

San Giovanni Battista dei Genovesi



San Giovanni dei Genovesi is a 15th century regional church for expatriates from Genoa, very heavily restored, in Trastevere. The dedication is to St John the Baptist.

History

When the church was founded in the late Middle Ages, it was the national church of Genoa, because that city was independent until the end of the 18th century. The Republic of Genoa was the dominant Christian maritime power in the western Mediterranean. The church was built in an area close to the Ripa Grande, where many of the mediaeval Genoese merchants had their homes and warehouses.

In 1481 one of these merchants, Meliaduce Cicala, left a bequest for the construction of a church dedicated to St John the Baptist, one of the patrons of Genoa, as well as a hospice for indigent sailors. The project was approved by Pope Sixtus IV in that year, and in 1489 the Istituto Nazionale Genovese was given a charter by Pope Innocent VIII.

The church was finished in 1492, together with the remarkable adjacent cloister of the hospice which was built in the style of a convent.

The new complex was plundered in the Sack of Rome in 1527. After struggling on for a few years, the hospice shut down in 1551. The following year the church and hospice was given over to the care of the Confraternita di San Giovanni dei Genovesi, a group of expatriate Genoese living in Rome. This was approved by Pope Julius III, and Cardinal Giovanni Battista Cicala traced and recovered much of the original endowment. The confraternity itself ran out of funds in 1704, and shut the hospice.

The church seems to have been deconsecrated, because the high altar was re-consecrated in 1725. There followed a restoration, and the church was re-dedicated in 1737. Then, from 1738, there was a thorough re-modelling under the aegis of the Marquis Giovanni Piccalunga, chairman of the confraternity. He also augmented the capital of the confraternity, and built the Chapel of St Catherine of Genoa.

A restoration began in 1843, but was interrupted by the Roman Republic of 1849. French troops besieging the city shelled the church, seriously damaging it. In 1864 there was a further major restoration, and the present façade was built by 1876. The architect was Luigi Carimini.

In the late 20th century, the former hospital buildings became an annexe to the Domus Romana Sacerdotalis, the hostel run by the Holy See for clergy working in the Curia or the Vatican diplomatic corps. At present this also maintains the church.

Exterior

The church is small, on a simple rectangular plan with an aisleless nave. The nave has five bays, the second and fourth being shallower than the others. There is a separate entrance bay, but that is occupied by side-chambers. The sanctuary has a single shallow bay and a semi-circular apse, with two small sacristies tucked into the corners behind the curve of the apse wall.

The cloister is attached to its left hand side. The Chapel of St Catherine opens off the bottom left hand corner of the church, and is on the ground floor of the south-east wing of the cloister.

There is a campanile on the top end of the right hand side wall, which has three round-headed bell openings in a row, under a triangular pediment. This is just visible from the street. The same wall has three large lunette windows, high up.

Despite its size, the church manages to dominate the little piazza in which it is situated. The hospice block to the left has three windows on the ground floor with curved cornices, and these light the side chapel of St Catherine of Genoa.

Façade

The façade was repainted in 2009. It is 19th century, with two storeys having white architectural details on a pale puce background.

Four Doric pilasters in the first storey support an entablature with a prominent cornice, and in between each pair of pilasters is a white zone containing a blank rectangular panel with a square one above, in recessed frames. The doorcase has a protruding lintel raised over a dedicatory inscription, and above the lintel is an archivolt in relief which creates a tympanum. This is decorated with a stylized rose-and-leaf motif, and encloses the coat-of-arms of Genoa.

The second storey has a large arched window with a molded frame, with flanked by a pair of rectangular panels in the same style as on the first storey but larger. The composition is crowned by an empty triangular pediment with dentillate edges.

In 1968 a railing gate was provided for the entrance designed by Virgilio Tomaselli.

Cloister

The glory of the church is the adjacent cloister, considered one of the finest Renaissance cloisters in Rome and containing the accommodation for the original sailors' hospice. Work on it was started under Pope Sixtus IV (1471-1484), and the design has been attributed to Baccio Pontelli.

It has arcaded walkways on four sides of a large central garden, the octagonal arcade columns being of travertine and having unusually carved capitals. The arches appear as cut-outs in a blank wall rendered in dull orange-yellow, with no voussoirs showing. The first storey has a gallery, also on all four sides and with columns in the same style, but they support a trabeated roofline instead of an arcade.

Three sides of the cloister are occupied by former hospice accommodation. The fourth, north-east side has the church, and a fourth block continuing on the major axis of the church behind its altar. The entrance is in the south corner, and to the right of the entrance passage is the confraternity oratory.

The garden is charming and very well-kept, and in the middle is a 14th century well with a wellhead made of two Ionic columns supporting the beam for the bucket and rope.

Oratory

The entrance to the cloister is at its south corner, and to the right in the entrance passage is the little private oratory of the confraternity with the same dedication as the church.

Interior

Nave

The rectangular nave has an altar on each side, protruding from a shallow arched niche and with an aedicule. The latter has a pair of Corinthian columns in red marble, supporting a triangular pediment. These aedicules are by Caramini, allegedly using porphyry columns from San Paolo fuori le Mura after that church was destroyed by fire.

To either side of each side altar is a smaller arched niche, containing a statue. Each of these is flanked by a pair of gigantic shallow Corinthian pilasters revetted in red stone, with further such pilasters in the corners and two more flanking the entrance. These support an entablature from which the barrel-vaulted ceiling springs.

The ceiling vault has window lunettes, and a blank central panel which used to contain a fresco by Michelangelo Cerruti, late 18th century. This was destroyed in the French bombardment in 1849, as were the frescoes in the hexagonal panels in between the lunettes. However, the depictions of the shields of Genoa and the Cicala family are still there, in little square panels at either end of the main one.

Flanking the entrance is a pair of small custodians' chambers. These allow for a cantoria or musicians' gallery over the entrance, which was restored in 1919.

The far bay, next to the sanctuary, has the founder's tomb to the right and a door to the cloister to the left. Over these are two more cantoria with balustrades.

The marble floor dates from 1895.

Sanctuary

The sanctuary has a high triumphal arch with a molded archivolt, formed by the end of the nave vault. It springs from two posts in the entablature, below which are two Corinthian pilasters in the same style as the nave ones, but prouder. These are accompanied on the nave side by two nave pilasters.

There is a curved apse with a conch, and the high altar is against the far wall. It is designed by Caramini in the same style as the side altars, and the two columns allegedly also came from San Paolo. The altarpiece shows *The Baptism of Christ*, and is now thought to be by Jean Leclerc (although an alternative attribution to Nicolas Régnier also exists).

The apse wall is now whitewashed, and bears the shields of the four provinces of Liguria (the former Republic of Genoa). These are by Silvio Cigerza 1969. The conch is divided into five sectors by rays meeting at the *Dove of the Holy Spirit*, and was frescoed in 1899 by Mario Spinetti. Three sectors have tondi showing (left to right) SS Zechariah, John the Evangelist and Elizabeth (the first and last being the parents of St John the Baptist), and the other two have allegories of Faith and Charity.

To the right in the sanctuary is a marble aedicule of Venetian origin, donated in 1914 and now containing a terracotta statue of the Infant of Prague.

To the left is a late 15th century marble aumbry or holy-oil cupboard with the arms and initials of Meliaduce Cicala, which is tentatively attributed to Mino da Fiesole.

Artworks

The description is anticlockwise, beginning from the entrance.

The first arched niche to the right contains a polychrome wooden sculpture of the Madonna della Guardia, by which title Our Lady is venerated in her shrine at Monte Figogna near Genoa. The work depicts the original apparition in 1490, and is a copy of 1914 by one F. Fantini.

The altar on the right is dedicated to St George, and the altarpiece of the saint is by Filippo Zucchetti 1696. Under this is a little Dormition, from the 18th century and unusually for the period in a Byzantine style. The head of Christ is triple, an allusion to the Trinity. This work was donated by the shrine of Montallegro.

The second arched niche, beyond the altar, contains a statue in painted wood of St John the Baptist by Antonio Canepa 1918.

Just before the sanctuary on the right hand side is the beautiful funerary monument of the founder of the church, Meliaduce Cicala 1481. It is of the school of Andrea Bregno, and is the most important artwork in the church. However, it was moved here in the 19th century and it is thought that the arrangement of the sculptural elements is not original. Apart from the recumbant effigy of the deceased, there are relief figures of the Madonna and Child with SS John the Baptist and Catherine of Alexandria. The latter two look away from the former, which is not to be expected.

The left hand side altar has as an altarpiece *The Apparition of Our Lady of Savona* by Giovanni Odazzi.

The bottom left hand corner of the nave has some of the original 18th century sanctuary balustrade, kept when it was demolished in the 19th century.

Chapel of St Catherine of Genoa

The church's only external chapel is entered through a doorway in the near left hand corner. It was decorated by Odoardo Vicinelli by 1740, and is an attractive Baroque room. The altarpiece shows the saint's death, and the central panel of the ceiling vault her apotheosis. This is accompanied by four oval tondi showing allegories of the Cardinal Virtues, and four larger panels showing scenes from the saint's life. These are in monochrome; the former green and the latter, grey.

Access

The church is only open for liturgical events.

You can, however, visit the cloister which should be open:

Monday-Thursday 14:00 to 16:00 in winter, and 15:00 to 18:00 in summer.

Formerly, the custodian was amenable to letting visitors into the church if asked. Modern life and insurance assessors have mostly caught up with such courtesies in Rome, including here, so don't bother asking.

Apparently, the Confraternity allows visits to the church by groups (only), but these have to be arranged with it beforehand. See their web-page in the "External links".

Liturgy

The only regular Mass is on Sunday, at 11:00.

The major feast-day is the Birth of St John the Baptist, 24 June, when there should be a Mass at 18:00.

Info

Location:

Coord: [41°53'17.1"N 12°28'31.2"E](#)

Address: Via Anicia, 12, 00193 Roma

Phone: 06 58 12 416

Open Tuesday and Thursday. Summer: 2-4 pm. Winter 3-6 pm

External links

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[Wikimedia Commons photos](#)

[Diocesan web-page for confraternity](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Nolli map](#) (look for 1120)

[Confraternity website](#)

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

[Info.roma web-page](#)

["Roma Segreta" web-page](#)