

# Santa Maria Immacolata e San Giovanni Berchmans



Santa Maria Immacolata e San Giovanni Berchmans is a 20th century parish, convent and titular church with a postal address at Via degli Etruschi 36, just off the Via Tiburtina south-east of the Termini train station. This is in the Tiburtino district. The main entrance is on the Piazza Immacolata. The joint dedication is to the Blessed Virgin Mary under her aspect of the Immaculate Conception, and to St John Berchmans.

## History

### Foundation of Opera

The complex here was founded on the personal initiative of Pope St Pius X, when he was still Giuseppe Melchior Sarto, Cardinal-Patriarch of Venice.

The story is that in 1902 he made a trip out of the Centro Storico of Rome to pray at the tomb of Blessed Pope Pius IX in the basilica of San Lorenzo fuori le Mura. The area between the basilica

and the city walls was being developed as a rather rough suburb on the Via Tiburtina, and the cardinal was struck by the number of young boys apparently left to themselves in the streets.

He became pope in the following year, and in 1904 contracted with the Josephites or Giuseppini del Murialdo to found a new parish church and school complex. This active congregation of clerics had been founded in Turin by St Leonard Murialdo in 1873. He was an associate of St John Bosco, and with him recognised that it was absolutely essential for the Church to evangelise the urban working classes. Whereas Bosco was interested in educating younger boys, Murialdo focused on boys in their early teens who were of the age for entering apprenticeships or vocational training. Hence, he named his new congregation of priests dedicated to their training after St Joseph the Worker.

The founding priests came, however, from the community at Venice based at Santa Maria dell'Orto. They opened a chapel in a house in the nearby Via dei Campani as a base for the project.

The intention was to provide education for working-class boys from elementary level all the way through to vocational training. The institution was named the Opera San Pio X after the pope was canonized.

#### Erection of church

The parish church here was begun in 1906. It was designed by Costantino Schneider, house architect of the Papal palace, and the work was supervised by Francesco Strocchi. It was paid for mostly by Catholics in Belgium, hence the second dedication is to a Belgian saint. This, in itself is a historical witness of the regard which Pope St Pius received in his lifetime, and of the influence of Ultramontanism in the Catholic Church in Europe in the early 20th century. Nowadays, it seems odd that a domestic project for a church and school in an obscure suburb in Rome could be financed by personal contributions from Catholics in another country.

The church was completed in 1909, and consecrated by the Belgian Cardinal Désiré-Joseph Mercier.

The impressive campanile, not structurally part of the church, was begun in 1928 and completed in the following year. Its resemblance to the famous campanile of St Mark's at Venice is deliberate, being a tribute to the origins of the religious founders. Another small reminder is the nearby convent chapel of Madonna dell'Orto a Porta Tiburtina, which has the same dedication as the originating parish in Venice (this, however, is a coincidence as the sisters there derive their name from a Marian shrine in Chiaravari).

#### Bombing

The British launched a bombing raid on the railway installations of the city in 1943. This was badly botched, and most of the bombs fell on the suburb. Famously the basilica of San Lorenzo was hit and seriously damaged, but not so well-known is that hundreds of civilians in the suburb were killed. The church and convent immediately became the centre for relief operations, and one of the Josephites named Fr Libero Raganella (alarming, his name in English is "Free Tree Frog") was especially remembered with gratitude for the help that he gave to those in distress.

The gratitude of the locals found concrete expression in the commissioning of the artist Mario Prayer to paint a cycle of fresco murals in the church. These were executed between 1946 and 1954, and include portraits of some killed in the bombing.

#### Nowadays

The church was re-ordered in 1972, when a statue of St Leonard Murialdo was blessed. He had been canonised in 1970. In the same year, the boys' college was closed owing to declining admissions and

unsuitable premises. Instead, a hall of residence for students of the nearby Sapienza University was opened.

The roof of the church and the campanile were restored in 1983, and there was another comprehensive restoration of the fabric in 2010.

### Cardinalate

The church was made titular by Blessed Pope Paul VI in 1969, the first cardinal being Peter McKeefry from New Zealand.

The present titular is Raymundo Damasceno Assis, of Brazil.

The title of the church and that of the cardinalate are different, the latter being Immacolata al Tiburtino. This is actually not uncommon in Rome -if you know the title of a cardinal, don't automatically assume that his church has the same one.

## **Exterior**

### Layout and fabric

The church is basilical in plan, which is based on a Latin cross. There is a central nave with side aisles of six bays, and then comes a wide transept. This is two bays deep on each side beyond the central crossing, and hence is one bay wider on each side than the nave with its aisle. The ends of the transept have their own structural side aisles -an architectural alteration from the original plan as drawn. Then there is a sanctuary of two bays, with an integral semi-circular apse.

The far end of the church is incorporated into the college and convent block, and the free-standing campanile is beyond this.

The central nave, transept, sanctuary and apse are all under one single, cross-shaped, pitched and tiled roof.

The fabric of the exterior of the edifice is described as neo-Romanesque with Gothic hints, in pink brick with some architectural details in limestone. It is actually quite grim. There is a side elevation to the left, where you can see that the building has aisles to its transepts. There is a side entrance here near the far corner of the nave, and the frontage of the left hand transept end which is a simpler version of the façade.

### Façade

The façade has a single storey, mostly in bare brick set on a stone plinth. The central nave frontage is flanked by two gigantic brick pilasters rising to the gabled roofline of the nave, and end in a pair of imposts flanking the gable ends. The gable roofline and these imposts are in stone and are dentillated like a cornice, with a frieze below of little arches in brick springing from tiny stone corbels (these arches also decorate the pilasters). On the pilaster imposts, and on a platform at the gable tip, are three very odd-looking etiolated little kiosks, each with four long thin columns supporting a steep pyramidal cap. The arch in each side of one of these kiosks is Gothic, being trefoil.

The side aisles have sloping rooflines, with the same dentillation and arcading (dentillation is a feature of the overall design). Where the rooflines join the central pilasters, a pair of imposts is

inserted into the latter. The two outer corners of these side zones have another pair of brick pilasters, also terminating in platforms with another two of the "stretched" kiosks on top.

Each side zone has a large, elongated round-headed window with a molded frame. On top of the curve is a further molding, which is continued across the entire the façade as a string course.

The best detail on the façade is the large central Gothic rose window, with a dentillated dished frame and ornate mullion tracery

The ornate single entrance has a molded doorcase which is again dentillated. It is within an arch of two step moldings, supported by four thin columns in a vaguely Corinthian style themselves supporting an entablature which runs above the doorcase lintel. The tympanum of the arch above this entablature is occupied by a mosaic depicting the Immaculate Conception, and the arch is flanked by a pair of pilasters in the same style as the columns. These support a second pair of pilasters above the entablature, which themselves bear another two of the Gothic kiosks. Finally, over the arch is a dentillated stone gable with a central monogram of Our Lady and a stone cross finial on its tip.

### Campanile

The separate tower campanile vaguely resembles that of St Mark's in Venice, and was added in 1929. It is an important civic landmark in a boring suburb not improved by graffiti. The main elevation is in brick with broken stone banding, has a pilaster on each corner and another at the centre of each face. These end at a pair of arches on each face. Above are two cubical storeys, the lower having a wide white frame on each side -it was obviously intended to have a clock. The upper is the bellchamber, and has an arcade of three arches on each face. Both of these storeys have projecting cornices. Finally, there is a pin balustrade from which rises the steep pyramidal cap, unusually in brick with each triangular face again outlined in white.

## **Interior**

### Layout and fabric

The spacious interior has a Latin cross plan, with a central nave having side aisles. The transept is wide, with an altar at each end.

The nave has six bays, but each section of the cross-vaulted ceiling covers two bays. The nave piers are clustered columns with vaguely Corinthian capitals, and are horizontally striped in pink and white. The arcade archivolt are simply molded, and are in white. Two of the nave piers on each side have their central inner column extended upwards to provide a springer for the nave vault, which is in blue with yellow stripes outlining the ribs. A floating cornice runs just over the arch keystones and around the church, and the wall surfaces below this in the nave and transept are also striped.

The side aisles are also cross-vaulted, except in white, and these vaults spring from engaged pilasters on the outside walls which are again striped.

The crossing piers resemble the nave piers, but are larger. The transept vault, and that of the sanctuary, also conform to the decoration of the nave.

Note the low stone sanctuary screen, which has Gothic trefoil arches recalling those of the pinnacle kiosks on the façade.

#### Artworks

Above the entablature, on the nave and transept walls and also on the counterfaçade, are frescoes by Mario Prayer, 1946-54. Many of the faces in the frescoes are of those who died in the bombing raid in 1943.

The golden apse fresco shows The Triumph of Our Lady Immaculate, and shows her standing within a rainbow mandorla and on a globe, being venerated by angels. The rays emanating from her allude to her status as Mediatrix of Graces. The Host of Heaven stand on each side.

The high altar has a frescoed reredos.

The sanctuary is flanked by a pair of side chapels, one dedicated to the Immaculate Conception and the other to the Sacred Heart. They have good wooden reredoses in red, blue and gold, with central statues. The former has two flanking panels depicting SS Leonard Murialdo and Pius X, and on the frontal are depictions of the Expulsion from Paradise and The Annunciation. The latter has a very similar altar, except that the statue of the Sacred Heart is flanked by picture panels of adoring angels.

Next to the crossing pier outside this chapel is the venerated statue of St Leonard Murialdo.

#### **Special notes**

Mass is celebrated:

Weekdays 8:00, 9:00, 18:00,

Sundays 8:30, 10:30, 12:00, 18:00.

The Rosary is recited every day at 17:20, before Mass.

#### **Artists and Architects:**

#### **Location:**

ia degli Etruschi 36, Roma  
Coord:

#### **Info:**

#### **Links:**

[http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/Santa\\_Maria\\_Immacolata\\_e\\_San\\_Giovanni\\_Berchmans](http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/Santa_Maria_Immacolata_e_San_Giovanni_Berchmans)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Parish website](#)

[Info.roma web-page](#)

[Ettorecunial blog gallery](#)

[http://www.zoonar.de/photo/santa-maria-immacolata-e-san-giovanni-berchmans-in-the-san-lorenzo-district-in-rome\\_829784.html](http://www.zoonar.de/photo/santa-maria-immacolata-e-san-giovanni-berchmans-in-the-san-lorenzo-district-in-rome_829784.html)