

San Lorenzo in Palatio ad Sancta Sanctorum and Scala Santa



San Lorenzo in Palatio ad Sancta Sanctorum is a devotional church in an edifice having a 13th century core in a mainly 16th century structure. Here is the famous **Scala Santa** or "Holy Staircase". The entire complex is an extraterritorial property of the Vatican City, which means that the freehold remains with the Republic of Italy but all government and administrative functions pertain to the Vatican.

The building contains several discrete elements:

- Santuario Papale della Scala Santa,
- Sancta Sanctorum,
- San Lorenzo in Palatio,
- Cappella del Crocifisso,
- Oratorio di San Silvestro
- Oratorio del Santissimo Sacramento,
- Passionist convent.

The Passionists are in charge of the sanctuary and church.

History

Sancta Sanctorum

The chapel now known as the Sancta Sanctorum was the original private papal chapel of the mediaeval Lateran Palace, and as such was the predecessor of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City.

The popes made the Lateran their residence in the early 4th century as soon as the emperor Constantine had built the basilica, but the first reference to a private palace chapel dedicated to St Lawrence is in the entry in the Liber Pontificalis for Pope Stephen III (768-72). Pope Gregory IV (827-44) is recorded as having refitted the papal apartment next to the chapel. The entry for Pope Leo III (795-816) shows the chapel becoming a major store of relics. It describes a chest of cypress wood (*arca cypressina*) being kept here, containing "many precious relics" used in liturgical processions. The famous full-length icon of Christ Santissimo Salvatore *acheropita* was one of the treasures, first mentioned in the reign of Pope Stephen II (752-7) but probably executed in the 5th century. The name *acheropita* is from the Greek *acheiropoieta*, meaning "made without hands" because its legend alleges that St Luke began painting it and an angel finished it for him.

The name of the chapel became the *Sancta Sanctorum* in the early 13th century because of these relics. Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) provided bronze reliquaries for the heads of SS Peter and Paul which were kept here then (they are now in the basilica), and also a silver-gilt covering for the *Acheropita* icon. The next pope, Honorius III, executed a major restoration of the chapel. In 1277, during the reign of Pope Nicholas III, there was a major earthquake in Rome which seriously damaged the palace including the chapel. As a result, the pope ordered it rebuilt "from the ground" and decorated with "beautiful pictures". The result is the chapel as we now have it. The consecration was in 1279.

The popes moved to Avignon in France in 1309, then part of Papal territory, and stayed there until 1377. The Avignon Captivity was a disaster for the papacy, for the city of Rome and for the Lateran Palace. When the popes returned, they never moved back in and eventually settled at the Vatican Palace which was rebuilt in 1447.

The *Sancta Sanctorum* fell into obscurity in the latter half of the 20th century. Guidebooks described it as "never open". A much-needed restoration was begun in 1995, when it was decided to sacrifice the 17th century paintings in order to uncover the 13th century frescoes underneath. Since this has been finished, the chapel has been open to guided tours.

Scala Santa

The tradition attached to the Scala Santa is that the staircase used to be the access to the Praetorium in Jerusalem, which was the residence of Pontius Pilate as the governor of Judaea at the time of Christ's crucifixion. So Christ had to descend these stairs as he went from his condemnation by Pilate to Golgotha, shedding blood as he did so. The alleged stains of his blood are venerated on the second, eleventh and twenty-eighth steps. The twenty-eight steps were salvaged by St Helena, and brought to Rome when her son the emperor Constantine was having the neighboring basilica built. They were then installed at the new palace of the popes. The Liber Pontificalis entry for Pope Sergius II (844-7) mentions that he was the one who had the staircase installed. The first unambiguous reference to the legend seems to be in a papal bull of Pope Paschal II (1099-1118).

After the popes returned to Rome in the 15th century, the old Lateran Palace was apparently left mostly derelict until Pope Sixtus V ordered it to be rebuilt in 1586. **Domenico Fontana** was the architect, and the process was carried out ruthlessly. The entire mediaeval complex was demolished, and replaced with the present smaller palace around its square courtyard north of the basilica. However, the pope ordered two architectural units preserved. One was the apse of the Triclinium Leoninum, and the other was the *Sancta Sanctorum*. Further, he ordered the Scala Santa to be salvaged and re-erected.

Fontana demolished everything around the *Sancta Sanctorum*, leaving it as the top storey of an isolated two-storey fragment. In front of it he built five parallel cross-vaulted staircases ascending from a longitudinal loggia, and installed the steps of the Scala Santa in the middle one. Flanking the *Sancta Sanctorum* he built two chapels, one on the right dedicated to St Lawrence (the present church), and one on

the left which replaced an old oratory dedicated to Pope St Sylvester. The loggia was fronted by the present formal façade, which originally had five open arched portals (four were blocked up in the 19th century).

The walls and vaults of the interior were frescoed by a team of artists led by **Cesare Nebbia** and **Giovanni Guerra**; the project included the overpainting of the 13th century frescoes in the Sancta Sanctorum. **Nebbia** was responsible for overall design, as many drawings by him survive. The team was described by Giovanni Baglione writing in 1642 as including **Giovanni Baglione**, **Paul Brill**, **Cesare Conti**, **Vincenzo Conti** (these two were brothers), **Baldassare Croce**, **Ferraù Fenzone**, **Paolo Guidotti**, **Andrea Lilio**, **Paris Nogari**, **Prospero Orsi**, **Giovanni Battista Pozzo**, **Giovanni Battista Ricci**, **Ventura Salimbeni**, **Antonio Scalvati**, **Giacomo Stella**, **Cesare Torelli** and **Antonio Viviani**. However which artist did which bit is not recorded, and so attributions have to be on stylistic grounds. This work was completed by 1589, taking only two years. The shrine was dedicated in that year. The frescoes in the staircase top landing were completed in the following year.

A description has been left of the transfer of the staircase. Each marble step was individually removed from its location in the old entrance stairway of the palace, and carried in procession to the new location. To make work easier and so that the sacred stairs did not have to be stashed temporarily, Fontana had the top step put at the bottom of the new staircase and the descending steps put in ascending order, so that the present arrangement is back to front compared to what it used to be.

The shrine became very popular for pilgrims when St Philip Neri included it in the itinerary of the Seven Churches devotion that he helped to propagate, as part of the pilgrim visit to San Giovanni in Laterano.

San Lorenzo in Palatio

After the popes returned to Rome in the 15th century, Pope Sixtus V ordered mediaeval complex to be rebuilt in 1586. Domenico Fontana was the architect. However, the pope ordered the Sancta Sanctorum be preserved. Fontana demolished everything around the Sancta Sanctorum, leaving it as the top storey of an isolated two-storey fragment. Flanking the Sancta Sanctorum he built two chapels, one on the right dedicated to St Lawrence (the present church), and one on the left which replaced an old oratory dedicated to Pope St Sylvester.

In the mid 19th century, when Pope Pius IX ordered a major restoration which involved the building of a Passionist convent. The Passionists have been in charge ever since they moved in in 1853, taking over the Oratorio di San Silvestro as their choir chapel.

The campaign for a large church was taken up again by the Passionists in 1905. The Passionists then built a corridor linking their choir chapel with the church, running behind the Sancta Sanctorum. The brethren contented themselves with a new Oratorio del Crocifisso behind the Sancta Sanctorum, accessed by the corridor just mentioned.

The church itself, the former Oratorio di San Lorenzo, was restored in 2007 with funds from the Getty Foundation.

Oratorio del Santissimo Sacramento

An oratory for the Lateran Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament (Arciconfraternita Lateranenese del Santissimo Sacramento) was established in the premises in 1661. In 1735 the confraternity began to fit out a new oratory, on the ground to the right hand side of the main edifice and below the Oratorio di San Lorenzo. The patrons and architect were Duke Giuseppe Sforza Cesarini and Prince Filippo Sforza Cesarini Savelli, and work was completed in 1765. The headquarters of the confraternity has been here ever since, despite fires damaging the oratory in 1778 and 1857.

Exterior

The flat-roofed two-storey façade by **Domenico Fontana** is approached by a wide set of stairs with seven steps. The storeys are of approximately equal height. The first storey has five arches with Doric impostes and molded archivolt, which used to open onto the loggia. In between the arches are four Doric pilasters on high plinths and supporting a separating entablature with triglyphs on its frieze. Two pairs of conjoined pilasters occupy the corners of this storey.

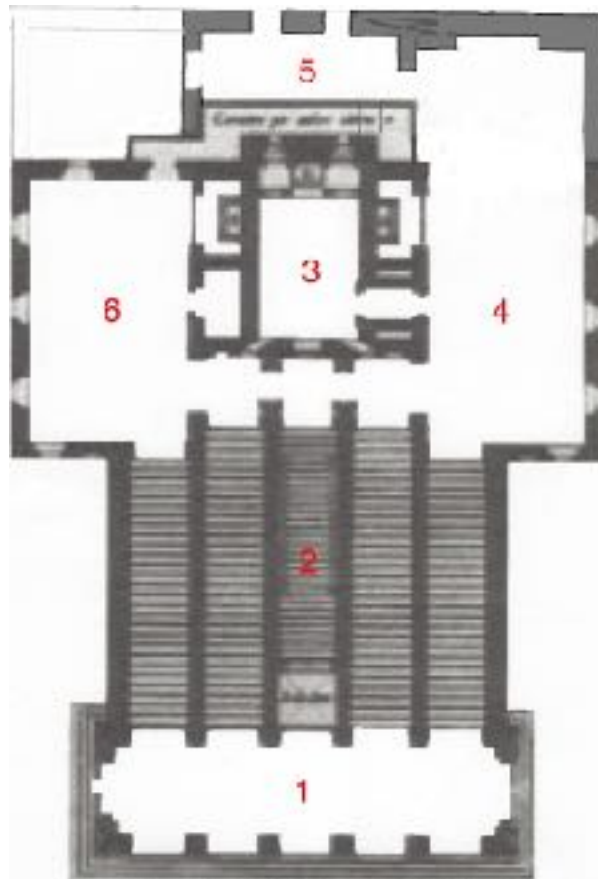
The 19th century blocking of the four side arches is not attractive. The central arch is left open with a railing gate, but the two inner side ones now have doorways with molded doorcases and floating cornices over a pair of inscriptions together commemorating the restoration in 1853. The arch impostes are joined by matching string-courses to create lunette windows.

The second storey has a matching set of pilasters, except that these are Ionic. They support a roofline entablature with a frieze inscription reading: *Sixtus V fecit, sanctoriq[ue] loco Scalam Sanctam posuit* ("Sixtus V did this, and put the Holy Staircase in a holier place"). In between the pilasters are five rectangular windows which light a chamber above the vestibule which pertains to the convent. These have raised pediments which are either triangular or segmental, two of the former and three of the latter.

The fabric is rendered in pale pink, with architectural details in white.

To the right of the façade is a small flight of steps leading to a patio. There's a doorway at the far end, which is the entrance to the Oratorio di Santissimo Sacramento.

Plan



Interior

On entering, you will find yourself in an atrium with five parallel staircases in front of you. The holy one is in the middle. At the top is a landing with the entrance to the Sancta Sanctorum straight ahead, and that of the church to the right. To the left up there is the choir chapel of San Silvestro, which is not usually visitable.

Overview of frescoes

Most of the fresco work which covers all the walls and vaults of the main and two inner side staircases belongs to the enormous decorative project executed by a talented team of artists headed by **Cesare Nebbia** and **Giovanni Guerra**, and completed in 1589. It focuses on the events of the Passion of Christ, and on the events prefiguring it in the Old Testament.

The atrium vault frescoes are not really part of the scheme, which begins at the bottom of the Scala Santa with a pictorial presentation of the Passion of Christ. The landing at the top has three large frescoes of the *Crucifixion*, *Resurrection* and *Ascension* as the culmination of this.

The other wall frescoes in the landing belong to the Old Testament cycles, which comprise Genesis in the left hand inner side staircase and Exodus in the right hand one. The narrative order of these is top to bottom.

The outer side staircases are not figuratively frescoed, but contain heraldry.

Atrium (1)

The present atrium used to be an open loggia until it was walled up in a restoration ordered by Pope Pius IX, which was finished in 1856. It was provided with a set of rather academic large white marble devotional figurative sculptures in the process.

The atrium's vault has frescoed tondi by **Paris Nogari**, featuring *Christ* in the center and *Our Lady* and *St John the Baptist* on either side. The end tondi have the heraldry of Pope Sixtus, who was of the Peretti family. These tondi are surrounded by angels holding Instruments of the Passion, as well as symbols associated with it.

The Scala Santa itself is flanked by a pair of matching sculptures showing *The Kiss of Judas* to the right, and *Ecce Homo* (Christ and Pilate) to the left. These are by **Ignazio Jacometti**. Further to the left is a *Pietà* by **Oskar Sosnowski**, and then *Christ Tied to the Column of Flagellation* by **Giosuè Meli** with *Pope Pius IX at Prayer* by **Sosnowski**. To the right is *Christ in Gethsemane* by **Giuseppe Sartorio**.

Scala Santa (2)

The marble stairs of the Scala Santa are now protected with wooden boards, which have slits on the risers so that you can see the actual stone. On the second, eleventh and twenty-eighth steps are little peep-holes intended to show rust stains on the marble traditionally regarded as having been caused by Christ's blood.

The staircase is in one flight, and is shorter than those on either side. As a result, there is a short square entrance bay before the start of the ascent. The walls and vault of the staircase are decorated with frescoes in seven separate registers including the first one in the entrance bay. The other six have four scenes each, starting with one on the right hand wall, two on the barrel vault and one on the left hand wall. So, as you go up look to the right, then at the vault and then to the left.

The entrance bay has a cross-vault depicting *The Four Evangelists* by **Prospero Orsi**. This vault is flanked by a pair of archivolt, having matching stucco decorations including figures of the Four Major Prophets (*Isaiah*, *Jeremiah*, *Ezekiel* and *Daniel*). The large side wall frescoes forming the first register of the fresco cycle are *The Washing of the Feet* by **Cesare Nebbia** and

The Last Supper by **Nebbia** and **Angelo da Orvieto**.

Subsidiary scenes are

Judas Accepts Thirty Pieces of Silver by **Andrea Lilio**, and
Christ Predicts Peter's Denial by **Paris Nogari**.

Now starts the staircase. The second register has:

Christ and the Apostles on the Way to Gethsemane by **Nogari**,
The Agony in the Garden by **Nogari**,
Christ Rebukes the Sleeping Apostles by **Andrea Lilio** or **Avanzino Nucci** and
The Angel Comforts Christ in the Garden by **Nogari** or **Ercole Ruggiero**.

The third register has:

Christ Announces the Arrival of His Captors by **Lilio**,
The Kiss of Judas by **Orsi**,
St Peter Cuts Off the Ear of Malchus by **Giovanni Baglione** and
The Arrest of Christ by **Antonio Viviani** and **Lilio** from a drawing by **Nebbia**.

The fourth register is by **Giovanni Battista Ricci**. It has:

Christ Brought Before the High Priest,
Christ Before Ananias,
Christ Being Struck and
Caiaphas Tearing his Clothes.

The fifth register has:

Christ Mocked By the Sanbedrin, by **Ricci**,
The Denial of Peter by **Baglione**,
Christ Before Pilate by **Ricci** and
Judas Returns His Payment by **Baldassare Croce**.

The sixth register has:

Pilate Asks the Crowd about Christ by **Ricci**,
Herod Dresses Christ in Purple by **Ricci** (?),
Pilate's Wife Warns Him about Christ by **Ricci**,
The Flagellation by **Ferraù Fenzone** and **Ventura Salimbeni** and
The Crowning With Thorns by **Nebbia**.

The seventh register has:

Ecce Homo by **Nebbia**,
Christ Meets the Women on the Way to Calvary by **Nebbia**,
Christ is Stripped of His Clothes by **Ricci** and
The Erection of the Cross by **Fenzone**.

The top of the staircase ends with depictions of two prophets and Instruments of the Passion by **Orsi**.

Top landing

The top of the staircase faces a *Crucifixion* by **Nebbia**, which is visible to you all the way up. It is over a barred window for viewing the Scala Sanctorum. To the left is *The Resurrection* by **Giacomo Stella** and **Paul Brill**, and to the right is *The Ascension* by **Nebbia**. The ceiling is vaulted with three little domes, the central one over the Crucifixion depicting *God the Eternal Father*.

Genesis cycle

The Old Testament cycle of frescoes featuring scenes from the Book of Genesis starts at the top of the near left hand side staircase. Here are:

- The Creation of Eve by **Stella**, and
- The Sacrifice of Isaac by **Viviani** and **Brill**, or **Ricci**.

The staircase itself has the following scenes:

- The Trees of Life and Knowledge of Good and Evil* by **Brill** and **Giovanni Guerra**,
- The Original Sin* by **Salimbeni**,
- The Expulsion from Paradise* by **Brill** and **Paolo Guidotti**,
- The Sacrifices of Cain and Abel* by **Salimbeni**, **Croce** or **Fenzone**,
- The Killing of Cain* by **Abel** by **Fenzone**,
- The Construction of Noah's Ark* by **Croce**,
- The Flood* by **Brill**,
- God's Covenant with Noah in the Rainbow* by **Croce**,
- The Drunkenness of Noah* by **Brill** and **Stella**,
- Abraham and Isaac Going to the Sacrifice* by **Brill** and **Viviani**,
- Esau Sells His Birthright* by **Orsi**,
- Jacob's Ladder* by **Viviani**,
- Jacob's Sacrifice at Bethel* by **Antonio da Orvieto**,
- Jacob Wrestles with an Angel* by **Viviani**,
- Joseph Thrown into the Pit* by **Viviani**,
- The Finding of Moses in the Rushes* by **Baglione**,
- The Staff of Moses Turns into a Serpent* by **Lilio**, and
- The Staff of Moses as a Serpent Eats Those of the Magicians* by **Lilio**.

Exodus cycle

The corresponding near right hand side staircase continues the storyline from the Book of Exodus, which carries on into the time of the Kings. In the landing at the top are:

- The Institution of the Passover* by **Nogari** or **Conti** and
- The Bronze Serpent* by **Fenzoni**.

In the staircase are:

- The Crossing of the Red Sea* by **Guidotti**,
- The Pillar of Fire Protecting the People* by **Orsi**,
- The Drowning of the Egyptians* by **Orsi**,
- Moses Makes the Bitter Water Sweet* by **Guidotti**,
- Moses Brings Water from the Rock* by **Lilio**,
- The Battle of Joshua with the Amalekites* by **Stella**,
- The Ark of the Covenant* by **Croce**,
- The Seven-Branched Candlestick* by **Stella** (?),
- Aaron With the Blood of the Sacrifice* by **Croce**,
- Moses Consecrates Aaron and his Sons as Priests* by **Croce**,
- The Offering of Reconciliation by Moses* by **Croce**,
- Moses with the Fruits of Canaan* by **Nogari**,
- Gideon Conquers the Midianites* by **Stella**,
- Samson Kills the Lion* by **Guidotti** and **Girolamo Nanni**,
- Samson Uprooting the Gates of Gaza* by **Stella** and **Brill**,
- Samson Demolishes the Temple of Dagon* by **Stella**,

David Soothes Saul with the Harp by Stella,
David and Goliath by Orsi,
Jonah Thrown into the Sea by Brill and
Jonah Returned to the Land by the Whale by Brill.

Sancta Sanctorum (3)

The Sancta Sanctorum is a precious mediaeval survival, and well worth the cost of the guided tour that you will need to join to see it. The 13th century fresco work is spectacular, and the recent restoration has restored the original bright colors.

The present structure is a rebuilding of the original 8th century structure ordered by Pope Nicholas III and completed in 1279. The original entrance is the one from the church, through the bronze doors. To the left of anyone entering through these is an inscription reading *Magister Cosmatus fecit hoc opus*, indicating that the Cosmati family was in charge of the project.

The nave is on a square plan, seven meters on each side and an adjacent rectangular apse measuring 2.73 by 5.85 meters.

The nave walls have three horizontal registers each. Apart from the apse end, the lower walls are clad in re-used ancient marble revetting slabs of two kinds of marble, one white with dark grey veins and one light grey with white streaks.

Above in each of all four walls is the second register, an identical arcade of seven Gothic arches with ogee tops, separated by twisted columns with in two styles. Some are singly twisted (barley-sugar or Solomonic), while others are also molded in their twists (more Gothic). These arches contain frescoes of saints, twenty-six in total. The missing two figures are replaced by relic-cupboards with gilded gridded doors, visible above the apse. The corners of the nave have thin gilded columns supporting the vault springers, which begin at the top of the arcades.

The third register is bounded by the vault arch on each side, which is slightly pointed. Each wall contains a single-light Gothic window in a dished frame, flanked by a pair of figurative fresco panels. The ceiling is a straightforward cross-vault, with ribs meeting at an undersized foliated boss.

There is a superb Cosmatesque floor with roundels in porphyry, although the outer zones of this near the walls is laid with further re-used ancient marble revetting slabs. On these choir stalls used to stand, but these have been removed.

The east wall arcade, above the apse, shows the *Madonna and Child* in the middle, flanked by *SS John the Baptist* (left) and *St John the Evangelist*. Then on either side come two relic cupboards, with doors in the form of gilded open metal grids. Each of these has a little figurative fresco above and below. To the left, on top is the *Hand of God holding a Eucharistic host*, and at the bottom *The Fall of the Manna*. To the right on top there is an angel with a piece of stone, thought to be a fragment of the Holy Sepulchre once kept here, and a procession with a reliquary at the bottom. The latter is allegedly the removal of the relics of SS Marianus and Diodorus from catacombs on the Via Salaria to here by Pope Stephen VI in 896.

The two fresco panels in the top register are surrounded by decorative elements on a red background, which match those on the other three walls. At the top, flanking the window arch, is a pair of angels and at the sides are a pair of vases emitting vine-scrolls. Note the two blackbirds pecking at grapes dangling from each vase.

The two frescoes flanking the east window show, to the left, *Pope Nicholas III offering the chapel and accompanied by SS Peter and Paul*. The depiction of the model of the chapel is thought to be an accurate rendition of its appearance at the time. To the right is a depiction of *Christ the King*, to whom the chapel is being offered.

The south wall arcade shows *SS Peter, James the Great, Bartholomew and Stephen*, with three other anonymous apostles. Above, the fresco panels show *The Crucifixion of St Peter* to the left, and *The Beheading of St Paul* to the right.

The west wall arcade shows *SS Francis, Nicholas (?), Gregory the Great, Sylvester (?), Denis of Paris (?), Benedict and Dominic*. The fresco panels show *The Stoning of St Stephen* and *The Martyrdom of St Lawrence*.

The north wall arcade shows *SS Lawrence, John the Evangelist, Paul, Luke (?), Matthew (?)* and two anonymous apostles. The fresco panels show *The Beheading of St Agnes* to the left, and *St Nicholas Gives a Dowry to Three Poor Girls* to the right. The tradition behind the latter scene is that the family of the girls was so poor that the girls had no clothes, which is why they are shown in bed.

The vault is in deep blue, with the symbols of the four *Evangelists*.

Sanctuary

The sanctuary is entered through three rectangular portals, the central one being wider and separated by a pair of porphyry columns with gilded Composite capitals. These support an entablature with Cosmatesque mosaic work on its architrave and a gilded epigraph on its frieze reading "There is not a holier place in all the world". The walls of the sanctuary are revetted with marble slabs of the same sort as the nave, except for two porphyry ones behind the altar.

The ceiling is barrel-vaulted, with lunettes having smoothed-out angles. This is so that the vault can bear its mosaic, which is of the same date as the rest of the chapel despite its archaic style. In the center is *Christ the King* (Pantocrator) in a large tondo or clipeus, supported by four angels. The vault lunettes contain portrait busts of saints, which over the altar are *SS Agnes, Peter, Paul and Lawrence*. To the left side is *St Nicholas*, and to the right side *St Stephen*. The lunettes behind the entrance entablature, only visible to anybody actually in the sanctuary, depict six sanctuary lamps.

Acheropita

The famous icon of Christ "painted without (the use of human) hands" is enthroned on the altar. It is tentatively dated to the mid 5th century, but there is so little left of the original paintwork that this is uncertain. If true, it would be the oldest icon in Rome. The first documentary mention is in the reign of Pope Stephen II (752-7), when it was taken in procession in the face of a barbarian invasion.

The actual work was painted in encaustic on a linen backing framed in walnut, and represent Christ seated on a throne with a backrest encrusted with jewels. One hand blesses, and the other holds a scroll. Of all this, you can only see the face which was re-painted in the reign of Pope Alexander III (1159-81). The rest is covered with a chased and jewelled silver-gilt cover which was added in the reign of Pope Innocent III (1198-1216), who is commemorated in an inscription on it. This cover has little relief depictions of the thirteen saints enshrined in the chapel, together with the symbols of the Evangelists. There used to be three holes at breast-height and one larger one at the feet, and these were used in a ceremony where the hands and feet of the image were washed with perfumed water. The top three holes were closed with silver discs in about 1400, which have enamel representations of the *Crucifixion, Nativity* and the *Coronation of Our Lady*. The hole over the foot has a rectangular shutter with four little scenes from the history of the Confraternita del Santissimo Salvatore, founded in 1318 to propagate the veneration of the icon.

The two lateral panels were added in the 15th century, each consisting of four silver-gilt reliefs of *Our Lady with the angel of the Annunciation* at the top, and six saints.

The altar itself has a railing grid, evoking the gridiron of St Lawrence and imitated in the modern re-fitting of the sanctuary of the church next door. The grid protects the original wooden relic-chest installed here at the start of the 9th century.

Treasure and Relics

Below the Papal altar, protected by an enormous wrought iron cage, lie two bronze doors, covered with reliefs and inscriptions dating from the 13th century. These decorations cover the cypress wood ark, specifically made by Leo III to contain the illustrious treasures and relics of the Sancta Sanctorum. In 1902, the grate was opened for the first time since 1521, after Father F. Jubaru S.J. got the permission to examine the head of Saint Agnes which was kept within. In 1905, F. H. Grisar, was allowed to open it once again to study the magnificent collection of sacred objects made of gold, silver, ivory, and precious woods, together with numerous relic holders, crosses, fabrics, brocades, parchments, miniatures and enamels, all of incalculable value – a veritable treasure chest. The reliquaries were transferred to the Sacred Christian Museum in the Vatican library. Among the relics kept at this site were the heads of the apostles Peter and Paul, which are now venerated in the Basilica of Saint John Lateran.

The chapel of the Sancta Sanctorum has been rarely open in recent years, but after some renovation is now open except on Wednesdays and Sundays, 10:30-11:30 and 15:00-16:30 (information correct, 2010). There is liable to be an entrance charge.

Church of San Lorenzo in Palatio (4)

The entrance to the church is through the doorway at the right hand end of the landing.

The nave is rectangular, with three bays. There is a separate sanctuary of the same width as the nave but with a lower ceiling, which was re-fitted in the late 20th century by the Passionist architect **Ottaviano D'Egidio**. This is entered through three rectangular portals, the central one much wider than the side ones and separated by a pair of Doric columns in what looks like red and white jasper. The columns here support an entablature running around the church interior, which is otherwise unsupported by columns or pilasters. The gilded frieze bears a quotation from St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, first chapter.

The frescoed ceiling vault of the nave has three lunettes on each side. The central panel depicts *The Glory of the Trinity*, and the eight panels on the vault springers depict *Doctors of the Church* (*SS Basil, Ambrose, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Jerome, Gregory the Great and John Chrysostom*). Four of the six lunette coes have *Angels with Instruments of the Passion*, and the other two allegories of *Faith* and *Charity*. On the right, above the windows, are three lunette panels and there is one in the middle bay on the left which contain bucolic landscapes by **Brill**. All these frescoes have been very well restored recently.

At either end of the church there is a large lunette above the entablature and fitted into the vault, which has a central panel showing angels playing musical instruments, flanked by a pair of prophets.

The near and far bays on the left hand side are occupied by tall arches, which incorporate the lunettes here and break the entablature. The near one contains the entrance, but the far one leads into a little chapel dedicated to St Lawrence. Here is an altarpiece fresco depicting *The Apotheosis of St Lawrence* possibly by **Croce**.

There are three windows on the right hand side, containing modern stained glass roundels depicting *Symbols of the Passion within the Crown of Thorns*.

The former apse with its altar is now occupied by the organ, and is cordoned off by a railing screen in the form of squares. This evokes the gridiron on which St Lawrence was traditionally martyred. In front of this is a large gilded tabernacle for the Blessed Sacrament which has an elliptical door, and in front of that again

and actually in the nave is the free-standing modern altar which incorporates more iron grid-work. In the apse there used to be a large crucifix, but this is now in the Cappella del Crocifisso. The high altar is dedicated to the Crucifixion, which is why there is a side chapel dedicated to St Lawrence.

The pedimented doorway on the left in the middle bay leads into the Sancta Sanctorum, but you cannot access the latter this way. There is an ornate relief coat-of-arms of Pope Sixtus V above the triangular pediment. The massive bronze doors are decorated with a pair of stylized wreaths, and it is suggested that they might be 4th century. If so, they are the oldest survival from the former papal palace.

Cappella del Crocifisso (1)

The corridor running round the back of the Sancta Sanctorum, accessed by a door in the top left hand corner of the church, leads into the 20th century Oratory of the Crucifix. This has a 14th or 15th century painted wooden crucifix, restored and installed here in 1988. It is surrounded by iron railings. On either side are modern stained glass windows bearing scenes from the Passion as well as portraits of Passionist saints. There is a side altar to the left, dedicated to St Paul of the Cross the founder of the Passionists and which has an anonymous depiction of his Apotheosis. Under the altar is a painted statue of the Crucified Christ. To the right is a bronze bust of a well-loved Passionist priest called Candido Amantini, who was based here from 1961 until his death in 1992 and who had a great care for pilgrims and those in need of spiritual help. There is some hope for his beatification.

Cappella di San Silvestro (6)

The chapel dedicated to Pope St Sylvester is the choir chapel of the Passionists, and is to the left of the Sancta Sanctorum. The vault was frescoed by Giovanni and Cherubino Alberti, and depicts The Symbolism of the Papacy of Sixtus V. Heraldic symbols referring to Pope Sixtus V are featured. The lunettes and side panels feature more landscapes by Bril, again very well restored after being almost completely obscured by filth.

The altarpiece is a fresco of St Sylvester who is depicted with the countenance of Sixtus V, but the altar itself is polychrome marble work dating from 1727.

Artists and Architects:

Andrea [Lilio](#) [aka L'Anconitano] (1555-1642), Italian painter

Angelo da Orvieto (17th cent), Italian painter

Antonio [Scalvati](#) (1559-1619), Italian painter

Antonio [Viviani](#) called Il Sordo (1560-1620), Italian painter of the late-Renaissance and early-Baroque

Avanzino [Nucci](#) (1552-1629), Italian painter of the late-Renaissance period

Baldassare [Croce](#) (1558-1628), Italian painter of the late-Mannerist period

Cesare [Conti](#) de'Ancona (1550-1622), Italian painter

Cesare [Nebbia](#) (c.1536-c.1622), Italian Mannerist painter

Cesare [Torelli](#) (d. 1615), Italian painter

Domenico [Fontana](#) (1543-1607), Swiss-born Italian architect and engineer of the late Renaissance.

Ercole [Ruggiero](#) (17th cent.), Italian painter of the Baroque period

Ferraù [Fenzone](#), [aka *il Faenzone*] (1562-1645), Italian Mannerist painter from Faenza

Giacomo [Stella](#) (1545-1630), Italian painter of the late-Renaissance or Mannerist period, from Brescia

Giosuè Bernardino [Meli](#) (1816-1893), Italian sculptor
Giovanni [Baglione](#) [aka *il Sordo del Barozzo*] (1566-1643), Italian Late Mannerist and Early Baroque painter
Giovanni Batista [Ricci](#) [aka *Da Novara*] (1545-1620), Italian painter
Giovanni [Guerra](#) (1544-1618), Italian draughtsman, painter and stucco artist
Girolamo [Nanni](#) [aka *il Poco e Buono*] (17th cent), Italian painter of the Baroque period
Giuseppe [Sartorio](#) (1854-1922), Italian sculptor
Ignazio [Jacometti](#) (1819-1883), Italian sculptor
Oscar [Sosnowski](#) (1880-1939), Polish sculptor
Ottaviano [D'Egidio](#) (b. 1941), Italian Passionist priest and architect
Paolo Guidotti [aka *Cavalier Borghese*] (1560-1629), Italian painter
Paris [Nogari](#) aka *Romano* (1536-1601), Italian painter of the Renaissance period
Paul [Brill](#) (1554-1626), Flemish Baroque painter
Prospero [Orsi](#) (17th cent), Italian painter
Ventura [Salimbeni](#) (1557-1613), Italian painter from Siena
Vincenzo [Conti](#) († 1610), Italian painter

Location:

Address: Piazza di San Giovanni in Laterano, 14

Coord: [41° 53' 13.8" N, 12° 30' 24.3" E](#)

Info:

Telephone: +39 06 7726641 (dalle 8.00 alle 12.00)

Fax: +39 06 772664219

Email: scalasantaroma@gmail.com

Telephone booking: +39 329 7511111 (for the visit of the Holy of Holies - for groups)

Opening times

Sanctuary of Holy Stairs and Holy Stairs:

- 6.00-12.30;

- 15.00-18.30;

The Scala Santa closes a quarter of an hour before the closing of the Sanctuary (# 12.15/18.15)

Mass Schedule:

Weekdays: 6.30, 7.00, 9.00, 15.30;

Holidays: 7.30, 9.30, 11.30, 17.30;

Visits to the Chapel of St Lorenzo in Palatio (known as Sancta Sanctorum):

Monday-Saturday (Holidays excluded):

- 9.30-12.10;

- 15.00-17.10;

- Sanctuary of Holy Stairs and Holy Stairs: free admission;

- Chapel of St Lorenzo in Palatio (known as Sancta Sanctorum): € 3,50;

A multimedia audio-guide service is available to visit the pope's Chapel of Sancta Sanctorum, please ask at the entrance.