

Sacro Cuore di Gesù a Villa Lante



Sacro Cuore di Gesù a Villa Lante is a 19th century convent church in the rione Trastevere. The dedication is to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

History

The Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was founded at Paris in France by St Sophie Madeleine Barat in 1800. Her vision was a religious congregation of women similar in outreach to that of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), with a devotion to the Sacred Heart and an external focus on the education of girls. She was superior of her congregation until her death in 1865 aged 85, and oversaw its expansion internationally. When she died, there were over 3500 sisters in 99 convents in Europe, Africa and America. She founded her first convent at Rome when she bought the Villa Lante property on the Gianicolo in 1837.

The Villa Lante was originally built at the start of the 16th century by Baldassarre Turini, a very important figure in the papal government of the time. Then, the Gianicolo was virtually uninhabited and was a long ridge covered in trees. The convent of Sant'Onofrio al Gianicolo was at the north end, that of San Pietro in Montorio at the south end and nothing but woods was to be found in between. Turini bought two hectares of these, and employed Giulio Romano to build him a country retreat. This was completed in 1525.

However, when Turini died his heirs were not interested and sold the property to the Lante family in 1551. They extended the grounds as far as the vineyard of Sant'Onofrio, and also down the slope to where the

convent is now. Back then, the property was outside the ancient city walls and access was by a long driveway from outside the Porta San Pancrazio. But in 1640 Pope Urban VIII ordered a defensive wall to be built along the ridge of the Gianicolo, and this impinged on the Lante property. The driveway was moved within the new wall, and the family was compensated by being granted a famous villa at Bagnaia and a ducal title to go with it.

As a town house, the Lante family built the Palazzo Lante at the bottom of the hill in the early 18th century. This was at the end of a street then called Via di San Giacomo, now Via di San Francesco di Sales. It is on the site of the present convent and church.

The Villa Lante property, including the palazzo, was sold by the family when they ran out of money in 1817. Prince Camillo Borghese, husband of Napoleon's sister Pauline in 1817, bought it but he died in 1832 and again the property was unwanted. Hence, St Madeleine Sophie was able to purchase it in 1837.

Foundation of Convent

St Madeleine had already received the tenancy of the convent at Santissima Trinità dei Monti in 1821, but did not wish this to be the main base of her congregation. Her idea was to establish the international headquarters of her sisterhood here, including the noviciate. This was originally in the villa itself but not stay long, as it was moved downhill in 1842. However, before that the saint judged some of the frescoes in the villa to be too risqué for the eyes of her (hopefully) innocent novices, and so ordered them to be removed. They are now to be found at the Palazzo Zuccari.

The new convent was based on the 18th century palazzo, but was substantially rebuilt. The L-shaped plan, around a courtyard facing onto the street, was preserved but the new convent was five storeys high with the church in the top two storeys of the western wing. It is invisible from the street.

The new church was designed by Girolamo Vantaggi and, as payment for his work, he asked only that prayers be said for his soul in one of the side chapels. According to the tradition of the congregation, the design was the work of two of the sisters with Vantaggi acting as engineer and master mason.

The consecration was on 7 July 1843, and was by Costantino Cardinal Patrizi, Cardinal Vicar of Pope Gregory XVI. It is the first church in Rome that was dedicated to the Sacred Heart.

The edifice is in the Neo-Gothic style, which is uncommon in the Centro Storico in Rome (there are several other examples just outside the walls). It is sometimes referred to as the first Gothic church in Rome - Santa Maria sopra Minerva is much older, but that church is Gothic only in its interior.

As soon as the convent was finished, the villa on the hill was judged to be surplus to requirements and was rented out. In 1880 the archaeologist Wolfgang Helbig moved in with his wife, Princess Nadine Schahawskoy and the couple restored the building with the remnants of its gardens. They also hosted a famous salon here, with visitors including Tolstoy and Wagner. He died in 1915, she in 1922.

Since 1950, the villa has housed the Finnish Institute (Institutum Romanum Finlandiae) and the Finnish Embassy to the Holy See. At least until recently it has been possible to visit it by prior appointment. It is the only place from which the exterior of the church can be seen.

The church was restored in 1963. The Generalate (headquarters) of the congregation is now at Via Tarquinio Vipera 16, which is a boring building in the ugly and boring suburb of Monteverde Nuovo. The convent on the Gianicolo is now only the headquarters of the congregation's Roman province, and the two convents now (2016) have twelve sisters between them. This is a problem, and there have been rumours concerning the future of the Gianicolo property. If the sisters leave, it is hard to see how the church can have a future.

Meanwhile, the complex is also the home of FOCSIV, or the Federazione Organismi Cristiani di Servizio Internazionale Volontario which is an umbrella organization for voluntary work overseas in a Christian context. The convent has been providing hotel accommodation for paying guests.

Exterior

The church is actually near the Garibaldi Park, which has a large statue of Garibaldi and busts of many of his officers. This adjoins the Villa Lante grounds, which are closed to casual visitors. However, there is no way from the crest of the Gianicolo to the convent. You have to get there via the Via della Lungara, which is a long walk round via the Acqua Paola and down into Trastevere.

As mentioned, the church is on the top two floors of the wing of the convent directly behind the entrance gate. It is a short rectangle of three bays, having a central nave with aisles as well as an external apse. Only the right hand side wall, next to the Villa Lante gardens, is free from neighbouring structures although the apse has its own lead half-dome roof (the main roof is pitched and tiled). This garden side wall has three large single-light Gothic windows, and nothing else.

The odd-looking red brick campanile can be seen peeping over the convent block, from the street near the convent entrance, although it vanishes behind the roofline when you approach the gate. It has three Gothic arches side by side, and on top of its flat upper surface is a very strange squat octagonal stone spirelet. There are two matching rectangular pyramidal finials on either end.

Entrance

The gateway is at the top end of the Via di San Francesco di Sales, where it turns a corner. The deconsecrated church of Santa Teresa del Bambin Gesù al Gianicolo is on the other side of the street here.

The gate archway has a sculpture of the emblems of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary on top of it.

If the gate is open and the church is visitable, you go across the courtyard, into a doorway with a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus above it, and up a staircase.

Interior

The interior looks very French.

There are three bays to the nave, which has very narrow side aisles separated from the central nave by arcades of three Gothic arches on either side. The archivolt of these arches are incorporated into the cross-vault, and are supported by two clustered columns on either side with stylized leaf ornament on the capitals. The vault is further supported by a pair of engaged semi-columns flanking the apse.

The surfaces of the vault is decorated by a rather creepy design of bare tree branches and twigs intertwined, white on pale blue, rather like looking up in a deciduous forest in winter.

The first bay is occupied by the organ gallery over a narthex, and you enter the church proper via three molded Gothic archways in a blank ashlar wall. This has a gallery parapet consisting of thirteen trefoil niches containing little statues of the apostles, the surroundings in blue and white again.

The walls are in white limestone ashlar, not plastered or painted. The three Gothic windows in the right hand wall have poor patterned stained glass in them -not figurative.

Sanctuary

The sanctuary is an apse with its own conch vault, decorated in blue with gold stars and with ribs supported by engaged semi-columns in the wall. Windows at the sides, protected by grilles, throw light on the altar. The sanctuary area extends into the final bay of the nave, delineated by a low screen consisting of two arcades of ogee arches forming three sides of an octagon. The floor is raised by one step.

The high altar itself is worth examining. The actual frontal, with a roundel containing the Lamb of God, is recessed by another carved arcade screen which is highly decorated. The tabernacle has interesting decoration, and above it is a delicately carved monstrance throne for exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. This is in the form of a Gothic aedicule with very thin pillars.

The altarpiece is a statue of the Sacred Heart, on a corbel on the far wall of the apse. This seems to have replaced a painting of the same subject by Pietro Gagliardi (1809-90).

Chapels

Two little side altars are at the ends of the narrow aisles. They also used to have paintings by Gagliardi; the one on the left showed The Holy Family on their Flight to Egypt, and the one on the right Our Lady of Sorrows. These were apparently moved to the sacristy in the 1963 restoration (are they still there?), and replaced by statues of St Sophie Madeleine on the right and the Immaculate Conception on the left.

Access and Liturgy

The feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is celebrated on the second Sunday after Pentecost, and you should find the church open to visitors on this date. The other major feast day is of St Sophie Madeleine, on 25 May.

Otherwise, the church really functions as a private convent chapel and is apparently only occasionally open. The entrance gate is on an entryphone system, so you cannot just walk into the convent courtyard.

Location:

Address: 18 Via San Francesco di Sales

Coord: [41°53'37.5"N 12°27'45"E](#)

External links

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[GCatholic Web page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Congregation's website](#)

["De Alvariis" gallery on Flickr](#)

[Info.roma web-page](#)

[Viaggi Spirituali web-page](#)

[FOCSIV website](#)

[Roman Despatches](#) - blog with gallery