



APRIL 16, 2026

1. IN THE HEART OF THE CHURCH AND THE INSTITUTE

1.3 Encountering the Church of yesterday and today

1.3.2 Catacombs and Basilicas

(Prayer in pullman)



Regina Caeli

Entrustment *(in preparation for World Gratitude Day)*

Guide: We entrust Mother Chiara and each one of us to Mary, our Mother and guide so that she can help us to joyfully sing of God's love for us, to live our vocation with commitment, renewed in faith, in love with Jesus, eager to communicate with passion and coherence the beauty of the Gospel to the new generations:

O Mary Help of Christians, You inspired in the hearts of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello a strong missionary impulse, giving life to an Institute all your own for the salvation of young people.

Rekindle in us the missionary boldness of our origins.

We thank you for the gift of Sister Maria Troncatti's holiness.

May we, like her, an ardent missionary, hear the voice of Jesus inviting us, «Go and do likewise».

We entrust to you Mother Chiara,

a sign of communion and unity in the Institute.

Support her with your maternal intercession, so that she may continue to be a presence of joy, an artisan of peace and reconciliation.

Bless our educating and missionary communities.

Make us believers joyful and free,

to serve the young people you entrust to us. Amen.

PRAYER

Guide: The Catacombs of Saint Callistus in Rome were visited with devotion and interest by Don Bosco on his first trip to Rome. The chronicles state that Don Bosco entered the Catacombs at 8am and left at 6pm. The visit gave the saint many ideas for writing the lives of martyrs and saints. Some years later, Mother Mazzarello on her trip to Rome also visited these significant catacombs. The chronicles record this fact which speaks of her love and her ability to care for others. Two days after Mother Mazzarello's arrival in Rome (*8 November 1877*) they went to visit the Catacombs.

Through our visit to this holy place, let us allow ourselves to be fascinated by the testimony of the first Christians so that it may lead us to become aware of the sufferings of the Church of yesterday and today.

(pause)

Song: Christ be Our Light (9)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tr5XhaRaL0M>

Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
light for the world to see.

Refrain

Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your church gathered today.



Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has pow'r to save us.
Make us your living voice. (Refrain)

Longing for food, many are hungry.
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us your bread, broken for others,
shared until all are fed. (Refrain)

Guide: Psalm 63 provides a roadmap for a faith-filled life marked by a thirst for God, satisfaction in His love, meditation on His word, and trust in His protection. It emanates a message of hope, resilience, and faith, underscoring the importance of seeking and finding consolation and support in God amidst life's trials.

Psalm 63: My Soul is Thirsting (10)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGxa4a6HGlg>

Refrain

My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord,
thirsting for you, my God.

My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord,
thirsting for you, my God,
thirsting for you, my God.

My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord,
thirsting for you, my God.

My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord,
thirsting for you, my God,
thirsting for you, my God.

O God, you are my God,
and I will always praise you.
In the shadow of your wings

I cling to you and you hold me high. (Refrain)
Through the day you walk with me;
all the night your love surrounds me.
To the glory of your name

I lift my hands; I sing your praise. (Refrain)

I will never be afraid,

for I will not be abandoned.

Even when the road grows long and weary

your love will rescue me. (Refrain)

2 Corinthians 1:3-5

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and God of all encouragement, who encourages us in our every affliction, so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any affliction with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God. For as Christ's sufferings overflow to us, so through Christ does our encouragement also overflow.

Intercessions

Guide: Our Savior's faithfulness is mirrored in the fidelity of his witnesses who shed their blood for the Word of God. Let us praise him in remembrance of them:

You redeemed us by your blood.

- Your martyrs freely embraced death in bearing witness for the faith, give us the true freedom of the Spirit, O Lord.
- Your martyrs professed their faith by shedding their blood, give us a faith, O Lord, that is constant and pure.
- Your martyrs followed in your footsteps by carrying the cross, help us to endure courageously the misfortunes of life.
- Your martyrs washed their garments in the blood of the Lamb, help us to avoid the weaknesses of the flesh and worldly allurements

Guide: Together let us pray, preserve in us, Lord, the manifold riches of your gifts, and through the merits of Jesus Christ our Savior, grant to all people peace and the graces needed to merit it by the good works we are called to do. Through Christ our Lord. Amen



VISIT THE CATACOMBS OF SAINT CALLISTUS

(Ahead of time the participants will be divided into two groups for the guided tour.)



Personal reflection

(After visiting the Catacombs of Saint Callistus, with a partner the participants are invited to spend a few minutes answering one of the below questions. Once the time has finished the participants will gather to listen to the description of Quo Vadis and Fosse Ardeatine.)

Guide: We are invited to think of the life of those people who had to hide, who had the practice of burying the dead and celebrating the Eucharist here... Even today there are persecuted Christians, maybe even more so than in the first centuries. These Christians, who lived in God's presence, are for us women and men of hope. You are invited to take time to reflect on the following questions:

1. Today we can ask ourselves: but me, where do I feel safest: in God's hands or in others, trusting other sources?
2. What image, what words catch my attention and what aspects of our faith does it recall for me?
3. Although faith is a gift from God, it also requires readiness to receive it. What strategies have I developed in my life to nourish my faith?
4. Recall a phrase or an expression of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello that expresses their love for the Church, and their being Church.

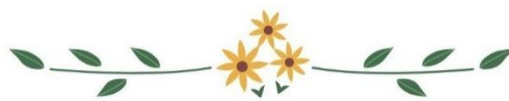
VISIT QUO VADIS OR FOSSE ARDEATINE

*(Participants will have the option of visiting Quo Vadis or Fosse Ardeatine **with one of the animators**. These locations are located outside the grounds of the Catacombs so please keep in mind there is a distance to walk. There is also the option of enjoying the grounds of the Catacombs. Participants must make time to eat lunch before the established departure time.)*

Guide 1: The church of the “*Domine Quo Vadis*” was rebuilt in 1600. It takes its name from the oral tradition according to which the apostle Peter, fleeing from the city to avoid martyrdom, meets Jesus to whom he addresses the following words “*Domine quo vadis (Lord, where are you going)?*” And the Lord replied “*Venio Romam iterum crucifigi (I am coming to Rome to be crucified again)*”. Peter, aware of the rebuke, turns back to face his destiny and Jesus disappears but, in disappearing, he leaves the impressions of his footprints on the road. As evidence of the incident, within the Church there is a stone with the imprints “of His holy feet”, left by Jesus precisely on the site where the Church now stands. (Note: The stone is actually a copy: the original is in fact preserved in the Basilica of San Sebastiano.)



Guide 2: The Fosse Ardeatine Massacre, was a mass killing carried out in Rome on March 24, 1944 by German occupation troops during the Second World War. It was a reprisal for a partisan attack conducted on the previous day in central Rome against the German Police in which the partisans killed 32 policemen. The next day the Germans in turn rounded up 335 male citizens killing them in the Ardeatine Caves. Today, the caves contain a mausoleum with the tombs of the 335 victims of the mass killing.



VISIT THE BASILICA OF SAINT JOHN LATERAN

(in the pullman before arriving at the basilica)



Guide 1: The Cathedral of the Most Holy Savior and of Saints John the Baptist and the Saint John the Evangelist in the Lateran is the oldest and highest ranking of the four papal major basilicas, giving it the unique title of "Archbasilica". Because it is the oldest public church in the city of Rome, it is the oldest and most important basilica of the Western world, and houses the cathedra of the Roman bishop. It has the title of ecumenical mother church of the Catholic faithful

Guide 2: The Basilica of Saint John Lateran is the Cathedral of the diocese of Rome. The Roman Basilica is a symbol of unity of the whole Christian community with Rome and the “mother of all churches”. It reminds us that we are united by the one faith and we all journey towards the same goal.

Personal prayer *(in the Basilica of Saint John Lateran)*

As you walk through the “mother of all churches” silently name the Cathedral of your diocese and pray for all priests, religious and lay persons who serve in your diocese.

VISIT THE BASILICA OF SAINT MARY MAJOR

(in the pullman before arriving at the basilica)



Guide 1: Our Lady, Guide and Protectress of the people of Rome is known by the title the *Helper of the Roman People*. Pope Liberius commissioned the construction of the Liberian basilica around 360. He wanted a sanctuary built on the spot where there was an apparition of the Virgin Mary

to a local nobleman and his wife. According to tradition, the outline of the church was physically drawn on the ground by a miraculous snowfall that occurred on 5 August 358 on the Esquiline Hill. The Basilica is dedicated to Mary, 'Our Lady of the Snow'.

Guide 2: A living Monument to Mary Help of Christians in Mornese: Don Bosco's words to the first FMA: “You now belong to a religious Family that is all of Mary; you are few in number, lacking in means and not supported by human approval. Take heart, let nothing disturb you. Things will soon change and you will have so many girls that you will not know where to put them; and not only girls but also so many postulants that you will be spoilt for choice. Yes, I can assure you that the Institute will have a great future, if you keep yourselves simple, poor, mortified... Have as your glory your title of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and often think that your Institute must be the living monument of Don Bosco's gratitude to the Great Mother of God, invoked under the title of Help of Christians.” *(Cronistoria I, 303)*

Guide 1: Through Mary, Help of Christians Don Bosco creates a religious family on the hills of Mornese, initiated on the same day as in Rome centuries before. A sweet snowfall of fresh and clear flakes fell again on 5 August 1872, on the altar in the chapel of Mornese to spread candor of virtue and faith all around.

Personal prayer *(in the Basilica of Saint Mary Major)*

In this memorable basilica of Mary's intervention in the Church and in our Institute, we pause in prayer and address Mary with Pope Francis' prayer to her:

"Virgin and Mother Mary, you who, moved by the Spirit, welcomed the Word of life in the depths of your humble faith, totally given to God, help us to say our "yes" in these demanding times, to make the Good News of Jesus resound. Obtain for us now a new ardor of hope to bring to all the Gospel of life that conquers death. Confer on us the audacity to seek new paths so that the gift of beauty that does not fade, may reach all. Star of the New Evangelization, help us to shine, witnessing communion, service, an ardent and generous faith, and justice and love for the poor. In so doing may the joy of the Gospel reach the ends of the earth and no periphery be deprived of its light. Mother of the Living Gospel, source of joy for the little ones, pray for us. Amen".

VISIT THE BASILICA OF THE SACRED HEART

(If a guide is not available, one of the animators will guide the tour. The following can be used as an introduction to the tour.)



Guide: The church was intended to be built by Pope IX, and the first stone of the new building was laid down by him in 1870, but because of the annexation of Rome to the Reign of Italy the work was interrupted. Owing to the tenacity of Don Bosco, the construction resumed in 1880 and was completed in 1887. The architect was Francisco Vespignani.

This Basilica was desired by two Popes: Pio IX and Leone XIII. With the help of the dioceses of the Catholic world, it was built by St John Bosco with the assistance of the architect Count Francesco Vespignani, architect of the Holy Buildings from 1881-1887.

(The animator continues the tour highlighting key parts of the Basilica.)

Personal reflection *(in the Basilica of the Sacred Heart)*

An important moment in Don Bosco's life was the Eucharist he celebrated on 16 May 1887 at the altar of Mary Help of Christians... There he understood everything about all his undertakings and Mary's maternal action in his life and mission.

- I re-read my life recognizing the moments in which Mary Help of Christians has had a special intervention and I thank God for this maternal guidance.

Don Bosco led the construction of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, trusting fully in God's Providence and living obedience to the Pope in a heroic way: his strength diminished, his health weakened... but a wish from the Pope was an order for Don Bosco.

- I remember the moments in my life when an obedience was difficult but became fruitful in my life. Thanks to these hidden 'YESs', the Lord has built wonders for the salvation of young people... everything is grace... I remember and thank the Lord.



MASS *(Casa Sacro Cuore)*

Prayers of the Faithful

Celebrant: Let us pray together as we say:

Lord, help us to love one another.

1. For Pope Leo XIV: that he may continue to be, by word and example, the voice and hope of those living in situations of material, moral and spiritual poverty. May we, with him, “in a world suffering the impacts of war and the climate crisis”, be bearers of peace in any way we can in our own realities; we pray to the Lord.

2. For the Church and in particular for our sisters and brothers who are called to bear witness to the faith today through martyrdom, that the Lord may give them the strength to face this moment with joy and courage, we pray to the Lord.
3. For the leaders of nations and international agencies, that they may seek with a righteous conscience what benefits progress and not be corrupted by the lure of money and power, we pray to the Lord.
4. For peace in the world, hear Lord the cry of pain of those who suffer and implore an end to violence, and grant those who promote peace to persevere in doing good towards those most marginalized, we pray to the Lord.
5. For all of us pilgrims in these holy places, that we may be open to the foreseeing love of God the Father, who has called us to follow Jesus Christ more closely, and confirm our resolutions of holiness, making us strong and firm in faith, we pray to the Lord.



(Rosary in pullman)

ROSARY

(The Mysteries of Light will be prayed beginning with the opening prayer and omitting the litany.)

Opening prayer: Faithful to the spirit and mission of Don Bosco, we Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, allow ourselves to be guided and sustained by the maternal presence of the Blessed Virgin for an ever-fuller gift to the Lord so as to bear witness to God's love for young people. With this love we pray the Rosary for peace in the world, for Christians who suffer in various ways.



ADDITIONAL READING

Cronistoria of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Vol II
Don Bosco a Roma-Venti Viaggi nella Città Eterna, edited by Fr. Antonio Sperduti.
ANS - 12 June 2017

DON BOSCO IN ROME

The **Catacombs of San Callistus in Rome** were visited with devotion and interest by Don Bosco on his first trip to Rome. The chronicles say that Don Bosco entered the Catacombs at 8am and left at 6pm. The visit offered the saint many ideas for writing the lives of the Martyrs and Saints.



Let us recall some facts about the Catacombs of St Callistus. They are located on the right side of the Via Appia Antica, after the little church of '*Quo Vadis*'.

The Catacombs of San Callisto are among the largest and most important in Rome. They were created in the mid-2nd century and are part of a cemetery complex occupying an area of 15 hectares, with a network of tunnels almost 20 kilometers long, on different levels, and reaching a depth of more than 20 meters. They take their name from the deacon St Callistus who, in the early 3rd century, was appointed by Pope Zephyrinus to administer the cemetery, and so the Catacombs of St Callistus became the official cemetery of the Church of Rome.

In the 1st century, the Christians of Rome had no cemeteries of their own. If they owned land, they buried their dead there, otherwise they resorted to the common cemeteries also used by non-Christians. This is why St Peter was buried in the *necropolis (city of the dead)* on the Vatican Hill, which was open to all. St Paul was also buried in a *necropolis* on the Via Ostiense.

These Catacombs were the official cemetery of the Church of Rome in the 3rd century where dozens of martyrs, 16 pontiffs and many Christians were buried. *Since 1930 they have been entrusted to the guardianship of the Salesians of Don Bosco.*

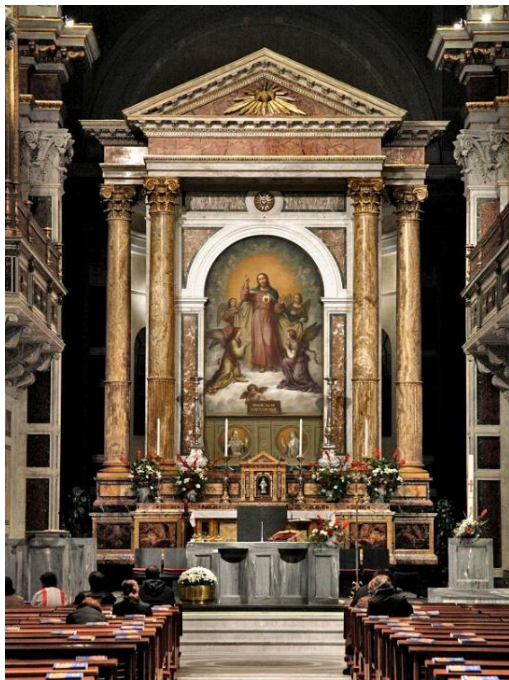
The underground cemetery consists of several areas. The Crypt of the Popes is the most sacred and important place in these catacombs, called 'the little Vatican' because 9 popes and probably 8 dignitaries of the 3rd century Church were buried there. Along the walls are the original inscriptions in Greek of 5 popes. On four gravestones, next to the name of the pontiff is the title 'bishop', because the pope was considered the head of the Church of Rome, and on two gravestones there is also the Greek abbreviation for 'MPT' (*martyr*).

The Statue of St Cecilia is a copy of the famous work by Maderno, sculpted in 1599. The crypt was decorated with frescoes and mosaics. On the wall next to the statue is an ancient image of St Cecilia in a praying attitude. Further down, in a small niche is a depiction of the Savior, holding the Gospel. Next to it, is a painting of the martyred Pope, St Urban. On one wall of the skylight are the figures of three martyrs: Polycamus, Sebastian and Quirinus. These are the oldest depicted paintings (*2nd century*).

Passing through imposing galleries full of niches, one comes to five small rooms, real family tombs, called Sacrament Cubicles which are particularly important for their frescoes. The frescoes date from the early 3rd century and symbolically represent the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. The prophet Jonah, symbol of resurrection, is also depicted there.

The beautiful image of the Good Shepherd in the Catacombs makes one think of Don Bosco, the founder. An attentive observer with a passionate heart for his mission, looks to Don Bosco who walked and visited the humblest of abodes and walked the corridors of the most sumptuous of places always with the gaze of a caring father, willing to give his life for 'his' boys. He responded promptly to any need and then planned for the future, leaving it to Providence to dispose of the ways and means. (*Don Bosco a Roma-Venti Viaggi nella Città Eterna, edited by Fr. Antonio Sperduti*)

The Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Rome, where Don Bosco wept during Mass



Rome, Italy - On April 5, 1880, Pope Leo XIII invited Don Bosco to take the initiative to build a church in honor of the "Sacred Heart of Jesus", specifying that he had no funds to offer him.

The Piedmontese priest accepted on one condition: expanding the work to include "a large hostel, where poor young people, extremely numerous, especially in this very neighborhood, can be housed, and started off in schools for arts and crafts." (*Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, "John Bosco, the Life of the Venerable Servant of God", vol. 2).*

The building cost the elderly Don Bosco an incredible effort, but on May 14, 1887, it was consecrated. The Saint of young people celebrated Mass there for the last time on May 16, 1887, during which he "often wept on contemplating his life." In 1921, Pope Benedict XV declared the temple of the "Sacred Heart of Jesus" as Minor Basilica.

Basilica of the Sacred Heart, Rome



The church was intended to be built by Pope IX, and the first stone of the new building was laid down by him in 1870, but because of the annexation of Rome to the Reign of Italy the work was interrupted. Owing to the tenacity of Don Bosco, the construction resumed in 1880 and was completed in 1887. The architect was Francisco Vespignani.

"In this Temple My Eyes and My Heart will always be waiting for You"

(Don Bosco)

This Basilica was desired by two Popes: Pio IX and Leone XIII. With the help of the dioceses of the Catholic world, it was built by St John Bosco with the assistance of the architect Count Francesco Vespignani, architect of the Holy Buildings from 1881-1887.

It was patterned in the Bramante Style, Latin Cross Shaped, constructed with classical timeless elegance. The majestic Church was built on the Esquillino Hill in Rome within the Aurelian walls. Its bell tower is the highest point in Rome. This was the first parish Church built after the capture of Rome and it became a parish in February 2, 1879.



On the right side, one can find Confalonieri's marble statue of Pope Pio IX, friend of Don Bosco, who was responsible for the acquisition of the land on Esquillino Hill on where the basilica was to be built. Over this statue is an admirable portrait of Pope Leone XIII, who wanted Don Bosco to build this Church.

This is followed by the St. Maria Domenica Mazzarello altar, the co-foundress of the FMA. Her image was painted by Crida in 1966. Originally the altar was dedicated to St. Luigi.

After that is the altar dedicated to St. Francesco di Sales, the patron of the Salesian Family and of the journalists. At the end of the right side the altar of St. Joseph. Here Don Bosco celebrated Mass very often.

Originally Pio IX, who bought the ground to build this Church, wanted to dedicate it to St. Joseph. However, after discussion with several people about the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, he changed his mind dedicating it to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The picture over the altar, located there in 1893, is from Giuseppe Rollini, ex-pupil of Don Bosco at Valdocco.

Over the door towards the sacristy, there is a plaque to commemorate the date of the Church Consecration on May 14, 1887.



The main centerpiece is the High Altar, coming from the town of Siena. It was taken down from the Church of St. Francis to be restored and it was sold, together with other marble to Don Bosco. With a height of 16 meters, the columns are exquisitely made of alabaster, while the rest of the Altar is made of precious California marbles. The Tabernacle is of great value for its precious marbles and precious stones.

At the center of the Altar is a rendition from Francesco de Rohden (1817-1903), this master painter was the last of the so-called Nazarenes painters. The wall behind the Altar was built in 1969 by Ficini the architect and Mariani the painter to separate the Church from the chorus.

To the sides of the Altar, were five lamps burning as they represent the five continents. The dome was painted by Virginio Monti (1852-1942), representing the glorification of the Holy Heart.

From this point, turning around one can see that the Church is Latin Cross shaped, and the ceiling is rich in frescoes and pictures. At the transept, in the center one can see the Salesian Coat of Arms made of wood by Andrea Bevilacqua. The roofs frescoes are all by Virginio Monti.

Going on in the nave, the eight Basento granite columns can be sighted. The dimensions of this Church are 28 meters in length and 30 meters in width. Don Bosco wanted to change the original plan and added 28 meters to its length. On the two sides of the nave, there are bishops, popes, patriarchs and Fathers of the Church busts, which indicate the universality of the basilica.

Above are painted the Twelve Prophets by Cesare Caroselli (1847-1927). He also made the Apostles and the Evangelists frescoes that are placed on the pendentives of the transept and on the nearby walls.

In the center of the ceiling of the nave stands out the Sacred Heart carved in golden wood by Andrea Bevilacqua, also the author for all the other wooden bass reliefs.

Over the main door, there is a plaque which explains the reason for the name of the Church. Above there are three stained glass windows representing Jesus, St. Peter and St. Paul. The Salesian College of Alassio gifted the basilica with two holy-water basins.

Turning right, one finds a precious Carrara marble baptismery by Petertongo which was a gift from the Trento diocese.

This is followed by the altar dedicated to St. Anne and St. Joachim with a painting from Guido Guidi (1991). Further one there is the altar dedicated to St. John Bosco and St. Dominic Savio. Noteworthy are the two exceptional columns coming from an ancient Roman temple, it was a presented by a rich family. The lower part was remade in occasion of Don Bosco's canonization by architect Guerra Baldellie. The expenses for the renovations were paid for by a rich Roman family.

The painting is by Giuseppe Crida (1934), who also made the Candoglia marble bass reliefs. The Tabernacle is adorned with precious stones.

Finally, one finds the altar dedicated to Mary, Help of Christians. It was originally installed at St. Teresa's Church, situated in the corner between Via XX Settembre and Via della Consulta. Then it was taken down and lodged in Villa Torlonia (*in Via Nomentana*) until finally installed in this church.

The center painting is by Giuseppe Rollin, who painted the picture of St. Joseph too. He was inspired by Our Lady of Ovverbuk. The diadems crown and the scepter, blessed by Giovanni XXIII on his deathbed in 1961, were placed there by the Cardinal Paolo Marella in the name of the Vatican Chapter on May 31, 1963.



It was in this Altar where Don Bosco celebrated the Holy Mass on May 16, 1887. Here he stopped for fifteen times crying, realizing the words of his nine-year dream "At the right time you will understand everything." At this Altar, as he was reviewing his life, he understood the meaning of these words. On May 16, 1987 a plaque was placed to commemorate its centennial anniversary.

History of the Front of the Church

Don Bosco invited Leone XIII to be responsible for the building of the front, but for many reasons, he was unable to do it. So the Italian Catholics decided to make a national vow for its building, thanking God for having avoided the cholera plague in 1885. Financial contributions came from all the bishops and many public institutions.

Finished in neoclassical style in Travertino marble from Tivoli, crafted by artists such as Benzoni, Pantorese and Baroni who worked on it. The stained-glass windows are a work of the Mosaic Company of Venice. The Leone XIII shield is by Geipi.

The statues of the saints which crowns the front of the Church should have been four: St. Francis of Sales by Baroni, St. Augustine by Pantorese, St. Teresa of Avila and St. Margaret Alacoque, these last two were never made. The two angels under the Cross are by Angelo Benzoni.

