

TRASTEVERE WALK

*From the Tiber to the Church of
Santa Maria in Trastevere*



Trastevere—the colorful neighborhood across the river from downtown—is *the* place to immerse yourself in the crustier side of Rome. This half-mile walk is designed to train your eye to see Rome more intimately. In Trastevere (trahs-TAY-veh-ray), you'll discover a secret, hidden city of heroic young martyrs, lovers kissing on Vespas, party-loving Renaissance bankers, and feisty "Trasteverini"—old-timers who pride themselves on never setting foot on the opposite bank of the Tiber River.

Orientation

Length of This Walk: Allow 1.5 hours. With limited time, taxi directly to Santa Maria in Trastevere. You'll still capture plenty of ambience.

When to Go: This walk can work well at any time of day. Mornings are cool and relatively quiet. Note that many churches are closed at midday, and Villa Farnesina closes at 14:00 Mon-Sat (and is closed Sun—except on second Sun of the month). Strolling through Trastevere at dusk is especially atmospheric. Consider combining this walk with a meal or as a prelude to my Heart of Rome Walk (see page 110).

Getting There: Trastevere is on the west side of the Tiber River, south of Vatican City and across the river from the Forum and Capitoline Hill area. To get there by foot from Capitoline Hill, cross the Tiber using the bridges linked to Isola Tiberina: the Ponte Fabricio and Ponte Cestio. You can also reach Trastevere on tram #8 from Piazza Venezia or Largo Argentina, or on express bus #H from Termini train station or Piazza della Repubblica (on the northeast side of the square, near the entrance to the Baths of Diocletian); if taking either of these,

get off at Sonnino/Piazza Belli, just after crossing the Tiber. From the Vatican (Piazza Risorgimento), take bus #23 or #271 to the Lungotevere Alberteschi stop (a short walk from Isola Tiberina).

Church of Santa Cecilia: Free, Mon-Sat 9:30-12:30 & 16:00-18:30, Sun 16:00-18:30; crypt-€2.50, opens 30 minutes after church; loft with frescoes-€2.50, same hours as crypt but sometimes closed in the afternoon, closed Sun; tel. 06-4549-2739.

Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere: Free, daily 8:30-21:00.

Villa Farnesina: €6, Mon-Sat 9:00-14:00, closed Sun (except open 9:00-17:00 on second Sun of the month), last entry 30 minutes before closing.

Tour: You can download this chapter as a free Rick Steves audio tour (see page 8).

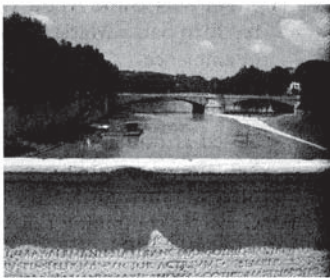
Eateries: Several recommended restaurants are on the map and described in the Eating in Rome chapter (see page 386).

The Walk Begins

• Start halfway across the *Ponte Cestio* (*Cestius Bridge*)—called the *"Ponte Fabricio"* on the east side of the river—which connects *Isola Tiberina* ("Island in the Tiber") to *Trastevere*.

1 Isola Tiberina and the Tiber River

Rome got its start 3,000 years ago along the Tiber River at this point. This was as far upstream as big boats could sail and the first place the river could be crossed by bridge. As a center of river trade, Rome connected the interior of the Italian peninsula with the Mediterranean. The area below you would have been bustling in ancient times. Look down and imagine small ports, water mills, ramshackle boats, and platforms for fishing.



The island itself was once the site of a temple dedicated to Asclepius, the god of medicine. Ancient Romans who were ill spent the night here and left little statues of their healed body parts (feet, livers, hearts...) as thank-you notes. This tradition survives: Today, throughout Italy, Catholic altars are often encrusted with votive offerings, symbolizing gratitude for answered prayers. During plagues and epidemics, the sick were isolated on the island. These days, the island's largest building is the Fatebenefratelli, the public hospital favored by

Roman women for childbirth. The island's reputation for medical care lives on.

The high point of the **bridge** (upon which you're probably leaning) is an ancient stone with a faded inscription dating from about A.D. 370, when this then-400-year-old bridge was rebuilt. The eroding plaque is stapled into the balustrade like a piece of recycled scrap. Run your fingers over the word "Caesar" (top line, just right of center). This part of the Tiber River flooded frequently, which devalued the land on the north bank; in time it would become the site of the Jewish ghetto (started in the 16th century, but now long gone, though Rome's synagogue remains—❖ see the Jewish Ghetto Walk chapter).

In the 1870s, the Romans removed the threat of flooding by practically walling off the Tiber, building the tall, anonymous embankments that continue to isolate the river from the city today.

• *Head south to leave the bridge. If open, the green riverside Sora Mirella kiosk on the right (run by Mirella's son, Stefano) is the most famous vendor of Rome's summer refresher called a grattachecca (pronounced grab-tab-kek-kab, €4), a concoction of shaved ice with fruit-flavored syrup and chopped fruit (similar to a granita). Cross the street and go down the steps into the car-filled piazza.*

❶ Piazza in Piscinula

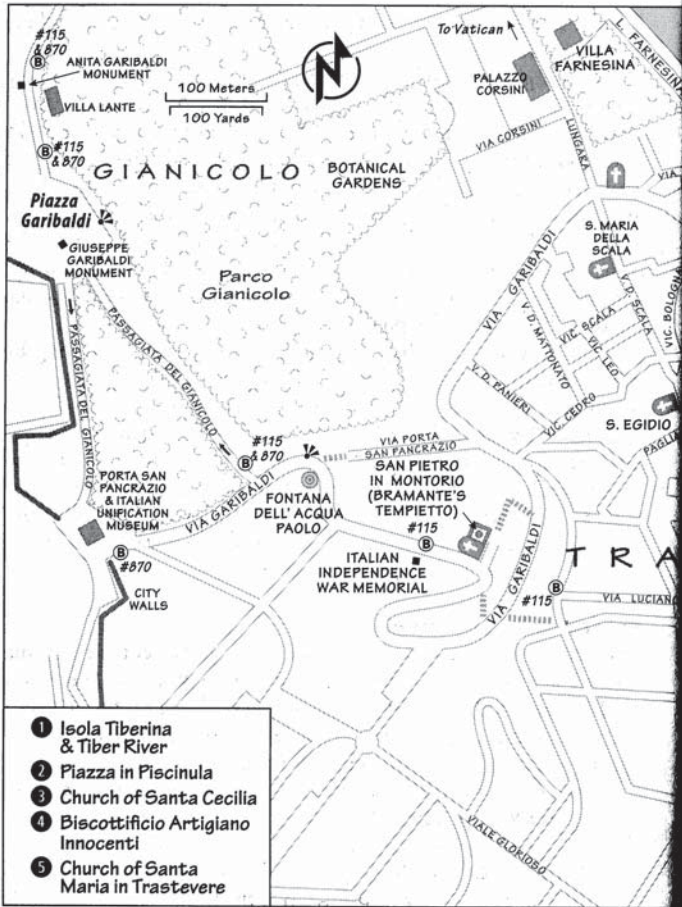
This square is famous for its church bell tower (the cute little thing directly across from the bridge); dating from 1069, it's the oldest working one in the city. Study the brown building on the riverside and spot faint traces of Renaissance decoration. Today's earth-tone shades of the city echo this original Roman brown.

• *Facing the tower, exit the square from the far-right corner, opposite where you entered, going uphill on Via dell'Arco de' Tolomei.*

Trastevere Back Lanes

Look up and directly ahead to the top of the hill to see the elegantly restored, freshly painted **tower** sandwiched between apartments. In medieval times, the city skyline had 300 of these towers (about 50 survive). Each noble family competed for the tallest one until, in about 1250, city authorities got fed up and had them all lopped off. Later (mainly Baroque) construction incorporated most of the remaining "stumps," and you can still see these remnants of medieval Rome all over the old center. Incorporating old structures into new ones was always considered more economical and practical than demolishing and starting again from scratch. In the Middle Ages, Rome had regressed to being a big village; any idea of town planning was lost until the Renaissance.

Notice the plants spilling over the many rooftop terraces—the



Roman equivalent of a leafy backyard. An *attico con terrazzo* (penthouse with a terrace) is every Roman's dream.

Continue on, walking under the low arch. Lots of aristocratic buildings were connected by these elevated passages. Imagine herds of sheep shuffling through here in medieval times while smoke billowed from the windows and doors of homes that lacked chimneys. • Turn left and walk along *Via dei Salumi* ("Cold Cuts Street").

Because of its vicinity to the river, Trastevere was always a commercial neighborhood, and many of its alleys were named after businesses based here. The streets—rarely paved—were clogged by shop stalls.

The red-brown building on your right (pretty ugly unless

Agostino had his wedding banquet in this room. His parties were the talk of the town. On one occasion, he invited his guests in the (now lost) dining loggia overlooking the Tiber to toss the gold and silver dishes they had just used into the river. (The banker had nets conveniently placed just below the river's surface.)

The small chamber at the end of the Room of the Perspectives was the **bedroom**. The painting on the wall depicts the wedding of



Alexander the Great and Roxanne. Roxanne has the features of Agostino's bride, and the bed is the jewel-encrusted ebony bed that received Agostino and his bride here in this room. On the entrance wall, find the three-arched ruins of the Basilica of Constantine in the Forum. The room was painted by Il Sodoma, a devoted fan of Michelangelo and one of the artists who was canned when Raphael took over the decoration of the

papal apartments at the Vatican. Had that not happened, the Raphael Rooms at the Vatican might have looked like this.

Agostino had famous affairs with the most beautiful courtesans of his day. He eventually settled down, but his wild-living descendants didn't, and—in the space of a couple of generations—the Chigi family lost its fabulous fortune.

nymphs announce the pagan spirit revived in Renaissance Rome. All the painting's lines of sight (especially the cupids' arrows) point to the center of the work, Galatea's radiant face. Galatea is considered Raphael's vision of female perfection—not a portrait of an individual woman, but a composite of his many lovers in an idealized vision.

• *Continue into Room 2.*

Loggia of Psyche: This room was painted by Raphael and his assistants. Imagine it without the glass windows, as a continuation of the garden outside, where plays were performed to entertain

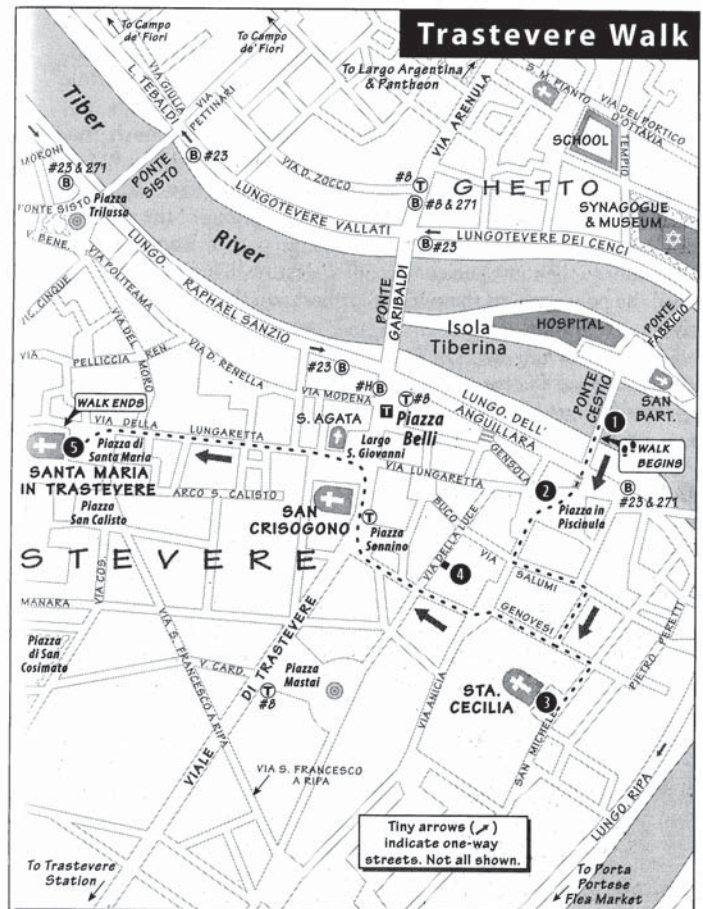
Agostino's guests. Raphael's two ceiling frescoes were painted to look like tapestries (complete with ruffled edges), suspended from the ceiling by garlands, making the room appear to be an open bower. View the frescoes from the top, with your back to the garden. The ceiling shows episodes in the myth of a lovely mortal woman, Psyche, who caught the eye of the winged boy-god Cupid (Eros). See the loving couple at the far left end, at the base of the ceiling. The big ceiling fresco on the left depicts the gods of Olympus gathered to plan a series of ordeals to test whether Psyche is worthy to marry a god. (Find Hercules with white beard and club, and Dionysius pouring the wine.) The other shows the happy ending, as Cupid (boy with wings) and Psyche (to his left, in topless robe) stand before Zeus to celebrate their wedding feast, attended by the pantheon of gods.



The whole setting—the room by the gardens, the subject of the frescoes, the fleshy bodies—has an erotic subtext. At the time, Raphael was having a passionate affair with the celebrated Fornarina (the “baker's daughter,” who lived down the street). Agostino, noticing that his painter was constantly interrupting his workday to be with her, had the girl kidnapped so that Raphael would finally concentrate. But production slowed even more, as Raphael was depressed. Agostino gave up and had the Fornarina move in with Raphael to keep him company as he happily resumed work in this cheery room. The room's imagery abounds with images both phallic and yonic (the female counterpart of phallic). Next to the ripe and split-open cantaloupe (right end, base of ceiling), find the gourd wearing a condom.

• *Upstairs, accessed from the stairway near the entrance, is the...*

Room of the Perspectives: Peruzzi, another trendsetter, painted this room. Walls seem to open onto views and perspectives that actually correspond with what lies outside. The insulting-to-Catholics graffiti (for example, on the wall at the far end) dates from 1527, when Protestant mercenaries sent by Charles V sacked the city.



you're a fascist) is a **school from the Mussolini era**. The fascist leader believed in the classical motto *mens sana in corpore sano* (“a healthy mind in a healthy body”), and loved being seen fencing, boxing, swimming, and riding. He endowed school buildings with lots of gyms.

• *After passing the school, turn right again, heading up Vicolo dell'Atleta (“Alley of the Athlete”).*

Check out the latest fashions in underwear hanging out to dry. Apartments in Rome tend to be quite small, and electricity is more expensive than in the US, so few have clothes dryers.

Strolling here, you'll understand why the Italian language has no word for “privacy” (they use our word and roll the *r*). Read-

ing a letter on the Metro attracts a crowd. If someone has a fight (or a particularly good orgasm), the entire neighborhood knows. Young lovers with no place to go are adept at riding *motorini*...while parked.

All around, ancient fragments are recycled ingloriously into medieval buildings. Halfway down the alley on the right (at #14) is a restaurant that, a thousand years ago, was a **synagogue**. Find the Hebrew faintly inscribed on the base of the columns of the exposed brick structure (on the upper floor). A large part of Rome's Jewish community, the most ancient outside Palestine, lived in Trastevere until the popes moved them into the ghetto on the other side of the river in the 1500s.

• *Continue, turning left on Via dei Genovesi, then right on Via di S. Cecilia to reach Piazza di Santa Cecilia. Enter the convent courtyard of the church, sit by the fountain, and take a moment to enjoy the peace and quiet.*

③ Church of Santa Cecilia

Trastevere had early Christian churches like Santa Cecilia because, in the second and third centuries, a large community of foreigners lived here. Early Christians from Greece and Judaea introduced their cultures and religions to the neighborhood.



Notice the church's eclectic exterior. Its mismatched columns were recycled from pagan temples. The typical medieval bell tower sports an 18th-century facade. This church, dedicated to Cecilia, patron saint of musicians and singers, is popular for weddings. Of Rome's 40 medieval churches, many have two-year waiting lists for weekend weddings. While most young

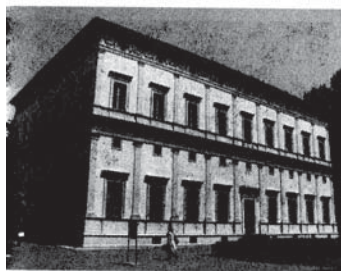
Roman couples favor the more sober elegance of medieval churches over Baroque (usually dismissed as *tropo pesante*—"too heavy"), typical Italian wedding gowns are far from understated.

A Christian convert from a wealthy family in a time of persecution, Cecilia revealed her faith to her pagan husband on their wedding night and told him of her aspiration to remain chaste (uh-oh...). An angel appeared to reason with the frustrated groom. Once converted, he devoted himself to carrying out Christian burials in the catacombs, until he himself was killed. Cecilia was soon condemned as well. The Romans, who tried unsuccessfully for three days to suffocate her with steam in her bath to make it appear accidental, finally lost patience and beheaded her. Cecilia

▲Villa Farnesina

Here's a unique opportunity to see a sumptuous Renaissance villa in Rome decorated with Raphael paintings. It was built in the early 1500s for the richest man in Renaissance Europe, Siene banker Agostino Chigi. Kings and popes of the day depended on generous loans from Chigi, whose bank had more than 100 branches in places as far-flung as London and Cairo. His villa was the meeting place of aristocrats, artists, beautiful women, and philosophers.

Architect Baldassare Peruzzi's design—a U-shaped building with wings enfolding what used to be a vast garden—successfully blended architecture and nature in a way that both ancient and



Renaissance Romans loved. Orchards and flower beds flowed down in terraces from the palace to the riverbanks. Later construction of modern embankments and avenues robbed the garden of its grandeur, leaving it with a more melancholy charm. Inside, cavorting gods and goddesses cover the walls and ceilings,

most famously Raphael's depiction of the sea nymph Galatea.

Cost and Hours: €6; Mon-Sat 9:00-14:00, closed Sun except open 9:00-17:00 on second Sun of month, last entry 30 minutes before closing; across the river from Campo de' Fiori, a short walk from Ponte Sisto and a block behind the river at 230 Via della Lungara; tel. 06-6802-7268, www.villafarnesina.it.

• **Self-Guided Tour:** Enjoy the best bits of the villa with this commentary.

• *Begin in Room 1.*

Loggia of Galatea: Note the ceiling painted by Peruzzi, showing the position of the signs of the horoscope at the exact moment of Agostino's birth (21:30, November 29, 1466). The room's claim to fame is Raphael's painting of the nymph Galatea (on the wall by the entrance door). She shuns the doting attention of the ungainly one-eyed giant Polyphemus (in the niche to the left, painted by another artist) and speeds away in the company of her rambunctious entourage on a chariot led by dolphins. She turns back and looks up, amused by the cyclops' crude love song (which, I believe, was "I Only Have Eye for You"). The trigger-happy cupids and lusty, entwined fauns and



ner checks the temperature of the water with her hand before she bathes the baby, introducing an element of tenderness that breaks the abstract rigidity of medieval art. Next comes the angel announcing Jesus' coming to Mary, Jesus' birth, the adoration of the Magi, the presentation of Jesus in the temple, and Mary's eternal sleep (not "death"). The gold mosaic backgrounds show buildings that, while still unrealistic, are a good step toward accurate 3-D representation.

The incredibly expensive 13th-century **floor** is a fine example of Cosmati mosaic work—a style of mosaic featuring intricate geometric shapes (in this case, made with marble scavenged from Roman ruins).

As you leave, spend a moment with **St. Anthony** (in the back corner, opposite the entry). He was a favorite of the poor and is inundated with prayer requests on scraps of paper. The Community of St. Egidio operates from this church. They feed the local poor and care for young drug addicts. Each Christmas they take out all

the pews, move in tables and chairs, and put on a huge dinner for those in need.

• From here, enjoy simply exploring Rome's most colorful district. Saunter around the streets to the left of the church as you leave. The farther you venture from the square, the less touristy and more rustic the neighborhood becomes. Wandering the back lanes and pondering the earthy enthusiasm people seem to have for life here, I can imagine that bygone day when proud Trastevere locals would brag that they never crossed the river.

*To cap off your Trastevere stroll with one more sight, consider visiting **Villa Farnesina**, a Renaissance villa decorated by Raphael (see page 93 for a self-guided tour). To get there, face the Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere and leave the piazza by walking along the right side of the church, following Via della Paglia to Piazza di S. Egidio. Turn right and exit the piazza near the church—you'll be on Via della Scala. Follow through the Porta Settimiana, where the street changes names to Via della Lungara. On your right, you'll pass John Cabot University. Look for a white arch that reads Accademia dei Lincei (#230). The villa is through this gate.*

*If you're in the mood to extend this walk, head to the river, cross the pedestrian bridge, Ponte Sisto, and make your way to Campo de' Fiori, where my **Heart of Rome Walk** begins (see that chapter for details).*

bequeathed her house to the neighborhood community, and this spot has been a place of worship ever since.

In the days when Christianity was illegal, wealthy converts hosted Mass for the local community in their homes. When Christians were finally allowed to build churches, they often did so on the sites of these homes for the sake of continuity. While this site was a place of worship during and after Cecilia's lifetime, what we see today was built in the early ninth century and extensively restored in the eighteenth century.

Enter the church. Find the **statue of St. Cecilia** by Stefano Maderno (in the case below the altar). During the Catholic Counter-Reformation, art charged with great emotional impact was used to enhance faith. The new appetite for relics led to a search for Cecilia's remains. When her tomb was opened, Maderno was present and claimed, along with other bystanders, to have seen her body perfectly preserved for an unforgettable instant before it turned to dust. He created this touching statue from his memory of that scene. Cecilia lies with her face turned and hidden, the violence of her death suggested only by the gash in her neck, the position of her fingers indicating the oneness of the Trinity. (Like Italians today, she counted starting with her thumb.)

The **canopy** above the altar, dating from the 1200s, represents an innovative fusion of Roman and French Gothic architecture and sculpture, showing that the artist (Arnolfo di Cambio) knew his classics and had also been to Paris.

The **mosaic** in the apse dates from the ninth century. Pope Paschal (on the left), who built the church, holds a little model of it in his hands. His square halo (the "halo of the living") signifies that he was alive when the mosaic was made.

If you visit mid-morning, you have two options before leaving: You can go downstairs to see the crypt or head upstairs to the loft to view some fancy frescoes.

The **crypt** contains the scant ancient remains of a complex of ancient buildings, including Cecilia's house. The house is pretty bare, but it does have some early Christian iconography, original mosaic floors, and grain storage bins (€2.50, to the left as you enter the church).

The **loft**, where cloistered nuns would view the Mass while hidden behind a screen, contains a fragmentary but extraordinary Last Judgment fresco painted by Pietro Cavallini, a contemporary of Giotto (c. 1300). Scholars debate who influenced whom: Giotto or Cavallini. But there's no debate that the art here shows cutting-edge realism in the expressive faces of the apostles who sit believably in their chairs (€2.50, ring the bell on the left side of the facade). If you're here at 18:00 on a Saturday, you're welcome to read the *Lectio Divina* with the nuns.

• Leaving the church, backtrack left, and take the first left onto Via de Genovesi. To pop into the last traditional cookie bakery in the area, detour right at Via della Luce and walk a half-block to #21 (on the right), where you'll find **1** *Biscottificio Artigiano Innocenti*. Here, in the face of modern efficiency, humble Stefania Innocenti, who was "artisanal" long before it was cool, keeps the tradition of seasonal cookies alive in Rome.

Return to Via de Genovesi, and hike straight ahead to where it meets a busy street.

Viale di Trastevere to Piazza di Santa Maria

The wide, modern boulevard called Viale di Trastevere bisects Trastevere, which was otherwise spared most of the demolishing and rebuilding suffered by other traditional neighborhoods when Rome became the capital of a united Italy in 1871. Cross to the other side of Viale di Trastevere and turn right, then left into the square called Largo San Giovanni de Matha. Pass by the textbook Baroque facade of the faded yellow church and continue along the Via della Lungaretta. You'll notice a change in atmosphere—the quiet, mystical charm of the first part of your walk has given way to livelier, more colorful, more touristy (and higher-rent) surroundings. Look up. Now, along with underwear...you see art. Walk several blocks to the big square and sit down on the fountain steps.



Piazza di Santa Maria in Trastevere

You're in the heart of the neighborhood. Piazza di Santa Maria is the district's most important meeting place. With its broad and inviting steps, the 17th-century fountain was actually designed to be the "sofa" of the neighborhood. During major soccer games, a large screen is set up here so that everybody can share in the tension and excitement. At other times, children gather here with a ball and improvise matches of their own. For more on soccer, see the sidebar.

• *Dominating the square is the...*

2 Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere

One of Rome's oldest church sites, this building stands where early Christians worshipped illegally in a home until the year 313. It was made a basilica—probably the first church in Rome dedicated to the Virgin Mary—in the fourth century, when Christianity was

legalized. The tower survives from the 12th century, when the entire church was rebuilt. The portico (covered area just outside the door) is decorated with ancient fragments (some from the earlier church). Filled with early Christian symbolism such as the dove and olive branch, many of these stones were lids to burial niches from catacombs. In the fragment at the far-left end of the portico (left of the door), notice how early Christians prayed as evangelical Christians do today.



Step inside. Face the main door and look left to see a **plaque** on the wall dedicated to "Olea Sancta." The "holy oil" was actually a small petroleum deposit discovered here in 30 B.C. This black liquid was almost magical in its ability to power lamps and was incorporated into the lore of this church.

Grab a pew. Most of what you see dates from around the 12th century, although the granite columns are from ancient Roman buildings. Later architects tried hard to match them, but notice how the shorter columns have taller bases and how the capitals are mismatched. (Some have tiny pagan heads of Egyptian gods.) The ancient basilica floor plan (and ambience) survives. The intricate coffered ceiling has an unusual image of Mary painted on copper at the center.

Step up behind the main **altar** (left side) for a closer look at the fine mosaic work. Pop a coin in the box for light. The central scene is one of the few surviving examples of an early medieval mosaic (8th-10th century) in Rome. It's rich in symbolism. Christ is flanked by the first two popes. Notice the stature Mary is given. Tour guides claim this is the first mosaic to show her at the throne with Jesus in heaven. He has his arm around his mother as if introducing her to us. The flock of sheep is not just any flock—it represents Jesus in the middle (marked by a halo with a cross in it) and the 12 apostles. Sitting on the ground below all of these mosaics is the throne-like chair of the bishop, giving legitimacy to the Church leadership.



The more "modern" mosaic panels, below the sheep, show scenes from the life of Mary. These mosaics from the late 1300s (by Cavallini) are impressively realistic and expressive, yet predate the Renaissance by a hundred years. The first of six panels (to the left of the curved apse) shows the birth of Mary. A servant in the cor-