

# San Pietro in Borgo

## San Salvatore de Terrione in Vaticano



The church of **San Pietro in Borgo** is a small mediaeval (possibly 11th century) church by the south-east corner of Vatican City, just west of the Piazza del Sant'Uffizio in the rione Borgo. Located near the Vatican City, but in an Italian subject to extraterritoriality in favor of the Holy See. The modern dedication is to St Peter the Apostle. The present name is owing to the church having been re-dedicated as the school chapel of the Pontificio Oratorio San Pietro in 1924 after three centuries of deconsecration. [1]

Referred to in some historical documents as St. Salvatore of Ossibus due to confusion with a similarly named medieval church, now lost. This church was most properly called “of Terrione” after ruins near the present Roman Porta Cavalleggeri. The oldest names date from the pontificate of Leo IV (847-855). A decree from the pope names the church of St. Salvatore “in Terrione.” According to some studies the *Scuola Francorum* founded by Charlemagne, was attached. The Church appears again later in historical sources in both 1053 and 1186. [2]

### History

The church was restored about 1450, under the authority of Pope Nicholas V. The surviving fresco work on the interior walls dates from this restoration, the pope's heraldry occurs in it. [1]

However, the edifice was subsequently abandoned as a church. This seems to link to the construction of the adjacent Palazzo di Sant'Uffizio to house the Holy Office (now the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), which was proposed in 1511 but only actually finished in 1567. It is on record that the western end of the church was demolished in the process, which indicates that the mediaeval church used to have an entrance portico or narthex. Formal deconsecration took place in 1611. [1]

In 1922-1923 Pope Pius XI (1922-1939) gave the grounds at Nero's Circus to the Knights of Columbus so they could build the Oratory for St. Peter's. Several buildings were destroyed during this time. The Church of St. Salvatore of Terrione, however, was saved and restored. The supervising architect was Entico Pietro Galeazzi. [2] [3]

There was a restoration in 2011, sponsored by the "Ohio Chapter of the Patrons of the Arts in the Vatican Museums". [2]

It is now part of the Soup Kitchen, run by Missionaries of Charity, opened in the 1980's by Pope John Paul II as a gift to St. Mother Teresa. This is called the Casa Dono di Maria, and incorporates a shelter and soup kitchen for derelict and homeless women. [1]

## **Exterior**

The edifice is a simple nave of two bays, with a pitched and tiled roof. An external chapel is attached to the left hand side wall, squeezed into the narrow space between the church and the palazzo. [1]

There is an external semi-circular apse, which can be seen from the street. This has intricate dentillated brickwork forming the roofline cornice, repeated on the main gable. A small round window with fenestration in the form of a six-petalled flower is over the apse. The rendering used to be in yellow ochre, but has recently been re-done in grey. [1]

The left hand side wall has two large round-headed windows with two lights each separated by ring- and colonnette mullions, and two large pilaster buttresses with pitched and tiled tops. The rendering of the exterior away from the apse end is in light grey also. [1]

### Façade

The restored façade is very straightforward, being a blank wall with a little round window over the single entrance door. The window has a cross-shaped fenestration formed of four three-quarter circles, and amounts to the only decoration. The doorway is approached by a flight of steps, and has a blank semi-circular tympanum over it. It looks as if there might be a crypt. [1]

## **Interior**

### Nave

The nave has two bays, with a cross-vaulted ceiling lacking ribs. This springs from four pilasters in the corners, and two pilasters midway down the nave. These have Doric impostes but no capitals. [1]

The walls and vault have 15th century fresco decoration restored in 1924, which is illusionistic or trompe d'oeil. It gives the trick impression that the interior has Classical decorative architectural elements, when it has none. Here is one of the best examples of this in a Roman church. In the description below, elements within "quotation marks" are all painted on flat surfaces. [1]

The nave walls below the pilaster capitals are divided into three horizontal registers of fresco. The lowest depicts large "framed panels of stone slabs" in red, green and yellow partly concealed by "red curtains hanging from a horizontal rail" (both fresco motifs were popular in palaeochristian churches). The second register is blank. The third is in several shades of grey, and consists of ten strips of "decorative molding" in a wide band dominated by a central "molding" involving a cylindrical bundle of oak leaves tied with ribbons. This impressive third register is "supported" on painted brackets. [1]

The third register is broken by the two large round-headed windows to the right, which themselves are painted so as to seem to have wide frames of several "moldings" springing from "molded sills". The glass is from 1924, and contains two identical pairs of heraldic shields. One of the pair is of Pope Pius XI, and the other is of the Knights of Columbus. [1]

The ceiling vault has two painted "molded archivolt" where it meets the wall on each side. Where the sectors of the cross-vault meet are two representations of the Keys of Peter within a wreath with ribbons. In between these is a fresco of Christ Returning as Judge (surrounded by flames), and by the one nearest the altar are winged angels' heads. [1]

The 15th century fresco work continues across the counterfaçade, disproving the published remark that part of the actual church was demolished in the 16th century (this must have involved a portico). The entrance is painted so that it seems to have a "molded cornice" supported by a pair of

"ribbed Corinthian columns". The round window sheltered by the curve of the vault is given a "molded frame" including a wreath, and to each side are more perished frescoes of angels. [1]

The floor of polished brown marble tiles is also from 1924. [1]

### Sanctuary

The sanctuary is in the semi-circular apse. The impression of a triumphal arch is give by the same style of grey fresco work as is in the nave, depicting a wide "molded archivolt" springing from a pair of "wide ribbed Doric pilasters". Above, the round window has a "molded frame" bounded by a gigantic "oak-leaf festoon tied with ribbon". [1]

The capitals of the fresco pilasters are joined by a string course around the apse curve, below which are three of the panels in red, yellow and red. The conch has the text *Laudate pueri Dominum* ("Praise, servants, the Lord") within a wreath tied with ribbon. [1]

The altarpiece in front of the yellow panel depicts *The Holy Family*, described as 16th century although it looks later. The altar slab is supported on two little columns and shelters a cippus or limestone box bearing a relief of the Cross. This was installed in 1924. The Blessed Sacrament is now reserved on this altar. [1]

### Chapel of the Sacred Heart

In the near end of the left hand wall is a doorway leading into the church's only side chapel, fitted out in 1924. This is dedicated to the Sacred Heart, and has a tiny separate rectangular sanctuary entered through a completely plain triumphal arch. This contains an altar which is a marble slab perched on top of an ancient cippus with a defaced inscription. A round-headed portrait of the *Sacred Heart* in an ornate frame hangs on the wall above. The frame is worth inspecting, since it is an impressive neo-Baroque item with lots of gilded grotesque decoration on a ultramarine background. [1]

Opposite the entrance door in this chapel is the church's shrine to Our Lady, which is also the memorial of Cardinal Francesco Borgongini Duca (1884-1954). It is an attractive work, within an arched niche outlined by yellow marble. A mosaic of the Immaculate Conception is above a large epitaph tablet in pinkish-red marble, which in turn is above a plinth in purplish-brown marble. On this are bronze figures of the Cardinal, a young woman, a boy and a girl. The Cardinal's heraldry is on the front of the plinth. [1]

Here also is a memorial to Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani (1890-1979.) An epigraph within a Baroque frame in alabaster and yellow marble reads: *Christum et Ecclesiam vehementer dilexit, semper idem* ("He passionately loved Christ and the Church, always the same"). Above is his bust in bronze, within a round-headed niche edged with more purplish-brown marble and above this in turn is his heraldry in polychrome marble inlay. [1]

### **Access and liturgy**

The church now functions as a private chapel for the Missionaries of Charity, and has no public function. Special permission, obtained in advance, is needed to visit the church, and it is that this is not easy to obtain. [1]

Saint Teresa of Calcutta, the foundress of the Missionaries, has her feast-day on 5 September and the sisters celebrate this with solemnity. [1]

### **Burials**

Francesco Cardinal [BORGONGINI DUCA](#), (1884-1954)

Alfredo Cardinal [OTTAVIANI](#) (1890-1979)

### **Location:**

Coordinates: [41° 54' 2" N](#) [12° 27' 22" E](#)

## Links and references:

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
2. [Page in Vatican Patrons web site](#)
3. [Info Roma web site](#)

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Last visited: March 2011

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