

**Chiesa di Sant'Alfonso all'Esquilino**  
(Chiesa di Santissimo Redentore e Sant'Alfonso in Via Merulana)  
(Chiesa di Santa Maria di Perpetuo Soccorso)



The **Church of St. Alphonsus Liguori** is a 19th century convent and titular church just south-east of Santa Maria Maggiore in the rione Esquilino. It is dedicated to St. Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787), the founder of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer and one of the thirty-three Doctors of the Church. However, the church also has the nickname of Madonna del Perpetuo Soccorso after the famous icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary which is enshrined here.

The church is one of the rare examples of neo-Gothic architecture in Rome. It is one of the last papal churches of Rome, although the Redemptorists have possession of the church and its related complex.

### **History**

On this site used to be the Villa Caetani, built in the 17th century for that noble family and replacing an older property called the Villa Caserta. This estate was purchased in 1853 to become the Generalate or headquarters of the Redemptorist order (the Order of the Holy Redeemer).

The church was designed for this complex in 1855–1858 by **George Wigley**, an English journalist who had trained as an architect. He was most famous for his involvement in the foundation of the Society of St Vincent de Paul, as he was one of the original members.

The whole scheme was paid for by Fr Edward Douglas (1819-98), who was a priest of the order and a convert. The Scottish noble family of Douglas has held the title of Marquess of Queensberry since the 17th century. Fr Edward used his personal fortune to finance the project, and served as the superior of the order subsequently.

The church was consecrated on July 6, 1859 by Card. Costantino Patrizi. This was the last new church built within the walls of Rome before the suppression of the Papal government by Italy in 1870.

St Alphonsus was the original founder of the Redemptorist order. Originally the church was dedicated to Christ the Redeemer, but the dedication was changed to honor him in the 20th century after a major restoration and re-ordering of the church which was completed in 1900. There was another restoration in 1932, when the entrance staircase was provided.

The church was restored again for the centenary of the enthronement of the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour in 1958, and the final restoration was in 1964.

## **Exterior**

The roof is pitched and tiled, with one run over the nave. The presbyterium has a separate pyramidal roof. The apse is incorporated into the convent buildings, which are attached to the church at the far end of the presbyterium and to its right hand side. Over the latter range of the convent, where it joins onto the presbyterium at its junction with the nave, is a little campanile parallel to the major axis of the church. This has a very steeply pitched gable roof of its own, over open two Gothic arches side by side for the bells.

The church is approached by a flight of 24 wide steps, constructed in 1932. As can be deduced from the entrance stairs, the church stands over a crypt.

The main façade is in pink brick with architectural details in travertine, as is the rest of the exterior of the church. It is dominated by an enormous pointed arch supported on a pair of gigantic brick pilasters with impostes but no capitals. The section of the façade between this arch and the roof gable is brought forward to the same plane as the arch, and on this is the coat-of-arms of the order. This has the Cross with the lance and the sponge on a stick, instruments of the Passion, and above it is the all-seeing eye of God.

This top part of the façade is actually false, since it is higher than the nave roof behind.

On the gable is a stone Celtic cross, restored in 1964, which is a small reminder of the Scottish origins of the money that paid for the church's construction. On the archivolt of the arch is the motto of the order: *Copiosa apud eum redemptio* ("With him is fulness of redemption").

Within the arch is a large rose window, with twelve Gothic lights surrounding a six-petalled chrysanthemum. This contains stained glass depicting *Our Lady of Perpetual Succour*, which is by a French Dominican named **Marcellino Leforestier** (he also executed the stained glass in the aisle windows which depicts martyrs). The window has a circular molded frame in stone, with a brick band within which is quite an attractive detail.

Each of the very narrow aisle frontages has a six-petalled chrysanthemum window in a circular frame, above a single-light Gothic window without tracery.

The entrance loggia is added to the front of the façade, and is entirely in travertine. It was designed by one Fr Gerard, a Redemptorist. There are three entrances, the central one of which is larger and

has a prominent gable supported by blind pilasters. On the tip of this gable stands a marble statue of *Christ the Redeemer*. There is another pair of pilasters at the corners of the loggia, and these have pinnacles with crockets.

Over the main door is a large pointed tympanum which contains a mosaic copy of the icon of *Our Lady of Perpetual Succour* in a mandorla supported by angels. Over the side doors are two other tympani containing bas-reliefs of saints in prayer on a gold mosaic background; the left hand one is *St Alphonsus*, and the one on the right is *St Clement Mary Hofbauer*. These sculptures are by **Antonio della Bitta**.

## **Interior**

The plan of the church is that of a narrow arch, being rectangular with a semi-circular far end. Structurally the central nave with aisles has a total of eight bays, followed by a sanctuary also with aisles of three bays and finally an apse with an ambulatory connecting the aisles.

The interior is richly decorated in fresco, mosaic and polychrome marble, the result of the restoration in 1900. The Redemptorists executed this restoration themselves; both the architect, **Gerard Knockaert** from Belgium, and the principal artist **Maximilian Schmalzl** from Bavaria were members of the order. So was the carpenter who built the ornate Gothic confessionals, **Gerardo Uriarti**. The splendid mosaic in the apse, depicting the *Redeemer enthroned between the adoring Virgin and St. Joseph*, was created in 1964 and superimposed on an earlier fresco by van Rhoden.

Columns of colored marble separate the large central nave from two side aisles. The nave, separated from the side aisles by wide transversal arches presents a rich spectacle of polychrome marble. The side aisles contain six small chapels, erected between 1932 and 1939. The confessionals, constructed at the beginning of the twentieth century in florid gothic, following the design of **Gerard Knockaert**, are the work of the Redemptorist Brother, **Gerardo Uriati**, a noted cabinet maker. The ceiling is a Gothic rib-vault.

The stained glass of the rose window and that of the windows in the side aisles is of French origin and the work of the Dominican Brother, **Marcellino Leforestier**. During the years 1898-1900, two Redemptorists, the Belgian architect **Gerard Knockaert** and the Bavarian painter, **Maximilien Schmalzl** dedicated themselves to the embellishment of the church and to maximizing its available space. The paintings in the chapels and on the arches of the central nave, the work of **Schmalzl**, all date from this time, as well as those on the gallery, above the side aisles, which opens on to the nave through a series of three-mullioned windows.

### Sanctuary

At the end of the nave, on the triumphal arch above the entrance to the sanctuary, is the early twentieth century painting, by **Eugenio Cisterna**, depicting the *Coronation of the Virgin with the Angels and Saints of the Redemptorist Congregation*. Underneath is the inscription in Latin telling "The Holy Mother is exalted above the choirs of angels to the heavenly kingdom". **Cisterna** is also responsible for the painted medallions of *Apostles* and *Saints* to be found above the arches of the side aisles. On the arch of the apse there is another Latin inscription: "You have redeemed us by thy blood and have made us a kingdom to our God". High above the sanctuary there is a large painted Cross on a gold background flanked by the coats-of-arms of Pope Paul VI and the late Cardinal Joseph Ritter of Saint Louis, U.S.A. The apse is crowned by a mosaic, set in place in 1964, depicting the *Enthroned Redeemer between the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph*.

The high altar has a frontal in polychrome marble opus sectile work which incorporates the arms of the order, and the candle shelves above the altar stone are decorated with more stonework in Cosmatesque style. The miraculous icon is now enshrined above the altar in a simple gilded Gothic arch.

The original icon of *Our Lady of Perpetual Help*, which was produced in Crete in the 14th century and given to the Redemptorists by Pope Pius IX in 1866. Tradition claims that several miracles had

happened in Crete following veneration of the icon, and this continued in Rome. It was venerated in a church, but after that church was destroyed by Napoleon's soldiers it had been kept in a private chapel. After it was moved here, the devotion has spread throughout the world. It was crowned by Pope Pius IX in 1867. It is painted in the typical Byzantine style. The figures are identified in Greek letters. In addition to Our Lady and the Holy Child, an angel holding the Cross and Nails is depicted on the left and identified as St Gabriel the Archangel. The halos were added later, as this element was not common when the image was painted. The proportions between Our Lady and Christ are not right; the artist clearly wanted to emphasize Mary. The instruments of the Passion give the icon a sense of sadness. For a believer, it is possible to feel Our Lady's need for comfort at the thought of the sufferings her Son will have to endure, and at the same time realize that she above all is able to understand the sufferings of those who come to venerate the icon.

On the counter-façade there is the church pipe organ. This, which incorporates part of the phonic material of a previous instrument, created by **Charles Anneessens** in 1898, was built in 1932 by the Tamburini firm and restored in 1982. The entire phonic body is placed inside the original monumental wooden case in neo-Gothic style, designed by the German architect **Maximilian Schmalzl**.

The side altars are described clockwise from the bottom left. All of the chapel altarpiece statues were sculpted by **Kaspar von Zumbusch** from Bavaria, except that of the Holy Family which has a bas-relief. The altars are intricately decorated, and the Gothic aedicules have interestingly varying designs.

#### Altar of St. Francis of Assisi

Made with white and yellow marble. The statue of *St. Francis of Assisi* is of Bavarian origin, flanked by mosaics of the symbols of the passion. Below is a painting of *St. Gerard Majello* by Giovanni Gagliardi. The base of the altar has the monogram of St. Francis (SF) with the dates 1839-1939, commemorating the centenary of the canonization of St. Alphonsus Liguori. On the wall to the left of the altar is a mosaic of *St. Alphonsus Liguori*.

#### Altar of the Immaculate Conception

Made with veined gray, red and yellow marble. The statues of *Mary Immaculate*, *St. Alphonsus* (on the left) and *St. Gerard Majella* (on the right) are of Bavarian origin.

#### Altar of St. Alphonsus

Made with white, red and yellow marble. The statue of *St. Alphonsus Liguori* is of Bavarian origin.

#### Altar of the Holy Family

Made with white, rose and yellow marble. The bas-relief of the *Holy Family* is of Bavarian origin. On the base are the dates 1732-1932, commemorating the bicentennial of the founding of the Redemptorist Congregation.

#### Altar of St. Joseph

Made of veined gray, yellow and green marble. The statue of *St. Joseph with the Baby Jesus* is of Bavarian origin. The rosette on the front of the altar carries the monogram of St. Joseph (SJ).

#### Altar of St. Theresa of Jesus

Made with white, rose and yellow marble. The statue of *St. Theresa of Jesus* (of Avila) is of Bavarian origin. She is holding a book in her left hand and a quill in her right. On either side is a niche with an angel mosaic, one in green and the other in red. Below is a painting of the *Sacred Heart* with the inscription "Cor Iesu Eucharisticum". On the front of the altar is the monogram of st. Theresa (ST). On the wall to the right of the altar is a mosaic of *St. Gerard Majello*.

#### **Access**

The church is advertised unofficially as being open from 6:50 to 19:30 daily.

#### **Liturgy**

As a shrine church of Our Lady, the church has a full liturgical timetable despite not being parochial.

Mass is celebrated, according to the Diocese:

Weekdays 7:00, 9:00, 18:30;

Sundays 7:00, 8:30, 9:30 (in Polish), 12:30 (in Polish) 11:15,  
16:00 (in Tagalog), 17:00 (in Spanish), 18:30.

**Artists and Architects:**

George [Wigley](#) (d. 1866), English architect

Maximilien Schmalzl (1850-1930), Bavarian painter

Marcellino Leforestier (19<sup>th</sup> cent.), stained glass maker

Antonio della Bitta (1807-1882), Italian sculptor

Gerard Knockaert (1845-1928), Belgian architect

Gerardo Uriati (19<sup>th</sup> cent.), cabinet maker

Kaspar von [Zumbusch](#) (1830-1915), German sculptor

Eugenio [Cisterna](#) (1862-1933), Italian painter & mosaic designer

Giovanni [Gagliardi](#) (act. c.1860-1908), Italian painter

**Location:**

Addr: Via Merulana 26, 00185 Roma

Coord: [41°53'44"N 12°30'1"E](#)

**Info:**

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Open times: 06:50 am-19:30 pm

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