

# San Luigi dei Francesi

Via Santa Giovanna D'Arco 5 (00186)

(Near Piazza Novana)

Metro: Line A Barberini

Bus: 40, 42, 62, 63, 64, 70, 87, 186, 204, 630, 780, 810

**9:30 AM - 12:45 PM (Mon – Fri)**

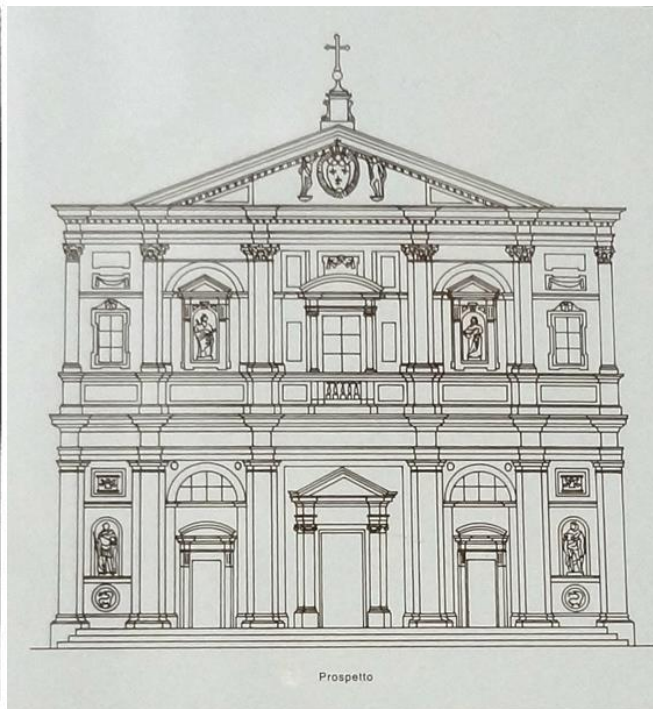
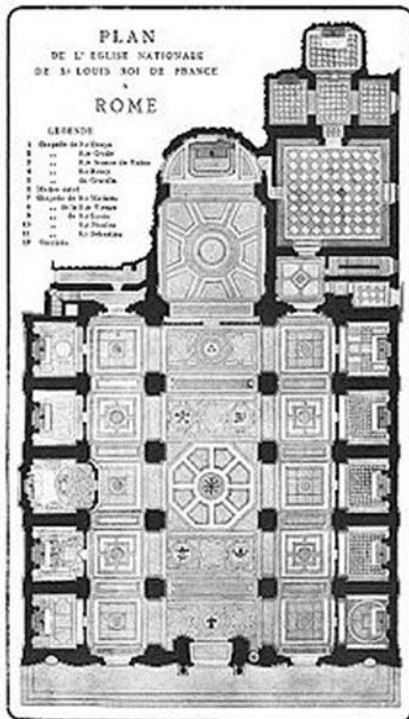
**9:30 AM - 12:15 PM (Sat)**

**11:30 AM - 12:45 PM (Sun)**

**2:30 PM - 6:30 PM (Every Afternoon)**

## Getting There

From the Colosseum, walk up Via dei Fori Imperiali to Piazza Venezia, turn left on Via Del Plebiscito. This turns into Corso Vittorio Emmanuele II. Continue past the Largo Argentina and turn right on Corso Del Rinascimento. Turn right on Via del Salvatore. At Via della Scrofa, turn left and the church is immediately on your left.



A pilgrimage spot for art lovers, San Luigi's **Contarelli Chapel** is adorned with three stunningly dramatic works by **Caravaggio (1571–1610)**, the Baroque master of the heightened approach to light and dark. At the altar end of the left nave, they were commissioned for San Luigi, the official church of Rome's French colony (San Luigi is St. Louis, patron saint of France). The inevitable coin machine will light up **his *Calling of St. Matthew, Saint Matthew and the Angel, and Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*** (seen from left to right), and Caravaggio's mastery of light takes it from there. When painted, they caused considerable consternation to the clergy of San Luigi, who thought the artist's dramatically realistic approach was scandalously disrespectful. A first version of the altarpiece was rejected; the priests were not particularly happy with the other two, either. Time has fully vindicated Caravaggio's patron, Cardinal Francesco del Monte, who secured

This Francophile church has for centuries served as the **spiritual center of Rome's French population**; it is the **French national church in Rome**. The cathedral was designed and constructed in the 1500s, thanks to the personal attention and patronage of **Catherine de Medici**. Many historic French notables were buried in its cool halls. The church sheltered Martin Luther during his trial; adjacent to the cathedral is the Saint Luigi de Francesi building, which in the 18th century served as a place of shelter for French pilgrims without resources.

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**Seat of the cardinal of Paris in Rome and the heart of the city's French community**, San Luigi dei Francesi houses three outstanding paintings by **Michelangelo de Merisi, known as Caravaggio**. It is also a riot of Roman baroque art. History of San Luigi dei Francesi

Cardinal Giulio di Giuliano de' Medici (later to become Pope Clement VII) ordered a **church to be built in 1518**, not only to serve the French community living in Rome but also as the seat of his cardinalship. The French connection came in the form of Catherine de Medici, great niece to Giulio and wife of King Henry II of France, who donated funds for its construction.

The site chosen was a small church named Santa Maria owned by Medici family. Santa Maria had been **built on the ruins of the Baths of Nero** and the Baths of Agrippa, and had long served the French community in Rome, which operated a hospital for the infirm on the site.

Construction of the church was halted in 1527, when Rome was sacked by troops of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. Building was resumed in 1580 under the direction of the architect **Domenico Fontana, who had completed the Dome of Saint Peter's**.

Since the **patron saint of France is King Louis IX, the church was dedicated to him, hence San Luigi**. The French kings Henry II, Henry III and the latter's mother, Catherine de' Medici, donated funds for its completion. It was consecrated in 1589

### **What to See at San Luigi dei Francesi**

Credit for the façade goes to Giacomo della Porta, who also designed the façade of Il Gesu. Carved from lovely **white travertine marble**, the façade has two levels (or orders), on top of which sits a small peak. The coat of arms at the top belongs to the Valois Family, and **carvings of salamanders represent King Francois I of France**, who was the French monarch when the foundation was laid. **Four statues depict Charlemagne, St. Louis, St. Clotilde (5th century Queen of the Franks), and St. Joan of Valois (daughter of Louis XI)**.

The **plan of the church is a basilica, that is, a rectangular shape without a transept. Originally a Counter-Reformation church, it would have been quite austere**. However, the wealth of the Medicis and the French kings resulted in its subsequent lavish decoration. A number of famous Italian and French artists worked on the interior. Charles Joseph Natoire, whose works also adorn Versailles palace, painted the ceiling fresco (1754), **which depicts San Luigi ascending into heaven**. It is surrounded by one of the richest and most ornate coffered ceilings in Rome.

The Polet Chapel, to the right of the altar, contains a cycle of frescoes (1612-14) by Domenichino. The bright frescoes recount the dramatic events in the life of Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of musicians and church music. Legend has it that as Cecilia lay dying, three days after her throat was cut, she continued to sing "in her heart to the Lord." Above the main altar hangs a painting by Francesco Bassano entitled The Assumption.

Amazingly, some descriptions of this church fail to mention that it contains three of the greatest and most influential paintings ever produced in Italy. Perhaps this has to do with the shadowy life of the man who painted them, **Michelangelo di Merisi, known as Caravaggio, who later killed a man and spent the last four years of his life on the lam**.

Then again, perhaps it has to do with the ambivalence of his paintings, which, though covering famous religious subjects, do not exactly inspire faith, either because of the dramatic content - decapitations, crucifixions, depositions from the cross, etc. - or **because Caravaggio often used his friends as models, including prostitutes, card sharps, and other folk of dubious morals.** One early travel guide to Rome says of him: "He painted chiefly plebian types." What is true is that Caravaggio's three paintings in the Contarelli Chapel **changed the way that people looked at painting** and influenced countless artists who followed.

The artist Cavalier D'Arpino received a commission to decorate the chapel for the French Cardinal Matteu Contreil (in Italian, Matteo Contarelli). **Caravaggio was working as an apprentice** for D'Arpino at the time, and when he became too busy to complete the decoration, Caravaggio's patron, Cardinal Francesco del Monte, attained the commission for the artist.

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**Contarelli's will stated that the chapel contain works depicting the life of St. Matthew,** Contarelli's namesake (Matteo is the Italian form of Matthew). The will was quite specific as to what should be painted - Saint Mathew's calling by Jesus; his divine inspiration to write his gospel; and his martyrdom. Caravaggio had never worked on such large canvasses before, and X-rays reveal he reworked the paintings a number of times.

**The painting on the left, The Calling of St Matthew,** takes place indoors where Saint Matthew, then a finely dressed moneychanger, sits with a group of common types. Jesus has just entered the dark room, raised his arm, and uttered the words "Follow me," (Matthew 9:9). The saint looks up, incredulous with an expression as if to say, **"Who, me?"** The composition contributes to the drama of the scene. A source of light above and behind Jesus' head slashes the darkness and slants down to illuminate the saint's face. **As in many of his religious works, Caravaggio's subjects are depicted at the moment of a miraculous event.** However, the contrast between the light of the illumined figures and their surroundings, which become almost indistinguishable as they recede into the dark, increases the dramatic tension of the work. **This play of light and dark in painting is called chiaroscuro, and Caravaggio's particular form became known as tenebrism (tenebre meaning "shadow" in French.)**

On the opposite wall hangs **The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew.** The scene shows St. Matthew, who had just been celebrating Mass, seconds before a **soldier sent by the King of Ethiopia plunges a sword into him.** Legend has it that St. Matthew converted the Ethiopian royal family to Christianity, but when Matthew preached a sermon on the virtues of virginity shortly before a prince's wedding, it so enraged the bridegroom that he ordered St. Matthew executed. At the moment of death, an angel appears before Matthew, and extends a palm frond toward him, reassuring the saint of his place in heaven. **Contarelli wished to show the effect of the martyrdom on the onlookers.** One flees, turning look back with an expression of terror on his face. Others stagger back or cower in fear. One figure to the left of the angel is actually a self-portrait by Caravaggio, notable for the look of sadness in his eyes. One scholar described the look this way: "[he is] contemplating and searching himself for responses to the scene to which he is witness."

The third painting, above the altar, **The Inspiration of Saint Matthew,** is not the painting Caravaggio originally created for this location. His first submission, entitled The Angel and Saint Matthew, hung in the chapel only a few days before the priests took it down. The reason? The priests said it had "neither the decorum nor the appearance of a saint." In this painting, the saint sits with his legs crossed and his bare left foot extending out toward the viewer. An angel, a winged young boy, whispers into Matthew's ear while guiding his hand in writing his gospel. Sadly, this work survives only as a black and white photograph. **The original perished in a museum in Berlin** at the close of World War II.

Caravaggio took the rejection hard, but **created another masterpiece to replace it,** which hangs there to this day. Two figures appear in the painting - St Matthew, at his table poised with pen in hand, and an angel hovering above him, inspiring him to write. Matthew is looking up and over his left shoulder at the angel. He is not seated. Instead one knee rests on a seat and his bare foot dangles. It looks as if he just ran to the table eager and awestruck to complete his gospel. The angel, encircled by floating, heavenly garments, is looking down, enumerating with his fingers the points he wants the saint to record in the gospel. The indistinct background is so dark the figures seem three-dimensional. It's a beautiful painting, and one's eye follows the lines from the angel's garments to the saint's forehead and then down along his robes to the ground.

**These three paintings, Caravaggio's first major church commission, cemented his reputation, and he continued to work constantly until his death in 1610 at the age of 38.**