

# Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza

**Francesco Borromini**

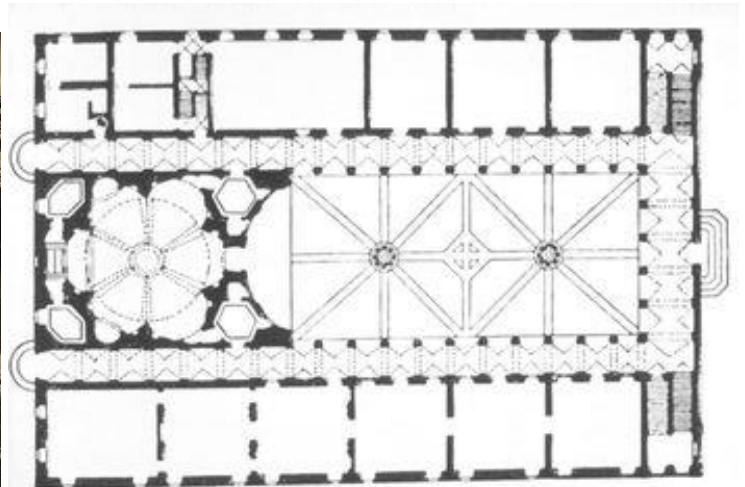
Corso del Rinascimento, 40

Metro: Colosseo

**9 AM – 12 PM (Sundays Only)**

This is claimed to be the only church in Rome without any religious statues at all.

Sant'Ivo is **located between Piazza Navona and the Pantheon**. From the Colosseo metro stop, walk up Via dei Fori Imperiali to Piazza Venezia, turn left on Via Del Plebiscito. This turns into Corso Vittorio Emanuele II. Turn right on Corso del Rinascimento. The entrance to La Sapienza is on the right.



Did you hear the one about the lawyer who became a monk, fought against unjust taxation, gave everything to the poor and was canonized a saint? It could happen. It did happen once in the 1200s to St. Yves of Brittany. Yves (Sant'Ivo in Italian) is memorialized in Rome by the baroque architect Francesco Borromini, who created a church dedicated to the saint in the courtyard of Rome's law school, "La Sapienza." This is fitting, as Saint Yves is the patron saint of lawyers as well as Brittany and abandoned children. The **church is considered Borromini's masterpiece**. Its integration into the majestic colonnaded courtyard of La Sapienza is both ingenious and awe-inspiring.

## **History of Sant'Ivo**

The startling Sant'Ivo sits at the far end of the courtyard of the **Palazzo della Sapienza (house of knowledge)**, which until 1935 was the **seat of the University Rome**. The palazzo now houses the Italian State Archives containing all official documents from the 9th century to the founding of the Italian Republic in 1870. **The University was founded in 1303** In the 1500s, work was begun on a single structure to consolidate the university. Under Pope Gregory XIII, Giacomo Della Porta was commissioned to complete the palazzo, and he created a spectacular two-story colonnade that wraps around its courtyard. (Della Porta died in 1602 before he finished the project.) Thirty years later, **the job of completing it fell to the son of a Swiss stonemason, Francesco Borromini**.

**Borromini had moved to Rome around 1619 at the age of 20** and went to work for a distant cousin, Carlo Maderno, who created the façade of St. Peter's in Rome. The young Borromini threw himself into the **study of architecture with Michelangelo as his inspiration**. When Maderno died two years later, the **project was given to Gian Lorenzo Bernini instead of Borromini**. This **might have been the cause of their famous rivalry**, though Bernini was able to help Borromini obtain his first major commission: the reconstruction of the church of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane. where, Borromini created a novel elliptical coffered dome, which established his reputation and brought him more work.

After designing the church San Agnese in Agone on the Piazza Navona, **Borromini won the commission to finish the Palazzo Della Sapienza and then Sant'Ivo, from the Barberini Pope, Urban VIII in 1632**. (Urban was the Pope who called Galileo to Rome to recant his belief in Copernicus' heliocentric view of the universe.) The work began in 1642 and **continued until 1660 under the sponsorship of two more Popes, Innocent X and Alexander VII**, who came from the powerful and wealthy families of **Pamphilij and Chigi**, respectively.

Borromini continued to work for seven more years after completing Sant'Ivo. **He was not as popular as Bernini**, who mastered painting, sculpture, and architecture and who thrived among the social, political and religious power brokers of his day. **Borromini was purportedly broody, surly and lacked the social graces of his rival.** Today his behavior might have been labeled bi-polar, and sadly he died at his own hand. Perhaps this is also why he did not enjoy the same reputation after his death as Bernini, though scholars starting in the 1800s began to acknowledge his influence.

### Façade

One of **Borromini's hallmarks is his use of convex and concave exterior and interior surfaces that play against each other.** When you enter La Sapienza, the breathtaking **white Travertine marble façade** of St. Ivo rises up before you at the far end of the long courtyard. Across the concave façade, Borromini gracefully continued the lines of the Palazzo's two stories of arched colonnades. Atop the church sits a **hexagonal drum that houses the dome**, its convex walls supporting a stepped pedestal. Next comes the **lantern**, also hexagonal, but with **concave sides**. To top it off, **Borromini crafted the most unique spire of any church in Rome. It resembles a spiral staircase**, reminiscent of the friezes on the nearby columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius. Borromini topped the spire off with a laurel wreath, a bronze orb, a dove, and a crucifix. Some speculate that Borromini either based the design of the spire on a conch shell, which he kept in his study, or drawings of the Tower of Babel. Others have compared the spire to the stinger of a bee, which is of course the symbol of the Urban VIII's Barberini family. By the way, Borromini also honored the other popes who contributed funds by incorporating their families' symbols into the structure:

Gregory XIII 1572-85 Buoncampagni Dragon  
Pope Urban VIII 1623-44 Barberini Bees  
Pope Sixtus V 1585-90 Montalto Lion, pears, three mountains and star  
Innocent X 1644-55 Pamphilij Dove, olive branch, three fleurs-de-lis  
Pope Paul V 1605-21 Borghese Dragon, eagle  
Alexander VII 1655-67 Chigi Six Mountains, Star, Acorn

### Interior

On entering the church, one can easily see why art historians call it **Borromini's chef d'oeuvre**. Once again we see **Borromini's use of alternating concave and convex surfaces and geometric shapes**, here miraculously united to make concrete the beauty of **mathematics** and its universal forms. For the small space, the architect **superimposed two triangles** on top of one another to form an enormous **Star of David** and create a **hexagonal floor plan** in the center of the church. The alternating points of the star, however, are rounded off either convex or concave and form niches that slope upward to the dome. The dome itself is segmented into six sections, each one **decorated with the Chigi family mountains or stars**. At the apex of the dome, the lines converge at a perfect circle that forms the base of the lantern. Remarkably, Sant'Ivo has none of the gaudy, gilt ornament of its Roman baroque contemporaries. In fact, the walls are painted white, which not only makes the tiny church seem grand, but also gives it an otherworldly airiness.

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### History - Early days of institution

The church was built from 1632 to 1660 by the architect Francesco Borromini, as the church of the University of Rome known as La Sapienza ("wisdom — knowledge"). It performed this role for almost three hundred years.

### Construction

Borromini was appointed as supervising architect in 1632, during the reign of Pope Urban VIII Barberini. However, he only **began work on the church in 1643**. Pope Innocent X Pamphilj (1644-55) oversaw the erection of the actual fabric, finished in 1652, but his successor **Alexander VII Chigi** authorized the consecration of the church in 1660 when the interior decoration was finally finished. He had intervened selfishly by requiring that his own family emblems appeared in the church decorations, with rather crass results (see the façade). **The heraldry of the families of these three popes dominate the decoration of the church. The Baberini gave their bees, the Pamphilj their dove with olive branch and fleur de lys, and the Chigi their stylized mountains and star.** In 1783, a new high altar was provided by Nicola Forti. In 1870, the Sapienza became a secular university. For the next sixty-five years it remained here, but the site became intolerably cramped.

### Exterior Layout

The external layout is rectangular, with **an incurved segmental arc** as the façade occupying one narrow end of the rectangle. The fabric is an integral part of the palazzo, and is in brick with the dome in concrete reinforced by brick.

The arcaded walkways at ground level of the palazzo continue as passages to either side of the church, to two large street doorways on the Via del Teatro Valle off the Piazza di Sant'Eustachio.

### Dome - Exterior

The dome, with its corkscrew lantern, is remarkable in its novelty. Its plan is based on a lobed hexagon, that is a hexagon with outwardly curved sides, and it is entirely rendered in white. The drum stands on a low attic plinth, and has six windows, one for each lobe. These are alternately round-headed and gabled, but are within identical tall rectangular framed recesses. The round-headed window facing the courtyard has a bas-relief of the Lamb of God over it, sitting on the Scroll with Seven Seals. Each window is flanked by a pair of Corinthian pilasters with the Chigi star in their capitals (the same design feature occurs inside the church). Also, the corners between the lobes have tripletted pilasters of the same form. Over each window recess is a circular tondo containing the Pamphilj dove, which is placed over the entablature.

### Spire

The famous spire is in the form of a cone with a spiral ramp running up it in four turns. The English are privileged to have a term for this shape, which is helter-skelter. The side of the ramp has panels with non-figurative Baroque decoration, and its edge has ball finials with curlicues in between. **These finials are perhaps a mistake by Borromini, as they break up the integrity of the form.** It has been debated whether Borromini was inspired by something in designing this, or whether it was simply the result of his genius. There is an odd resemblance to some mediaeval depictions of the **Tower of Babel**, and these in turn might have derived from the form of the 9th century minaret of the Great Mosque at Samarra in Iraq, the so-called Malwiya. The latter seems to be the only possible architectural inspiration for Borromini's design. The spire ends in a wreath with flames issuing from it. Above is a bronze finial formed of four bowed semi-hoops supporting a ball, over which is a looped cross embellished with **the Pamphilj dove and fleurs-de-lys**. This is now also the lightning conductor.

### Interior Layout

Many published diagrams of the interior layout are over-complicated, and some derive from a wish to discern what was in Borromini's mind when he designed the church. However, the template is quite simple despite appearances. To take in the basis of the design at a glance, look up at the dome cornice on entering the church. The form that this has, is created in **three easy geometric steps**. Firstly, take an equilateral triangle, and divide each side into six equal lengths. Secondly, draw an external semi-circle on each side with the diameter being the middle two lengths of that side. Thirdly, cut off each corner of the triangle with an arc of the same radius as the semi-circles, cutting at a length down each side from the corner. Simple. The shape that you get is here. However, the complex rhythms of the interior based on this shape have a dazzling geometry. **The undulations, both concave and convex**, of the interior surfaces create a jarring yet stunning aesthetic appeal. The whole is an example of **rational architecture or Baroque as mathematics**, which is intricate to the eye and perhaps more Platonic than the contemporary gilded and plaster excesses of Gianlorenzo Bernini (Baroque as theatre).

### Dome - Interior

**The dome has six sectors**, separated by simple ribs meeting at an **anulus around the oculus** which contains twelve **Chigi stars**. The oculus itself now contains a blank gilded glory, but apparently the glorified emblem which used to be in here was a **Barberini bee**. If you look carefully, you can see the hole left by the attachment. Each sector has eight Chigi stars running up each side, and a six-winged putto's head at the top next to the anulus. **This is a symbol of a seraph, itself a symbol of wisdom.** The sectors over the apses each has a gable-topped window with a winged angel's head over it, protected by an omega cornice resting on posts from which dangle chains of wreaths. Over the omega cornice is the **"six mountains beneath a star" emblem of the papal Chigi family**. The sectors over the chapels and entrance each has a round-headed window over which is a seraph symbol within a triangular pediment with a broken cornice. Over this is a complicated device consisting of a rose plant within crossed palm branches within a crown, themselves within garlands.

### Floor

The tessellated marble floor, in white and dark grey trapezoids, **is original and was designed by Borromini**.