

Gran Madre di Dio



Gran Madre di Dio is a mid 20th century parish and titular church in the Della Vittoria district just north of the Ponte Milvio. The dedication is to the Blessed Virgin Mary, under her aspect of the Mother of God.

History

The parish of Gran Madre di Dio was erected by Pope Pius XI in December 1933, and its new church was consecrated on 29 May 1937. The design was by Cesare Bazzani, and the supervision of the construction by Clemente Busiri Vici.

The project was intended as a commemoration of the 15th centenary of the Council of Ephesus (432), at which the Church declared that Mary was the Mother of God (in Greek, Theotokos).

The church was made titular in 1965,.

A major restoration of the exterior was underway in 2014.

Exterior

This imposing edifice in the Neo-Classical style is one of Rome's great modern domed churches. The overall plan is influenced by the church being in the angle of a Y created by two roads diverging from a junction. As a result, it is trapezoidal. The central unit is a Greek cross, comprising the domed crossing with four short arms. The sanctuary arm is lengthened by an additional bay and a semi-circular apse, and the entrance arm is simply a longer bay. In front of the latter is a monumental entrance propylaeum.

In the near inner angles of the cross are two side entrance lobbies in the form of quarter-circles. The frontages of these are continued, in the plan, along the two diverging streets as the façades of an identical pair of ancillary accommodation blocks for parish activities and priests' residences. Hence, this pair of subsidiary buildings are at diverging angles from the major axis of the church and form the sides of the trapezoid of the overall plan. The far inner angles of the cross are occupied by a pair of sacristies, joined to the ancillary blocks by side rooms and a pair of campanili.

The fabric is in pink brick, with architectural details in travertine limestone. The main body of the church is mostly concealed by ancillary units in the design, but the parts that can be seen are embellished by a pair of blind pilasters at each of the eight external corners of the Greek cross. These pilasters are not set exactly at each corner, but slightly away from it and support an entablature with a very thin frieze (almost non-existent). This entablature is posted out over the pilasters.

The exterior aspect of the edifice is dominated by the high lead-covered hemispherical dome on its octagonal drum, the eight sectors being separated by semi-cylindrical ribs. The drum has a large rectangular window occupying each face, and an oblate blind pilaster at each corner. The pilasters support a cornice (there is no proper drum entablature), and the dome sits on a low attic on top of this.

The roof of the church proper is flat around the dome drum, and has a pin balustrade running round its edge. The dome has a cylindrical lantern pierced by tall round-headed windows, and crowned by a pagoda finial in lead with a ball and cross.

There are two matching tower campanili in between the sanctuary arm and the ancillary blocks, aligned to the major axis and with their near corners attached to the far outer corners of the side arms. The main part of each of these is as high as the roofline of the church, and is then continued by a kiosk above a projecting cornice. This kiosk has a very large arched bell-opening on each face with a section of balustrade, a pair of Doric pilasters at each corner, a posted entablature with no frieze, a low attic and a lead-covered square ogee or onion cupola.

The semi-circular apse has five round-headed windows separated by blind pilasters supporting a full entablature with frieze.

The two blocks of ancillary accommodation which separate the church from the streets on either side are identical in design. Each is vaguely Baroque in appearance, with three storeys.

In the corners between the nave and transepts are two side entrance porches on a quarter-circle plan, each entrance having a broken segmental pediment into which is inserted an oculus (round window) and with a lead quarter-dome above. Their doorcases are flanked by a pair of round Ionic pilasters supporting the pediment. In front of the window is a square onion finial with a cross (echoing the campanili).

Façade

The main entrance is situated in an enormous and spectacular propylaeum in travertine, having a pair of vast square Doric piers at the corners into which are inserted two arched niches, one above the other. These piers support an entablature bearing the inscription *Praecelsae Dei Genitrici Dicitum*, meaning "Dedicated to the most high Mother (literally, birth-giver) of God". The triangular pediment above contains a coat of arms, and in between the square piers is a void containing a pair of Corinthian columns in the round.

Inside the loggia, above the actual church entrance, is the year of dedication, 1938, then a segmental pediment defaced by a shield and finally a semi-circular lunette window.

Interior

Unlike the majority of the great domed churches of the Centro Storico, the main interior has little decoration and is mostly in travertine and cream-coloured render that has turned grey with dirt. Its cool

restraint does recall Santi Luca e Martina in the Forum, however, and hopefully the contemporary restoration will involve a clean-up. The overall impression is of an unfinished decorative scheme.

The four dome piers are identical, as are the eight sides of the cross arms, and are all in travertine limestone. Each pier is chamfered, with a diagonally aligned recessed face containing two large empty round-headed niches, one above the other and with curved backs. At the bottom, sitting on the dado molding, is a framed red marble panel with a bowed floating cornice. Each side wall has a rectangular portal, with a trabeation beam supported by a pair of Doric impost pilasters. This beam supports a pin balustrade, which fronts an arched cantorie or gallery box for musicians. The arch lacks imposts, and is recessed.

The dome and side aisle vaults spring from an entablature lacking a proper architrave, which runs round the interior. The side arms have barrel vaults which outline the dome pediments, and each of which has a single curve of rectangular coffers. The pendentives are in blank render, but the pendentive arches and coffering frames are in travertine as is the drum cornice.

The dome drum has eight large windows with slightly protruding frames, in between which are single pilasters with floating hammerhead devices in lieu of capitals. Each of these supports the raised central section of a wide rib, and the eight ribs converge to an upper string-course which encircles the oculus at a distance. There is no decoration.

The entrance arm has a shallow extra bay in front, which accommodates the organ galley with the organ itself in a floating balcony over the entrance.

Side chapels

The chapels in the side arms look as if they are decorated in polychrome marbles (is it real?), and the décor is very similar. Each has a pair of derivative Corinthian columns in purplish-grey marble supporting an entablature beam with an epigraph, above which is an archivolt bearing a heraldic shield left blank. Into the curve of the vault is fitted a large lunette window.

The left hand chapel is dedicated to the Sacred Heart, and is the Blessed Sacrament chapel. The epigraph reads *Cor Iesu flagrans amore nostri* ("The heart of Jesus burning with love for us"). The altarpiece is a statue within a segmental apse flanked by the columns.

The right hand chapel is dedicated to St Joseph, and has a statue of him. The epigraph reads *Familiae decus, exemplar opificum* ("Ornament of the family, example for workers").

Sanctuary

The apse has rich marble cladding, with Ionic pilasters in red separating the five windows, polychrome geometric panelling below them and pale green marble panels edged with orange-pink forming a high dado. Behind the altar is a large statue of the Mother and Child on a floating box plinth.

The frieze of the conch entablature has an epigraph *Sancta Maria Ora pro Nobis*. The conch of the apse has a fresco featuring five sectors containing angels bearing symbols associated with Our Lady. At the apex there is the Dove of the Holy Spirit, surrounded by another epigraph *Et concepit de Spiritu Sancto*.

The side chapels in the transepts are also decorated in polychrome marble.

Access

The church is open daily from 7:00 to 12:30, and 16:30 to 19:30.

Liturgy

Mass is celebrated;

Weekdays 8:30 (not July or August) and 19:00;

Sundays and Solemnities 8:00, 9:15 (not July or August), 10:30, 12:00, 19:00.

The Solemnity of the Holy Mother of God is celebrated on 1 January.

Location:

Address: 1 Via Cassia, 00191 Roma

Coord: [41°56'18.5"N 12°27'56.2"E](#)

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