

# San Lorenzo in Piscibus



San Lorenzo in Piscibus is dedicated to St Lawrence, a deacon and martyr. It is sometimes referred to as San Lorenzo in Borgo or San Lorenzino (Little St Lawrence's).

## History

The legendary foundation of the church is by St Galla in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, but this is undocumented. However, an early origin is hinted at by the way the church does not fit into the mediaeval street plan of the Borgo. The south side of the Via della Concilazione marks the route of the former Borgo Vecchio, but the church has always stood well back from this and has had domestic buildings in between its entrance frontage and the street. This implies that there was once an entrance atrium or courtyard, a feature of early basilicas. A further surmise is that it was originally a monastery church, but there is no record of this. (1)

The church is first recorded in 1143 in a book which is called Ordine di Benedetto Canonico in the bibliographies (which has caused a confusion -the reference is not to "Benedictine Canons", which have never existed). In this, it is called in Porticu Majore or "in the great portal (of St Peter's?)". The appellation in piscibus (literally "in fishes") appears in 1205, and possibly comes from a nearby fish market although there is no independent evidence for this. Back then, the church was administered by the Chapter of St Peter's although it seems to have been transferred to the Lateran before the end of the century. Even at this early period there seems to have been some doubt as to what to do with the church. (1)

It was attached to a convent of Poor Clares founded here at the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but they were not there for long. In 1513, Pope Leo X granted the church to a lay community associated with the nearby church of Santo Spirito in Sassia . Around the same time, Francesco Cardinal Armellini (died 1528) restored the church and the adjacent palace. Because of this, the church was for a period

known as San Lorenzo dell'Armillini. (1)

In 1659 it was remodelled in the Baroque style by the Cesi family, and functioned more or less as their private church. However, in the same year its liturgical administration was entrusted to the Brothers of the Christian Schools. In 1733 they were able to buy three adjacent houses to form a convent, and commissioned Domenico Navone to provide a façade on the Borgo Vecchio together with a long connecting entrance passage. (1)

The church had two very narrow escapes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Firstly, in the 1930's it was going to be demolished as part of the clearances for the Via della Conciliazione. In the event it was preserved, but the Navone entrance portico was destroyed and the Brothers moved away. The church was very closely constrained by tall office blocks on three sides, leaving just enough space for somebody to walk around. (1)

A severe restoration followed, by the architects Galeazzi e Prandi. The Baroque fittings were apparently in a bad condition, and it was decided to destroy them all. This left the church as it is now, in a very stark Romanesque style. (1)

The second narrow escape was after the Second World War. In 1950 the church was declared redundant and deconsecrated. At first it was used as a storage unit, and then as a lecture hall for the Scuola Pontifica Pio IX before becoming a studio for the famous sculptor Pericle Fazzini in the 1970's. (1)

In 1983, there was a complete reversal of fortunes. Pope John Paul II re-consecrated the church as part of the "San Lorenzo International Youth Centre" run by the Emmanuel Community, and in November 2007 it was made titular for the first time in its history. (1)

## **Exterior**

It is a small basilica with aisles, entirely in red brick, and has a semi-circular windowless apse facing the street looking rather like part of a factory chimney. Above this apse is a blank pediment with dentillating in brick on the edges, including the cornice. This cornice runs all round the church, and is part of an identical pediment over the entrance. An identically styled string course runs along the aisle rooflines. (1)

Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century restorations, this end of the church had a rectangular apse with a large central lunette window and two identical entrances with raised triangular pediments. To the outer side of each pediment was a rectangular window, and over this were two round-headed windows. There was a little two-storey Baroque cupola over the high altar, having an octagonal drum supporting a squat urn-shaped top storey supported by volutes and with smaller volutes clustering to the ball finial. (1)

The campanile is from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and is just visible from the street if you peer down the alley to the right of the church. It sits over the entrance end of the left hand aisle, and has a tall first storey reaching as far as the abovementioned cornice, which runs round it as well. Above this are two storeys with a pair of arched apertures on each face. The lower storey has these arches separate, but the upper one has them paired with a central stone column supporting an impost. (1)

The nave clerestory has arched windows, and the entrance façade has two small arched windows above a large single one. There is no decoration here whatsoever. (1)

## **Interior**

The interior is divided into a nave and side aisles by arcades with twelve ancient marble columns, six on each side. These columns have no proper capitals, only cylindrical limestone extensions supporting imposts -unusual in an old Roman church. The interior walls have all been stripped and are bare brick, and the modern wooden truss roof has no ceiling. (1)

There are no side chapels, and no artworks of any interest apart from the main altar. This is

cylindrical, of granite, and has strigilate decoration which derives from Ancient Roman sarcophagi. The set of vertical curves which makes the decoration is meant to resemble an ancient Roman razor -*strigil* in Latin. (1)

### **Note**

The postal address is Via Padre Pancrazio Pfeiffer 24, but this is the street running off the Via della Conciliazione to the east. You should be able to get to the church when it is open through the building here. Alternatively, go to the end of the street, and just before the junction with the Borgo Santo Spirito you will find a passage to the right running round the apse of the church. (1)

The feast of St Lawrence is celebrated on 10 August. (1)

### **Location:**

Address: Via Pancrazio Pfeiffer 24, 00193 Roma

Coordinates: [41°54'6"N 12°27'33"E](#)

### **Links:**

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
2. [Tourist Info](#)
3. [De Alvariis photo catalogue](#)