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# THE ROMAN CROSS

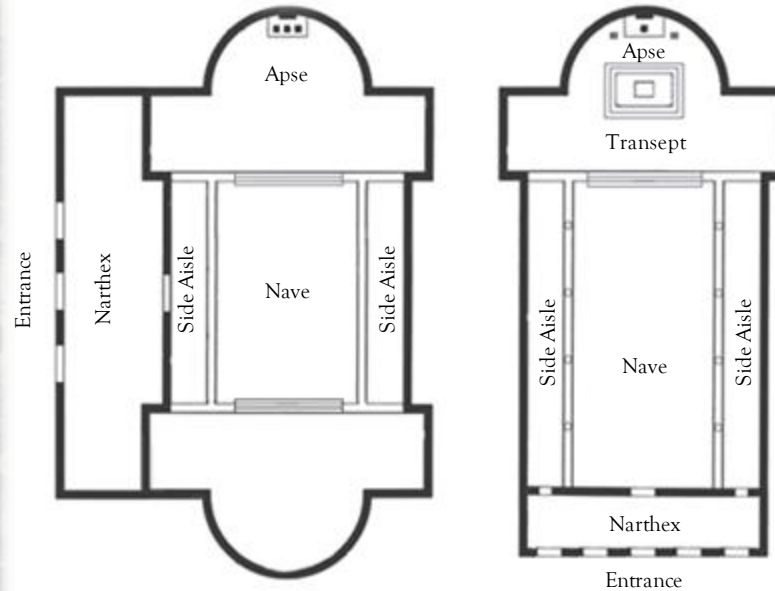
A chronology of the plan and style of the Roman Church  
Andrew Fraser | Honors Rome Trip 2014



# TRANSFORMATION OF THE ROMAN BASILICA

From Chaotic Center of Business to Reverent Place of Worship

The Roman basilica began as a large, bustling public building used to house business and legal interactions. The first basilicas began to appear in the first century BC and became immensely popular as the economic center of a city. These secular basilicas were typically entered through an exterior porch, or narthex, on the long side and consisted of a high center nave flanked by shorter side aisles that were separated by arcades or colonnades. Clerestory windows were placed in the upper walls of the nave above the side aisles to allow plenty of light to enter the space. The early Roman basilica usually had a raised apse on one end of the nave where magistrates sat. The ceilings of these buildings were typically barrel vaults that spanned the length of the building.



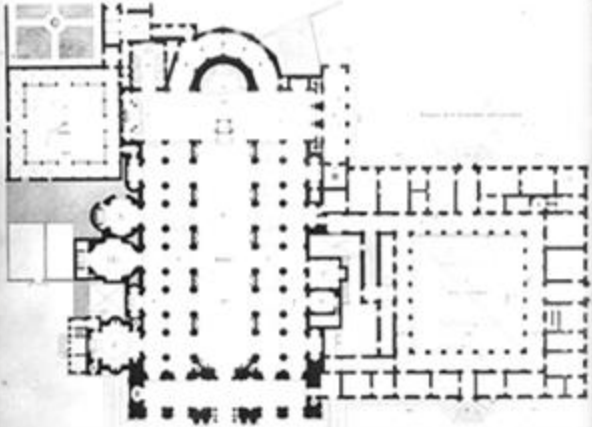
Once Christianity became legal in the Roman Empire, the emperor Constantine set out to build many places for new Christians to worship. The most logical building type to use was the basilica due to its size and ease of construction. In order to adapt to its new purpose, the basilica was built with the entrance and narthex on the short side of the building. The nave and side aisle layout were preserved, although chapels were built along the exterior sides of the side aisles. One of the largest differences was the implementation of the transept, typically with a special architectural feature in the center, as a symbol of Christ's death on the cross. The apse was preserved, although it now housed an altar or served as a special place for the bishop or choir.



# SAN GIOVANNI IN LATERANO

Founded: 4<sup>th</sup> Century | Style: Early Christian, Renaissance, Baroque, Neoclassical

Notable Architects: Alessandro Galilei, Giacomo della Porta, Domenico Fontana, Francesco Borromini



- Large plaza leading up to basilica
- 18<sup>th</sup> century two-story, neoclassical façade with a full spanning loggia (open air gallery) and balconies by Alessandro Galilei
- Tall narthex with hexagon coffered barrel vault ceiling
- Five entry doors with wide, bronze center doors from the Roman Curia
- Traditional floor plan with center nave, transept, and flanking side aisles lined with chapels
- Tall, wide nave with flat, gilded wooden ceiling in Renaissance style
- Large granite piers and Roman arches separate central nave from inner side aisles
- Traditional transept with altars on each end
- Double side aisle (of differing heights) with smooth groin vaults
- Granite colonnades separate the inner and outer side aisles
- Small chapels of different size, shape, and style lining each side aisle
- Apse remains in 13<sup>th</sup> century form with an ambulatory wrapping around it
- Baldachin from the 14<sup>th</sup> century in center of transept
- Cloister connecting to the transept from the 13<sup>th</sup> century

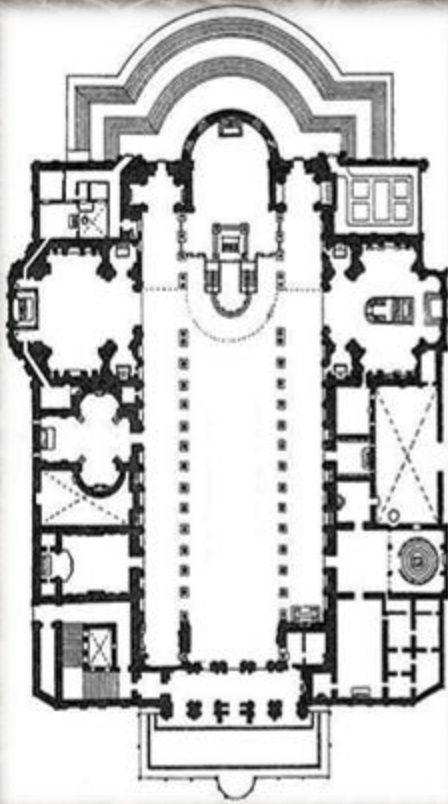


As the first basilica built once the Roman Empire adopted Christianity, the original floor plan of St. John Lateran set the precedent for the future of the Roman church. The structure that stands today dates to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and still exhibits traces of its early beginnings despite its Baroque style. The plan of the church is traditional, with a large nave and side aisles, but features an additional set of side aisles, which is mirrored in the 18<sup>th</sup> century façade. Francesco Borromini, the designer of the interior, juxtaposes the Renaissance style ceiling in the nave with Baroque style ceiling of the side aisles, a move that emphasizes the dynamic qualities of Baroque architecture.



# SANTA MARIA MAGGIORE

Founded: 5<sup>th</sup> Century | Style: Early Christian, Renaissance, Baroque | Notable Architects: Fernando Fuga, Giuliano da Sangallo



- Plaza with obelisk in front of the church
- 18<sup>th</sup> century façade with screening loggia (open air gallery) on upper level in Baroque style
- Traditional narthex entry with barrel vault ceiling
- Three doors in end of nave for entry
- Traditional basilica floor plan with center nave, side aisles, and transept
- Tall center nave with clerestory windows and a flat ceiling with 16<sup>th</sup> century gold coffers in the Renaissance style
- Long granite colonnades separating nave and side aisles
- Transept that appears more as part of the nave than as a separate crossing
- Small dome in center of transept
- Side aisles with barrel vault ceiling
- Small chapels lining the exterior walls of each side aisle
- Apse with 13<sup>th</sup> century mosaics and chapels flanking
- Medieval bell tower that is the highest in Rome at 240 feet

Another classic example of the floor plan of the early Roman church, Santa Maria Maggiore has the traditional nave and transept combination forming a Latin cross. Although rebuilt since its original form, the floor plan of this church has remained exactly the same and does an excellent job of creating an opening feeling between the nave and the two side aisles. In contrast to other basilicas of this era, Santa Maria Maggiore has side aisles that seemingly dead-end at the altar and only break the line of the colonnade for a brief time at the transept. The transept in this church is a variation of the typical form since it seems merely implied through the two large chapels at the ends of both side aisles.





# SANTA MARIA SOPRA MINERVA

Founded: 13<sup>th</sup> Century | Style: Gothic, Renaissance | Notable Architects: Sisto Fiorentino, Ristoro da Campi



- Small plaza in front of church with obelisk by Bernini
- Plain 17<sup>th</sup> century façade with three small doors and small round windows
- No narthex – entry straight into nave
- Traditional floor plan with center nave, transept, and side aisles flanked by chapels
- Tall center nave with ribbed groin vaults, rich blue paint, and gilded stars in a 19<sup>th</sup> century Gothic style
- Stained glass, rose-shaped clerestory windows
- Arcade of gothic arches separating the center nave from the side aisles
- Side aisles flanking nave with ribbed groin vaults and large gothic arches separating bays
- Small chapels of varying size, style, and shape
- Small, ribbed apse with stained glass windows

The only Gothic style church in Rome, Santa Maria sopra Minerva still maintains the standard floor plan of a traditional Roman basilica. What sets this basilica apart, instead, is the stark contrast between its simple Renaissance façade and elaborate Gothic interior. The pointed Gothic arches and vaults of the interior give this basilica a tall, airy feeling. The nave ceiling is a repetitive ribbed groin vault that extends the length of the church, completely ignoring any intersection with the transept, and painted a brilliant shade of blue. This ribbing is continued into the apse, making an elongation of the nave.

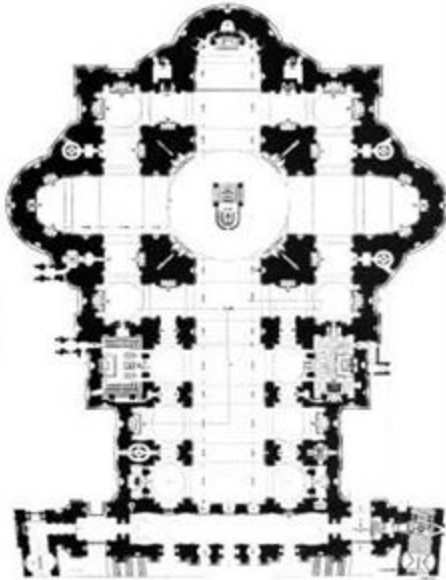




# SAN PIETRO IN VATICANO

Founded: 16<sup>th</sup> Century | Style: Renaissance, Baroque

Notable Architects: Donato Bramante, Michelangelo, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Giacomo della Porta, Carlo Maderno



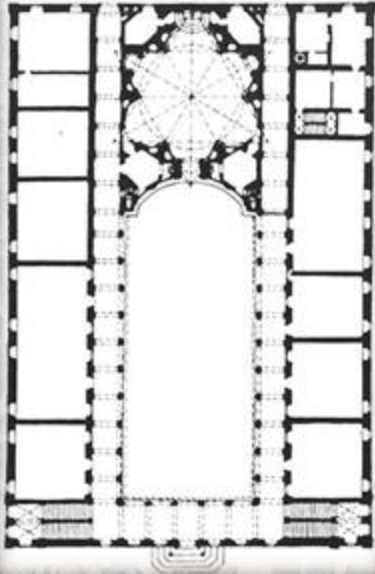
- Massive plaza and portico (St. Peter's Square) in front of the basilica designed by Bernini
- Façade designed by Carlo Maderno with many large windows and balconies
- Two clocks located on either side of the façade
- Traditional narthex with ornate barrel vault
- Latin cross floor plan with square ring around transept and individual rooms instead of traditional side aisles
- Towering nave with coffered barrel vault ceiling and clerestory windows
- Massive granite piers separate nave from the implied side aisles
- Parabolic dome over transept designed by Michelangelo and supported only by four massive granite piers
- Lantern on top of the dome capped with a spire
- Side aisles formed by a succession of small rooms of the same size and shape, but with unique styles and small domes
- Smaller chapels and altars on side aisles with unique designs and ornamented ceilings
- 90 foot tall Baldacchino designed by Bernini with bronze from the Pantheon
- Apse (Cathedra of St. Peter) with large monument known as St. Peter's throne made of gilded bronze by Bernini

As the largest basilica in Rome, St. Peter's is unique in the size and scale of its architectural design and interior ornamentation. The large scale of the church is a reflection of its status as the heart of Catholicism and is intensified by architectural features such as the long coffered barrel vault in the nave, massive piers supporting the dome, and the infinite appearance of the dome. In an interesting contrast to the traditional style, the side aisles of St. Peter's are implied through a succession of small "rooms" that hold altars or lead to chapels. The square ring around the center of the transept is a major change from the typical floor plan and indicates the creative freedom architects will begin to take with the layout of the Roman church.



# SANT'IVO ALLA SAPIENZA

Founded: 17<sup>th</sup> Century | Style: Baroque | Notable Architects: Francesco Borromini



- Exterior courtyard formed by a late 16<sup>th</sup> century palazzo designed by Giacomo della Porta
- Façade that juxtaposes concave and convex forms and integrates the arcades of the neighboring palazzo
- Entrance on lower corner of star – no narthex, nave, transept, or side aisles
- Plan derived from the superimposition of two triangles to form a Star of David with alternating convex and concave ends
- Six part ceiling that converges in a perfect circle at the base of the lantern
- Spire with alternating convex and concave architecture that takes the form of a spiral staircase
- Simple decoration – white walls and minimal ornamentation
- Altars in each of the corners of the star – chapels formed by seats, not walls



As popular architects began to experiment with architectural forms as a part of the Baroque movement, the floor plan of the Roman church changed drastically. No longer laid out in the typical nave – side aisle – transept plan, Sant'Ivo has a plan in the shape of the Star of David. Borromini plays with convex and concave forms throughout the church, most notably in the outline of the ceiling. Without side aisles and chapels, Sant'Ivo incorporated altars into the main area of the plan, making the church seem more intimate and yet less private all at once. Interestingly, the interaction between the church and the neighboring palazzo seems to maintain the idea of the narthex, but in the form of an arcaded courtyard instead of a porch.





# SANT'ANDREA AL QUIRINALE

Founded: 17<sup>th</sup> Century | Style: Baroque | Notable Architects: Gian Lorenzo Bernini



- Approach directly from the street – no special plaza or courtyard
- Simple façade of two tall Corinthian pilasters with a single entry door under a semicircular porch
- Oval shape of church visible from exterior and reflected in staircase approaching entry
- Simple entry directly into main space
- Oval floor plan with nine small altars around its perimeter
- One space – lack of nave, side aisles, or transept
- Elliptical dome with shrinking hexagonal coffers and rays to make the ceiling appear to extend to infinity



Another example of the variation of floor plan in the Roman church during the Baroque period, Sant'Andrea al Quirinale has an oval shaped floor plan. The basilica exists as one simple room with nine altars equally spaced along its perimeter. Considerably smaller than its predecessors, Sant'Andrea al Quirinale relies heavily on the optical illusion of the ceiling to make the space seem grander. In an interesting delineation from the past, the lack of narthex in Sant'Andrea al Quirinale allows entry directly into the heart of the church, making the basilica seem much more exposed and public.



# REFLECTION

## My Encounter with the Roman Basilica

In the months leading up to my trip to Rome, the last thing I was thinking about was my excitement to see a bunch of centuries-old churches. I was well aware that Rome was the heart of the Catholic world, but I was much more interested in secular monuments like the Colosseum and Pantheon. Nevertheless, I'm still a bit surprised that the basilicas of Rome had such a large impact on me.

I will never forget the first basilica we visited – Santa Maria Maggiore. We were fresh off the plane and hadn't even seen our hotel rooms before we were whisked away to see our first sights. Walking up to the basilica, I wasn't quite sure where we were even headed, but I was excited to be out among the sights and smells of Rome. We got to the plaza in front of the church and I was amazed – the façade was so beautiful, old, elaborate, and immense. We dropped into the crowd and hustled our way through the entry doors and I was completely blown away. Words cannot capture the feeling and energy within the basilica. I immediately went into sensory overload when I tried to take in all of the ornamentation that covered every single surface of the church. I was so awed at the beauty of the interior of the basilica.

This became my standard experience as we visited more and more churches during our tours of Rome. I began to look past the immense amounts of decoration of the churches in search of particular sculptures, artworks, or architectural features that spoke to me in particular. I began to notice the intricate details of each church and saw each basilica as a unique place of worship. Each time I wandered around a different basilica, I was blown away when I began to think of all of the different people throughout history that had visited that particular place.

In each of the many churches we visited in Rome, I tried to make a conscious effort to reflect on my relationship with God and the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made for my sins. Although I'm a Protestant follower of Christianity, I was still very emotionally tied to these basilicas as places to worship and pray. It was special for me to see the relics of Christianity and to appreciate these places as sites of important Christian events. I also picked up on many of the intricate differences between Protestants and Catholics, which gave me a new perspective on Christianity as a whole.

On our final afternoon in Rome, I made a special effort to make it to San Giovanni in Laterano. I knew it was the oldest basilica in the Christian faith, and subsequently had been the seat of the Catholic faith for many centuries, and so I knew a visit was a priority. I was surprised when none of the other students wanted to join me, but I was determined to make it there, even if it meant riding the metro alone. As with all of the other basilicas, I was blown away at the size and intricate decoration of San Giovanni, especially its double side aisle. Once I began to wander around the church, I realized that I was glad that none of my classmates joined me – it allowed me more time and peacefulness to reflect on our trip to Rome. I sat in the basilica for nearly half an hour thinking of the sights I'd seen, the jokes I'd developed with my peers, and how much the ancient city had impacted me. I loved my visit to Rome and left with a much broader appreciation for art, architecture, culture, and religion.