

Santi Vitale, Valeria, Gervasio e Protasio



San Vitale is a titular minor basilica church in Rome, dedicated to the martyrs St Vitalis, his wife St Valeria and his sons Sts Gervase and Protase. The full name of the church is **Basilica di Santi Vitale, Valeria, Gervasio e Protasio**, or alternatively **Santi Vitale e Compagni Martiri in Fovea**. St. Vitalis is said to have been one of the seven sons of St. Felicity. It is the station church for Friday of the second week on lent. It is also the church for the mission to Romanian expatriates of the Roman rite. [1] [3] [b]

History

When the church was built the area was a densely populated residential quarter on a street running east-west up the valley between the Quirinal and Viminal hills, from the Forum of Augustus to the Baths of Diocletian. The street was called the Vicus Longus and was on a slightly different angle than today's Via Nazionale. [1]

The church was originally built about 400, replacing a former chapel dedicated to the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius, financed by a bequest from a wealthy widow, Vestina. The new church was a richly-adorned oratory, and consecrated by Pope Innocent I in 401/2. The church was built as a basilica with a central nave and side aisles. [1] [2] [3]

This church is recorded as *Titulus Vestinae* in the acts of the 499 synod of Pope Symmachus, and three presbyters are listed, and it is mentioned several times by Gregory the Great as a titular church. The dedication to St Vitalis was first recorded in 595, when it was referred to as *titulus Sancti Vitalis*. [1]

The first restoration of the church on record was that of Pope Leo III, about 800, during which he donated many precious items to the basilica. The church was massively reduced in size on the orders of Pope Sixtus IV, before the 1475 Jubilee. The motivation for this was that the old building had

become ruinous. The aisles of the nave were demolished and the arcades walled up, to create the rather elongated single-nave edifice which exists now. The apse was left untouched, but the entrance doors were reduced to one and the windows on the façade replaced by a little round window or oculus. [1]

In 1595 it was united by Clement VIII to the large novitiate of the Jesuits based at Sant'Andrea al Quirinale. Because the church was extremely dilapidated, the Jesuits immediately set about repairing it, but they lacked funds to make significant improvements. In 1598 the Countess of Urbino, Isabella della Rovere, wife of the Neapolitan nobleman Nicole Bernardino di Sanseverino, the prince of Bisignano, provided the Jesuits with a large endowment for the church. This endowment financed the fresco decoration of the interior in 1603, as the church appears today. Also the land between the two churches was entirely planted as a joint herb garden. [2] [a]

It was restored again in 1859, by order of Pope Pius IX. It seems that the old sacristy to the left was demolished, and replaced with one to the right. [1]

The Italian government sequestered almost all the convents in the city in 1873, including the Jesuit novitiate. Since then the church has been served by diocesan clergy, and was made a parochial church by Pope Leo XIII in 1884. [1]

As a result of the construction of the Via Nazionale in 1880 the church in its valley was left well below the new road level, and is now accessed by a flight of steps. [1]

The church was renovated in 1937, the work taking a year. The architect was Ezio Garroni. The narthex was restored to something like the condition it had before the Jesuits. The church was again restored in 1956, when archaeological investigations were made of the fabric. This work was completed in 1960. During this restoration the front arcades of the narthex were reopened and those in the facade wall uncovered. The triple arcade on the north side of the narthex is still visible in the later wall. Masonry of 5th century date and a row of rectangular beam holes can be seen in the upper part of the facade wall. [1] [5] [b]

From 2009, the church is home to the diocesan mission to Romanian expatriates of the Roman rite. [1]

Exterior

The church is a very simple structure, a long, rather thin edifice under one pitched and tiled roof. There is an external semi-circular apse with its own tiled roof of eight sectors, and the entrance narthex which has a single-pitched tiled roof. There is a tiny bellcote over the far end of the left hand side wall. The staircase (1) from via Nazionale was constructed on order from Pope Pius IX in 1859. [1]

On the right-hand outer wall of the church are remnants of the earlier arches and columns. The first piece (3) is from the 5th century in alternating tuf and brick, while the later on (4) is later (from the 9th century where the church was restored by Pope Leo III) and made up of recycled materials, with the brick in the wall above the arches and tufa above. The narrow courtyard on this side of the church (5) corresponds to the old right side nave. On the wall to the new fire station in the house next to the church (accessed by a side street from via Genova) you can see remains of the old church wall. During the Pope Sixtus IV the old side aisles were demolished and remnants can be seen intermittently still in these walls. [2]

The apse of the church also originate from the ancient church from the 5th century and from the outside (6) one can see how it was constructed by alternating bricks and tufts, as it was common in Rome in the 4th and 5th centuries. This is the best preserved piece of the original building. [2]

Narthex

The portico or narthex (2) is the most ancient part of the church, possibly dating back to the 5th century and hence as old as the church itself. It was altered at the end of the 16th century by the Jesuits, but restored to its presumed original condition in 1938. [1]

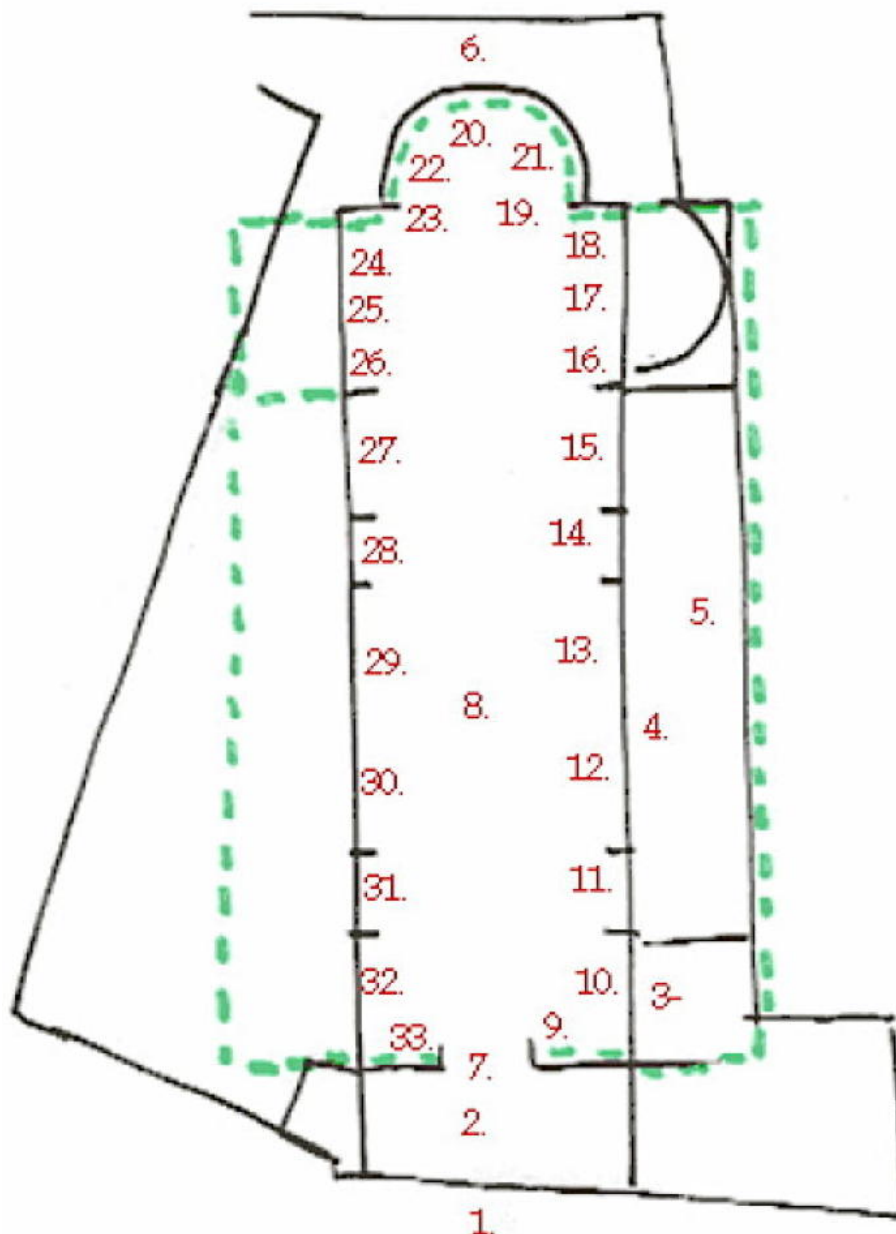
The narthex is of brick, and has solid walls at the sides and corners. In front there are five arches, and these are separated by four grey granite columns with Composite capitals carved in travertine. The roof of the narthex is pitched and tiled, and slopes up to the absolutely plain nave frontage which contains a rectangular window the sill of which is in line with the upper roofline of the narthex. The narthex is actually not on a rectangular plan, but is trapezoidal. The left hand side wall is shorter than the right. [1]

The façade (7) is very simple. The 1930's restorers have left exposed in the church frontage two of the original four entrance arcade columns, in the same style as those of the narthex, together with the brick arcade voussoirs. [1]

The carved wooden door shows some fine 17th-century craftsmanship. The scenes on the right side are: "Martyrdom of St Protase", "Martyrdom of St Valeria", and "Sant'Ignazio pellegrino". On the left side are: "Martyrdom of St Gervase", "Martyrdom of St Vitale", and "Vision of St Ignatius of Antioch". In the side niches, the four martyrs the Church: Gervasio, Protasio, Vitale and Valeria together with St Ignatius Loyola and St Frances Saverio. The rest of the fields are adorned with angel heads flowers and Jesuit symbols (IHS). [2]

On the lintel of the marble doorcase is carved the shield of Pope Sixtus IV, embellished with ribbons and, between the lintel and a floating cornice, is an inscription recording that pope's restructuring of the church in 1475. A tablet has been attached to the wall with an inscription commemorating the visit of Pope St John Paul II on 8 March 1992. [1]

Plan



Interior

The church has a single nave with no arcades, but with two pilasters without capitals near the triumphal arch. These are survivals of a triumphal arch inserted in the 12th century. There are two side-altars either side of the nave, which are not recessed into chapels but are enclosed in aedicules formed of a pair of Corinthian columns supporting an entablature and triangular pediment. [1]

Nave (8)

The modern flat coffered ceiling is of varnished wood, and was inserted in 1938. It has some painted and gilded decoration in the coffers, with the central panel featuring a portrait of the church's patrons. The floor was laid in 1937. It has an impressive central roundel in polychrome marble inlay, featuring the heraldry of Cardinal Karel Kašpar, Archbishop of Prague, who oversaw the 1930's restoration. [1] [4]

The nave walls are completely painted with frescoes executed in 1599-1603 by **Tarquino Ligustri**, including scenes of martyrdoms which, when you first see them, appear to be simply bucolic landscapes with views and trees. You have to look closely to see the action. There are inscriptions under each scene, explaining whose martyrdom is depicted, and above each is a depiction of a prophet or a window. These scenes are separated by trompe-l'oeil columns painted on the flat walls. [1] [5]

Right hand nave frescoes

The description is clockwise, beginning to the right of the entrance: [1] [2]

(9) Up in the right hand corner of the counterfaçade is *San Vittore and Santa Corona*, with the prophet *Micah* above.

(10) Then comes the first scene on the side wall, with *Martyrdom of St Andrew Stratelates and his Companion Soldiers*. The prophet *Daniel* is above, accompanied by one of his lions.

(11) The first altar to the right has an aedicule with a pair of grey marble Corinthian columns supporting a triangular pediment. Above this is a window. The altarpiece, *The Triumph of the Virgins*, is by **Giovanni Battista Fiammeri** who was a Jesuit priest and also a sculptor (see his statues in the sanctuary). The central dominating figure is St Catherine of Alexandria, with St Barbara to the right. The one holding the lamb is St Agnes, and St. Ursula on the left.

(12) The next scene features *St Paphnutius*, one of the Desert Fathers of Egypt who was mutilated for his faith. The landscape is about as far from the Egyptian desert as you can get. Above is the prophet *Jeremiah*.

(13) The following scene is of *Sts Marcellinus and Peter the Exorcist*, with a window above. They were beheaded and buried outside of Rome in an isolated spot. Two women, Lucilla and Firmiana, found the bodies and had them properly buried. That is the theme of the fresco.

(14) The second altar to the right is dedicated to the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady, and has a pair of grey granite Corinthian columns. The altarpiece is by **Fiammeri** again, and shows *Our Lady in Glory* with symbols associated with her. The mirror is the speculum iustitiae (glass of justice), the rose-bush is the rosa mystica and the door is the porta caeli. Behind the rose is the hortus conclusus, the "garden enclosed" (Song of Solomon 4:12). The tree by the stream to the right is an allusion to the first psalm: *Sicut lignum plantatum secus decursus aquarum* ("like a tree planted by flowing waters"). The palm tree on the left is the palm of En-Geddi (Sirach 24:14), and the lily is the lily of the valley (Song of Solomon 2:1). On the pediment frieze of the aedicule is a quotation from Sirach 43:2: *Vas admirabile, opus excelsi* ("Wonderful instrument, a work of the Most High"). Above the aedicule is a depiction of King Solomon, the traditional prophetic originator of these symbols.

(15) An amusing anachronism can be seen in the *Martyrdom of St Ignatius of Antioch* which is depicted in the next scene. He faces the lions in a meadow, with the Colosseum in ruins in the background.

Left hand nave frescoes

(27) The scene next to the left hand pier depicts the *Martyrdom of Pope St Clement* in what is now the Crimea (then called the Chersonense). The legend involves a chapel containing his relics emerging from the sea.

(28) The second altar on the left is dedicated to the Crucifix (although the crucifix is apparently sometimes replaced with the Sacred Heart), and matches the one opposite. It has a pair of grey granite columns, and a frieze inscription: "In order to heal the broken hearted". Above is *King David*, with his harp.

(29) The next scene shows *Martyrdom of St Januarius*, with a window above.

(30) The one after that involves the *Forty Martyrs of Sebaste*, with the prophet *Isaiah* above.

(31) The first altar on the left has a pair of dark grey marble columns, and is dedicated to *The Holy Confessors*. St Francis features to the right in the altarpiece by **Fiammeri**, and a holy pope, St Gregory the Great, to the left. The frieze inscription: "Those who belong to Christ have crucified."

(32) The first scene on the left features *Sts Martinian, Saturninus and Companions* who were killed in North Africa by the Vandal king Genseric. Above is the prophet *Zechariah*.

(33) On the wall next to the front door: *The honeyed soldier exposed to insects*, and above the prophet *Ezekiel* (or Joel).

Sanctuary

The sanctuary is delineated by a pair of large square Doric piers, which now support nothing but which used to be part of a triumphal arch. They are decorated with fake polychrome marble revetting. [1]

The present church occupies the nave and apse of the original structure. The apse is now smaller, having been reduced in size by the addition of an inner wall lining the original one. It is possible that early 5th century decoration exists behind this inner wall. [b]

The fresco in the conch depicts *The Ascent to Calvary* (20), and was executed by **Andrea Comodi**. Below is the high altar, the aedicule of which is coved (concave) to fit into the curve of the apse. It has a pair of black marble Composite columns supporting a segmental pediment with a contrasting red marble frieze. The pediment has a large stucco glory with gilded rays and putti, containing the IHS monogram. The altar itself is decorated with the heraldry of the Della Rovere family, and has an altarpiece by **Comodi** showing *Sts Vitalis, Valeria, Gervase and Protase*. **Comodi** also painted the flanking pictures in the apse. To the left is *The Flogging of St Gervase* (22), and to the right *The Beheading of St Protase* (21). [1] [5]

The arch of the apse has angels in its spandrels. To the left of the arch is *Sampson Finds Honey in the Lion's Corpse* (23), and to the right is *The Battle of Gibeon* (19). These are by **Agostino Ciampelli**. He was also responsible for the large paintings on the sanctuary side walls. To the left St Vitalis is depicted being racked (25), and to the right he is being buried alive (17). Below each painting is a sacristy door, with a triangular pediment on which painted angels recline. The door is flanked by a pair of stucco statues in round-headed niches, which are by **Giovanni Battista Fiammeri**. To the right are *St Augustine* (16) and *St Ambrose* (18), and to the left *St Gregory the Great* (24) and *St Jerome* (26). These are the Latin Doctors of the Church. [1] [5]

In front of high altar is a modern altar pro populo used for Masses facing the people, which is a high-quality sculptural work by **Federico Severino** depicting the *Triumph of the Lamb of God*. [1]

Special notes

Free bread was distributed to the poor by the church according to the will of a Roman nobleman, Francesco Silla.

The feast of St Agnes is celebrated on 21 January, with a triduum starting on 19 January. St Vitalis and Companions are celebrated on 28 April. St Giuseppe Cottolengo is celebrated on 30 April - the new Calendar places his feast on 29 April, but since that would mean two major feasts in a row the old date is used.

Artists and Architects

Agostino [Ciampelli](#) (1565-1630), Italian painter of the Baroque period, from Florence

Andrea [Commodi](#) (1560-1638), Italian painter of the early-Baroque period, from Florence

Ezio Garroni (1877-1952), Italian architect

Federico Severino (b. 1953), Italian sculptor

Giovanni Battista [Fiammeri](#) (1530-1606), Florentine Jesuit painter and sculptor

Tarquino [Ligustri](#) da Viterbo (c.1564-1615/21), Italian painter

Location:

Addr: 63 Via Nazionale, Rome, Lazio, Italia

Coord: [41° 53' 58.7"N 12° 29' 27.2"E](#)

Links and References:

1. [Churches of Rome Wiki](#)

2. [Annas Guide](#)

3. [Pontifical North American College](#)

4. [Cardinals of the Catholic Church](#)

5. [Info Roma web site](#)

a. Valone, Carolyn; "Women on the Quirinal Hill: Patronage in Rome, 1560-1630"; *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (Mar., 1994), pp. 129-146

b. Webb, Matilda; THE CHURCHES AND CATACOMBS OF EARLY CHRISTIAN ROME; 2001