

# Bambin Gesù all'Esquilino



**Bambin Gesù all'Esquilino** is an 18<sup>th</sup> century convent church in the rione Monti (I). The dedication is to the Holy Child (Jesus Christ as a baby or toddler).

## History

The church here is a recent foundation but it has an ancient precursor in the basilica of Sant'Eufemia in Esquilino, which was here or hereabouts. This was demolished in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, but was important for its paleochristian mosaic. The convent church was regarded as its successor. [1]

The basilica was originally founded in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and is first mentioned in 451. The most interesting event in its history occurred when the Capuchins occupied it for a few years before moving to San Bonaventura al Palatino, between 1530 and 1536. They were replaced briefly by a community of Franciscan Tertiary nuns, who in turn built a new convent at San Bernardino da Siena ai Monti after the old church was demolished. [1]

The Oblate Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus (Suore Oblate del Santo Bambino Gesù) was founded in 1672 by Anna Moroni, a native Roman. She had been involved in working with young prostitutes, and recognized that their lack of education meant that they often had no other choice in earning a living. So, in 1667 she opened a boarding school and attracted disciples who helped her with the teaching and administration. Five years later the little group of thirteen organized themselves into a congregation with herself as superior. They were oblates and not proper nuns under vows. Oblates make promises, not vows, and in the 17<sup>th</sup> century this meant that they did not have to live within an enclosure. In 1717, the new congregation adopted the Augustinian rule. [1]

Just before this, in 1713, the sisterhood began construction of a new school, convent and Generalate on this site. The first architect chosen was Alessandro Specchi, but something went wrong and his involvement stopped within the year. Then, **Carlo Buratti** took over and it was he who initiated the construction of the church in 1731. Unfortunately, he in turn had to step down in 1732 (he died in 1734), and **Ferdinando Fuga** finished the church by 1736. He was the favorite architect of Pope Clement XII, who financed the construction. [1] [2]

In 1736, the Pope, assisted by Cardinal Pietro Marcellino [Corradini](#), commissioned paintings for the altars by three renowned artists: Mark Benefial, the altarpiece for the high altar; **Giacomo Zoboli**, for the altar on the left; and **Domenio Maria Muratori**, for the altar on the right. [2]

**Carlo de Dominicis** concluded the work on the church between 1745-1751. [3]

In 1856 the church was enriched by the sumptuous chapel of the Nazarene, built by the architect **Virginio Vespignani** for Cardinal Mario [Mattei](#). [2]

In 1882, there was major restoration of the church by **Andrea Busiri Vici**. At this stage, the four Angels with scrolls in the spandrels of the dome and the fresco in the vault of the high altar were painted of **Giovanni Battista Gagliardi**. The same artist also worked on the new altarpiece for main altar, which replaced the one by Benefial. Also in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the street outside (Via Urbana) was raised, burying the flight of steps leading up to the church entrance. [1] [2]

The sisterhood remain in residence, but with declining numbers have converted part of their convent into a hotel (Casa per Ferie). [1]

## **Exterior**

The church is on the plan of a Greek cross superimposed on a circle. The two side chapels have one bay each, the entrance has two bays and the presbyterium three, with a further rectangular apse. [1]

The entrance bay is joined to convent wings on both sides, and sacristy accomodation flanks the presbyterium also on both sides. However, the end of the presbyterium used to overlook the convent garden (now built over), and this has a pediment with an oculus. The gable of this is higher than the roof of the presbyterium behind. [1]

The dome is a round saucer in tiles, with eight pantile ribs meeting at a mushroom finial. The low circular drum has eight elliptical windows, and has a strongly projecting molded cornice. There is a flat zone between this and the dome proper. [1]

A tiny campanile is attached to the hip of the roof of the left hand side chapel. It is a single arched space for one bell, crowned by a molded tympanum. [1]

The exterior walls are rendered in a pale salmon pink, with white detailing. [1]

## Façade

The straightforward Late Baroque (tardobarocco) design is of one storey, and has a wide central zone flanked by two narrow zones set slightly back. A triplet of gigantic Corinthian pilasters occupy the outer corners of the central zone and all of the two side zones; the middle of the triplet is almost hidden. These support an entablature with a molded architrave, blank frieze and projecting cornice; the entablature is brought forward over the capitals of the inner elements of the pilaster triplets. On top is a segmental pediment broken at the top, into which is placed a large finial in the form of an aedicule with its own triangular pediment also broken at the top. This contains a cobra-hood detail on which the wire cross sits. A pair of large flaming urn finials sit on top of the outer corners of the façade. [1]

The single doorway has a Baroque doorcase with a raised segmental pediment and a pair of tassels on the sides. Above it is a large window with a slightly curved top, and above that is a heraldic shield embellished with swags, curlicues and scallop shells. This now contains no heraldry. [1]

The façade is in an overall dirty ochre color, and needs attention.

## Interior

The church is built on the plan of a Greek cross. Once through the entrance, you are in a wide low-ceilinged vestibule which has a gallery above it. Through this, you are under the dome which dominates the interior space. To the left is the chapel of St [Andrew Corsini](#), who was of the same family as Pope Clement XII who arranged the completion of the church. To the right is the chapel of St Augustine. These two chapels have identical windows above the altars, with gently curving tops matching the window in the entrance façade. [1]

Just by the entrance on the right is the Chapel of the Passion, built in 1856 by **Virginio Vespignani**. [1]

The central dome has pendentives, and the four arms of the cross have short barrel vaults. The pendentives of the dome rest on four enormous piers with diagonal faces, and on the corners of these are tripletted Composite pilasters which echo those on the façade. These four piers are treated identically. In between the pairs of pilasters on each pier is a doorway with an incurved gable cornice above a winged putto's head. Above the doorway is a little gallery or opera box with a balustrade or grille, which is called a coretto. [1]

The pilasters support an entablature which runs around the church interior. The frieze of this, together with the pilasters, has marble revetting in a grey and ochre stone -unless it's scagliola (fake marble done up with marble dust and linseed oil, with dye). [1]

The floor echoes the design of the dome in white, dark grey and light grey stone -a nice touch. [1]

### Gallery

The entrance bay is occupied by a musicians' gallery, which is supported by a pair of Corinthian columns in what may be yellow Siena marble. The balustrade has unusual conjoined balusters, and a fretwork screen on top. Traditionally, when a secular choir or musicians perform in church to accompany the liturgy there are not meant to be seen, because they are not giving a performance. [1]

In the barrel vault of the entrance bay, above the gallery, is an elliptical tondo containing a choir of three angels surrounded by the following antiphon: *Cantantibus organis, Caecilia Domini decantabat* ("with the organ playing, Cecilia sang to the Lord"). It's in honor of St Cecilia. [1]

### Dome

The great dome is the work of **Ferdinando Fuga**. The decoration is geometric, with eight wide ribs converging on an oculus containing the *Dove of the Holy Spirit* in a glory. There is no lantern. The sectors contain a conical floral bouquet in white stucco on gold, springing from the eight oval windows in the dome drum. The rays are picked out in white, light grey and dark grey. [1]

The pendentives have frescoes of rather cute angels by **Gagliardi**. [1]

### Presbyterium

The presbyterium is lit by side windows. In its barrel vault is a fresco of *The Child Jesus* by **Gagliardi** again. [1]

The high altar has a pair of ribbed Composite pilasters with gilded ribbing, supporting an entablature with swags and putto's heads. The triangular pediment above this is broken at the top, and into the break is inserted a large tablet bearing the sacred monogram IHS (standing for Jesus, or ΙΗΣΥΣ in Greek). This is in a white and gold glory on a blue background. The actual altar is flanked by another pair of pilasters in the same style as those in the rest of the interior. [1]

The altarpiece is of *The Nativity*, by **Gagliardi**. It replaced an Adoration of the Shepherds by Marco Benefial, and the reason might have been because early guidebooks described the latter work as being very poor. [1]

The balustrade separating the presbyterium from the main body of the church has an attractive ogee curve. [1]

## Side chapels

St Augustine's chapel, to the right, has an altarpiece from 1736 by **Domenico Maria Muratori** depicting *The Triumph of St Augustine over Heresy*. The figure getting the kicking is Pelagius. The altar is attractively designed with a pair of doubletted Corinthian pilasters in rose-pink marble (or marbling) supporting a triangular pediment within a segmental one. Inserted into the broken cornice is a device of a flaming heart in a book, within a wreath. [1] [2]

The chapel of St Andrew Corsini, on the right. The altar was constructed by the Portuguese architect **Emanuele Rodriguez Dos Santos** in 1736 upon a commission of the Portuguese Mons. D'Almeida. The chapel has an altarpiece depicting *The Virgin Appearing to St Andrew Corsini* by **Giacomo Zoboli** from Modena. The design reflects that of St Augustine's altar opposite, except that the pilasters are in what looks like verde antico and the single segmental pediment has a double scallop shell motif inserted into its broken cornice. [1] [2] [3]

Through a doorway in the entrance bay is the Cappella Mattei or the Chapel of the Passion, which was commissioned by Cardinal **Mario Mattei** in 1856. **Virginio Vespignani** was responsible for the incredibly ornate neo-Renaissance design in a very restricted space. The gilded stucco decoration features floral sprays, and geometrically complex coffering on the ceiling vaults. A venerated painted wooden statue of *Jesus Crowned with Thorns, Holding the Reed and Dressed in the Purple Robe* is in a tiny apse, which has its conch supported by four free-standing spirally fluted alabaster Corinthian columns. [1] [2]

Two paintings here by **Francesco Grandi** depict the *Arrest of Christ in Gethsemane* and the *Flagellation of Christ*; he also did the little *Cross Being Carried by Angels* in the vault. The marble statues of the *Evangelists* in the niches are by **Stefano Galletti**. [1] [2] [3]

## Museum

The small museum was set up in 2006 to display some of the art treasures of the Oblate Sisters of the Infant Jesus, who testified four centuries of history. The museum not only exposes the works belonging to the general house of Rome, but also those who were transferred from homes to Palestrina and Ascoli Piceno.

In the two exhibition rooms you can admire paintings of the 17<sup>th</sup> 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, valuable liturgical furnishings, vestments and an interesting collection of statues of the Infant Jesus, made in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in wax, wood and papier-mâché. [2]

The collection, full of memories and references to the history of the institute, including antique books and manuscripts, as well as numerous testimonies on the life of the nuns in past centuries. [2]

In the museum have been placed well as some works from the nearby Church of the Infant Jesus, as the two round tables designed by **Virginio Vespignani** for the chapel of the Nazarene and the beautiful chalice with the stories of the Passion donated by Cardinal Benedetto Barberini in 1844. [2]

## **Artists and Architects:**

- Andrea **Busiri Vici** (1817-1911), Italian architect
- Carlo Buratti (18<sup>th</sup> cent), Italian architect
- Carlo **de Dominicis** (1696-1758), Italian architect
- Domenico Maria **Muratori** (1661-1744), Italian painter of the Baroque period
- Emanuel **Rodriguez dos Santos** (1702-1764), Portuguese Baroque architect
- Ferdinando **Fuga** (1699-1781), Italian architect in the Baroque style
- Francesco **Grandi** (1831-1891), Italian painter
- Giacomo **Zoboli** (1681-1767), Italian painter from Modena
- Giovanni Battista Gagliardi (c.1860-1908), Italian painter
- Stefano **Galletti** (1832-1905), Italian sculptor
- Virginio **Vespignani** (1808-1882), Italian architect

## **Location:**

Addr: Via Urbana 1, 00184 Roma  
Coord: [41°53'52"N 12°29'45"E](#)

### **Links and References:**

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
  2. <http://www.suorebambinogesu.it/it/9/la-chiesa-del-bambin-ges.htm>  
(no longer online)
  3. [Info Roma web page](#)
- a. Donovan, Jeremiah; ROME ANCIENT AND MODERN AND ITS ENVIRONS; 1842; Vol. II,  
pg. 184x

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