

San Giovanni Calibita



San Giovanni Calibita is a 17th century hospital and convent church located on the Tiber Island opposite San Bartolomeo all'Isola. Pictures of the church at Wikimedia Commons here. There is an English Wikipedia page here.

The dedication is to St John Calabytes, whose legend claims him as a young 5th century nobleman of Constantinople with a story suspiciously similar to that of St Alexis.

History

Ancient times

The original site in ancient Roman times was occupied by a temple dedicated to Iuppiter Iurarius (Jupiter the Guarantor of Oaths), and ancient remains under the eastern part of the hospital attached to the church seem to belong to this.

They were discovered in 1994, and on top of them were the remains of an old church which is identified with one described in the records as San Giovanni Battista.

The ancient foundations have been conserved, and are now in an underground room.

Foundation legend

The legend attached to this church is that the future Pope Formosus (891-96) became bishop of Porto in 864, and moved his residence to this church for a short time in order to escape possible attacks by pirates. He brought with him relics of SS Hippolytus, Herculanus, Taurinus and John Calabytes, and allegedly re-dedicated the church to the last-named. If so, the change in dedication did not stick. The relics were enshrined in a re-used pagan sarcophagus, and an inscription was added naming them.

Cathedral

The church itself is first securely attested to in papal records for 1018, and was dedicated to St John the Baptist as San Giovanni Battista Cantofiume. About this time it was taken over again to be the cathedral of the bishop of Porto, which it remained until the 13th century. The bishop had to abandon his original cathedral in what is now Fiumicino because of pirate raids.

Amazingly, at the time he moved to here the boundary of the diocese of Rome ran up the Tiber, and both the Isola and the Vatican were in the diocese of Santa Rufina. The bishop of this diocese also resided on the island, at San Bartolomeo all'Isola opposite, until the two dioceses were merged in 1124. The cathedral of Porto Santa Rufina moved to Cerveteri (it is now Sacri Cuori di Gesù e Maria di Porto Santa Rufina.)

Middle ages

At the start of the 14th century, the church was in charge of a college of five secular priests but was also described as virtually ruinous. Next to it, on the city side of the island, was another church called Santa Maria Cantu Fluminis which was occupied by a community of Benedictine nuns called the Santucce.

In 1366 these were moved to San Giovanni, which was restored, and Santa Maria was abandoned. The nuns remained in possession until 1573, when they moved to join those already at Sant'Anna dei Falegnami after apparently becoming tired of being continually flooded out by the river.

The church was then taken over by a confraternity of expatriates from Bologna. They only stayed ten years, before moving to the present Santi Giovanni e Petronio dei Bolognesi.

Hospitallers

Permanent tenants came along in 1584, when the Hospitallers of St John of God (nicknamed Fatebenefratelli) settled on the island and founded the hospital which survives to the present day. The church functioned both as the chapel of their convent and of the hospital, and so it remains. Both the religious order and the hospital are named after St John of God.

The church was completely rebuilt in 1640, which we now know was on a fresh site just to the south-east. Obviously it was more convenient to build the new church while the old one was still being used. When the body of St John Calabytes was found underneath the altar during the demolition of the old church, the new one was rededicated to him. This rebuilding was part of a massive expansion of the hospital.

The façade was formerly described as added in 1711 by Luigi Berettoni -this was asserted by Armellini writing in 1891. However, the design is now attributed to Martino Longhi the Younger 1644. What happened in 1711 was a restoration of the interior by Romano Carapecchia from Malta.

The interior was frescoed in 1742 by Corrado Giaquinto.

There was a restoration from 1930 to 1934 by Cesare Bazzani, who provided the present campanile.

Exterior

Layout and fabric

The church has a rectangular plan, of three bays with a transverse rectangular sanctuary.

It is flanked by hospital buildings on both sides, the wing on the right being taller than the church. To the left of the façade, the large doorway leads into an alleyway which runs down the left hand side of the church to the hospital cloister, which is arcaded on all four sides.

Near the church, on the other side of the road, is an 11th century tower that belonged to a fortress. The church's campanile faces this, on the corner of the hospital wing by the Ponte Fabricio, and has tall arched sound-holes and a little onion cupola. It is a familiar feature in river views hereabouts

Façade

The façade was originally thought to have been designed by Luigi Berettoni, as mentioned, but Romano Carapeccchia is now regarded as having altered a design by Longhi. The architectural ensemble incorporates the wings of the hospital on either side. The architectural details are in travertine, and the background walling rendered in a brownish yellow.

The entrance door has a raised segmental pediment, and on either side is a pair of Doric pilasters with a stone panel between them. The outer two are doubletled, as if another two are hiding behind. These pilasters support an entablature that stretches across the whole width of the composition, including the hospital wings mentioned, and which has a dedicatory inscription on its frieze. The cornice projects, but only on the portion of the entablature occupying the front of the church.

Above this, the second storey of the façade has a large rectangular central window with a raised lintel, and on either side at the corners a pair of pilasters with capitals in a derivative Composite style. These pilasters are doubled round the corners, into two recessed portions of the upper façade containing urns. The capitals incorporate an eight-pointed star, an emblem of the order, and larger stars are to be seen on top of the urns. These pilasters support an entablature and a blank triangular pediment, but there is a higher balustrade running across behind this and this is also decorated with stars.

Interior

Layout

The plan is simple, a rectangle with an aisleless nave and presbyterium separated by a triumphal arch. There are two chapels on each side of the nave, and these are merely large arched niches from which the altars protrude. In between these chapels are side entrances; the right hand one gives access to the sacristy, and the left hand one leads into the hospital.

The interior is small, but very richly decorated with much polychrome marble work. The fresco decoration, completed in 1742, is mainly by Corrado Giaquinto.

Nave

The side chapels and entrances are separated by double Corinthian pilasters revetted in red marble, which support an entablature that runs round the church. On this sits the barrel-vaulted roof, with window lunettes over the chapels and entrances. The arched niches have Doric imposts in black and white veined marble, which is a nice contrast to the red pilasters.

Over the two side entrances are cantorie or opera-boxes for solo musical performers, with solid balustrades embellished with gilded fretwork above.

The fresco in the nave ceiling depicts the Charity and Apotheosis of St John of God, in two scenes, and is by Giaquinto.

Sanctuary

The main altar is faced by a 17th century altar frontal in opus sectile marble and mother-of-pearl work, and has an aedicule with a pair of dark green marble Composite columns with gilded capitals. These support a broken and separated segmental pediment, and into this is inserted a stucco relief of two putti playing with a bouquet of flowers. More putti are on top of the omega cornice over this, and a pair of angels are on the pediment fragments.

The altarpiece is The Vision of St John of God by Andrea Gennaroli, 1640. In it, Our Lady is shown handing the Christ-Child to the saint. The side walls have two pictures showing the Martyrs of Porto and the martyr companions Marius, Martha, Audifax and Abacus, both by Giaquinto.

The relics of St John Calabytes are enshrined under the altar.

The fresco in the central tondo of the sanctuary vault shows an allegory of the Trinity, with allegories of Charity and Humility in the lunettes and angels carrying the Instruments of the Passion in the pendentives. All this is by Giaquinto again.

Behind the altar is the church organ.

Side chapels

The famous 13th century icon of Our Lady of the Lamp (Madonna della Lampada) is preserved in the first chapel on the right. The legend is that it used to be outside, by the river, and was covered by a flood in 1557. The votive lamp provided for it continued to burn underwater, however. After the icon was taken into the church, a copy was put in its place.

The icon is supported by a pair of gilded stucco angels designed by Giuseppe Cesari.

The sacristy, through the side door beyond this chapel, has a painting by Johann Paul Schor (Il Tedesco) showing the brethren assisting sick people.

The second chapel on the right has an altarpiece showing The Death of St John Calabytes by Giovanni Battista Lenardi. This used to be the altarpiece of the high altar.

The second chapel on the left is dedicated to St Anthony the Abbot, and the altarpiece showing his death is by Giaquinto.

The first chapel on the left is dedicated to the Passion of Christ, and has a Flagellation by Mattia Preti.

Access

The church is usually not open. The advertised times are (unofficially):

Sundays only, 10:00 to 12:00.

Apparently, if you want to visit during the afternoon on weekdays you can make an appointment to do so by contacting the hospital administration. See their website, link to which is in "External links" below.

Liturgy

Mass is celebrated, according to the hospital website (which should be up to date):

Weekdays 6:30, celebrated with Lauds.

Sundays 11:00.

Vespers with Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament is on Sunday, 19:00. Vespers (only) for the rest of the week is 19:30.

No visitors are allowed to view the church during Mass or Vespers.

The feast-day of St John of God is 8 March, and is celebrated here with solemnity.

Note that the times above differ from those advertised elsewhere online on tourist websites.

Info

Location:

Coord: [41°53'26.9"N 12°28'39.6"E](#)

Address: Isola Tiberina 39, 00186 Roma

Telephone: 06-68.37.342

External links

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[English Wikipedia page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Nolli map](#) (look for 1093)

["De Alvariis" gallery on Flickr](#)

[Info.roma web-page](#)

["Romeartlover" web-page](#)

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[Photo of icon on Flickr](#)

["Resurveying the Religious Topography of Tiber Island" \(PDF\)](#)