

San Callisto



San Callisto is a 17th century titular and former convent church at Piazza di San Callisto 16 in Trastevere. The dedication is to Pope St Callixtus, who is also commemorated by his catacombs on the Appian Way (Catacombe di San Callisto). There is no church at the catacombs.

History

The church was rebuilt in 741 by Pope Gregory III on the site of the supposed residence and place of martyrdom of St Callixtus in 222. There was a previous church or oratory already on the site, which had apparently fallen into ruins. The saint was, according to the tradition, thrown into a well next to his house and drowned (the well is still there). His relics are, however, enshrined beneath the altar of nearby Santa Maria in Trastevere.

According to the Oratorian scholar Severiano, writing in the 17th century, remnants of the fresco cycle commissioned for his new church by the pope survived subsequent rebuildings, and could be seen in his day. These have now vanished.

The church functioned as a shrine to the saint, and was part of the pilgrimage tour of Rome in the Middle Ages. It was restored or rebuilt in the 12th century, and again in 1455 by Pope Callixtus III in honour of his saintly predecessor.

There used to be a small church on the Quirinal called San Saturnino de Caballo, which was first mentioned in 1160 and was across the road from the present Sant'Andrea al Quirinale. In 1505 the church was given to the Benedictine monastery of San Paolo fuori la Mura by Pope Julius II, and the monks established a small convent. It had been long noticed that the summit of the Quirinal was a less likely place to catch malaria than the valley of the Tiber (although nobody knew then that it was because the anopheles mosquitoes tended not to fly up the hill), and so the monks could take time off here.

However, the popes wanted to establish their permanent residence on the hill for much the same reason. The Quirinal Palace was founded in 1583, and was extended by Pope Paul V in 1615. This entailed the demolition of the Benedictine convent, and to compensate the brethren at San Paolo the pope gave them the church of San Callisto with the adjacent palazzo.

This transfer took place in 1608. Beforehand, the palazzo on the left hand side of Santa Maria in Trastevere was the residence of the cardinals attached to that church and had been built by Cardinal Giovanni Morone in the late 16th century. The Benedictines immediately rebuilt the church and altered the palazzo for their own purposes, and this work was carried out by Orazio Torrigiani. The project was completed in 1613, and also involved the addition of a large convent block to the west of the church.

The monastery was dependent on that at San Paolo. However, the latter had joined a reform movement centred on the abbey of St Justina in Padua, which became the Cassinese Benedictine Congregation when the abbey of Monte Cassino also joined in 1505. The result of this was that the convent was used as the Roman hospice or residential centre for the entire congregation, being used by monks visiting the city.

The complex was sacked during the French occupation at the beginning of the 19th century, and monastic life was not renewed here. As a result, the property reverted to the Holy See.

Pope Pius IX ordered the church to be restored in 1851.

As a result of the Lateran Pacts of 1929, the former convent and church together with its large garden became an extraterritorial possession of the Holy See.

The church was restored again in 1936, and the garden used to build office blocks which still accommodate administrative and pastoral institutions of the Holy See. This work involved the demolition of the convent block added by the monks to the west of the church.

The Diocese lists it as one of the category of subsidiary churches with their own priests (chiese rettorie), but in this case the priest concerned is the parochial vicar of neighbouring Santa Maria in Trastevere.

The building seems to be in good condition, has been recently repainted and will probably end up in the care of a nationality group or a new religious order in due course since it is at present pastorally redundant.

The appointment of a new cardinal in 2012 prompted a minor restoration of the interior to allow him to celebrate his inaugural Mass. Before this, the church was disused.

Cardinalate

The church was made titular in 1517, and the first cardinal was Francesco Armellini Pantalassi de' Medici. The present cardinal is Willem Jacobus Eijk, who was appointed in 2012.

Exterior

The church is a small edifice, having an aisleless nave and a small attached rectangular apse. There are two very small external chapels attached to the nave walls, halfway along each side.

The fabric is in brick, now rendered in a cream colour. The nave has a pitched and tiled roof, the pitches of which can be seen behind the volutes on the façade. The side chapels and apse have their own little double-pitched roofs. There is a pair of small windows in each nave side wall, flanking the chapel, and the chapels have a lunette window each.

There is a little campanile or bellcote perched on the right hand side of the far gable of the nave roof.

The palazzo is to the north, on the other side of a courtyard. The main entrance on the Piazza di Santa Maria in Trastevere actually leads into an arcaded loggia on the north side of the courtyard with one wing over this facing north. The other wing faces east, and attaches to the north side of the church. As mentioned, there used to be very extensive gardens which are now mostly gone.

Façade

The façade was designed by Orazio Torriani for the 17th century rebuilding, and is early Baroque with some interesting design details.

It has two storeys, with the fabric rendered in a cream colour and architectural details in travertine limestone. The first storey has four Ionic pilasters with swagged capitals supporting an entablature with a strongly projecting cornice. The inner two of these pilasters are half concealed by a pair of projecting Doric pilasters, which are attached to the very large molded marble doorcase. The architrave of the entablature is replaced by the lintel of the latter, the upper corners of which have stylized diagonal breaks. The doorcase projects even further, and the entablature above is vertically stepped to accommodate the planes of the Doric pilasters and doorcase. A little triangular pediment is over the door, intruding into the second storey.

Between the Ionic pilasters on each side is a blank panel in an elaborate Baroque frame decorated with curlicues, and with a segmental pediment. The tympanum of the latter contains a winged putto's head, which is oozing through a break in the cornice. These two panels used to have frescoes of saints, lost through neglect in the 19th century.

The central zone of the second storey is a large projecting plane with a wide raised frame. This contains a third blank panel with a molded Baroque frame, simpler than the first storey ones and with a raised segmental pediment containing a winged putto's head. In between panel frame and pediment is a swag flanked by a pair of triglyphs. Above the zone just described is an entablature with a dentillated frieze (odd), and then a crowning projecting triangular pediment containing the coat of arms of Pope Paul V. The whole composition is crowned by a finial showing a stylized triple mountain bearing a cross, which is a Cassinese Benedictine motif. (Don't confuse this with the coat-of-arms of the Chigi family, familiar on Roman monuments and which has six mountains crowned by a star.)

The side zones of the second storey have a pair of Doric pilasters at their outer corners. Each side has a large recessed rectangular panel, and above this a gigantic incurved double volute reaching up to the central pediment. On the main curl of the volute is a flaming torch finial.

The façade can be admired at leisure while sitting at the outside tables of the Bar San Callisto opposite. This establishment offers very cheap pannini and Castelli wine by the tumbler or carafe, and is worth mentioning here because it does not charge extra for sitting down outside instead of standing al banco!

Interior

The interior is a rectangular box of a nave, of five bays with an attached rectangular apse having a triumphal arch. An external side chapel occupies the centre of the side wall of the third bay on each side. The last two bays of the nave are railed off to form the sanctuary

Nave

Separating the nave bays are four Doric pilasters on each side wall, painted so as to resemble pink marble. Four further pilasters are folded into the corners of the interior, and two flank the entrance.

These pilasters support an entablature on which the flat coffered nave ceiling sits, and which runs across the counterfaçade but not the triumphal arch wall. The frieze of this has an epigraph which is a quotation from the Book of Wisdom describing the patriarch Joseph being sold into Egypt. In full this is:

Honestum fecit illum Dominus. Descendit cum illo in foveam, in vinculis non dereliquit eum. D illi claritatem aeternum.

("[Wisdom] made him honoured. She went down with him into the pit, [and] did not abandon him in chains. She gave him eternal glory". Wis 10:10-14)

The flat nave ceiling has a fresco in a large circular tondo of St Callixtus in Glory by Antonio Achilli. Note the holy well depicted in the foreground of the painting, which is outside the church on the left hand side. The tondo is flanked by the symbols of the Evangelists.

The left hand side wall of the second bay has a window, but the opposite wall is blank. Here there used to be a picture by Avanzino Nucci, but this and others by him hung on the walls elsewhere have been removed.

Over the entrance is a gallery on curlicued brackets, with the panels of its solid balustrade embellished with acanthus-scrolls and putti. The case for an organ is still there, but the instrument has been removed.

Sanctuary

The sanctuary is structurally part of the nave, and shares its ceiling. It is separated by balustraded rails with red marble balusters. The first bay has a pair of windows, and the second bay seems to have two more of the missing paintings by Nucci.

The far wall with its triumphal arch looks as if it revetted in polychrome marbles; red with yellow borders for the Doric pilasters supporting the archivolt, and pale tan with a green border for the rest of the wall. The archivolt is deep, and is molded with a coat-of-arms over the keystone.

The altar aedicule is against the far wall, and has a pair of thin Ionic pilasters in a pavonazzetto brecciated marble supporting a segmental pediment. The frontal looks as if it is of porphyry. The altarpiece shows Our Lady Venerated by St Callixtus and Other Saints, and is also by Nucci. The composition actually shows several people, including children, worshipping at an altar with an icon of Our Lady.

Chapel of the Martyrdom

The arches into the two side chapels are of the same design as the triumphal arch.

The left hand chapel is the Chapel of the Martyrdom, and has its walls painted to resemble polychrome marble work. There is a large lunette window, but no altar aedicule. The altarpiece depicting The Martyrdom of St Callixtus by Giovanni Bilivert. It is a dramatic representation of the pope about to be stuffed down the well head-first.

To the right of the altar is what looks like a small cupboard door. This opens onto the actual well concerned, the main wellhead of which is on the other side of the wall. It still contains water.

Chapel of St Maurus

The right hand chapel is dedicated to St Maurus, one of the disciples of St Benedict while he was at Subiaco.

There is an altarpiece painting of the saint by Pier Leone Ghezzi, but more interesting are the two large marble angels holding it up which are allegedly by Bernini. The picture frame is in red marble, and the plinth and surrounds of the aedicule are in dark grey. There is a pair of curlicues imitating a broken pediment on top, with a winged putto's head in between swags.

Well

The well of martyrdom (Pozzo di San Callisto) is right by the outer wall of the left hand chapel. The wellhead is a re-used ancient burial urn by the look of it, and is an attractive cylindrical stone item with strigillate decoration. It sits on a box plinth made of marble slabs.

The garden formerly here has become a car park, which is part of the extraterritorial area administered by Vatican City. If you go into it to view the well, you are liable to be chased out. The writer was.

Access and liturgy

The church does not seem to be regularly open, even for liturgical activities.

It seems that the church is being used occasionally by the Sant'Egidio community. They would not welcome visitors wandering about during any liturgy that they hold.

Apparently you can enquire at the parish office at Santa Maria in Trastevere about access.

Burials:

Leandro Cardinal di PORZIA, O.S.B.Cas., (1673-1740)

Fortunato TAMBURINI, O.S.B.Cas., (1683-1761)

Info:

Location:

Coord: 41°53'20.5"N 12°28'13.4"E

Address:

Piazza San Callisto

External links

Roman Churches Wiki

Official diocesan web-page

Emglish Wikipedia Page

Italian Wikipedia page

Nolli map (look for 1164)

"De Alvariis" gallery on Flickr

Info.roma web-page

"Romeartlover" web-page

"Roma segreta" web-page

"Rometour" web-page

List of cardinals