

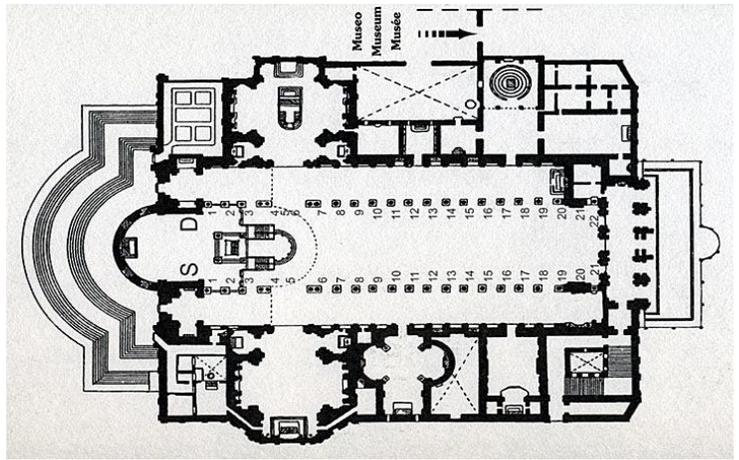
# Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore

42 Piazza di Santa Maria Maggiore (00185)

Metro: Termini, lines A and B.

Bus: 16, 70, 71 y 714.

**7 AM – 6:30 PM (Every Day)**



The basilica is regarded as the **most important church worldwide dedicated to Our Lady**.

The Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore is an ancient Catholic basilica that is considered to be the largest of the churches dedicated to the Virgin Mary in Rome. **It is one of the city's four major basilicas.**

Built on a pagan temple dedicated to the goddess Cybele, the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore was built in the mid-4th century under the orders of Pope Liberius. According to legend, the Virgin appeared before the Pope with the instructions for building the church, and the **shape of the floor was designed based on a miraculous snowfall.**

Over the years, the basilica has had many different names, such as Saint Mary of the Snow (due to snow that led to the church's shape), St. Mary of the Nativity (because it received a relic of the Holy Nativity), and it was finally called Santa Maria Maggiore, as it is the **largest of the 26 churches in Rome** dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

## Inside

The basilica displays varied architectural styles, **from early Christian to Baroque**. The entire building was restored and renovated during the 18th century, so the facade and much of the interior dates from that period. Despite this, the church retains the bell tower, some mosaics and **marble floors from the medieval period** and some **ionic columns from other ancient Roman buildings**, as well as splendid **5th-century mosaics**. The ceiling decoration has been preserved from the Renaissance period, while the domes and chapels belong to the Baroque era.

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Founded in the 4th century, the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore (Basilica of Saint Mary Major) is one of the five great ancient basilicas of Rome. Its 18th-century exterior conceals one of the best-preserved **Byzantine interiors** in the city.

## History of Santa Maria Maggiore

Santa Maria Maggiore stands on the site of a temple to the goddess Cybele. According to a 13th-century legend, the first church was built here by Pope Liberius (352-66), on the site of an apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The legend has it that the Virgin appeared to Pope Liberius in 352, instructing him to build a church on the Esquiline Hill. That night, the **floor plan was outlined by a miraculous snowfall.**

Archaeological evidence, on the other hand, indicates that the church was probably first built in the early 400s and completed under Pope Sixtus III (432-440). This was a time when **churches dedicated to Mary were beginning to spring up all over the empire**, prompted by an increasingly popular devotion to the Virgin and the official acceptance of her title "**Theotokos**" (**Mother of God**) at the **Council of Ephesus in 431.**

Santa Maria Maggiore was fully restored and renovated in the 18th century and the basilica is served by Redemptorist and Dominican fathers and remains very popular with pilgrims and tourists alike.

## What to See at Santa Maria Maggiore

The development of the city has taken away the impact of Santa Maria Maggiore's commanding position on the summit of the Esquiline Hill, but the church is still **considered by many to be the most beautiful church in Rome after St Peter's**.

The interior of the basilica preserves its majestic Early Christian form, which was standard in Rome in the 5th century: a tall, wide nave with side aisles and a round apse at the end. The 5th-century mosaics on either side of the nave depict **scenes from the Old Testament**. This was the first large-scale cycle of Biblical scenes in Rome. The left-hand side has scenes of Abraham, Jacob and Isaac; the right-hand side has scenes of Moses and Joshua. Although most are original, not all the nave mosaics have survived. The cycle of Biblical scenes is interrupted several times and some panels were replaced by painted copies in the 16th c.

The golden mosaics of the triumphal arch are also from the 5th century and depict scenes from the early life of Christ. The Athenian marble columns supporting the nave are the oldest parts of the church - they either come from the first basilica or from an antique Roman building. However, the shafts were reworked and the old capitals and bases were replaced during a restoration of the 18th century.

The **medieval bell tower is the highest in Rome** at 240 feet. The floor of the church is paved in opus sectile mosaic, featuring the **Borghese arms of an eagle and a dragon**.

The high altar of this is a papal altar, **used only by the pope himself**, or a priest given specific permission by him. It is traditional for the pope to lead a mass here on the Feast of the Assumption of Mary, every August 15. A porphyry urn on the altar contains the **relics of St. Matthew** and other martyrs. Beneath the altar is a **confessio** with a kneeling statue of Pope Pius IX. Beneath this, St. Jerome (d.420), Doctor of the Church and author of the Latin translation of the Bible, is buried in the Bethlehem crypt. The crypt is built to resemble the cave of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

In the right transept is the Sistine Chapel, containing the elaborate tomb of Pope Sixtus V (1521-90) and decorated with frescoes and reliefs of events from his reign. The chapel centers on a **reliquary containing part of the Holy Crib**, which was carried to Rome by Christian refugees during the Muslim conquest of the Holy Land in the 7th century. Just outside the chapel is the **tomb of Gian Lorenzo Bernini** and his family. Another **relic held by the church are pieces of the True Cross**, housed in a 14th-century cross-shaped reliquary. According to a 14th-century manuscript there were even more relics that have not survived:

A museum below the church contains Roman remains that were found here in the 18th century, including a section of Roman road, a mosaic pavement, two wells, a series of arches and narrow passages cut into the bedrock.

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## Monastic colony

Rome's dignity as a great city came to an end in circumstances that remain very obscure, but **the old idea that the barbarian sacks of the 5th century destroyed its civic identity is now discredited**. The Senate and city government continued until the early 7th century. However, one change in circumstances massively altered the surroundings of the basilica. The **collapse of the aqueducts** meant that only those who able to afford the digging of deep wells could continue to live on the hills, so almost all of the surviving population had migrated down to the Tiber flood-plain and neighbouring small valleys by the 8th century. The vacated land was given over to vineyards (drinking well and river water was very unhealthy) and also monasteries.

The basilica, now ex-urban, became the **focus of a monastic colony** comprising several monasteries in the last quarter of the first millennium. Many, if not most, of the original monks were refugees from the Iconoclast persecutions in the Byzantine Empire and from the conquests of Islam, and so worshipped in the Eastern rites.

## Renaissance

Up to the 15th century, the roofs of the nave and aisles in the interior were **open**. In 1455, Pope Callixtus III had the central nave covered by a flat coffered wooden ceiling. The story is that the later gilding was done using the first shipment of gold to Spain from the conquered Inca Empire, presented to Pope Alexander VI (1492-1503) by **Ferdinand and Isabella**. Both popes belonged to the Borgia family, hence its heraldry is displayed in the ceiling.

## 17th century

However, it seems that the intention in the 17th century was to focus on the **back end of the basilica as the focus** of the church's monumental civic presence. In 1669, **Bernini was appointed by Pope Clement IX to remodel the apse** -the **Gothic windows were well out of fashion**. Bernini's proposal included a surrounding colonnade, but Clement X, the next pope, cancelled the project owing to the proposed expense. In 1673, Carlo Rainaldi was appointed to execute a scaled-back project. Rainaldi then added the impressive, curving sweep of stairs in front. His work has remained unchanged.

## 18th century

A major restoration was ordered by Benedict XIV (1740-58), who chose **Ferdinando Fuga** as the architect. The work took several years from 1741. In the sanctuary Fuga provided a new **baldacchino** in 1749, and preserved some of the reliefs from the mediaeval one by attaching them to the apse wall. He also built a new Chapel of the Crucifix (aka the **Chapel of the Relics**) off the right hand aisle. He dismantled the two Gothic tabernacles in the sanctuary, and used the porphyry columns for this chapel.

The **Cosmatesque** floor of the central nave was carefully restored, and missing areas replaced with new. One patch of new work bears the date 1750, a Jubilee year for which the church's restoration was finished. On the other hand, the floors of the side aisles were replaced with marble tiles.

Fuga also re-vamped the colonnades. Previously, the ancient columns had been used as found by the original 5th century builders of the basilica and were of differing lengths and widths. Uniformity was achieved by packing the bases as needed. Fuga carefully removed the columns one by one, pared down the thicker ones and cut short the longer ones so that the set was uniform. Then he provided a new set of bases, and new capitals. So, although the nave side walls are ancient and bear their original mosaics (mostly), the colonnades actually count as 18th century.

## Column of Peace

The **Colonna della Pace** in front of the basilica used to belong to the **Basilica of Maxentius in the Forum**, and is a gigantic ribbed Corinthian monolith, described as being of Parian marble. Two eagles and two dragons in bronze adorn the plinth, which derive from the pope's family of the Borghese. The statue of the Immaculate Conception on top is in cast bronze.

## Campanile

The mostly **Romanesque campanile** or bell-tower is the **highest one in Rome**, rebuilt in 1370. The red brick tower has six storeys, but only four are visible above the façade. Each of these four upper storeys used to have arched openings on each face, but the lower two have had theirs blocked and the second one up now contains the basilica's public clock. Above the clock face is the heraldry of Pope Paul V again.

The storeys are separated by decorative cornices, formed from **modillions** in marble in between **dentillations** in brick. A matching string course connects the arch springers in each storey.

The first visible storey has two blocked **Gothic** arches on each face -that is why the campanile is "mostly" Romanesque. The second storey has a pair of double arches, blocked up. The third storey has these arches in their original state, each pair being separated by a marble column. The top storey has these two pairs of arches set within two larger arches, the tympani of which have each a stone quatrefoil opening (another Gothic hint).

## Façade

The façade was designed in 1743 by Ferdinando Fuga, on the orders of Pope Benedict XIV. He employed a strong **chiaroscuro effect, a play on light and shadows**, in his design of the central section which fronts the ancient façade of the basilica. Below is the entrance portico, and above is a so-called Loggia of Blessings from which the pope could bless a crowd in the piazza. The actual façade of the basilica has two storeys, and is entirely in **travertine limestone**.

## Doors

The **central bronze door dates from 1949**. The figurative panels depict episodes from the life of Our Lady, framed by images of prophets

## High altar

The high altar is a so-called "papal altar", reserved for the celebration of Mass by the Holy Father

## Tomb of Bernini

A short distance away from the confessio, in the floor to the right of the high altar, is the **simple tomb-slab** covering the entrance to the crypt of the **family of Gian Lorenzo Bernini**. It displays the family's heraldry, and the epitaph "Here the noble family Bernini waits for the Resurrection". The architect himself has been given a short Latin epitaph of his own which is carved into the step adjoining -"Gian Lorenzo Bernini, the glory of the arts and of the city, here rests humbly".

## Chapel of the Holy Relics

The next chapel was built about 1750. It is actually dedicated to the Crucifix, and the altarpiece is a 15th century crucifix. The walls are **revetted** in yellow Siena marble, and the same stone is used for the relic depositories after which the chapel is now named. These are designed as **aedicules**, with triangular pediments.