

San Valentino al Villagio Olimpico



San Valentino al Villagio Olimpico is a late 20th century parish church near the Ponte Milvio. The dedication is to the famous St Valentine.

History

The church was conceived as the successor to the Basilica e Catacomba di San Valentino, a ruined paleochristian complex which contained the shrine of the patron saint and is a short distance away.

The first proposed modern place of worship hereabouts was commissioned by Pope St John XXIII for the 1960 Olympic Games, and in the original plan for the Villagio Olimpico was to have stood on what is now a garden between the Viale XVII Olimpiade and the Piazza Jan Palach. However, the plan for the church was abortive as the necessary preparations were mishandled and took too long -so the Games went ahead without the Olympic Village having a dedicated Mass center.

After the games, the residential units built in the Village were allocated to government employees and the military. For the new permanent population, a parish was set up 1962. It was provided with a temporary church at the north end of the Via Bulgaria. The suburb is still known as the Villagio Olimpico.

Until 1979, the original small prefabricated building had to suffice but in that year the architect Francesco Berarducci inaugurated the building of the permanent church and parish center. His collaborator was Ludovico Alessandri, and the engineer in charge of construction was Tommaso Mazzetti. The church was completed structurally in 1985, was formally dedicated in the following year and had its parish ancillary accommodation finally finished in 1987.

Exterior

The new church occupies a substantial and long rectangular site, shared with parish, social and sports facilities. From the main street entrance on the Viale XVII Olimpiade, first there is walled entrance piazza. Then comes the church, which is basically on a rectangular plan. However, the entrance frontage steps back to the right and this is replicated in an open loggia occupying the

frontage. Behind the church is an enclosed garden, and then a separate block comprising the parish and social center. Finally there is a sports ground.

Down the left hand side of all these, in a very long and straight wing, are ancillary facilities including a ferial (weekday) chapel. This layout is separated from all the facilities itemised by a long enclosed corridor beginning at the entrance piazza, although the parish office block does have a wing which extends over it. Over this side range is a short tower campanile, about where the ferial chapel is.

A narrow garden strip runs down the right hand side of the side, fronting the Via Germania and is separated from that street by metal railings rather than by a wall. A side entrance to the church is here. On the other, left hand side of the site (the Via Belgio) there are no railings, but a completely unremarkable blank brick wall.

Fabric

The church is mostly in pink brick, with some details in travertine limestone and peperino tufo. The roof is supported by steel girders, left exposed inside. The glass in the fenestrations is clear.

The geometric form of the edifice is impossible to describe fully -view it in Google Earth or in the images available online (see "External links", below), or visit it yourself.

The architect began his design by dividing the site into a grid of small unit squares. The church itself has eight of these across, twelve long down the left hand side and eleven down the right. The discrepancy is accounted for by the right hand side of the frontage being recessed for three squares. Groups of these squares form different aspects of the design in a completely asymmetric way, but this means that there are no diagonals or curves in the design.

The functional major axis is not the longitudinal axis of the rectangle, but occupies squares number five counting from the left.

The back wall of the church has two unit-square apses added. One is at the end of the line of squares just mentioned (it contains the tabernacle), and the other is three squares from the left.

The design of the elevation deliberately recalls an ancient Roman ruin, in homage to the nearby ruined basilica of St Valentine. The right hand wall is in blank brick with a wide horizontal limestone stripe near ground level along its entire length. It rises to three different heights, and has a flat top at all these heights.

The roof, likewise is at three different levels and is flat for all these levels. Some areas are in a blackish composition, and others are in large skylight areas of clear glass, with the squares in the design delineated by horizontal girders and the fenestrations supported by horizontal girders forming an X within each square.

The only symmetric design unit in the roof is that the highest zone is over the fifth line of squares for five squares, including the apse. Over this apse it has a square skylight.

Campanile

The low tower campanile, perched on the flat roof of the ferial chapel, is a vertical cuboid in blank brick with limestone blocks at the corners. The bell-chamber is a cubical cage of metal bars, slightly smaller in width than the tower below.

Approach

The civic face of the church is not so much the entrance frontage, but the main gateway. The right hand red brick side wall of the church, with its horizontal stripe of limestone, is extended down the right hand side of the entrance piazza, along its street frontage and then all the up the left hand side of the church site. It loses its stripe in the latter. In front, the wall is shorter with the stripe near the top. It is interrupted by the wide entrance portal, containing four square metal gates made up of bars. Each gate has four smaller squares, filled with bars in a double-cross motif (like the British flag). The stone stripe in the wall is turned up in a corner kerb flanking the gates. A notice board has been fixed to the left hand gate, blocking it.

The wall to the right of these gates is specially treated. At the street corner it broken, the corner gap being occupied by a simple limestone column of the same height. To the left of this are two thin vertical slots, the top outer edges being flanked by kerbstones like the gates. Nearer the gates there is a single slot, but this is crossed by a gap in the stone stripe and this cross device is accentuated by four stone blocks with square faces. The stone stripe to the right of this cross-aperture has a simple dedicatory inscription: S. Valentino al Villagio Olimpico.

Piazza

The entrance piazza is paved in light grey overall, with the wall already mentioned to the right. To the left is a staircase leading to the roof of the left hand ancillary wing, and this has a bed of shrubbery accompanying its right hand balustrade.

The important thing to note in the piazza is the decorative pattern running from the gate to the entrance of the church. This is in the form of a row of squares, each containing a different geometric pattern in white. The one featuring a square spiral is symbolic of the catacombs of St Valentine.

This decorative feature continues in the interior of the church, up to the altar. Each square has the dimensions of a unit square in the overall design.

Façade

The entrance façade gives a very simple impression initially, being mostly blank pink brick wall, but is rather difficult to describe and the way the bricks are laid is rather clever.

It is divided into two vertical zones, with the right hand third recessed. This part of the frontage has its upper part as a brick wall, supported by a metal pillar at the far right hand corner, and the lower part mostly as an open loggia giving access to the Via Germania entrance (off to the right). Although the brick wall here is in one plane, the brickwork contains a relieving arch spanning the void beneath and also features bricks laid on end along the roofline. The right hand corner of the latter has a white stone block as an eye-catcher -this design feature occurs elsewhere, as already noted.

The main part of the entrance frontage, the left hand two-thirds, fronts a loggia which leads on the left to the longitudinal passage running up the left hand side of the church. Where the frontage steps back vertically, the short longitudinal wall and the left hand section of the wall of the recessed part (that is, left of the right hand portal) are extended upwards above the roofline to form a strange little L-shaped tower, with a white stone cross on its angle and another eye-catcher block on its top right hand corner. This architectural feature has two broad white decorative bands as decoration, echoing the broad stripe in the right hand church wall. (A glance at a photo may make sense of this.)

Immediately to the left of this tower feature is the main entrance, which is a large horizontally rectangular aperture leading into the main internal loggia. Above this entrance portal, the left hand half of the frontage is brick again with half a relieving arch. The right hand half is an impressive bronze tablet with a relief of the saint, held in place by metal girders in brown.

To the left of the main entrance portal there is another smaller vertical rectangular portal, which is bounded on the left by the revetting wall running down the left hand side of the piazza. The relieving arch of this side entrance starts at the bottom left hand corner of the main entrance, and sweeps up past its top right hand corner. The roofline above all this has bricks on end again.

Interior

Nave

The church is intended to emulate the ambience of the Catacombs of St Valentine, which are located not far from it under the former basilica. This hopefully invites the visitor to silence and calmness. There is a single nave, with an opening on the left leading into the Chapel of the Transfiguration. This is the ferial or weekday chapel.

The interior walls are of the same pink brick as the exterior ones, with the horizontal limestone stripe running all round the interior. The roofs are supported by large transverse trusses made from

steel girders painted brown. The fenestration is in clear windows below the ceiling, as well as skylights.

The right hand wall is straight, but the left hand one features three portals separated by lengths of transverse and longitudinal wall. The portals exit to the long access corridor on that side and to the ferial chapel. The transverse lengths of wall support the left hand ends of the steel roof trusses.

The reason for the stepped façade becomes clear on looking to the left of the entrance. The step in the plan accommodates an alcove containing two confessionals. The frontages of these are in wood, in tessellated square panels, and with the white stripe in the wall continuing across them.

The floor is in dark grey and white. It features a continuation of the decorative paving of the piazza, running as a line of squares containing geometric patterns which leads you between the pews to the altar.

Cappella di San Francesco

The wall arrangement to the left includes an alcove on a square plan, with walls on three sides. It is called the Cappella di San Francesco, although it has no altar. Rather, it contains a cross-shaped plinth bearing three monochrome statues. The central one is of St Francis of Assisi, the right hand one of St Anthony of Padua and the left hand one, oddly, of St Rita. This is odd because she was an Augustinian, not a Franciscan and you would have expected St Claire here.

Cappella della Trasfigurazione

The ferial chapel is dedicated to the Transfiguration. It is a simple rectangular room, in naked brick.

The altarpiece is a large triptych icon in classic Byzantine style, featuring the Transfiguration of Christ with Moses and Elijah.

Sanctuary

The sanctuary is a platform at the end of the nave, raised on two steps. The furnishings (altar, two lecterns and font) are in grey and white marbles and bear New Testament texts.

On the wall behind the altar is a framed copy of a fresco fragment showing Christ in glory, seated in a mandorla. Where is it from?

The tabernacle, in the square apsidal niche behind the altar, takes the form of a blazing sun in white metal. The other apsidal niche, to the left, contains the font which, in line with the overall design, is not a curved bowl but a grey cuboidal box bearing the text Jn 3:5. On the wall behind is a figurative depiction of The Baptism of Christ.

Over to the left of the altar is an alcove which houses the choir, and has the church organ above.

Access

The church is open:

08:00 to 13:00, 16:00 to 20:00.

The bus to use to get here is number 217, which leaves from Termini.

Liturgy

Mass is celebrated:

Weekdays 7:30 and 18.30 (winter) or 19.00 (DST in summer);

Sundays and Solemnities: 9:00, 10:30 (11:00 in August), 12:00 (not August), 18.30 (winter) or 19.00 (DST in summer).

On weekdays, Mass in the Byzantine Rite in Romanian is celebrated at 9:30 in the Chapel of the Transfiguration. On Sundays and Solemnities, Mass is celebrated in Spanish at 16:30 for the Paraguayan expatriate community. The feast of St Valentine is celebrated on 14 February, although apart from churches dedicated to St Valentine this celebration is superseded by that of SS Cyril and Methodius.

Location:

Address: Viale XVII Olimpiade/ Via Germania 13

External links

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[Wikimedia Commons Photo Index](#)

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Info.roma web-page](#)

["Archidiap" web-page](#) (includes video)

[Beweb web-page](#)

[Good photo of church façade](#)

[GCCatholic web-page](#)