

# Santa Maria del Popolo

Piazza del Popolo

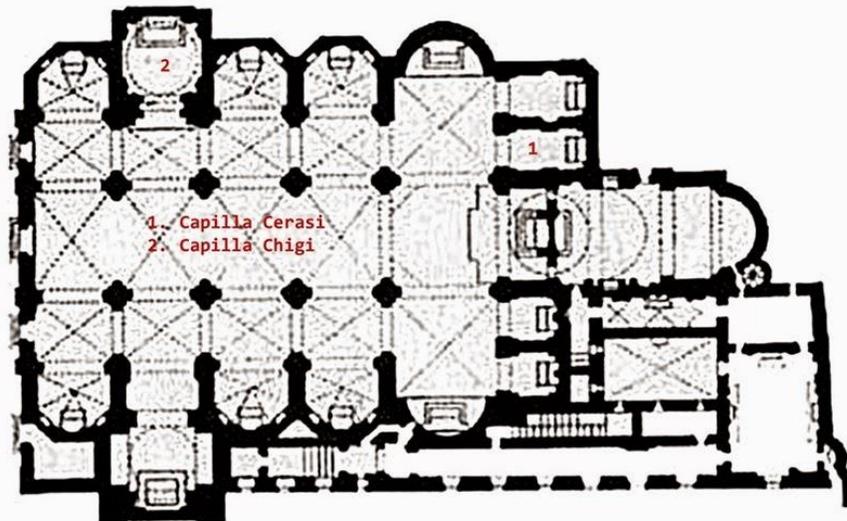
Metro station: Flaminio, line A

**7 AM – 12 PM (Closed Sunday)**

**4 PM – 7 PM (Closed Sunday)**



*Sculpture of Habakkuk and the Angel by Bernini (after 1652) in the Chigi Chapel  
Crucifixion of St. Peter (1600-01) by Caravaggio in the Cerasi Chapel.  
Baroque facade added by Bernini in 1600*



Standing on the Piazza del Popolo, near the **northern gate of the Aurelian Wall**, the Basilica of Santa Maria del Popolo is a **small temple with a splendid Renaissance decoration** in its interior.

### In its interior

Santa Maria del Popolo's decoration is unlike any other church in Rome. The **ceiling, less high than most built during the same period, is practically bare**, while **the decoration of each of the small chapels is especially remarkable**. Among the beautiful art work found in the church, it is worth highlighting **the Chapel Cerasi, which houses two canvases by Caravaggio from 1600, and the Chapel Chigi, built and decorated by Raphael**. If you look closely at the wooden benches, you'll be able to see inscriptions with the names of the people the benches are dedicated to. This custom is also found in a lot of English speaking countries like Scotland or Edinburgh, where the families of the person deceased buy urban furniture in their honour.

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Located next to the **northern gate of Rome** on the elegant Piazza del Popolo, the 15th-century Santa Maria del Popolo is famed for its wealth of Renaissance art. Its walls and ceilings are decorated with paintings by some of the greatest artists ever to work in Rome: Pinturicchio, **Raphael, Carracci, Caravaggio and Bernini**.

### History of Santa Maria del Popolo

Before the monumental Piazza del Popolo was created in 1538, the Church of Santa Maria del Popolo was already standing proudly next to the northern entrance into the city. It was **originally built in 1099 by Pope Paschal II to solve an unusual problem**. Apparently, **the ghost of Emperor Nero (believed to be buried nearby) was haunting the site**. The locals complained, so Paschal ceremonially chopped down a walnut tree that was sheltering demonic-looking black crows and built a church on the site.

The original Romanesque chapel was enlarged in 1227 and entirely reconstructed in 1472-77.

### What to See at Santa Maria del Popolo

There is not too much to see of Santa Maria del Popolo on the outside - the long side facing the piazza is covered with buildings. The facade, which is perpendicular to the Porta del Popolo, is in a **simple Baroque style designed in 1660 by Bernini**. Some of the small domes of the chapels can be glimpsed from the piazza.

Santa Maria del Popolo's interior is in the **early Italian Renaissance** style of the late 15th century. Its rib vaulted nave has large round arches, wide side aisles, no gallery, and small windows in the clerestory.

**The apse was designed by Bramante** for Pope Julius II around 1502; it was one of the artist's earliest works in Rome. There is a **light switch on the left side**. The vault frescoes depict the Coronation of the Virgin, the Four Evangelists, four Sibyls, and four Fathers of the Church. The small altar painting is the 14th-century Madonna del Popolo.

The apse also contains the monumental tombs of Cardinal Girolamo Basso della Rovere (1507) and **Cardinal Ascanio Sforza (1505)**. The **organ case** in the south transept was designed by **Bernini** and bears the Della Rovere **oak tree, part of the Chigi coat of arms**.

The first chapel to the left of the choir in the north transept is the **Cerasi Chapel, famed for its two canvases painted by Caravaggio in 1600**. They depict the Crucifixion of St. Peter and the Conversion of St. Paul - key events in the lives of the patron saints of Rome. Both are characterized by dramatic lighting, emotion and realism. St. Paul lays on the ground, stunned, while St. Peter is depicted as an old man facing a humiliating and painful death.

The chapel's altarpiece is The Assumption of the Virgin by Annibale Carracci, painted just prior to Caravaggio's paintings. It looks old-fashioned next to the modern use of light and realism in the Caravaggios.

The **Chigi Chapel**, in the north aisle left of the altar, was commissioned by the Sieneese banker Agostino Chigi (1465-1520). It **was built and decorated by Raphael** (who also decorated **Chigi's home, the Villa Farnesina**) in 1513-16. The dome mosaic of God the Father in Benediction was carried out by a Venetian artist after cartoons by Raphael.

Both Agostino Chigi and Raphael died in 1520, bringing major work on the chapel to a halt. The tombs of Agostino and his brother Sigismondo (d.1526) were given a unique pyramidal design, based on ancient Roman models.

The altarpiece of The Nativity of the Virgin was painted by **Raphael's rival Sebastiano del Piombo** in 1530-34. The bronze altar frontal was sculpted by Raphael's disciple Lorenzetto, as were the statues of Jonah and Elijah.

**The chapel was completed by Bernini** for Cardinal Fabio Chigi (Pope Alexander VII) after 1652, including the famous sculpture of **Habakkuk and the Angel** and the prophet Daniel. Bernini also added the oval medallions on the pyramid