

Santa Croce in Gerusalemme



Santa Croce in Gerusalemme is a heavily restored palaeo-Christian parish and titular church at Piazza di Santa Croce in Gerusalemme 12 in the rione Esquilino, just south of the Porta Maggiore and about as far east as you can get within the walls of Rome. The dedication is to the True Cross, since the church was by tradition built to house the Relics of the Passion brought to Rome by St Helena the Empress.

History

Originally part of the Sessorian Palace, probably begun by Septimus Severus and completed by the mad emperor Elagabalus between the years 180 and 211. It was large complex of buildings, including the partially surviving Amphitheatrum Castrense to the west of the church. During the reign of the emperor Constantine, the palace was by tradition the Roman residence of his widowed mother St Helena. There are no contemporary documents describing the foundation of the church. The first reference is from the year 501, and reads *Hierusalem basilica Sessoriani palatii*. The entry in the *Liber Pontificalis* describes how the church was founded by Constantine. It is from later in the 6th century, when the name *Basilica Heleniana* was also in use. The present name of *Santa Croce* was given to the church in the Middle Ages.

In 326 St. Helena returned from Jerusalem with pieces of the True Cross and other relics of the Passion. Sometime in the 4th century the large *aula* or public assembly hall of the palace was appropriated for the purpose of displaying the relics, although most of the rest of the palace is known to have survived as an imperial residence until the early 6th century.

The church was restored by Pope Gregory II (715–731) and Pope Hadrian I (771–795). In 1003, Pope Sylvester II dropped dead while celebrating Mass in the church. According to legend, he was told in a dream that he would die if he ever said Mass in Jerusalem. He thought that meant the city, and forgot about the name of the church. In the Middle Ages it was believed that the bones in his tomb at the Lateran would rattle about when the reigning Pope was about to die.

In 1049, the church was given to the Benedictines of Monte Cassino. They moved to San Sebastiano

fuori le Mura in 1062, and the Canons Regular of San Frediano of Lucca were installed by Pope Alexander II.

The Canons of the church had it rebuilt in the Romanesque style during the pontificate of Lucius II (1144–1145). At this time the interior was gutting while keeping the exterior walls which survive, and re-building the nave with aisles under one large pitched and tiled roof. If the wall arcades were still open, they were blocked up then. A tall campanile was attached to the façade. It was at this time that the church was re-named *Santa Croce*. The floor level was raised, leaving the Chapel of Helena below ground level.

While the papacy was based in Avignon in the 14th century, the church was abandoned. In 1370, a few years before the papacy returned to Rome, Pope Urban V handed it over to the Carthusians. They restored the church, especially during the periods when Pedro Gonzales de Mendoza and Bernardino Lòpez de Carvajal were titulars of the church, respectively in 1484–1493 and 1495–1523.

In 1561, the Carthusians were transferred to Santa Maria degli Angeli, and Lombard Cistercians from the congregation of San Bernardo were installed. They seem then to have turned the amphitheatre into a garden, which survives. They also demolished the Carthusian monastery behind the church, and built their own between the church and amphitheatre.

Pope Benedict XIV had the church rebuilt in the Baroque style between 1741 and 1744. The architects were **Domenico Gregorini** and **Pietro Passalacqua**. They remodelled the church interior and added a spectacular entrance vestibule. Owing to the late period in which this work was done, it has been called the "Swan-Song of the Baroque at Rome". The monastery was rebuilt around a rectangular cloister, and a separate building was provided to the left of the church for symmetry in the façade. The roads that Pope Sixtus V had planned in the early 16th century, linking Santa Maria Maggiore, San Giovanni in Laterano and this church, were finally completed at this time.

A completely new chapel was built in the 1930's to display the relics, to the left of the church on the site of the former sacristy.

In May 2011, the Cistercian abbey linked to the basilica was suppressed by a decree of the Vatican Curia following the results of an apostolic visitation prompted by years of serious problems, including significant liturgical abuses.

Exterior

The late Baroque style of the façade **(1)** verges on the Rococo. It is of a single storey, and the central section is bowed so as to match the curved wall of the atrium. To each side there are short wings projecting diagonally. A set of six Composite pilasters, on very tall plinths, support an entablature which has an inscription on its frieze commemorating the restoration by Pope Benedict XIV. The central pair of pilasters has a segmental pediment above the entablature. The façade is crowned by a balustrade, but above the pediment is a trapezoidal screen with curving sides and top, and this bears a pair of sculpted angels venerating the wire cross finial. To each side on the balustrade there are three statues of saints, six in all - the four Evangelists and, on the outer corners, Helena and Constantine (the last is not recognized as a saint by the Catholic church, although he is venerated by the Orthodox).

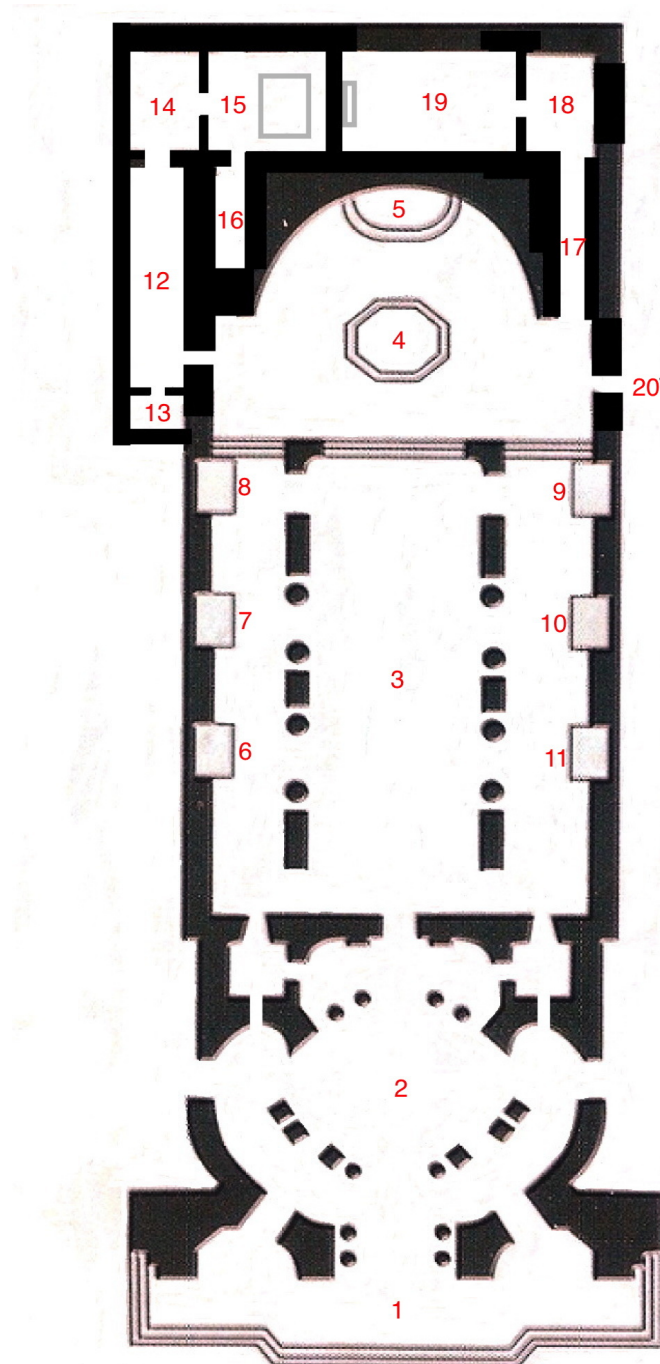
The main entrance is an enormous arched portal, with a pair of Ionic columns in the round. Above it is a window which at first sight is elliptical, but is actually a stretched circle. The main portal is flanked by a pair of side portals beyond the inner pair of pilasters, and these are rectangular. Above them is a pair of windows shaped like the floorplan of an apsidal basilica. The portals have wrought iron gates.

If you walk around the church, it is still possible to see the original Roman masonry in some places. You can also see the ruins of a medieval cloister adjacent to the church.

The 12th century campanile has three storeys now above the roofline (it used to have four) in unusually crisp brown brick. Each face of each storey used to have an arcade of four narrow arches, but many of these have been blocked and one face has an unusual one-handed clock (no minute

hand). The storeys are separated by projecting dentillate cornices, and coloured ceramic platters have been inset as decoration below these. The top storey facing the street has a statue of St Helena in a niche with a little gabled aedicule.

Plan



Interior

Atrium (2)

The oval atrium from 1741-1744 has a domed vault and an ambulatory. The shape of this atrium leaves room for the surviving mediaeval campanile, which is attached to the actual frontage of the church on the right hand. Its color scheme was reconstructed recently. The architects were clearly influenced by Borromini.

By the entrance is the funerary inscription of Pope Benedict VII (974–983). It's a metric inscription in seventeen verses, inserted into the wall. An interesting piece of information in it is that he

founded a monastery and also gathered monks for it.

Nave (3)

The short nave has wide side aisles, with three side altars in niches on each side. The nave and aisles are separated by six enormous rectangular Baroque pillars connected by trabeations (there are no arcades), not including the piers of the triumphal arch. The trabeations between the pillars are supported by pairs of ancient pink granite Corinthian columns from Aswan in Egypt. There are eight of these in total, and they are the only parts of the ancient church which are still visible. Six other columns are allegedly entombed inside the pillars. The granite columns are spolia, and may have been taken for the palace from an earlier building. The hardness of the stone, and the distance it had to be transported, made it immensely prestigious in ancient Rome. The pilasters are from the 18th century rebuilding.

The ceiling is a false vault, since it is made of wood. It is decorated with a painting of *Our Lady Presenting St Helena and Constantine to the Trinity*, executed by **Corrado Giaquinto** in 1744. The insertion of this wooden ceiling in the 18th century fortuitously preserved the upper parts of the 12th century fresco cycles that used to decorate the nave walls. These were discovered completely by accident by workmen surveying the state of the roof in 1913, but had to wait until 1968 for proper examination and conservation. Above the triumphal arch are remnants of an ornate depiction of the Lamb of God, whereas the nave walls have lines of medallions depicting Old Testament characters. The left hand nave wall is thought to be executed by Roman painters, and the right hand one by Venetians; the hands of two artists are distinguishable in the latter. None of any of this is visible from the body of the church.

The marble holy water stoups have carved fishes swimming about in them,

The Cosmatesque pavement is from the 12th century and extensively restored in 1933.

Sanctuary and Apse

The apse (5) has a series of 15th century frescoes of the history of the recovery of the True Cross derived from the Golden Legend of Jacopo da Varazze (13th c.). From left to right the frescoes represent: *Helena discovers three crosses; Helena identifies the right one by means of a miraculous cure; the True Cross is venerated in triumph*; (shown with Cardinal Mendoza, the Titular Cardinal of the Basilica) and *its return to Jerusalem after being captured by the Persian Sassanid Empire*. The frescoes are attributed to **Antoniazio Romano**, working at the end of the 15th century.

Above this fresco cycle is a depiction *Christ in Glory*, seated on the clouds within a mandorla. Its quality is such that it used to be ascribed to Giotto.

In the center of the apse, against the wall, is the tomb of Cardinal Quiñones, who died in 1536. This is an unusual place for a tomb, and it is even more strange that a tabernacle for the Blessed Sacrament is incorporated in the tomb. It was designed by **Jacopo Sansovino**. The tabernacle is in a little propylaeum with porphyry columns, and this is flanked by statues of *SS Peter and Paul*. To the left of Cardinal Quiñones tomb is that of Cardinal Lopez de Carvajal.

The ciborium (4) over the high altar is from the 18th century. Four Ionic columns in pavonazzetto marble are on the corners of a square, and support curved strips of marble forming open segmental pediments. These in turn support a large, ornate gilded bronze crown. Below the altar is a green basalt urn, containing the relics of Sts Caesarius and Anastasius.

The presbyterium (sanctuary) has a very unusual transverse roof which has a single pitch, sloping down to the external semi-circular apse. The painting in the vault above the high altar is another work by **Corrado Giaquinto**, the *Apparition of the Cross on the Day of Judgement*.

Side altars

The side altars will be described clockwise, from the left rear of the church.

The near altar on the left (6) is dedicated to St Thomas the Apostle, and the altarpiece by **Giuseppe Passeri** shows him inserting his finger in Christ's side. The finger concerned is one of the holy

relics.

The central altar on the left (7) is dedicated to the Crucifix. The 15th century wooden Crucifix is by an unknown artist, probably belonging to the school of Donatello

On the left hand side, the far altar (8) is dedicated to Pope St Sylvester with an altarpiece, *Pope St. Sylvester shows Constantine the effigy of the Apostles Saints Peter and Paul*, is an oil painting by **Luigi Garzi**.

The third altar on the right (9) has an altarpiece by **Giovanni Battista Vanni** showing *The Dream of the Mother of Saint Robert of Molesme*. St. Robert was one of the Three Founders of the Cistercian Order.

The middle altar on the right (10) is dedicated to St Bernard, and has an altarpiece by **Carlo Maratta**, *St. Bernardo induce the antipope Vittore IV to humiliate himself to Innocent II*.

The first altar on the right (11) is dedicated to St Caesarius, and the altarpiece is by **Giuseppe Bonatti**.

The Chapel of St Helena (18)

Behind the apse on the right was a room which is now the Chapel of Helena, and this was probably the most sacred area of the palace complex. By tradition it was Helena's private parlor. It is entered via a shallow flight of stairs at (17) the end of the right hand aisle, which features a long epigraph in Spanish tilework of the 16th century describing the 15th century rediscovery of some of the holy relics. The pavement here is that of the original floor level of the palace, almost two meters below the present level of the basilica.

The room was decorated with mosaics by Emperor Valentinian III (425-455), his mother Galla Placidia and his sister Honoria. No trace of these remain. The vault was redecorated by **Baldassare Peruzzi** in the 16th century with a mosaic of Christ blessing, flanked by the Evangelists. On the sides are four scenes from the Crucifixion, and also featured are SS Peter and Paul, St Sylvester, St Helen and Cardinal Carvajal. Frescoes of the finding of the True Cross by **Cristoforo Roncalli**, painted in 1590, can be seen below the mosaic.

The statue of St Helena is a copy of the Vatican Juno. The image of the pagan goddess has been adapted through the addition of symbols of the Passion of Christ.

By tradition the floor of the chapel of St Helena was packed with soil brought as ballast by ships from the Holy Land. This may have made the floor into a sacramental. An odd regulation prohibiting women entering the chapel survived the centuries to be noted as still in force in the late 19th century.

The Chapel of the Pietà also known as the Gregorian Chapel (19)

The chapel was built between 1495 and 1520. It was ordered by Cardinal López de Carvajal, titular of the church, as a mirror image of the Chapel of St Helena which it is joined to. Above the altar is a bas-relief in white marble on black, depicting the *Pietà*. It is the work of an unknown master of the 17th century.

The *Vision of St Gregory* was painted on the vault in 1630 by **Girolamo Nanni** and **Francesco Nappi**. The subject is the liberation of souls from Purgatory through the prayers of the faithful and the intercession of saints. St Gregory the Great, in papal robes, and St Bernard of Clairvaux, with his Abbot's mitre, can be seen kneeling in the middle section. The other saints are St Benedict of Nursia, standing behind St Gregory, and St Robert of Molesme, standing behind St Bernard. Above them are Apostles and St John the Baptist, and the Blessed Virgin Mary. At the top is the Holy Trinity, to whom their prayers are directed.

The altar has a special privilege. According to the Decree on Purgatory of 1536, passed by the Council of Trent, the freeing of souls from Purgatory is linked to the Eucharist. If the Eucharist is celebrated at certain altar, including this one and the high altar at San Gregorio al Celio, the soul is

granted a plenary indulgence and the personal intercession of St Gregory.

To the left is the monument of Cardinal Gerolamo Souchier (1571), and to the right, that of Pompeo Cornazzano, bishop of Parma (1647). Outside the iron grille, to the right is the sepulcher of Cardinal Gioacchino Besozzi (1755), the work of **Innocenzo Spinazzi**. Beyond that is the memorial stone of Attilio Pietrasanta, bishop of Vigevano (1683), and lastly, a pedestal with an epigraph to the Empress St. Helena. To the right is the memorial stone of the Abbot Ilarione Rancati (1663). On the door of the Chapel of St. Helena, one sees the coat of arms of Cardinal Carvajal

The Passion Relics were originally kept in a chapel below the church. You can reach it via the ramp to the left of the sanctuary. Look for the light switch (which glows red) to light up the 15th century mosaic in the vault.

The Chapel of the Passion Relics (15)

The Passion Relics were transferred to a new chapel converted from the old Sacristy of the Basilica according to the plan by the architect **Florestano Di Fausto**. This made it much easier for the faithful to venerate them. You will find the entrance to the chapel near the end of the left aisle. A flight of steps (12) leads you to the Vestibule (14). Going up on the steps, you pass the stations of the Cross (in 14 bronze works by **Giovanni Nicolini**) and quotations from the New Testament and from the Liturgy of the Good Friday. Finally, from the Vestibule, beyond a rood-screen, you see the Relics, kept in six precious shrines, wholly or partly realized during the 19th century in order to replace the old ones forfeited in 1798 by the Roman Republic. The Chapel is made of polychrome marbles, enriched by the artistic stained glass windows and the mosaics planned by **Corrado Mezzana**. It was opened in 1930 and finished in 1952. Inside there is a leaflet in several languages which explains what you will see. You may go round the altar to see the relics more clearly. The relics kept here are:

- Two thorns from the crown of thorns. The plant they come from has not been identified. They are consistent with other thorn relics.
- A nail from the Crucifixion. The nail is of Roman type. There are many churches where such nails are venerated, since filings were supposedly taken from the true nails and imbedded in copies to make relics of a lower class. Some of these were presented as true nails from the Crucifixion rather than copies, but it is safe to say that the one kept here is among those most likely to be one of the true nails.
- The *Titulus Crucis*, part of the Title of the Cross bearing the words "Jesus of Nazareth, King...". It was found on 1 February 1492, built into the wall of the basilica behind a mosaic that was being repaired. The brick which covered it was inscribed "TITULUS CRUCIS" - it can be seen in the outer relic chapel, together with a reconstruction of the whole Title. The relic was unknown at the time, but there are sources indicating that such a relic was venerated in the courtyard on Calvary in Jerusalem. The pilgrim Aetheria (c. 385) mentions this, as does the pilgrim Antonius of Piacenza two centuries later. St Helena is said to have divided the relic into three parts, giving one to Constantine, keeping one in Jerusalem and sending the last to Rome. The relic was allegedly hidden in the wall c. 455, when the clergy needed to protect it from the attacking Visigoths. It is unknown why it was left there, and forgotten, until 1492, but it might simply be because the cleric responsible for hiding it was killed or displaced during the sack of the city. The workmen found a lead coffer sealed by Cardinal Gerardus, later Pope Lucius II. It is said to have been in quite good condition at the time, but Bosio wrote 60 or 70 years later that the red paint on the letters had faded and that worms had eaten away the words 'Jesus' and 'Judaeorum'. The words are cut from the right to the left, leading some scholars to believe they were cut by a Hebrew used to writing in that direction. It does seem unlikely that a medieval forger would do such a thing.
- Splinters of the True Cross.
- Part of the good thief's cross

- Fragments from the Pillar of the Scourging (the original pillar is traditionally at Santa Prassede), Christ's Tomb and his Crib. These are in one reliquary.
- The finger that St Thomas placed in Christ's side.

On the rood-screen of the Chapel of the Relics is the *Veronica*, a copy of one of the most worshiped icons in Russia. It is the true icon of Christ and was painted by the iconographer **Archimandrite Zenone** and given to the Basilica in 2006. There is also displayed a copy of the Shroud of Turin, useful because the original is rarely on display.

Tomb of Antonietta Meo (17)

At the foot of the rising corridor leading to the chapel is the tomb of Antonietta Meo, a six-year-old Roman girl who died of cancer in 1937 after displaying an amazingly mature life of prayer. The process hopefully leading to her canonization is ongoing.

Museum (20)

The entrance to the museum is from the right side of the sanctuary. Among the objects there is the “Shrine of Gregory the Great”, a famous reliquary, shaped as a triptych with a silver frame. There are some 200 relics in it, and in the center is a 13th or 14th century mosaic of the *Imago pietatis*, the suffering Christ. Ten enamels were added to the silver frame, and seven of these are preserved. The work was probably commissioned by Raimondo del Balzo, who went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1380, and was donated to the church in 1386. A few years later, it was said that the image of Christ on the reliquary was the same as that seen by Pope St Gregory the Great in a vision. The inscription «Fuit Sancti Gregorii Magni Papae» was probably added to the tympanum of the reliquary at this time. Then, an inscription was engraved in 1495 by Israel van Meckenem below the image, stating that the image is a copy of the one St Gregory had painted after his vision. There is no mention of such a vision in the biographies of St Gregory, and it is thought that it is a myth that originated in this church.

Liturgical notes:

The church was included in the pilgrims' itinerary of Roman churches, and later became a Jubilee basilica. St Philip Neri included it in his list of seven churches that should be visited by pilgrims.

It is the station church on the fourth Sunday of Lent, when the relics are exposed for veneration, and on Good Friday when Mass is preceded by a papal procession from the Lateran.

Other feasts kept with great solemnity at this church are the Discovery of the Cross on 3 May and the Exaltation of the Cross on 14 September.

Artists & Architects

Antoniazzo [Romano](#) (1430-1510), Italian Early Renaissance painter
 Archimandrite [Zenon](#) (b. 1953), Ukrainian iconographer
 Baldassare Tommaso [Peruzzi](#) (1481-1536), Italian painter and architect from Siena
 Carlo [Maratta](#) (1625-1713), Italian Late Baroque Classical painter
 Corrado [Giaquinto](#) (1703-1765), Italian painter of the Rococo period (also see [here](#))
 Corrado [Mezzana](#) (1890-1952), Italian painter and mosaic designer
 Cristoforo [Roncalli](#) [aka *Il Pomerancio*] (1552-1626), Italian Mannerist painter
 Domenico [Gregorini](#) (1692-1777), Italian architect
 Florestano [di Fausto](#) (1890-1965), Italian architect
 Francesco [Nappi](#) (1565-1630), Italian Mannerist painter from Milan
 Francesco Zucchi (1526-1622), Italian painter, sculptor
 Giotto [di Bondone](#) († 1337), Italian painter and architect
 Giovanni Battista [Vanni](#) (1599-1660), Italian painter and engraver of the Baroque period
 Giovanni [Nicolini](#) (1872-1956), Italian sculptor
 Girolamo [Nanni](#) [aka *il Poco e Buono*] (17th cent), Italian painter of the Baroque period
 Giuseppe [Bonatti](#) (Bonatti) [aka *Giovannino del Pio*] (1635-1681), Italian painter of the Baroque period
 Giuseppe [Passeri](#) (1654-1714), Italian painter of the Baroque period
 Innocenzo [Spinazzi](#) (1726-1798), Italian sculptor of the Rococo period
 Jacopo [Sansovino](#) (1486-1570), Italian sculptor and architect

Luigi [Garzi](#) (1638-1721), Italian painter of the Baroque period
Pietro [Passalacqua](#) (1690-1748), Italian architect of the late Baroque period

Burials:

Sts Caesarius and Anastasius

Pope [Benedict VII](#) (d.983)

Buried in the wall of the nave on the right side of the entrance

Bernardino Cardinal [LÓPEZ DE CARVAJAL](#), (1456-1523) [also see [here](#)]

Guillén-Ramón Cardinal de [VICH Y DE VALTERRA](#), (?-1525)

Francisco de los Ángeles Cardinal [QUINONES](#), O.F.M., (1475-1540) [also see [here](#)]

Buried in a tomb that he had built for himself

Jérôme Cardinal [SOUCHIER](#), O.Cist. (1508-1571) [also see [here](#)]

Giuseppe Cardinal [FIRRAO](#), (1670-1744) [also see [here](#)]

Buried in front of the main altar in the sepulchre that he had built.

Gioacchino Cardinal [BESOZZI](#), O.Cist., (1679-1755)

Luca Melchior Cardinal [TEMPI](#), (1688-1762)

Tombstone provided by his nephew, Marquis Luigi Tempi.

Ludovico Cardinal [VALENTI](#), (1695-1763) [also see [here](#)]

His heart was deposited in the church of S. Andrea delle Fratte, under a marble slab with his cardinalial arms, near its main entrance

Antonio Eugenio Cardinal [VISCONTI](#), (1713-1788) [also see [here](#)]

Antonio Maria Cardinal [CAGIANO DE AZEVEDO](#), (1797-1867) [also see [here](#)]

Abbot Ilarione [Rancati](#) (1594-1663)

Founder of the Sessoriana Library

Attilio Pietrasanta, bishop of Vigevano (1683)

Pompeo Cornazzano, bishop of Parma (1647)

Edmondo [Bernardini](#) (1879-1955)

77th abbot General of the Cistercian Order

[Antonietta Meo](#)

Access

Open daily 08:00 – 19:00

Location:

Address: Piazza di Santa Croce in Gerusalemme 12

Coord: [41°53'17.7"N 12°30'56.9"E](#)

Links and References:

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[English Wiki page](#)

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[Basilica Web page](#)

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