century monastic oratory. By dubious tradition, this was originally the house of St Silvia -as mentioned, it was actually a late 4th century aula belonging to a large private house. [1]

The original entrances to the old crypt were staircases by the sanctuary steps, creating a confessio through which pilgrims could pass. The crypt was revetted with marble, and had frescoes only small traces of which remain. Also, an inscription of the 9th or 10th century was found here mentioning a pope called Gregory, an abbot called Eugenius and the so-called Cella Muroniana which was a small hermit's apartment above the gate of Porta San Paolo. [1]

The excavated void of the oratory is now accessed from the portico, to the left hand side. On the wall by the oratory entrance have been fixed tiles used as tomb markers, with epigraphs in red; one reads Ioannes episcopus. Also here is a pair of column bases thought to have flanked the original

oratory entrance. The lower courses of the side walls of the oratory survive complete, as does the layout of a small side chapel to the left which had a tiny apse. [1]

The present sotterraneo contains modern brick pillars supporting the floor of the church above. It measures 13.5 by 10 meters, and is 1.9 meters high. It shows evidence of reconstruction in the 8th century, when the floor was raised by 65 cm to cover burials and then paved with marble slabs. Other burials are in the walls, and epigraphs can be made out on the closures: Eugenius praepositus Monasteri Sancti Ermetis and Petrus episcopus ecclesiae Nicopolitanae. [1]

The burial arrangements extended under what is now the right hand aisle of the church, outside the right hand wall of the oratory. They included re-used ancient sarcophagi (now removed), and also odd loculi or catacomb slots. Catacomb burials were usually in transverse slots, but these were cut longitudinally at about two meters long and three quarters of a metre wide. [1]

Some small parts of the original frescoes can be seen, but the most interesting bits were rescued and taken to the sacristy, as mentioned. [1]

### Special notes

There is a small museum (6) that is entered from the left aisle. In the museum are displayed eight reused Classical sarcophagi and other finds from the excavations. A doorway in the north-east wall of the oratory led into a small 8<sup>th</sup> century chapel, which is visible through a grating (8) in the left aisle pavement. Its left-hand wall incorporated the wall of an ancient kiln.

Remains of the Chapel of St Silva were found in 1901, below the church. You may ask the sacristan to let you in. Access is by way of a flight of stairs in the portico.

### **Location:**

20 Piazza Bernini, Rome, It

Coordinates: [41°52'43"N](#) [12°29'7"E](#)

### **Info:**

Telephone: 0039 06 64580140

Email: [parrocchia@sansaba.it](mailto:parrocchia@sansaba.it)

Email: [parroco@sansaba.it](mailto:parroco@sansaba.it)

Open times: Weekdays 8.00am-12.00am 4.00pm-7.10pm

Holidays 9.30am-1.00pm 4.00pm-7.30pm

Orario Messe: Festivi 10.30 12.00 18.30

Feriali 9.00 18.30

### **Links and References:**