

San Giuseppe dei Falegnami



San Giuseppe dei Falegnami is a church dedicated to St Joseph the Carpenter, foster-father of Our Lord Christ. The church lies on top of the *Chapel of the Crucifix*, which in turn is on top of the Mamertine Prison.

History:

The area here used to be the Comitium, the political centre of the ancient city from the earliest times and functioning as such since at least the 7th century BC. Back then, a king of Rome called Ancus Marcius (640-616 BC) founded a prison here for condemned enemies of the State, and it remained in use for this purpose during the lifetime of the Roman Empire. It was known as the Cacer (now usually called the Mamertine), and the innermost and most secure section was known as the Tullianum (there were other cells, now lost, dug out of the hillside of the Capitoline). It is the latter part which survived, because the legend grew up that St Peter was imprisoned here before he was martyred at the Circus of Nero and Caligula at the site of the Piazza San Pietro. Other known prisoners are Vercingetorix the Gaul and Simon bar Giora, who defended Jerusalem against Titus.

The tradition of St Peter's imprisonment is uncertain, but not entirely improbable. According to tradition, the prison was converted into a church of San Pietro in Carcere by Pope Sylvester I in the 4th century (in reality, possibly in the 8th century).

An upper church was built about 1500 during the reign of Pope Paul III. However, this was rented by the Confraternity of Carpenters in 1540 (the name "falegnami" means "wood-joiners" or "carpenters"), and they re-built it. Construction of this baroque church started in 1597 or 1598. It was designed by Giacomo della Porta, but the project took a long time to complete. He handed over to Giovan Battista Montano, who designed the façade, in 1602, and when he died in 1621 his pupil Giovan Battista Soria took over. Completion was only achieved in 1663 by Antonio del Grande.

There was a restoration in 1863, when a new apse was constructed. Finally, in the 1930's a new outside staircase was provided so as to allow easier access to the Mamertine.

Exterior:

The complex has four levels. Firstly, the church. This is on top of a crypt-chapel, the *Chapel of the Crucifix*, which in turn is on top of the antechamber of the Mamertine Prison. Below that is the dungeon.

Montano's entrance façade, completed in 1602, includes volutes, aedicules and 2 small pediments contained within the larger one. The balustraded double staircase on the façade was mutilated in 1932 to make way for a new and enlarged ground-floor entrance portico in the Mussolini classical style.

The church has a rectangular nave, an attached presbyterium which is both lower and narrower, and finally a semi-circular apse which is lower still. The roofs are pitched and tiled. The side walls of the church are rendered in a dull pink, with three square windows on each side, but the two-storey façade is in white travertine with stucco ornamentation. The first storey has four Ionic pilasters with their capitals embellished with putto's heads, and these support an entablature. Between each pair is a framed panel containing a badly faded fresco, above which is a charming little winged cherub holding carpenters' instruments and inserted between volutes. The entrance is monumentally treated, with columns in the round having capitals in the same style, supporting a triangular pediment by means of pilasters inserted into the entablature above the capitals. There is a putto (with no wings) hiding in this pediment, and above the door is another panel with a faded fresco. The second storey has a horizontal oeil-de-boeuf window above the entrance pediment, framed by volutes and with two more cherubs sitting on it. This is flanked by two short pilasters with un-Classical strapwork capitals decorated with garlands, and these support a crowning pediment containing a pair of gigantic volutes. The outer zones of the second storey are occupied by a pair of round-headed panels with another two faded frescoes, and these have wide frames flanked by double volutes and crowned by little triangular pediments of their own.

Interior

The interior is richly decorated. There is a chapel on each side of the short nave. The gilt coffered ceiling is beautiful, and there is a carving of the *Nativity* by Carlo Maratta of 1661.

The Carpenters' Guild chapel has frescoes of the life of St Joseph, now in need of restoration.

The frescos in the apse are from 1880 by Angelo Maccaroni and Cesare Mariani.

In the former palazzo of the guild or confraternity, adjacent on the right, is an oratory of 1627 that can be approached from the right aisle of the church. It contains an altar by Tiberio Calcagni (1532-65); frescoes of 1631-7 by Marco Tullio Montagna; and a painting of the *Virgin with St. Joseph and St. Joachim* by Pier Leone Ghezzi (1674-1755).

The Chapel of the Crucifix

Below the church lies a chapel where a 16th century crucifix is venerated. The chapel was excavated between the floor of the church and the Mamertine Prison, and hence has a low ceiling which is coffered and has a transverse curve. It is supported by yellow marble Doric columns on either side, and there is intricate marble polychrome work on the altar.

Carcere Mamertino - the Mamertine Prison

First constructed in the 7th century BC, this was a prison for condemned enemies of the State. According to legend, St [Peter](#) was imprisoned here before he was martyred at the Circus of Nero and Caligula at the site of the Piazza San Pietro. Other known prisoners are Vercingetorix the Gaul and Simon bar Jiora, who defended Jerusalem against Titus. The tradition of St Peter's imprisonment is uncertain, but not improbable. The stairs down to the cell are a later addition; the prisoners were lowered down into the cell through the circular hole in the floor. The cell has been turned into a chapel dedicated to St Peter. It was incorporated in San Giuseppe in 1597, and consecrated in 1726 by Pope Benedict XII (1724-1730).

Legend says that St Peter brought forth a spring in the cell, and used the water to baptize two of the guards, Processus and Martinianus.

The present altar was made by Jean Bonassieu in 1842. It is decorated with a bas-relief depicting the baptism of the guards.

Special notes

The church is normally open only on Sundays, while the Mamertine prison is usually open every day.

Location:

Addr: 1 Clivo Argentario

Coordinates: [41° 53' 35.8"N 12° 29' 5.8"E](#)

Info:

Closed

The church opens for the celebration of marriages only.

Masses

Holidays 11.00

Links:

<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/italy/rome-mamertime-prison.htm>

http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/San_Giuseppe_dei_Falegnami

http://www.tesoridiroma.net/chiese_barocco/giuseppe_falegnami.html

<http://romeartlover.tripod.com/Vasi42.html#Giuseppe>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mamertine_Prison

http://www.rome-tour.co.uk/mamertine_prison.htm



A small altar in the lower room of the Mamertine Prison. The upside-down cross lends the desolate place an extra-sinister air, but that's just the Cross of St. Peter (who was crucified upside down). In the foreground is a spring that Peter is said to have miraculously sprung up so he could baptize his fellow prisoners; the altar relief shows him doing so.