

Sant'Elena all'Esquilino



Sant'Elena is an early 20th century parish and titular church at Via Casilina 405, just south-east of the Porta Maggiore in the Prenestino-Labicano quarter. It is near a station named Sant'Elena after it, on the Ferrovia Roma-Giardinetti. The dedication is to St Helen the Empress.

History

The church was commissioned by Pope Pius X to celebrate the six hundredth anniversary of the Edict of Milan in 313, when the emperor Constantine established the Church as the Empire's official cult. St Helen was the emperor's mother. The same anniversary also gave rise to the church of Santa Croce a Via Flaminia.

Documentary evidence exists from the end of the 14th century (the earliest being 1379) that the locality was then called Sant'Elena. Back then it was nothing but farmland, but the unprovable suggestion is that the name arose from a lost monastery that used to be on the site.

The church was by Giuseppe Palombi in a neo-Renaissance style, and was completed in 1914. The parish was erected in the same year. However, the consecration was in 1916 after (presumably) the debts of construction had been paid off.

In 1915 the parish was entrusted to the Oblates of Mary the Virgin (Oblati di Maria Vergine).

In 1943 the parish priest, Padre Raffaele Melis, was killed in a bombing raid while tending to parishioners sheltering in the cutting made by the Via del Mandrione as it passes under the main line railway near the church. A stone cross at the top of the revetting wall of the cutting marks the site, which can be seen from the Via Casilina. His cause for beatification was introduced in 1995, and he is buried in the church.

The church's roof was badly damaged in this raid.

In 1985 the church was elevated to a titular diaconate, with the title of Sant'Elena fuori Porta Prenestina. The present cardinal deacon is João Braz de Aviz.

In 2003 the Oblates gave up the parish, which is now in the care of diocesan clergy.

Exterior

Layout and fabric

The plan is that of a simple rectangular basilica, with a nave of seven bays having side aisles, a sanctuary of a single bay and a semi-circular apse. The nave aisles extend to flank the presbyterium in a pair of side chapels.

The fabric is in red brick. The nave roof is pitched and tiled, and the sanctuary has its own matching roof at a slightly lower level. The apse roof is pitched in three sectors, and the aisle roofs are flat.

Surrounding buildings mean that there is no public view of the exterior of the church apart from the façade. It is rendered in a beige colour, and is windowless except for a large round-headed window in the central nave wall in each side of each nave bay.

Campanile Edit

There is a tower campanile attached to the left hand aisle about halfway along the nave, but this can be difficult to spot since the road is narrow and there is an electric metro line on the other side followed by a main line railway. One can see this campanile from the other side of the main line railway, but this takes a bit of effort.

Three storeys in red brick project above the roofline, separated by narrow stone cornices and with a single arched aperture in each face of each storey. There is a shallow pyramidal cap.

Façade

The two-storey gabled façade is in red brick, with architectural details in white travertine limestone. The nave and aisle entrances have the same design, although the nave one is larger, and each has a simple stone doorcase topped by a wide lintel supporting a triangular pediment. The three lintels have dedicatory inscriptions; the left hand one has the name of Pope St Pius X, the main one the dedication and the right hand one the year of consecration.

The central nave frontage is very slightly brought forward from that of the aisles, and has four shallow rectangular Composite pilasters with high plinths, supporting a full entablature with blank frieze and projecting cornice. This entablature is continued, via a very shallow step back, along the flat rooflines of the aisles, and another pair of pilasters marks the outer corners of this storey of the façade. The outer two of the nave frontage pilasters are doubletled along their outer edges.

The second storey, above the entablature, has an attic plinth, supporting four pilasters of the same style flanking a round window. The two on the outer corners are also doubletted. There is a crowning entablature and triangular pediment, all in stone but with a blank tympanum.

Over the side entrances are two plaques bearing the heraldry of Popes St Pius X and Benedict XV. To the left of the main entrance is a large wall memorial to those parishioners killed in the 1943 air raid, with two bronze palm branches. This memorial, with its list of names, has badly decayed but was under restoration in mid 2015.

Interior

The nave is separated from its aisles by arcades springing from pink marble Ionic columns. A floating entablature runs above the archivolt, and above this in each bay is a large round-headed window with geometric stone mullions.

The floor is of good quality, using polychrome veined marbles.

The central nave roof is open, in wood, but the side aisles have cross-vaults. The two side chapels have a barrel vault each.

The aisle cross vaults and the central nave walls below the entablatures have fresco decorations. The central nave has tondi in the spandrels of the arches, depicting the legend of the True Cross.

The aisle walls have a horizontal strip each which displays scrollwork decoration and gilding, and on this are affixed the church's Stations of the Cross
Sanctuary Edit

The triumphal arch displays the symbols of the Evangelists.

The large apse has a conch, on which is depicted scrollwork in an early Christian style, surrounding a central cross. Below this, the apse wall has St Helen in glory, attended by saints. Below this in turn is the church organ, behind a large painted wooden crucifix.

Special notes

Mass is celebrated:

Weekdays 8:30, 18:30 (19:00 in summer);

Sundays and Solemnities 8:30, 10:30, 18:00 (19:00 in summer).

"Summer" is from 1 July to 15 September.

There is Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament every Thursday from 9:00, and on First Fridays from 17:00.

Rosary is recited daily at 17:30.

Artists and Architects:

Location:

Via Casilina 209 Roma
Coord: 41°53'14.24"N 12°31'34.96"E

Info:

Links:

<http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/Sant'Elena>

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Parish website](#)

[nfo.roma web-page](#)