

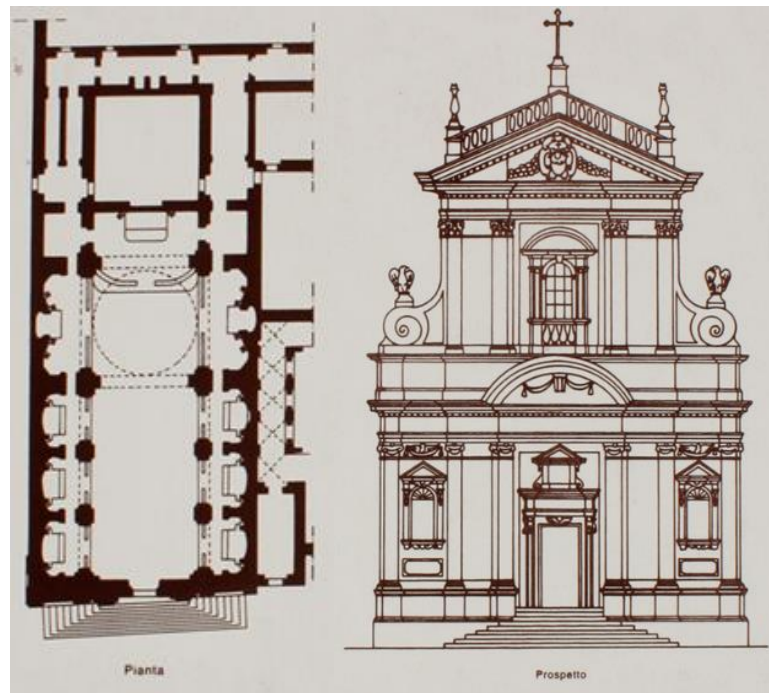
# Santa Maria della Vittoria

Via 20 Settembre, 17.

Metro station: Repubblica.

Buses: 60, 61, 62, 84, 492 and 910

**7 AM – 12 PM, 3:30 PM - 7 PM (Every day)**



Santa Maria della Vittoria, **Our Lady of Victory in English**, is a basilica dating from the 17th century. It was erected to commemorate the victory of Emperor Ferdinand II at the battle of White Mountain, which marked the end of the Bohemian period of the Thirty Year's War. The basilica has become extremely popular since it appeared in the novel *Angels & Demons*, written by the American author Dan Brown.

Although the church's façade isn't very impressive, its **interior is extravagantly decorated**. Since there is **very little natural light** inside the church, it is filled with candles, which create a very special atmosphere.

**One of the most notable parts of the church is the Cornaro Chapel that houses the "Ecstasy of Saint Teresa", a sculpture by Bernini. This figure is considered to be a sculptural masterpiece of the Baroque period.**

The interior of Santa Maria della Vittoria suffered a fire in 1833 and had to be restored. However, nowadays it is completely reconstructed. Near the Basilica Santa Maria della Vittoria stands the grandiose **Fontana dell'Acqua Felice**, in English the **Fountain of Moses**. It was designed to symbol the end of the Acqua Felice aqueduct. Although this fountain

is not very popular among the Romans on account of its disproportion and its sheer size, it is an imposing architectural ensemble worth taking a look at. Santa Maria della Vittoria is a 1603 baroque church

**Foundation of the convent** - The present church was built by the **Discalced Carmelite Friars**, who purchased the church and some land adjacent in 1607. The initial scheme was that this new convent would be the Novitiate for the Order, or alternatively a missionary seminary. Initially they financed the work themselves, but when clearing the foundations discovered a superb pagan statue which is now called the Borghese Hermaphrodite. Cardinal Scipione Borghese made a deal with them, whereby he obtained the statue in exchange for paying for the work.

The new convent was not the novitiate for long, as it was decided to go for the seminary option. It was at first named San Paolo after the older chapel. The convent opened in 1612, but the church was only finished in 1626. Convent life and the seminary proved incompatible, and the latter moved out in 1662.

**Modern times** - The 18th century saw the church decorated extremely sumptuously, with lots of gilded stucco and polychrome marble so that hardly any of the interior wall surfaces are left naked. This was especially because some of the richest of Rome's noble families sponsored the side chapels. The **opus sectile work** on floors and altar frontals is amazing. During the French occupation after 1798, the convent was occupied by French troops who caused serious damage and stole anything movable of value. In 1833 the church was very seriously damaged by a fire.

**Exterior Layout** - This is not a large church. Its plan is based on a **Latin cross**, with a short nave, central dome, transepts and an apse. There is a monastic choir behind the apse, which is not accessible to visitors. Also there is a crypt, which means that the main entrance is accessible by a flight of stairs. It is on a corner site, and is hemmed in by buildings.

**Interior** - The nave of three bays is short, and hence feels wide. It has aisles on either side, and these contain three chapels each. Beyond is the transept, with a dome over the crossing and a large chapel at each end. The sanctuary is a large apse with a conch. Baroque style was used to decorate the church later, **partly through the example of Bernini's Cappella Cornaro** in the left transept. The interior decoration is an example of the **Baroque style taken to its extremes**.

**Nave** - On the counterfaçade (the interior wall above the entrance) is the organ and cantoria by Mattia de' Rossi, who worked with Bernini. **A cantoria is a balcony for solo singers**, and this one is shaped like a drum flanked by trapezoids. There are more angels holding it aloft, and rich scrollwork above and below the balustrade. Yet another pair of angels are seriously enjoying themselves either side of the organ, and above the latter you can just about see the stained glass window which occupies the centre of the second storey of the façade outside. Unfortunately the organ obscures it.

**Dome** - The dome fresco continues the theme of the **empyrean** as featured in the nave ceiling, and has the viewer staring into heaven at a host of heavenly beings. The angels in the **pendentives** are later, and look faded but very lush.

**Choir** - The **conventual** choir is a square room behind the apse. It has a depiction of St Paul with Putti, a reminder of the original dedication of the church.

**Sacristy** - There is a collection of captured **Ottoman Turkish battle standards in the**

#### **Chapel of St Francis**

The middle right hand nave chapel is dedicated to St Francis of Assisi and has paintings by Domenichino. The altarpiece has Our Lady Offering the Christ Child to St Francis, and the side walls show the **Ecstasy of St Francis and St Francis Receiving the Stigmata**.

#### **Chapel of St Joseph**

The right hand transept chapel, opposite the Ecstasy, is dedicated to St Joseph. It has a marble sculpture, which shows the **angel revealing Mary's virginal conception to St Joseph** - a rather unusual subject for a sculptural group. The whole altar is inspired by the chapel opposite, and has four Corinthian columns in verde antico supporting a bowed triangular pediment with a recessed central section. **The gilded rays from a hidden window is the most obvious homage to Bernini**. The bas-relief panels on either side depict the **Adoration by the Shepherds and the Flight into**. Under the altar is a **wax effigy**, containing the relics of an obscure catacomb martyr called Santa Vittoria.

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#### **Chapel of St Teresa of Avila**

The **Baroque Cappella Cornaro was designed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini in 1646**. He was out of favour with the Papal court at the time, and was patronized here by the Cornaro family who paid for the work. They were Venetians, and hence were not very worried about what Pope Innocent X thought about Bernini. The initial patron was Cardinal Federico Cornaro, Patriarch of Venice, who wished to establish a **funerary chapel for the family** and paid Bernini 12000 scudi for the work - an enormous sum. **Bernini considered it his best work**.

Bernini made magisterial use of the shallow transept available to him. Instead of trying for an enclosed chapel, which would not have worked, he presented the composition as **a theatre facing out into the presbyterium**. The altar is surmounted by a bowed propylaeum with two pairs of Corinthian columns in black and white breccia, supporting an ornate pediment with the central section recessed. This structure frames the famous sculpture, which is cleverly lit by a window hidden by the pediment. The altar frontal is a depiction of the Last Supper in gilt bronze.

On the flanking walls are two opera-boxes containing sculptured representations of members of the Cornaro family (**not all by Bernini himself; some are of his school**). The one on the right features the Cardinal Patriarch watching the saint having her ecstasy, while his three companions are ignoring her for their own conversation (that is how Italians behaved at the opera back then). The one on the left has a half-hidden figure to its left, and this **is reputed to be a self-portrait by Bernini**.

The vault of the chapel has a trompe-l'oeil fresco showing cherubs in the open sky, with the Holy Spirit **descending as a dove**. The walls are **revetted** with precious marbles; the pair of pilasters flanking the sculpture are of verde antico.

### Ecstasy of St Teresa

The most famous work of art in the church can be seen in this chapel: **Bernini's Ecstasy of St Teresa of Avila**, executed with the rest of the chapel in **1646**. It is considered one of the best Baroque sculptures in Rome, and is one of Bernini's most accomplished and well-known works. He certainly thought so himself.

It is **carved from a single block of Carrara marble**, and is highlighted by rays of gilded stucco radiating from the window. **The saint, the Spanish founder of the Discalced Carmelite nuns** and a Doctor of the Church in her own right, is depicted as **seated on clouds as on a bed**. She is caught during an ecstasy that she described in her mystical autobiography, when she experienced an angel piercing her heart with a dart of divine love. Here she is shown as if on the point of getting out of bed, caught in her rumpled coverlet and with one bare foot on the way to the floor. The angel is standing over her, with a rather ambiguous smile and holding a gilt bronze stabbing-spear as if to pierce her again.

The rumpled cloth in which she is swathed is rather odd symbolically, but **Baroque sculptors liked to demonstrate their mastery of their medium by carving folded fabric and Bernini was extremely talented at this**.

### Doctrinal meaning

**Bernini was a devout Roman Catholic, and so this work demonstrates truths of the faith**. The meaning behind the original vision was probably a re-enactment of the piercing of the heart of Christ by the soldier's lance as he hung on the Cross, as this was traditionally regarded as the Birth of the Church. The shedding of blood and water from the heart of Christ was taken to be the moment when the redemptive sacrifice of the Passion was completed, and hence the saint's ecstasy was an experience of joy and wonderment at this mystery of redemption.

Further, the **Baroque style deliberately expressed the Catholic doctrine that mystical and spiritual aspects of religion may be experienced through all the senses**, and by means of all created realities as derived from God the Creator. This was obviously a **reaction to the Protestant** (and especially Calvinist) wish to confine religious experience to the use of words, a position which contemporary Italians such as Bernini regarded as a mental health problem rather than a theological one. Hence, the lush sensuousness of Baroque art as expressed by this sculpture.

### Reactions

**Protestant reactions to this work have been mostly uncomprehending and hostile**, and this is only to be expected. However, even Catholics have had problems with its interpretation ever since its unveiling. The jibe that it shows an ignorant and frustrated virgin having a spontaneous orgasm, while not knowing what is happening to her, seems to have originated with 18th century French visitors and has had a long history. This opinion is simply crass, as the saint was a capable and intelligent woman who founded and administered a string of new convents and was also a spiritual director of note. She knew all about the reality of the human condition, as her writings testify.

**A more substantial criticism is that Bernini made no attempt at portraiture**. The saint was a short, sallow Spanish brunette with prominent cheekbones and small mouth and chin. **It is possible that Bernini used a male model, as Michelangelo certainly did for his female figures**.

The prominent bare foot has inspired an interesting misunderstanding. The saint founded the Discalced Carmelite nuns, and the word "discalced" is often translated "barefoot" (in Italian, scalzo actually does mean this). This is wrong, as the **original Latin discalceatus means "without shoes", and includes the wearing of sandals**. St Teresa put her nuns in (then) cheap straw sandals known as alpargatas, and forbade them either to wear shoes or to go barefoot. She thought that the latter could be vainglorious ("Uriah Heep humility") in winter, and dangerously pleasurable in hot weather.