

Sacro Cuore di Cristo Re



Sacro Cuore di Cristo Re (Sacred Heart of Christ the King) is a 20th century Fascist-era parish, conventual and titular church dedicated to Christ the King, in the Della Vittoria quarter. It has the dignity of a minor basilica.

History

The church is the primary one for the suburb of Della Vittoria, which was laid out in 1909 after the government gave up the vast army parade ground called the Piazza d'Armi for development. The new neighbourhood was initially going to preserve the name, but was renamed "Of The Victory" after Italy had managed to win in the First World War. The major, and enormously lethal, campaign was on the so-called Italian Front against the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Italy came very close to losing this more than once, but the final battle of Vittorio Veneto in 1918 was a conclusive victory and this is what is being commemorated in the name of the suburb.

The project for a church was begun in 1920 on the initiative of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, nicknamed the Dehoniani after their founder Léon Dehon.

He had founded his new French congregation in 1888, but wished for it to have an international missionary charism and so established the Generalate or headquarters at Rome in 1892 (this is now a rather small house at Via del Casale di San Pio V 20, just off the Via Aurelia Antica). The first superior of the Italian province

was Ottavio Gasparri, and it was he who spearheaded the project and bought the land needed. Pope Benedict XV gave personal support.

Modern publications reproduce the allegation that the projected church was originally called Tempio della Pace, "Temple of Peace", and was intended to be a memorial to the soldiers killed on the Italian Front. This is an impossible name for a consecrated church, although an intended dedication to Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace was perhaps meant.

The foundation stone was laid in 1920. The architect was Marcello Piacentini, who allegedly began with a neo-Baroque (Barocchetto) design based on early Baroque churches of the late 16th century. He had already been heavily involved in designing edifices for the Italian rebuilding of Benghazi, and a hint of his early style can be seen with the Benghazi Railway Station (now destroyed) which has a photo here. The intended church would have joined several other great domed neo-Baroque Roman churches built in the previous half-century, such as Sacro Cuore di Gesù a Castro Pretorio or Gran Madre di Dio.

The parish was erected in 1926.

The progress of work was slow, and stopped entirely in 1929 when Ottavio Gasparri died and no-one else was willing to sponsor the project. Money was probably the problem. The parish had to make do with the crypt.

Work started again in 1931. Famously Piacentini had a complete re-think as regards the design, and settled for a radically simplified neo-Classical style influenced by modernism (although he had to work with the foundations which had already been dug, hence the plan of the church is neo-Baroque). This church is considered one of the earliest ecclesiastical examples of *razionalismo italiano* in 20th century architecture, a movement that had recently emerged in 1926 with the foundation of Gruppo 7. The Fascist government, and Mussolini in person, heavily favoured a "rationalist" style sexed-up with Classical motifs -and Piacentini received many commissions as a result. (Unfortunately for him, the Fascist sponsorship meant that his career came to an end with the war).

Paradoxically, also influential in the production of the many Fascist-era churches, which are rather hulking and heavy brick basilicas, was a romantic mediaevalism propagated by Antonio Muñoz which sought to "restore" old Roman churches to a false ideal of the Romanesque style involving lots of bare brick and few embellishments. The two sources of influence (rationalist and mediaevalist) are to be seen in the long career of Tullio Rossi, who was highly influential in designing new Roman churches well into the 1950's. Arguably, a proper use of modernist principles in architecture only timidly arose in the city's church architecture in the mid 20th century as a result.

One major advantage of the simplification of the design of the fabric was that the construction was quick. The church was completed in 1934, and it is a fair bet that it never would have been finished if the original design had been kept. This fate befell the church of Sacro Cuore Immacolato di Maria, a similar massive neo-Baroque project.

The parish and church has been served by the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus since the foundation. However the crypt has been given over to a community theatre, the Teatro San Genesio, since 2005.

The church was declared to be a minor basilica and a cardinal diaconate by Blessed Pope Paul VI in 1965. The present titular is Stanisław Ryłko.

Exterior

The church's plan is quite complex. It begins with a short nave of three bays with side aisles. Off the first bay, after the entrance, is a pair of lobbies leading to square chambers which are the first storeys of a pair of

identical flanking campanili. The second bay has a pair of apsidal chapels off its aisles, and the third bay has a square-ended chapel to the right. To the left here is an exit lobby to the convent attached to the church on the left hand side. These chapels and lobbies are structurally parts of the aisles.

The main body of the church is an enormous square domed transept, with a Greek cross interior layout. (The cross is formed by four massive concrete piers supporting the dome.) This transept is slightly wider than the nave with aisles. Beyond the far end of the transept is a sanctuary of three bays with aisles, and finally a large semi-circular apse over which is a smaller subsidiary dome.

The fabric is in reinforced concrete (structurally) and brown brick (visibly), with some details in limestone. The external walls are all in blank brickwork with few visible windows, the bricks being laid so as to give a horizontally striped effect to the church as a whole, rather like a washboard. The bricks are rather thin, and after every three courses of bricks a further two were laid slightly recessed so as to give the stripes. The process was then repeated. All the external walls of the church proper have horizontal rooflines, at the same height all the way round, although these are false in places (see below).

The aisles of the nave and sanctuary are actually lower than the central portions of both. This is not obvious from the outside, because the external nave and sanctuary side walls are extended upwards to the levels of the central nave and sanctuary rooflines. This (very un-modernist) architectural deception creates light-wells, which in the case of the nave contain two flying buttresses each to support the screen wall. The nave light-wells each contain nine vertical window strips in three groups of three separated by the buttresses, while the sanctuary light-wells each have eight window-strips equally spaced.

There is a very large rectangular window in the right hand end of the transept, and a smaller one on each side of the sanctuary. The roof is flat, in a red composition with a low parapet. It is on the same level all the way round, except for a low saucer dome over the sanctuary apse which is invisible from the ground.

Convent

The convent is attached to the left hand side of the nave and transept, and is a very vaguely neo-Baroque three storey building of three wings around a central courtyard (the fourth side being occupied by the church). It is rendered in ochre yellow, and does not match the church at all. It is obviously the first thing built on the site by Piacentini when the project started in 1920.

Campanili

The entrance bay of the church is flanked by a pair of striking landmark tower campanili, each on a square plan. Each has completely blank brick walls with a flat top bounded by a thin concrete cornice, except for the sound-holes. There are two of these, facing transversely, and each is a very large vertical rectangular aperture with a thin recessed concrete frame and a slightly protruding concrete sill.

These two apertures are connected by three concrete platforms, each comprising two slabs separated by a void containing two horizontal concrete beams the ends of which are visible in the apertures. One platform is at the bottoms of the apertures and the other two spaced above, and the bells are hung in the three chambers thus created.

The bells are of very good quality, and form a tuned set.

Main façade

The church has two monumental façades, one for the main entrance on Viale Giuseppe Mazzini and the other around the right hand corner on the Via Podgora. The main one is a single-storey rectangular frontage in the blank brickwork, slotted in between the two campanili and slightly brought forward from them. There are no windows. Three entrances are approached by a flight of eleven steps occupying the whole width of the façade, a reminder that the church stands on a crypt.

The entrances are recessed within three tall arches, well separated and with the central one much bigger. These arches have no piers -the brickwork with its striping occupies their corners. The archivolts are simple brick, flush with the wall. The doors are impressive, in bronze within limestone door-cases the sides of which are continued upwards to frame rectangular panels below blank stone tympani. The central panel displays a bronze relief sculpture depicting The Sacred Heart of Christ the King by Arturo Martini of 1933 in the tympanum with the salutation "" , with the text below Ave Rex Noster ("Hail, our king")

The side entrances are a matching pair. The left hand one has an iron sculpture depicting the heraldic symbols of Pope Pius XII (dove above mountains) and the tag Tibi gloria ("to you glory"). The right hand one has a bronze depiction of the symbol of the Sacred Heart with the Crown of Thorns and the Cross, and the tag Tibi regnum ("To you the kingdom"). The sculptures are by Isnaldo Petrassi.

The horizontal roofline has a thin cornice above a frieze with stone lettering in relief, saying Christo regi immortali pacifero a reparata hominum salute a XIX saeculari ("Greetings from the 19th century of human redemption to Christ the immortal king and bringer of peace").

To the left of the stairs is a war memorial, a bronze relief sculpture showing a group of those wounded and traumatized in the First World War who are sheltering under the cloak of Our Lady. The title is Regina Pacis ("Queen of Peace").

Side façade

The Via Podgora façade contains the old main entrance the crypt, with two side entrances to the church flanking it. However, the present entrance to the theatre in the crypt is on the left hand side.

The wall of limestone ashlar blocks which separates the sunken area from the street is part of the design of the church, and has raised slabs on blocks along its top. This echoes the design of the main dome (see below).

The centre of the façade here has an enormous stone-framed rectangular aperture, with a relieving lintel in the brickwork above. The top of the frame has the tag Jesum regem adoremus ("Let us adore Jesus the King"). Most of the upper part of the recess is taken up by a very large rectangular stained glass window, and below this the previously quoted tag is continued: Christum Dei filium ("Christ the Son of God"). Below this in turn is an epigraph in two parts, the first line in letters of bronze and the rest on a stone tablet.

The text amounts to an expression of gratitude for help received in building the church, and reads: Benedictus XV PM, huiusce templi munifico benefactori, eiusque in eodem perficiendo aemulatoribus vita functis, sacerdotes a Corde Iesu gratum animum testantes, pia fidelium suffragia eisdem perenniter simulque invocant. ("The priests of the Sacred Heart, witnessing to one with a genial spirit, continually and together invoke cleansing suffrages of the faithful for Pope Benedict XV, munificent benefactor of this temple, and for those who have finished life and who imitated him in the completion of the same").

The side entrances are similar to those in the main façade, with blank stone tympani. The left hand one has a metal sculpture of the monogram of Christ IHS and the tag Rex cordium ("King of hearts"), and the right hand one has the Alpha and Omega with the tag Rex gentium ("King of the peoples").

The frieze at the roofline has an epigraph recalling the original project to found a church to commemorate those killed in the First World War: Immani peremptis bello militibus piandis divina gentibus caritate sociandis ("[Recalling] the soldiers exterminated in the frightful war, to be included with the peoples purified by divine grace "). The corresponding frieze over the left hand side wall of the transept has a similar epigraph, but the convent gets in the way of viewing it.

Dome

The dome is a very odd design, and one wonders whether Piacenzini was harking back to the vaguely Moorish buildings which he had been designing at Benghazi in Libya.

It sits on a square attic plinth in brick, with three small well-separated windows in each side. The actual dome is a very shallow saucer, sitting on a low drum formed of sixteen large clear glass windows separated by square piers. The oddity in the design is that the saucer of the dome is extended horizontally on all sides to form a verandah around the drum in the form of a chamfered square. This verandah has four blind white concrete piers on each long side, melding with a horizontal concrete beam supporting the dome eaves.

Ambulatory

The other odd aspect of the church's structure is a striking and prominent ambulatory or covered passage running round the back of the apse. Six tall blind square brick piers support a flat extension of the apse roof, with seven huge rectangular voids between them. At the bottom of each void is a screen wall formed of fourteen large square windows, framed in concrete and with fifteen panes in each window. Along the top of the wall is a line of slabs supported by blocks, like the area wall at the side entrances.

Interior

Nave

The nave is separated from its aisles by rectangular slab piers placed transversely, which support a horizontal concrete cornice-beam below the windows on each side. The concrete roof is flat, with large transverse reinforced concrete beams poured into open metal girders which are left exposed.

There is an impressive set of Stations of the Cross in bronze, by Alfredo Biagini which are important works of art. The bronze baptismal font was executed by Corrado Vigni.

The walls have a high dado in polished limestone slabs, but are otherwise in a mid-grey colour. This contrasts well with the floor, which is in deep red porphyry.

Transept

The main worshipping area of the church is the crossing under the dome. The dome itself is supported by four massive concrete piers in a light grey, with diagonal main faces. Each face has a large rectangular portal, which leads into short passages running transversely and longitudinally. The transverse ones access side entrance lobbies, except the bottom left hand one which leads into an apsidal chapel. The longitudinal passages in the far side of the transept lead to the ambulatory described above, while the near side ones lead into the ends of the nave aisles.

Above these portals are enormous frescoes of The Evangelists, executed in a naturalistic style in orange monochrome by Achille Funi. These are good. The dome drum sits on a ring cornice supported by four enormous beams in what looks like green stone -there are no pendentives. The interior of the dome is completely undecorated.

To the right in the transept, between the side entrances, is the chapel dedicated to Our Lady. The altarpiece fresco is by Funi. Above is an enormous stained glass window, which is brightly coloured in predominantly blue and red hues. The theme is The Return of Christ the King as Judge of the Universe.

Sanctuary

The sanctuary roof is flat without beams, and each side wall has a large floating balcony or cantoria. The left hand one contains the church organ, which is a good instrument installed in 1932. Above the balconies are stained glass windows.

The enormous apse fresco by Funi is of Christ Pantocrator and is in the Byzantine style, showing him enthroned and holding the Gospel book. Two angels accompany him, and the text read Rex sum ego ("I am the king").

The metalwork of the tabernacle and the high altar candlesticks is by Corrado Vigni.

Location:

Address: Viale Mazzini 32, Rome

Coordinates: [41° 55' 2.6364"N 12° 27' 55.44"E](#)

Access

The church is open 6:45 to 12:30, and 17:00 to 20:00 daily (according to the Diocese).

Liturgy

Mass is celebrated;

Weekdays 7:00, 10:00, 19:00;

Sundays and Solemnities 9:00, 10:30, 12:00, 19:00.

There is Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament from 19:30 to 20:00 on weekdays. On First Fridays, it is from 11:30 to 13:00 and 16:00 to 19:00.

Rosary is recited from 18:30 on Saturdays, until Mass.

Lauds is celebrated at 7:30 (or when the Mass finishes) and Vespers at 19:45 (ditto).

External links

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[English Wikipedia article](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Info.roma web-page](#)

["Archidiap" web-page](#)

[Youtube slide-show](#)

(WARNING. The "parish website", which has a link on the diocesan web-page, contains hyperlinks which will download "fugdownload123" malware onto your computer. Hence no link to the website is given here.)