

San Pellegrino in Vaticano



Church of **San Pellegrino** is one of the oldest churches in Vatican City, in Via del Pellegrino. Since 1977, the church has been the chapel of the 150 Vatican gendarmes, as the police are called, and the 30 Vatican firefighters. The small church is entrusted to the care of the papal Master of Ceremonies and chaplain of the Vatican Gendarmerie, Msgr. Giulio Viviani. [2]

History

The small church of San Pellegrino is situated on the ancient road travelled by pilgrims from the north on their way to Saint Peter's Basilica at the end of Via Francigena (Via Trionfale). The oldest structures of the building date back to approximately the 9th century, the time of Charlemagne and Pope Leo III (795- 816). According to the *Liber Pontificalis* Pope Saint Leo III gave the existing church a silver lamp when the church was a hospice for the reception of pilgrims and the care of the cemetery of San Pellegrino in Naumachi was assigned to the chapter of the Basilica of St. Peter. (Naumachi refers to the fact that the church was built on the ruins of the building where the Roman emperors amused themselves by "playing a naval battle.") In 1743 The ruins of the "Naumachia Traiani" were excavated nearby. [2] [3] [b]

Discoveries in the church made by Msgr [Anton de Waal](#) in 1888, chancellor of the German Campo Santo nearby brought to light under the plaster remains of frescos dating back to the 9th century, and others from the 13th-14th century. [3]

The gendarmes and firefighters honor as their chapel's patron St. Peregrinus, which translates literally as San Pellegrino in Italian or St. Pilgrim in English. [2]

According to a later tradition, on the occasion of his coronation in the year 800, Charlemagne donated to the little church relics of St. [Peregrinus](#), the first bishop of Auxerre in modern-day France who was martyred in the fourth century. [1] [b]

Msgr. Viviani believes the church was first known as Sancti Peregrini, "The Holy Pilgrim's Church," because it was the last stop on Via Francigena, the ancient pilgrim route to St. Peter's Basilica. Perhaps precisely because of its location on the road trodden by pilgrims, the building took the name San Pellegrino after the missionary in Gaul and the first bishop of Auxerre who was martyred in the fourth century. [1] [2] [b]

Another possibility is that it was named in honor of a Pellegrino or Peregrinus martyred in Rome in the second century along with Sts. Eusebius, Vincent and Pontian.

It was granted by Pasquale I to the Monastery of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, from Leo IX to the monastery of Santo Stefano greater. In the 13th century, after the monasteries around St Peter's had failed, the church here was put under the charge of the Chapter of St Peter's. The Chapter paid for a restoration in 1590, when a new façade was provided and the floor raised over a crypt. [1]

The 147 guardsmen who died protecting Pope Clement VII during the Sack of Rome in 1527 were buried in the annex cemetery here, before they were moved to the Campo Santo Teutonico.

In 1653 under Pope Innocent X (1644-1655), the commander of the Swiss Guard, Rudolf von Pfyffer, asked for and obtained the half-abandoned church with the adjoining cemetery from the pope. For centuries the chapel functioned as a place of worship and burial (both inside and annex cemetery) for this worthy "Swiss cohort" as defined in the ancient tombstones.. For centuries members of the Swiss Guard were buried in the [crypt](#) of the church. They are responsible for its current façade, built in 1671. [3] [b] [c]

Msgr. Viviani said that even though the Swiss Guards have their own chapel now, they do return on the third Monday of each month and on All Souls' Day to honor the commanders commemorated there and the fallen guards who were buried in the courtyard of San Pellegrino until 1870. [2]

During the 18th century the church fell into disrepair. The church was given a restoration in 1906 on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the establishment of the Swiss Guard. During restorations at that time the Marian fresco was discovered, carefully removed from the chunk of wall, framed and hung on a side wall. [1]

However, the Swiss Guards seem to have preferred worshipping in Santi Martino e Sebastiano degli Svizzeri and so San Pellegrino was rather lacking a role for most of the 20th century after it was restored in 1913. Perhaps as a result, it was made the chapel of the Gendarmerie and the fire-fighters of Vatican City in 1977, after another restoration in the previous year. [1]

Exterior

The church is tightly surrounded by the barracks and administrative offices of the Corps of Gendarmerie of Vatican City.

The main body of the church is early 9th century fabric. The lower courses of the left hand side wall and the apse are in large travertine limestone blocks, most likely salvaged from an ancient building. The right hand side wall is on an ancient wall foundation. The rest of the fabric is in re-used ancient bricks. The nave used to have four small windows on each side, apparently. [1]

The Pontifical Swiss Guard commissioned in 1671 the church's façade in neoclassical style. It is a simple façade with a pair of doubled Doric columns that supports a large entablature crowned by a triangular pediment. The large round-headed niche above the entrance is decorated with a representation of St. Peregrinus. [3]

The single entrance has a marble molded doorcase with a floating cornice above. Above that in turn is a large round-headed niche with an arc cornice, containing a 19th century depiction of the patron saint in majolica tiles. He is depicted holding a scroll with the inscription: [1]

Nulla mihi patria nisi Christus, nec nomen aliud quam Christianus
("There is no homeland for me except Christ, and no name except Christian").

Interior

The original building was simple with only an apsidal hall decorated with frescoes. There is a small nave with a tiny apse, the latter containing the ancient fresco remnants discovered in the 19th century. There are no external chapels, and only one side altar.

Over the centuries, the church and frescoes have undergone several restorations. Between the XIII and XV centuries, several popes such as Innocent III, Gregory IX, Boniface IX and Nicholas V, were interested in the church of San Pellegrino. In the apse fragments of the original fresco -- probably from the 9th century -- are still visible. The paintings shows Christ Pantocrator, or Christ in Majesty accompanied by the Apostles Peter and Paul and two other saints. The Lord holds the Gospel in hand, on which the words are read:

EGO SVM RESVRRECTIO ET VITA.

(I am the resurrection and the life.)

But the bottom section of the fresco was removed in 1590 when the chapel was restored and the floor was raised more than six feet because of repeated flooding. [2] [b] [c]

Another series of paintings adorns the wall near the apse, but these are of the 13th and 14th centuries from the school Giotto. A fresco of the figure of the Virgin with the Child Jesus, worshiped by the angels that was the centerpiece of the lower level was removed, framed and used as an altarpiece for a small altar on the left wall. [2] [c]

The walls of the nave are rendered in a pinkish plaster, except for the fresco work on them. To the right is a collection of wall-memorials and epigraph tablets recording restorations, including the one overseen Johann Rudolf Pfyffer von Altshofen who had obtained the church for the Swiss Guards. This particular tablet is topped by the Commander's shield. His memorial is on the opposite wall.

The right hand side wall then has an altar dedicated to St Nicholas von Flüe, patron of Switzerland. The aedicule, in white, has a pair of Composite columns with incurved volutes, which support a segmental pediment having a recessed central section. A pair of putti sits on the ends of the pediment, and the tympanum contains an odd blank Baroque tablet with curlicues and leaf-sprays as well as a head with an ostrich-feather crown. The altarpiece depicts the saint. [1]

Beyond the altar to the right are two modern icons in the Byzantine style, one showing St Michael the Archangel as the patron of the Gendarmerie and the other St Barbara and Pope St Leo IV. The former is holding the tower that is her attribute, as her legend describes her being locked in one by her psychotic father. The latter ends up being struck by lightning, hence she is a patron of fire-fighters in general. Pope St Leo built the Leonine Walls, and also allegedly stopped a fire in the Borgo by making the sign of the cross. Hence he is a special patron of Vatican fire-fighters. [1]

The left hand side wall has two doorways of different sizes, and also has two illusionistic polychrome frescoes depicting the top halves of ornate Baroque doorways with a pair of columns each and split curlicued segmental pediments. These depictions do not match the placements of the present doors, and give the impression of not being in situ. [1]

Also to the left is a very attractive early 15th century fresco of the Madonna and Child, sitting within an ornately canopied Gothic baldacchino and being venerated by angels. The text over her reads *xfv*Armatura fortium Maria ("The armour of the strong, Mary"). This work used to be in the apse, but was removed to reveal the older fresco underneath. The octagonal baldacchino depicted is apparently based on the one then in Old St Peter's. [1]

On the left hand side wall near the entrance is the impressive Baroque monument dated 1658 to Johann Rudolf Pfyffer von Altishofen. This has an epitaph tablet in white marble in the form of a rumpled cloth, within a frame in green and yellow marbles from behind which two winged skulls are peering at the sides. There is a little water stoup attached, in the form of a shell in black marble.

The counterfaçade is a delight to any student of heraldry, as it has frescoes of the full coats-of-arms of the Commanders of the Guards from 1517 to 1984 which are continued on the near end of the left hand side wall. Over the entrance door is a tablet recording the donation of the church to the Swiss Guards by the Chapter of St Peter's in 1658. [1] [2]

The modern floor in red terracotta tiles contains tomb-slabs, and also the marble trapdoor to the burial crypt. [1]

Two modern stained glass windows are high up in the side walls near the sanctuary. [1]

Sanctuary

The little apse has a conch, and is very low as a result of the raising of the nave floor in 1590 because of repeated flooding. In the apse fragments of the original fresco are still visible. It is thought that the work is mostly 14th century, although it has been claimed that the figure of Christ is an overpainted survival of an original 9th century work. The paintings shows Christ Pantocrator, or Christ in Majesty accompanied by the Apostles Peter and Paul and two other saints. The Lord holds the Gospel in hand, on which the words are read:

EGO SVM RESVRRECTIO ET VITA.

(I am the resurrection and the life.)

But the bottom section of the fresco was removed in 1590 when the chapel was restored and the floor was raised more than six feet because of repeated flooding. The spandrels above the conch have two tondi containing saints with written scrolls, probably two of the Evangelists. [1] [2] [b] [c]

Between this fresco work and the ceiling are five coats-of-arms of popes associated with the church and the Swiss Guards. From left to right, they are of Pope Julius II who founded the Swiss Guards in 1506, Pope Paul III who re-established them in 1548, Blessed Pope Paul VI who had the church restored in 1976, Pope Alexander VII who gave the church to the Swiss Guards in 1658 and Pope St Pius X who had it restored in 1913. [1]

The valuable, finely decorated wooden coffered ceiling likely dates back to the 1600's,, painted with the coats of arms of the Guard commanders. For example, one can see the lilies of Pfyffer von Altishofen and the Röst flower. It is a wooden coffered ceiling consisting of hollow compartments arranged in regular retrieves, a technique previously used in ancient architecture (a typical example is the Roman Basilica of Maxentius), popular in the Renaissance and Baroque periods and has found wide use even later, especially in neoclassical architecture. This technique was used not only to reduce the weight of the ceiling, as in the Rotunda of the Pantheon, but also for decorative purposes. The ceiling of San Pellegrino is a good example of this decorative intention with its blue, green and yellow gold coffers. [b]

Access and liturgy

After being usually kept locked for the latter part of the 20th century, the church is apparently now usually open in the mornings and can be visited by those with permission to be in this part of Vatican City.

Location:

Addr: Via del Pellegrino, Vatican

Coord: [41° 54' 17.8"N 12° 27' 25.5"E](#)

Links and References:

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
2. [Article from Catholic News Service of Aug 13, 2010](#)
3. [English Wikipedia page](#)

[Italian wikipedia article](#)

Article in L'Osservatore Romano

[Nolli map](#) (look for 1295)

- (a) Lewine, Milton J; Article: Nanni, Vignola, and S. Martino degli Svizzeri in Rome: 1969
- (b) Article by The Patrons of the Arts in the Vatican Museums from 2012 but no longer online
- (c) [Armellini, Mariano](#) (1891), "Rione Borgo", [Le chiese di Roma dal secolo IV al XIX](#) (in Italian), Roma, pp. 786–787

Last visited: March 2010

[CoR link](#)