

# San Tommaso Moro



San Tommaso Moro is a 20th century parish church at Via dei Marrucini 1, just to the south of La Sapienza in the Tiburtino district (the suburban zone is called San Lorenzo). The dedication is to St Thomas More, the English Reformation martyr.

## History

### Villa

The area was still under vines at the start of the 20th century, producing the rather poor (and now extinct) local wine that everybody in the city used to drink. However, subdivision for suburban development began in the first decade of that century. A large plot north of the present Via Tiburtina, now bounded by Via dei Luceri, Via dei Ramni and Via dei Marucini, was obtained by an Italian branch of the French De Reinach banking family in 1907. They built a villa here, called La Villetta.

### Sister Helpers

The intention to found a convent here might have been in place from the beginning of the family's involvement. One Teresa Lemoine, described as a religious sister, was involved in the property with them.

The villa and its grounds were made over to a French congregation of sisters, in English known as the Society of Helpers of the Holy Souls and in Italian as the Suore Ausiliatrici delle Anime del Purgatorio. This had been founded in 1837 at Paris by Blessed Eugénie Smet, known in religion as Sister Marie of Providence, to assist the souls in Purgatory by means of graces acquired through doing works of charity.

The convent chapel was begun in 1921, being designed by Giuseppe Gualandi in a neo-Gothic style -which was very retro for the period. It was finished in 1926, and dedicated to "The Blessed Virgin Mary, Auxiliatrix of Christians in Purgatory". Gualandi is more famous in Rome as the architect of Sacro Cuore del Suffragio, built before the First World War. One wonders whether the plans for this church were also prepared then.

#### Parish, park and nursing home

The congregation decided to close its Rome convent at the end of the Sixties, so the sisters divided the property and sold it off. The southern part, on the Via Tiburtina, became the nucleus of a public park now known as the Villa Mercede. The northern part, including the convent and church, was sold to the Diocese which decided to found a new parish to be based here.

The church re-dedicated to St Thomas More, the English Reformation martyr, when it was given parochial status in 1974. This is a very late date to erect a parish in Rome's inner suburbs, and if the process had been delayed by only a few years it would not have been followed through. The new parish was carved out of those of San Lorenzo fuori le Mura and Santa Maria Immacolata e San Giovanni Berchmans, and arguably its creation was unjustified owing to the subsequent fall in regular Mass attendance among the city's population.

The church remains parochial. The former convent grounds to the north of it have been converted into sports facilities.

The former convent has become a residential care home, which obtained its final full paperwork in 1989. It is run by another congregation of sisters, the Daughters of the Cross who are based at Liege in Belgium. This is their only Roman institution (some of them work in a hospital as well). The home is called the Casa di Riposo Maria Teresa, and is named after the sisters' foundress Blessed Marie Thérèse Haze. The former convent chapel remains functional with a consecrated altar, and the Blessed Sacrament is reserved here.

Meanwhile the Society of Helpers re-established a presence in Rome in October 2014, at Viale di Trastevere 246. However, three sisters sharing an apartment does NOT constitute a convent -and calling the threesome a "community" is silly.

## **Exterior**

### Way in

Because of its former status as a convent chapel, the church stands in its own grounds away from the street. However, the street frontage has its own minor interest. In between brick walls is a section of walling in light grey stone, with a pair of rusticated gate piers with ball finials. The interesting point is that the wall was heightened at some stage with vertical slabs, and the same heightening was done to the brick walls on either side. The former sisters must have been worried about peepers.

The church stands above the street level, and so is approached through railing street gates and up a shallow stepped ramp with vertical stone revetting on either side.

### Layout and fabric

The church plan is that of a Latin cross, with a central nave of four bays having side aisles. There is an fifth entrance bay, without the aisles. There comes a transept, which is wider than the nave and aisles and has two large side chapels flanking the sanctuary. The latter has an external polygonal apse, which is enclosed by the parish offices which are on three sides of a square. This block used to be the chaplains' accommodation when the sisters were here.

The exterior walls are of red brick with stone detailing, and the brickwork is striped by horizontal bands of dark grey stone. The nave side walls are separated into bays by brick pilasters, and each bay has a narrow two-light Gothic window. The ends of the transept echo the design of the façade.

The roof has separate gabled pitches for nave, the ends of the transept and the sanctuary and these meet at a point over the crossing (there is no dome or lantern).

### Façade

The entrance façade has three zones, the central one projecting in front of the side aisle ones as mentioned. The fabric is in pink brick, with dark grey stripes. The central nave frontage has a single storey, framed by a pair of gigantic thin octagonal stone pilasters which have pinnacles on top extending above the gable, and which are striped by the same dark grey bands as the brickwork. There is a large, attractive Gothic rose window with cinquefoil mullions and with rosettes on its dished frame.

The ornate entrance is surmounted by a Gothic arch, enclosing a tympanum displaying a mosaic of the Cross and Crown-of-Thorns glorified. Above the arch is a tall triangular panel displaying a cinquefoil in blind tracery, with crockets and having a fleur-de-lys finial on its tip. The entrance is flanked by a pair of square Corinthian pilasters bearing tall pinnacles. Below the gabled roofline is a frieze of pendant Gothic arches, and above it an open balustrade of trefoil roundels.

The roofline decoration continues on the side aisle frontages, each of which has a narrow two-light Gothic window matching those in the nave side walls.

## **Interior**

### Nave

The attractive little interior is vaguely French Gothic, but the design is also a Hallenkirche since the side aisles are of the same height as the central nave.

The central nave and aisles are cross-vaulted, the vaulting being supported on thin columns in light grey limestone with foliate capitals and dark grey octagonal plinths. Since the vaulting is all of the same height, it forms a Gothic pointed-arch arcade on each side. The vault is in a cream colour, with light grey on the ribs which have dark grey transverse bands. These ribs are embellished with frilly leaf stencils in rows on either side, being yellow on blue. The same banding is applied to the frames of the side aisle windows.

Immediately below the side aisle windows in each aisle is a floating entablature with a pale blue frieze bearing a text in gold.

The floor is of good quality, being in polychrome marble square tiling in dark grey, white and yellow.

The ends of the aisles have blocking walls separating them from the transept. In front of the right hand one is a portrait of St Thomas More, the patron of the church. The right hand side aisle has a crucifix within a large stone-framed mandorla painted in red with a rayed design, and with a text on

the frame. This is an original part of the church's fittings. The left hand aisle has a modern polychrome statue of the Madonna and Child -she has rather a winsome smile.

### Transept chapels

The crossing of the transept is supported by four clustered columns in the same style as those of the nave. The sanctuary is flanked by a pair of identically designed large side chapels, which open onto the sanctuary via an arcade each of three Gothic arches supported by columns of yellow Siena marble on high plinths. These arcades are echoed by identical ones in the outer side walls of the chapels, and have molded archivolt in white.

The chapel altar reredoses each have a trefoil niche with red marble columns, containing a statue. The right hand one is of St Joseph. This chapel is used for the weekday Masses, and so has an altar pro populo in front of the original altar.

### Sanctuary

The sanctuary apse is five-sided, with a vault springing from corbels. The walls of the sanctuary have a blind arcade which is a continuation of the chapel arcades, and above these are five round windows with cinquefoil tracery.

The high altar is a very good Neo-gothic work, with a reredos comprising a semi-circular blind arcade of white marble tracery on red marble. There is a central niche containing a statue, with a crocketed canopy, and at the end of the semi-circle are two smaller niches in the same style containing angels.

The altar pro populo is, unusually, of high quality. This is because it was provided by the Diocese when the church was re-fitted for parish use in 1974, and not by some parish priest. The frontal is an open arcade of Gothic arches with little red marble columns.

The sanctuary floor, which extends into the side chapels, is of a more complex geometric form than that of the nave and is in black, yellow, white and red stone.

### **Special notes**

Mass is celebrated on weekdays at 7:30, on Saturdays at 19:00 and on Sundays at 10:00, 11:00 and 19:00.

### **Artists and Architects:**

#### **Location:**

Via dei Marrucini 1, Roma  
Coord: 41° 53' 58"N 12° 30' 48.5" E

#### **Info:**

#### **Links:**

[http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/San\\_Tommaso\\_Moro](http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/San_Tommaso_Moro)

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Parish website](#)

[Roman Despatches - blog](#) (with gallery) Website of Italian sisters