

Santa Maria dell'Orazione e Morte



Santa Maria dell' Orazione e delle Morte is an 18th century confraternity church in the rione Regola, next to the bridge over the street from the Palazzo Farnese. The dedication is to the Blessed Virgin Mary, under a special title of "Our Lady of Prayer and Death".

History:

Foundation of confraternity

The origins of the church lie with a confraternity founded in 1538 and associated with the basilica of San Lorenzo in Damaso. The Compagnia della Morte or "Company of Death" was an informal association of laypeople, concerned with a situation where abandoned bodies were being found in the countryside (campagna) or in the river. These were not receiving proper burial, and the problem was especially acute in the countryside around the city. The parish system did not apply there in practice, and poor country-dwellers were dumping their dead rather than take them into the city for a proper funeral. Most of them could not afford this, anyway.

The association received a charter as a pious confraternity from Pope Julius III in 1552. In this the pope made it clear that the new confraternity had the task not just of burying bodies, but of praying for the souls once in them. Hence, he changed the name to Confraternita dell'Orazione e Morte. The new confraternity immediately had trouble finding a headquarters. At first they were at Santa Caterina da Siena a Via Giulia, but things did not work out and they moved to San Giovanni in Ayno

after only a few months. They then helped to restore the little parish church. In 1571, they moved again to Santa Caterina della Rota but were already planning to build their own church. In the following year they bought the property on the present site, and began construction of a small church in 1575. It was finished in the following year, 1576. Very importantly, the new church was granted burial rights even though it was not a parish church. It is on record that members of the confraternity then actually went on body hunts in likely places in the Campagna, along the riverbank and on the seashore. Also, they attended on dying people in the Campagna and arranged the funerals. However, in these cases they had to be careful to respect the rights of existing parish churches, and so buried the dead in the appropriate parish graveyard -also paying the parish priest his fee.

Rebuilding

The small church proved inadequate in the 17th century, as did the attached cemetery. So, a project of complete rebuilding was entered into in 1732. The architect was Ferdinando Fuga. Famously, he embellished the exterior with skulls.

The new layout included a cemetery along the riverbank, and several ossuary vaults. The way the complex would have worked was that bodies would be buried in the cemetery, allowed to rot and then the bones dug up and put in the ossuary in order to make room for new interments.

Modern times

The confraternity was scrupulous about recording its funerary activity, and its records show that it buried about 8 600 bodies between 1552 and 1896. This amounted to about twenty-five a year. On the first day of November (the month of suffrages for the dead) the confraternity had a poster campaign appealing for information about abandoned bodies.

However, the location of the complex in the city centre was a gross health hazard. The ossuaries flooded every time the river rose, and the over-stocked graveyard encouraged vermin. When the French occupied Rome after 1808, one very useful thing that they did was to prohibit burials within the city walls, including here. The alternative was to open a very large municipal cemetery on a suburban site, the Campo Verano.

After the formal restoration of the papal government in 1815, the determination to return to a status quo ante in all areas of civic administration led to the practice of burials within the city again. However, the arrival of cholera put a definitive stop to this, as from 1837.

There was a restoration and embellishment of the interior in 1867.

From 1886 to 1910, the construction of the Tiber embankment entailed the loss of the cemetery and the destruction of the ossuary vaults, except for one under the church. The human remains were shipped off to the Campo Verano.

The confraternity continued to conduct funerals until 1896, when it stopped. One reason for this is that the Italian government sequestered the assets of religious confraternities in 1893. After a period when it almost dispersed altogether, since 1940 the confraternity has been active as a secular charity based at the church, mainly to give assistance in cases of bereavement.

The church had fallen into an indifferent state of repair by the start of the 21st century, and is now (2014) closed for restoration.

Exterior:

Layout and fabric

The plan of the church is based on a longitudinal ellipse. There is a transverse rectangular apse at the end of this, but no entrance vestibule or external chapels. The fabric is basically an elliptical brick cylinder, with the four side chapels as niches in the interior of the wall.

The interior has a domed ceiling, but this is not a genuine dome. Outside, the roof has twelve triangular tiled sectors on a gentle slope, meeting at a low elliptical lantern. The latter has six round-headed windows interspersed with pairs of blind pilasters, and its own tiled cap.

The campanile is a bell-chamber with an arched opening in each face and a Doric pilaster at each corner. It has a low ogee-curved cupola in lead, and is placed at an angle to the façade on the lower left hand side of the church roofline.

Where it is not obscured by adjacent buildings, the fabric is rendered throughout in white.

Façade

The impressive two-storey façade really deserves to be on a piazza, not a narrow street. A cut-off view can be obtained up the side street opposite. Notable in the design is an abundance of pediments.

The first storey has four pilasters, two flanking the large central entrance and two at the outer corners (the latter are actually applied to slightly larger piers). In between the inner and outer pilasters the frontage is recessed to accommodate a pair of Corinthian columns on each side. Columns and pilasters support a dividing entablature, which is posted out slightly over the entrance and the outer pair of pilasters. It bears an inscription: Ind[ulgentia] plen[aria] quot[idiana] perpetua pro vivis et defunctis. This advertises that a visit to the church for prayer can obtain a plenary indulgence on any day of the year, and that the offer is perpetual. Above the entrance, on this entablature, are two fragments of a segmental pediment broken at its top.

Above the central doorcase is a segmental pediment, the entablature of which has posts supported on corbels which (superbly) are in the form of grinning skulls embellished with olive wreaths and sprays of acanthus. They obviously refer to the purpose of the church. Also, the tympanum of the pediment has a relief of a klepsydra (Greek: "water-stealer"), a water-clock which symbolizes your time running out with death at the end.

To either side of the main frontage is a smaller side door, which accesses ancillary areas attached to the church. Each has a segmental pediment raised above a small horizontally elliptical window, which breaks its cornice. Above the pediment in turn is a large vertically elliptical window, with curlicues below and a knot of ribbon above. These windows have screens of iron strips, formed so as to display hour-glasses and the Instruments of the Passion.

The second storey has four pilasters and four columns like the first storey, except that these are Composite not Corinthian. They stand on an attic plinth, with pedestals for the pilasters, and support an entablature with a crowning triangular pediment. In the center of this storey is a large round-headed window, sheltered by a triangular pediment with a broken cornice and containing a winged skull. This pediment rests on posts supported by strap corbels. The window has a balustrade, inserted into the broken segmental pediment already mentioned. The crowning entablature is brought forward above the window and the two flanking pilasters, and above this in turn is a segmental pediment inserted into the tympanum of the main triangular pediment.

On top of the crowning pediment are four flaming urn finials, but the central finial is a Baroque tablet containing a winged hour-glass ("time flies", and then you're dead). This tablet is flanked by

volute, and is sheltered by an arc cornice on which is the metal cross that the Diocese prescribed for all its churches in the 19th century.

Alms box

To the right on the façade is a famous alms-box, much photographed. It has an incised marble slab which features Death as a winged skeleton sitting on an ancient sarcophagus, gloating over a corpse abandoned in the Campagna while holding a winged hour-glass. The date given is 1694.

Interior:

Layout and fabric

Once through the entrance door, you are in the body of the elliptical nave. Four side chapels occupy niches in the diagonal directions, and there is a rectangular apse for the sanctuary.

Nave

The church has a Baroque interior, in tones of blue-grey and gold. This is paint done up to look like marble.

The side chapels are rectangular niches, flanked by pairs of blue-grey Corinthian columns. These support an entablature which runs over the chapels and around the church, including the interior of the apse. Another pair of these columns flank the sanctuary triumphal arch, and yet another the entrance so there are twelve of them in all.

In between the chapels, between the far chapels and the triumphal arch columns and between the near chapels and the entrance columns the side wall is recessed slightly and is bowed (concave). The entablature conforms to the curve in these six places. The last two bowed zones nearest the sanctuary have a pair of cantorie or opera-boxes for solo musicians, each with a modesty screen and a curved balustrade with balusters.

Counterfaçade

The counterfaçade has a very impressive organ gallery, with a triple serpentine curve to its balustrade which also has pin balusters. This gallery is entered through second-storey doors at each end, in the first pair of bowed wall zones. Above the organ is a Baroque tablet held by two putti and sheltered by an archivolt with a single row of square coffers with rosettes. It reads:

Quando orabas cum lacrymis, et sepeliebas mortuos, et derelinquebas
prandium tuum, ego obtuli orationem tuam Domino
("When you prayed with tears, and buried the dead, and left your meal, I
[Raphael the Archangel] took your prayer to God").
Book of Tobit, 5:12.

Dome

The elliptical saucer dome dominates the interior. It does not spring from the entablature, but from an attic on top of it. Twelve wide ribs converge on an oval lantern oculus, containing the Dove of the Holy Spirit with putti. These ribs are each embellished with a row of fish-scale ornament, which are doubled to circle the oculus. The sectors in between have a diaper pattern in stucco. The paint scheme is in white, light grey and gold.

Where the ribs spring from the attic, the latter has V-shaped posts with triglyphs. The sectors over the entrance, sanctuary and side chapels have pointed lunettes containing windows, which are capsule-shaped and intrude into the attic over the chapel but are only round-headed over the entrance and sanctuary. These windows have winged skulls in relief over them in the lunettes.

Sanctuary

The sanctuary triumphal arch has a pair of Corinthian pilasters in yellow, fitted within the far pair of columns. The high altar is against the far wall, with its round-headed altarpiece in a niche flanked by four similar pilasters with the outer two folded into the corners. Above the interior entablature, which runs round the apse and curves round these corners, is a triangular pediment on which two stucco angels sit and hold a crown.

The altarpiece is The Crucifixion by Ciro Ferri, inspired by the famous altarpiece by Guido Reni at San Lorenzo in Lucina.

Chapel of St Catherine

The first chapel on the right is dedicated to St Catherine of Alexandria. It has a bowed aedicule with a pair of Composite columns with gilded capitals, in what looks like a pinkish-grey marble. Yellow Siena and verde antico marbles are also used.

The altarpiece, depicting The Mystical Marriage of St Catherine, is thought to be by Jacopo Palma Il Vecchio but this is uncertain. The little tondo portrait on the altar is of St Charles Borromeo.

Between this chapel and the next one is a fresco of St Anthony of Egypt meeting St Paul the First Hermit, by Giovanni Lanfranco.

Chapel of St Michael

The second chapel on the right is dedicated to St Michael the Archangel. The chapel was designed by Paolo Posi by 1751, and has a polychrome marble aedicule with a pair of Corinthian columns in a mottled grey marble.

The altarpiece is a good copy of the famous work by Reni in Santa Maria della Concezione dei Cappuccini.

Chapel of St Juliana

The second chapel on the left is dedicated to St Juliana Falconieri, the foundress of the Servite nuns.

The altarpiece showing her taking the veil is by Pier Leone Ghezzi 1737. There are putti on the triangular pediment above.

In between this chapel and the next is a frescoed depiction of St Simeon Stylites on his column.

Chapel of the Holy Family

The first chapel on the left is dedicated to the Holy Family. The altar aedicule has an unusual design. A pair of alabaster Corinthian pilasters flank the altarpiece, which is surrounded by square white coffers with rosettes on a background of verde antico. The altarpiece is by Lorenzo Masucci.

Sacristy

There is an interesting collection of pictures in the sacristy: St Michael Conquering Satan is possibly by Raffaellino da Reggio and a matching pair St Michael Disputing with Satan at a Deathbed and St Michael Saving a Soul from Purgatory are by Giacinto Brandi. The latter is especially good, showing other sufferers standing around in the flames. There is also an anonymous 17th century Deposition.

Access

In 2014, the church was reported as "closed for restoration", with no date given for its reopening.

Beforehand, it was unofficially advertised as open:
Weekdays 10:00 to 12:15 (except Saturdays), 16:00 to 18:30,
Sundays 10:00 to 12:30, 16:00 to 19:00.
The church was closed down for the months of July and August.
There was no regular access to the crypt.

Liturgy

Mass was celebrated on Sundays at 18:00.
"Baobab" advertised another Mass in Hungarian, at 11:00 on the last Sunday of the month.

Location:

Addr: Via Giulia / Via dei Farnesi, Rome
Coord: [41° 53' 40"N, 12° 28' 11"E](#)

Info:

Open Sunday 04:00pm-07:00pm
Closed July & August
Mass Sundays at 18:00

Links:

http://romanchurches.wikia.com/wiki/Santa_Maria_dell%27_Orazione_e_delle_Morte

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Maria_dell%27Orazione_e_Morte

http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=it&u=http://www.romaspqr.it/ROMA/CHIESE/Chiese_Sette-ottocentesche/s_maria_orazione_e_morte.htm

<http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=it&u=http://www.erbadellastrega.it/letture/orazione>

<http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=it&u=http://www.morelli.it/aom/>

[Official diocesan web-page](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Nolli map](#) (look for 703)

[Confraternity website](#) (Poor, unfinished and no pictures.)

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

[Info.roma web-page](#)

["Romeartlover" web-page](#)

["Rome Photo Blog" web-page](#)

[Youtube video](#)