

Santa Teresa del Bambin Gesù in Panfilo (Catacomba di San Panfilo)



Santa Teresa del Bambin Gesù in Panfilo is a 20th century Fascist-era conventual and former parish church in the Pinciano quarter, just north-east of the Villa Borghese and near the zoo. It stands over a set of 4th century catacombs, Catacomba di San Panfilo, which has its own entrance down a manhole at Via Giovanni Paisiello 24.

The church is dedicated to St Teresa of the Child Jesus, often known as Thérèse of Lisieux, who was a Carmelite mystic and is a Doctor of the Church. The catacombs are dedicated to St Pamphilus, a martyr once enshrined here.

History

Catacombs

The catacombs are thought to have been begun in the 3rd century, but the extant passages and contents are mostly 4th century. At its maximum development, the complex had a surface cemetery and three underground levels consisting of a small mezzanine between two major zones. No church seems to have been provided originally.

These catacombs were on the early mediaeval pilgrimage circuit, one of three shrines on the ancient Via Salaria Vetus that visitors could frequent in a systematic way from the 5th to the 9th centuries. These were the set nearest the city, followed by Basilica e Catacomba di Sant'Ermite and finally Catacomba ad clivum Cucumeris. From there, you could easily get to the Basilica e Catacomba di San Valentino on the Via Flaminia for a circuit taking a day.

Venerated here were three martyrs mentioned by name in the pilgrimage itineraries. St Pamphilus was one, and the other two were St Quirinus and St Candidus cum multis martyribus ("with many martyrs"). This last note suggests that a mass burial of epidemic victims had been found here, similar to the one now known at Santi Marcellino e Pietro ad Duas Lauros. Nobody wrote any edifying legends about these three, unlike many other catacomb martyrs in this respect, and their stories are completely unknown.

The date of abandonment, even the century, is also unknown but the 9th century is a good guess because that was when most of the suburban catacomb shrines were stripped and abandoned.

Antonio Bosio looked for, and quickly found, the catacombs in 1594 after working out the location from the documentation. He only got as far as the first level, as did Pompeo Ugonio and his crew of academic poseurs who left graffiti recording their presence shortly afterwards.

Giovanni Battista De Rossi began archaeological investigations in 1865, and found the original entrance stairway which he thought was later 3rd century.

However, the major scientific work done here was by Enrico Josi in 1920. He was also able to investigate the surface cemetery before the building of the church on the site.

Unfortunately, the suburban development of the area then damaged the upper level of the catacombs. Nothing much has happened to them since.

The underground shrine of St Pamphilus was found, but those of SS Candidus and Quirinus were not.

Church

The church was designed by Guglielmo Palombi, begun in 1927 and finished in 1932 as part of a convent of Discalced Carmelites. Apparently the original intention was to dedicate it as San Panfilo and to have the catacombs open to visitors as part of the complex. This would have been in some competition with the Benedictine nuns at the catacombs of Santa Priscilla which is not far away. For whatever reason, the catacombs were not integrated with the new complex in any way and were never given usable visitor access in the form of an entrance portal and stairway.

St Teresa had been canonised in 1925, and it was decided to fit out and dedicate the new church in her honour instead. In 1952 the parish was established, and about the same time the church became the center of devotion in Rome to St Teresa. This is because her former pilgrimage shrine church of Santa Teresa del Bambin Gesù al Gianicolo (now deconsecrated) was abandoned by the Discalced Carmelites for a new Generalate at Santa Teresa d'Avila.

The Relic Chapel was fitted out in the ground floor of the convent adjacent to the church in 1961, to house the veil that St Teresa wore during her audience with Pope Leo XIII.

St Teresa has not been fortunate with her Roman churches, because the parish here was suppressed in 2011. It was always too small in area and population to justify its existence. However, the church is still providing a public liturgical service and the veneration of the saint features highly here. The worshipping community has simply carried on as before, and is still calling itself a parish online.

There is also a good musical tradition, and concerts are held here.

Exterior

The church consists of a single nave of six bays, with a structurally distinct and narrower entrance bay. It stands over a ground-level crypt. The sanctuary has a segmental apse, not quite semi-circular and about half the width of the nave. A pair of apsidal side chapels, of the same size and form, flank the fourth and fifth nave bays.

The edifice stands at a V-shaped road junction, with the major axis splitting the V. The convent is a four-storey block on the left hand street, with its near end attached to the far side of the left hand side chapel.

The exterior fabric looks as if it is in large ashlar stone blocks (is this fake?), and is in a Baroque revival style which was old-fashioned at the time of construction. However, this makes for a church that is charming - rather than verging on the grim, as many of the Fascist-era Roman churches are.

The exterior walls are all now rendered in a light orange with architectural details in white -this was after a recent restoration. The fabric is divided into two storeys by an entablature running all the way round with a projecting cornice, except for the apses where it mutates into a simple string course. The frieze of this entablature is in pale orange. The second storey is given an Attic plinth by a second cornice, but this is interrupted by the apses. There is no proper roofline entablature, but instead another projecting cornice with dentillations.

The nave has four windows on each side in the second storey (one beyond the side apse), and these have restrained Baroque frames. The apses are windowless. The roof is pitched and tiled, and the apses have their own little, lower roofs which are tiled in sectors.

On the left hand side of the far nave wall is a campanile or bell-cote, consisting of a slab topped by a triangular pediment and containing two tall round-headed apertures for the bells.

Façade

Because of the crypt, the façade is approached by a steep set of fourteen stairs occupying the entire width which leads to a patio. There are three entrances off this, the main one leading into the entrance bay of the church and two side ones leading directly into the first bay of the nave.

Because the entrance bay is narrower than the nave, the latter has a pair of identical frontages containing these side doors. Each frontage is divided by the median entablature, and topped by the roofline cornice. The outer corners of the first storey are each occupied by corner pilasters without capitals, but posted over in the entablature, while the second storey has simple blind pilasters. Above each side door is a blank square panel with a raised frame, and this motif is repeated on each side by a vertical rectangular panel in the second storey. These details are not respected by the paintwork, which is all pale orange and hence obscures them. These two side zones are topped by short balustrades, ending at the corners in cubical plinths bearing flaming urn finials.

The main entrance frontage has pilasters at each corner, which do not touch at the actual corner angle. The first storey pilasters are simply posted, but the second storey ones have Corinthian capitals. These support a deep entablature containing a pair of posts, and this supports a triangular pediment with both modillions and dentillations. The tympanum of the pediment contains the heraldic shield of the Discalced Carmelites in relief.

The main entrance has a marble molded Baroque doorcase with a raised lintel, the corners of which are cut away to accommodate a pair of little double curlicues (like old-fashioned telephone receivers). The lintel itself has a simple dedicatory inscription. The actual doorcase is flanked by a pair of pilaster strips supporting a pair of strap corbels which support a pair of posts finally supporting a horizontal cornice (all rather fiddly).

The second storey has in its center a large vertical rectangular window with a segmental pediment, its own pair of Corinthian pilasters and a little pin balustrade.

Interior

Nave

The entrance bay is occupied by the organ gallery, which has a pin balustrade and is supported on a pair of red marble Ionic columns. The organ, a good instrument, was created by Agostino Benzi from Cremona in 1953 and restored in 1975.

The attractive interior is overall in a rather bright yellow. The nave bays are separated by Corinthian pilasters supporting the ceiling cornice, and below the latter in between the pilasters are panels containing stucco putti with swags. Four pilasters are also folded into the corners of the nave.

There are nine stained glass windows in the nave walls, four on each side and one in the counterfaçade peeping over the organ. They are a set by Luciano Vinardi, in a semi-abstract symbolic style referring to special events in St Teresa's spiritual progress:

- (Counterfaçade) -Her name in the stars (look for the red T).
- "The little white flower".
- The fall of snow after taking leave of her father at the convent.
- Her first sight of the sea.
- Scattering flowers by making small sacrifices.
- The eagle and the sparrow.
- Victim of merciful love.
- Desire for martyrdom.
- "In the heart of the Church my Mother, I will be Love".

Sanctuary

The sanctuary apse is decorated to resemble polychrome marble revetting, with a dado of green hanging curtains. There are two altarpieces, one above the other. The first is a crucifix in a niche, and above this is a large painting depicting St Teresa Shows Roses from Heaven by Ettore Ballerini.

Flanking the painting, on the curve of the apse, are two large heraldic shields of the Carmelites in imitation polychrome marble work. The conch of the apse has a fresco showing The Infant of Prague Venerated by Angels. It is by an artist called Morgante (not Aldo), and was executed in 1953. Mount Carmel is shown.

The sanctuary altar and ambo (lectern) are high-quality works in white marble with geometric inlays in red and green.

To the right of the apse is a richly decorated round-headed niche containing a statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

Chapel of the Sacred Heart

The side apses are chapels, and each are decorated in more imitation polychrome marble work with the apse conches given decorative coffering. This work was done in 1954 by Alberto Albani

The Baroque altars in these chapels were rescued from the church of Santa Maria in Macello Martyrum when it was demolished, and so the stonework should be genuine.

The chapel on the right is dedicated to the Sacred Heart, and the altarpiece is by Corrado Mezzana 1940. It is one of the better modern depictions of the subject in Rome.

Chapel of Our Lady of Mount Carmel

The matching chapel on the left is dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and has an altarpiece depicting Our Lady of Mount Carmel Presenting the Scapular to Simon Stock. This realistic and brightly coloured work is by Alfredo Bea, and was installed in 1934.

Simon Stock is venerated as a saint by the Carmelites, but he is only listed as a beatus by the Roman martyrology (2001 revision). The other saints depicted are (left to right) Teresa of Jesus, Joseph, Albert of Jerusalem, Teresa Margherita Redi and John of the Cross.

Relic Chapel

The relic chapel is through a portal to the far left, and is actually within the convent buildings. It was fitted out in 1961, in a style matching that of the church but with more expensive materials.

The walls are revetted in light tan veined marble slabs, except below the ceiling where there is a row of pictures depicting scenes from St Teresa's life. The far wall has a pair of round-headed windows with stained glass depicting symbolic scenes expressing the relationship between Christ and the soul of the believer. Over these are epigraphs proclaiming the saint as Patron of Foreign Missions and Doctor of the Church.

The altar has a pair of black marble columns, and a frontal in red marble. The altarpiece is a white marble statue of the saint, kneeling in front of a crucifix with a gilded bronze corpus. This has a golden mosaic background, and is within an arched aedicule with a pair of yellow Siena marble columns.

On the right is a little polychrome marble wall aedicule containing the mantilla worn by St Teresa aged fourteen before she entered the convent, when she tried to persuade Pope Leo XIII in 1887 to agree to her becoming a nun before the canonical lower age limit. The pilgrimage medal which she was given is also displayed. The aedicule has a tympanum in beaten and polished copper, depicting the saint.

Access

The church is open daily:

7:00 to 12:00, 17:30 to 19:00.

The catacombs have never been open to the public.

Liturgy

Mass is celebrated:

Weekdays 7:50, 11:00 (not July to September), 18:30;

Sundays and Solemnities 8:00, 10:00, 11:00, 19:00.

Location:

Address: Via Gaspare Spontini 17

Coord: [41°55′06.5″N 12°29′36.4″E](#)

External links

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page \(church\)](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page \(catacombs\)](#)

[Info.roma web-page \(church\)](#)

[Info.roma web-page \(catacombs\)](#)

[Carmelite web-page](#)

["Romasotterranea" web-page](#)

[Youtube video of church](#)