

Santa Maria Immacolata all'Esquilino



Santa Maria Immacolata all'Esquilino is a late 19th century former convent church, on the Esquiline north of the Manzoni metro station in the rione Esquilino. The dedication is to the Blessed Virgin Mary, under the aspect of her Immaculate Conception.

History

The church and convent were begun in 1896 for the Franciscan Third Order Brothers of Charity, also known as the Fratri Bigi or Grey Friars. Completion was in 1914, and the architect was Antonio Cursi. The complex seems to be his only work of note in Rome.

The congregation was founded in 1859 by Ludovico of Casoria. Unfortunately, this congregation had to disband in 1973 owing to lack of vocations, and the church is now a subsidiary place of worship in the parish of Santi Marcellino e Pietro al Laterano.

Since the mother church of the parish is small, the church here is now, in effect, functioning as a second parish church -and is actually busier liturgically.

Exterior

Structurally the church has a central nave covered by a pitched and tiled roof, and side aisles covered by flat roofs. The sanctuary is a simple structural extension of both. The unusual aspect of the layout is that there is an annexe off the left hand side of the sanctuary, amounting to a polygonal apse which gives the overall plan an L shape. This annexe was the choir of the brethren.

The right hand side of the church has a street frontage on the Via Galilei, but the left hand side is joined onto the very large and rather grim four-storey convent building, which stretches in a single block down to the Viale Manzoni. On the corner of its second storey at the crossroads is a statue of the Immaculate Conception, in a very good Gothic aedicule. This is worth a look.

The church itself is in the neo-Gothic style, rendered in dull apricot with white trim (which contrasts with the convent fabric, which is faked to look like limestone ashlar).

Entrance façade

The entrance façade has a single storey, with a gabled roofline fronting the central nave and a pair of tower campanili fronting the side aisles. The single entrance has a red marble doorcase, above which is a pointed and molded tympanum containing a mosaic of Our Lady Immaculate. Doorcase and tympanum are recessed, and are enclosed within a dished Gothic arch. This is in turn enclosed by a shallow gabled Gothic prothyrum, supported on two slender Corinthian columns. There is a frieze of Grottesque relief decoration connecting the capitals of the columns, and running under the mosaic. The gable of the prothyrum has three rosettes which allude to Our Lady (*rosa mystica*).

This prothyrum is itself enclosed by a gigantic molded and dished Gothic arch, which encloses a sixteen-light rose window in a deep dished frame above the entrance. The arch does not reach the gabled roofline, which is decorated with a frieze of little Gothic arches on corbels. This frieze is extended under the campanile and along the right hand side of the church, and also along the roofline of the convent on the left.

The aisle frontages are bounded by octagonal semi-columns without capitals. In between the inner pair of these and the gigantic Gothic arch are two columns in niches, without bases and with cushion capitals having a cross motif. This is a very odd design feature, and might relate to the Spanish devotion to Our Lady of the Pillar.

The narrow aisle frontages each have an etiolated two-light Gothic window, with a floating molded gable above. Above this is a string course, which is continued across the semi-columns and also along the side wall, and then comes blank circular tondo within a square which is just below the roofline. The semi-columns also display a second short string course at the level of the window arch springers.

The campanili each have an unglazed three-light Gothic sound-hole within a molded frame on each face, with slender dividing columns and a quatrefoil at the top. The corners have octagonal pilasters. A smaller version of the arcaded roof frieze runs above the sound-holes, forming little gables above them, and then comes a plinth which also has octagonal corner pilasters. This has a flat top, and one wonders if more was planned.

Side façade

The church has a longitudinal frontage on the side street, to the right, which matches the entrance façade. The first bay, below the campanile, is identical to the frontage round the corner, and then come two nave bays each with a large single-light window with a small two light window above, over the string-course. The sanctuary bay has a much larger two-light window.

Interior

Nave

The sumptuously decorated Gothic interior is awesome. If this church were in northern Europe, in England for example, it would be a tourist attraction in its own right.

The nave has three bays, a shallower entrance vestibule to start with and then two deeper ones. The side aisles are very narrow. There are three clustered arcade piers, each one comprising a bunch of four central red marble columns bounded by four other side-columns in a pinkish marble. The first pair have blocking walls joined to them to create two custodians' chambers flanking the entrance bay, and the last pair have similar blocking walls cutting the aisles off from the sanctuary.

These piers support a Gothic cross-vault, painted in blue with white stars and with the ribs outlined in vegetative bands on a pale brown. The side aisle vaults are in the same style and at the same height (this is a Hallenkirche), and spring from clustered semi-piers which match the arcade piers. Because of the narrowness, the aisle vaults are not cross-ribbed but each bay has a pair of triangular ribbed lunettes containing a trefoil aperture.

Over the entrance is an organ gallery, on three Gothic arches (the central one larger) supported by a pair of Corinthian columns in the pinkish marble.

The wall surfaces are entirely and spectacularly frescoed, with stencil work and many scenes depicting events in the life of Our Lady.

At the bottom end of the aisles are two Gothic statue niches, with the interior in star-spangled blue matching the vaults.

The two windows to the right have good stained glass, but to the left hand windows are fake because the convent is behind the left hand side wall.

Side chapels

The four side chapels have very similar altars, with arcaded frontals and gilt Gothic reredoses each having three picture panels depicting saints and angels. Above the reredoses and below the window embrasures are entablatures bearing texts referring to Our Lady. These chapels seem now to be dedicated to St Michael, the Sacred Heart, St Joseph and St Lucy.

The chapel of the Sacred Heart (first right) has a reredos showing him, flanked by SS John the Evangelist and Gertrude. The window embrasure is flanked by charming Christmas scenes.

The three reredos panels of the chapel of St Michael (first left) display him in the middle, flanked by SS Gabriel and Raphael, shown here as a Guardian Angel. Flanking the fake window above are two frescoes depicting The Annunciation.

The chapel of St Joseph (second right) has a plaster statue of him on the altar shelf, but the reredos actually displays St Anthony of Padua flanked by a pair of angels carrying lilies. The frescoes above depict The Presentation of Christ.

The chapel of St Lucy (second left) has a picture of her on the altar shelf, but the reredos displays St Francis of Assisi flanked by SS Bernardine and Bonaventure. Above are frescoes depicting The Visitation.

Sanctuary and choir

The vault of the sanctuary is figuratively frescoed, and springs from two more clustered semi-piers flanking the high altar. The walls of the sanctuary and apse are again covered with figurative frescoes, including figures of saints.

The high altar is spectacular, with a reredos incorporating the tabernacle and having two rows of five miniature Gothic aedicules containing frescoes of saints. Above the reredos is a massive Gothic aedicule containing a representation of the Immaculate Conception, flanked by a total of twelve frescoes of angels each with its own Gothic panel. These twelve frescoes are arranged in the semblance of a pair of Gothic stained glass windows. This main aedicule is topped by pinnacles and crockets, and above is a fresco of Our Lady being crowned Queen of Heaven. The aedicule is flanked by a pair of fresco panels displaying Biblical texts concerning the Immaculate Conception.

On the other sides of the semi-piers flanking the altar is a pair of statue shrines, in the form of pinnacled kiosks containing a round-headed statue niche.

The side wall to the right has a large stained glass window.

To the left is the apsed former choir, with a three-sided polygonal end having six more semi-piers. The frescoes here include scenes from the life of St Francis.

Liturgy

Mass is celebrated:

Weekdays 7:45, 8:30, 18:30;

Sundays 7:30, 10:00, 11:00, 12:00 (not in summer), 18:30.

Location:

Address: Via Emanuele Filiberto 129

Coord: [41°53′27.7″N 12°30′21.9″E](#)

External links

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

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