

# San Giovanni a Porta Latina

Saint John Before the Latin Gate



**San Giovanni a Porta Latina** is dedicated to St John the Evangelist, and is hidden away behind the Rosminian college at Via di Porta Latina 17. The church is located approximately 40 m north of the Via Latina, which passes through the wall at the Latin Gate (Porta Latina).

## History:

According to Tertullian, as quoted by Saint Jerome, in year 92 AD, St John the Evangelist survived martyrdom at Rome under the Emperor Domitian by being immersed in a vat of boiling oil, from which he emerged unharmed. He was later exiled to island of Patmos. This event was traditionally said to have occurred at the Latin Gate (located on the southern portion of the Roman wall). The nearby chapel of "*San Giovanni in Oleo*" is said to be on this very spot.

The church was built in the 5th century, according to tradition, by Pope St Gelasius I (492-496). This is consistent with the oldest of the roof tiles, which have the imprint of a taxation stamp for the Ostrogothic King and ruler of Italy Theodoric the Great (reigned 493-526). One of these ancient roof tiles is now used in the Basilica as a lectern.

Subsequent to the date of construction, S. Giovanni remains a mystery until the period of Pope Hadrian I (772-795), when the *Liber Pontificalis* states that the church underwent complete restoration. This being the earliest known textual reference. In 1191 Pope Celestine III ordered the restoration of S. Giovanni a Porta Latina when the campanile and portico were added.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, a Baroque ceiling and other Baroque features were added to the interior. At the end of the 18th century some of the ancient Roman columns re-used in the porch and nave were allegedly appropriated for San Giovanni in Laterano (an indignity also suffered by San Saba) and replaced with inferior ones, as the church and adjoining convent belonged to the Canons Regular of the Lateran.

French soldiers used it as a barracks after the invasion in 1798. After that, it was first turned into a storage facility for wool and then a tannery.

In 1905 the Annunciation sisters began a thorough restoration which lasted intermittently until the 1940's. This involved removing all Baroque embellishments in favor of the original Romanesque style. During the restoration in 1913-1915 Fr. Paul Styge and Mon. Joseph Wilpert discovered and restored a fresco above the high altar. Later, upon further renovations, they discovered an entire fresco cycle on the nave walls. In 1938 the Rosminian Fathers were given care of the Basilica and the building near-by. By 1941 the Fathers completely restored the fresco cycle.

### **Exterior:**

The exterior walls are all in brick. The entrance is on a courtyard with iron railings separating it from a quiet piazza just north of the former convent rebuilt by the Lateran canons in the 18th century, which separates the church from the road. This is now the central curia or headquarters of the Institute of Charity (IC) or Rosminians, founded by Antonio Rosmini.

In the small piazza in front of the Basilica is a 100 year old cedar and an 8th century well-head. The well-head, from the time of Pope Adrian I, has a double row circular design around its barrel and a Latin inscription completely around its crown:

+ IN NOMINE PAT[RES] ET FILII ET SPI[RITUS SANT]I

"In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost"

and a quote from the Prophet Isaiah:

+ OMN[E]S SITIE[NTES VENITE AD AQUAS]

"All you who are thirsty come to the water"

and the name of the stone-carver:

EGO STEFANUS

"I Stephen".

This wellhead is flanked by two small ancient marble Corinthian columns.

There is an entrance narthex, with a pitched tiled roof and five rather narrow arches with brick voussoirs and re-used ancient columns. They are mismatched, being green marble, grey granite, red granite and white marble. They have Ionic capitals, except the green one which has a debased Doric one. The white marble one is ribbed. Pieces of ancient sculpture have been used in the pavement. The main door is framed with a simple mosaic of red and green porphyry. In the narthex on the right is the original stone finial of San Giovanni in Oleo.

Above the narthex, the gable end wall of the nave is pierced by three arched windows in a row, with fretted marble screens. There is a glazed round window under the gable.

The campanile is from the 12th century restoration and was inserted into the narthex on the left hand side. It stands six stories above the narthex roof, each storey separated from the next by a dentillate cornice. The second storey displays an arched recess, the third one has two arches separated by a brick pier and the top three storeys have triple arches having marble columns and capitals.

From outside you can see that the triple apses are polygonal, which is an Eastern feature. The main apse has three large arched windows fenestrated with selenite (a kind of alabaster) rather than glass.

### **Interior:**

The church has a triple apse in the Eastern style.

The interior of the Basilica is divided into a nave and two aisles, divided by two rows of columns on which rest semi-circular arches. The two columns closest to the sanctuary are of white marble with deep fluting. The other columns are of various types of marble and granite, capped with a diverse collection of Ionic capitals. The central nave terminates with a half-hexagon apse. Each of the three sides of the apse opens with a large window filled with honey-coloured onyx. Each aisle terminated with an altar.

Occupying the ledge of the central window is a carved wooden crucifixion scene including Saint John the Evangelist and the Blessed Virgin Mary. In front of the altar is a mosaic pavement of a “cosmatesque” style. The geometric pattern of red and green porphyry is framed in white marble (as well as reused fragments of white marble with Latin lettering) is thought to have been created before the 12th century. Inserted in the front step of the altar, is the “title” of the Basilica, of ancient origin, discovered during the renovations of 1940:

TTT. S. IOANNIS ANTE PORTAM LA[TINAM]

The paintings on the attics and ceiling of the nave are by Paolo Gismondi. Over the great altar is *Saint John in the cauldron of boiling oil*; to the left is the *Vocation of James and John*; and to the right their mother *Salome* beseeching our Lord to place them sitting at his right and left hand, all by Filippo Lauri.

The frescoes in the central nave are of exceptional importance to the study of mediaeval art of Rome. The central nave is decorated with about 50 scenes representing the Old and New Testaments, from the creation of the world to the glorious apocalypse of the New Jerusalem. The frescoes are the work of several artists under the direction of one master. In the central apse are 12th century paintings of the 24 Elders of the Apocalypse and symbols of the Evangelists.

Over the altar of the left aisle is an ancient painting of *Saint Antony*. The paintings of the altar in the right aisle are by an unknown artist. On the walls of the sacristy are ovals with the portraits of several titulars; and over the altar is Saint John about to be cast into the cauldron, by Brughi

Fragments of ancient sculptures have been reused in the pavement of the sanctuary and the narthex, and some of the pieces can be interesting.

### **Artists and Architects:**

Filippo [Lauri](#) (1623-1694), Italian painter of the Baroque period  
 Paolo [Gismondi](#) aka Paolo Perugino (1612-1685), Italian painter

### **Burials:**

Luigi Cardinal [GUALTERIO](#), (1706-1761)  
 Buried in the left aisle chapel

**Location:**

Addr: Via di San Giovanni a Porta Latina 17, 00186 Rome

Coord: [41° 52' 37.9" N, 12° 30' 7.3" E](#)

**Info:**

**Opening Hours:** Usually open from 7:30-13:00 & 15:00-19:00.

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**Fax:** 0039 06 77400032

**Links:**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San\\_Giovanni\\_a\\_Porta\\_Latina](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Giovanni_a_Porta_Latina)

[http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/San\\_Giovanni\\_a\\_Porta\\_Latina](http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/San_Giovanni_a_Porta_Latina)

[http://www.info.roma.it/monumenti\\_dettaglio.asp?ID\\_schede=505](http://www.info.roma.it/monumenti_dettaglio.asp?ID_schede=505)

<http://www.060608.it/en/cultura-e-svago/luoghi-di-culto-di-interesse-storico-artistico/chiese-cattoliche/san-giovanni-a-porta-latina.html>

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:San\\_Giovanni\\_a\\_Porta\\_Latina\\_\(Rome\)](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:San_Giovanni_a_Porta_Latina_(Rome)) (pictures)

<http://images.google.com/images?hl=en&q=San%20Giovanni%20a%20Porta%20Latina&um=1&ie=UTF-8&sa=N&tab=wi> (more pictures)

**Ref:**

Donovan, Jeremiah; ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS; 1842