

Santa Maria del Buon Aiuto nell' Anfiteatro Castrense



Santa Maria del Buon Aiuto nell' Anfiteatro Castrense is a 15th century devotional and confraternity church, in the rione Esquilino. It is actually located on the west end of an ancient amphitheatre, the Amphitheatrum Castrense, and has its main entrance on the Via Nola where it passes through the ancient city wall. The chapel is no longer has an entry in the diocesan web page so it has probably been deconsecrated. The dedication was to the Blessed Virgin Mary, under her title of Our Lady of Good Help (Buon Aiuto).

History

Amphitheatre

The amphitheatre was originally part of the Sessorian Palace, probably begun by Septimus Severus and completed by the mad emperor Elagabalus between the years 180 and 211. Some scholars dispute this, because the hypothesis depends on reading Sessorium for Sesterium in Plutarch, the origin of the story. However, other hints in the written sources have allowed scholars to admit a consensus agreeing with the theory.

The palace was a large complex of buildings, including the amphitheatre to the west and a large aula or public meeting-hall which was converted into the basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in the 4th century. Further there was a race-track, the Circus Varianus, to the south-east. The layout was mutilated when the Aurelian Wall was built through it in 275, cutting through the circus and incorporating the south side of the amphitheatre. However, the main layout survived to be a major residence of the emperor at

Rome at the end of the 3rd century as a militarily more convenient alternative to the Palatine whenever he was in town (which was not often). The meaning of the name is unknown; it only appears in the form Sessorium at the start of the 6th century.

As mentioned, the south wall of the amphitheatre was incorporated into the city wall. As a result, it kept its full height until the 16th century. The plan is an almost circular ellipse, 88 by 76 metres, with a fabric almost entirely in brick (architectural elements in travertine limestone have mostly been robbed). The first storey had blind arches framed by Corinthian semicolumns, and the second storey was similar except it had pilasters instead of semicolumns. The lost third storey was pierced by windows, and had brackets for the velum or fabric sunshade.

After the Sack of Rome in 1527, the third storey was demolished and replaced with a solid wall.

Meanwhile the other, north side of the amphitheatre had been left to go to ruin until only the first storey was left.

Santa Maria de Oblationario

The 15th century edifice was not the first church on the site. A predecessor might have been in place before the end of the 12th century. A surviving grant by Pope Honorius II in 1198 reads:

"I grant to the alms-house near the Lateran Palace, the chapel of St Mary of the Official-in-Charge-of-Church-Offerings as a place to bury pilgrims, and all the adjacent territory with its garden and olive orchard, from the rock below the palace to the road that leads to the Holy Cross, from the upper road junction to the city walls").

The intention was to establish a cemetery for poor pilgrims who died while residing at their hostel at the Lateran. The oblationarius (Official-in-Charge-of-Church-Offerings) would have been the cleric at the Lateran in charge of processing and administering the offerings made at the Lateran basilica by pilgrims and visitors. This grant was renewed in 1238, after which the name is not recorded. Unfortunately, the topographical description is not sufficiently specific to identify the site with certainty.

Santa Maria de Spazolaria

A lost bull of Pope Innocent III (1198-1216), quoted by Fioravante Martinelli, referred to a pilgrim hospice called Sanctae Mariae de Spatularia which was also mentioned in 1216 and 1228. This might be the same as the church S. Maria Saxolaria listed in the Catalogue of Paris, about 1230.

In the reign of Pope Boniface VIII, an inventory of the assets of the Lateran Basilica listed a vineyard infra portam Lateranam iuxta ecclesiam S. Mariae de Splazolaria in loco qui vocatur Mons Cipollarius ("below the Lateran gate, next to the church of St Mary of 'Splazolaria' in a location called the Onion Hill"). It seems clear that the mediaeval scribes did not know what the name Spatularia meant -it seems to derive from a late Latin word meaning "small, flat piece of wood". The Monte Cipollario was to survive as a small hill until it was levelled in the mid 18th century when the road between the two basilicas was built.

There is an odd listing in the Catalogue of Turin, about 1320. This has an entry Ecclesia sancte Marie de Spatularia habet Sarabaitas VI. The word Sarabaita is a rare one in late Latin, and actually originally referred (pejoratively) to monks not living under a recognised rule. As a surmise, this group of six might have been made up of Benedictine monks from failed monasteries who were living without a superior.

Rebuilding

The church was rebuilt in 1476 by Pope Sixtus IV, and dedicated to Our Lady, Good Help for the Souls in Purgatory. The old church and hospice had been abandoned, and were ruinous.

Back then, the direct way between San Giovanni in Laterano and Santa Croce in Gerusalemme was not a road, but merely a path which ran past several hermitages tucked against the city wall (Santa Margherita in Prigione is the sole surviving example). The story is that the pope was walking between the two basilicas

when he was caught in a violent thunderstorm, and took shelter in a little aedicule or sacello dedicated to Our Lady. His rebuilding of the nearby ruinous church was in gratitude to Our Lady answering his prayer here when he was in danger from the lightning, and the madonnella or icon of her in the sacello was transferred to the high altar.

The new church was built actually on top of the ruined amphitheatre wall at this point.

Cistercians

The monastic complex of Santa Croce was taken over by a community of Cistercian monks in 1561. They turned the inside of the amphitheatre into a garden, primarily for growing vegetables and herbs. This became famous over subsequent centuries.

The church became part of the monastic complex, and was provided with a spiral staircase to the amphitheatre garden below.

According to Armellini writing in 1891, the monks allowed the church to be used by pious unions of peasantry. Until large plots were sequestered for country villas for rich people, a process beginning in the 17th century, the surrounding land within the walls was mostly given over to vines. The church had an endowment of a piece of farmland the income from which was used by the monks to defray expenses.

According to the same source, the church was the headquarters of a Confraternita dei Cappellari who seem to have been hat-makers. But by Armellini's day, it was in the possession of a confraternity set up by the monastic community, with the abbot as chairman. There were restorations in 1836 and 1880.

The last years of the 20th century the Cistercian monastery, which fell into moral, spiritual and financial degeneracy. The community had a completely unsuitable person, Simone Fioraso, as its abbot from 2005 until he was deposed in 2009. He had a high profile as a media personality and a socialite, with many contacts among rich people. After his deposition, an Apostolic Visitation was held in response to continued serious complaints. As a result of this, the monastery was forcibly closed in 2011 and the twenty monks dispersed. The basilica and parish of Santa Croce were handed over to diocesan clergy.

Exterior

The church is a very simple little building, in red brick on a rectangular plan. There is a pitched and tiled roof, and a little campanile or bellcote over the far left hand side wall. The altar wall is visible from the monastery garden in the amphitheatre, and displays a blocked window.

There are two identical doors, one in front and one around the left hand side. This is an arrangement intended for a small pilgrimage shrine, whereby pilgrims would enter one door and leave by the other.

Façade

The main entrance is approached by a single transverse stairway, leading to a little patio. The metal railing is modern.

The gabled façade is extremely plain, in a dull red render which has fallen off in places. There is a single rectangular window with a wide stone frame, and double dentillations in brick along the gable roofline.

The molded limestone doorcase has a marble insert above the lintel, itself protected by a slightly projecting floating cornice. This has an epigraph which reads: Sixtus IIII fondavt MCCCCLXXVI. In between the cornice and the window is a Baroque tablet with an epigraph in Italian: In questo santo loco, si prega Dio per l'anime del santo Purgatorio, la santa memoria di Sisto Quarto, fece ingrandire questo santo loco.

Interior

The interior is equally simple.

The counterfaçade shows that the façade window was originally round, and was converted to a rectangular form at some stage.

The venerated Renaissance fresco of “Our Lady of Good Help” by Antoniazio Romano is on the wall of a round-headed niche, and has below it the single altar which is just a slab on two curlicue legs rather like a bench in an old villa garden. The fresco has a painted glory in white, blue and red occupying the niche. The surrounds of the niche are painted in a trompe-l'oeil effect to give the impression of an aedicule with a pair of Doric pilasters supporting a segmental pediment, inserted into a semi-circular apse and revetted with polychrome marble. The work is rather naïve.

Location:

Address: Piazza Santa Croce

Coord: [41°53'15.4"N 12°30'52.7"E](#)

External links

[Roman Churches Wiki](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

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

["Romeartlover" web-page](#)

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