

Santo Stefano degli Abissini



Santo Stefano degli Abissini is the a parish church of the Catholic Church in Vatican City. It is one of the two national churches of Ethiopia in Rome, the other being San Tommaso in Parione. The liturgy is celebrated according to the Alexandrine rite (or "Liturgy of St Mark") of the Ethiopian Catholic Church. It is perhaps the oldest church exists within the Leonine walls. Surely it is the only surviving building of the many shrines, monasteries and hospices in the Middle Ages surrounded the basilica of St. Peter. The dedication is to St Stephen the Protomartyr. [1] [5]

The church is in the charge of the Ethiopian Catholic Church. This is one of the Eastern Catholic Churches in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church, and recognizing the Pope as head. It includes Ethiopian-rite Catholics in both Ethiopia and Eritrea. [1]

History

The first documentary reference derives from a synod held by Pope Gregory III in 732. Pope Stephen III (sometimes given as II) (752-7) founded a monastery nearby dedicated to his patron, which became known as Sancti Stephani Minor, later the lost church of Santo Stefano degli Ungheresi. So, the monastery here became known as *Santo Stefano Maggiore*. It stands above the ruins of a pagan temple dedicated to Vesta, and was originally built as a circular building with twenty Corinthian columns, which is a common plan for a temple of Vesta. [1] [5] [a]

Pope Leo III (795-816) restored or rebuilt the church, part of the campaign of endowment of the Vatican by the emperor Charlemagne. This seems to have been a continuation of a campaign by Pope Adrian I, the previous pope. Pope Paschal I (817-24) was abbot of the monastery under Leo III, and made it a diaconia when pope. A diaconia was a center of the Church's charitable activities in the first millennium AD, and here would have catered for needy pilgrims. The church is listed in the *Regestum Sublacense* of the 11th century, indicating that the monastery had become Benedictine by then. [1]

It was rebuilt in 1159 on the orders of Pope Alexander III. In 1479, Pope Sixtus IV restored the church and assigned it to the Coptic Ethiopian monks in the city in 1481. It was at this time that the name was changed to reflect that it was served by Ethiopians (Abyssinians). [1] [4]

Due to its dilapidated condition it was restored and altered under Pope Clement XI in 1706. The architect was Antonio Valeri. Previously, the edifice was basilical with a central nave, arcades, side aisles and a sanctuary apse. The aisles were separated from the nave by trabeated colonnades. A tower campanile was over the right hand aisle, behind the façade. In the rebuilding, it was reduced to a single nave without aisles, with the small hospice just to the north of the frontage. Valeri gave the church a completely new facade, probably destroying the portico that in previous centuries still appeared in front of the building. The work was paid for by a rich priest named Silverio Campana, a relative of Pope Clement, who erected a side altar to his patron saint, Pope St Silverius. [1] [5]

In 1731 Clement XII assigned the church, hospice and garden to the monks of St. Anthony Abbot: Abyssinian, Ethiopian, Coptic, or Egyptian, with the commitment to celebrate feasts of St. Stephen protomartyr December 26 and St. Silverio Pope on June 20, according to the disposition of the deceased rector Campana. [5]

In 1919 Benedict XV transformed the old hospice of the Abyssinians to the [Pontifical Ethiopian College](#) and in 1930 Pius XI renewed the name and rights of the college, including the church of Santo Stefano. [4]

A major restoration was begun by Gustavo Giovannoni in 1927 for a year, and again from 1931 to 1933. The work had mixed results. The neighboring buildings to north and south, including the old hospice and the nearby church of Santa Marta in Vaticano, were demolished and partly replaced by the block of the Palazzo del Tribunale. [1]

In 2008 the Fabbrica di San Pietro, under the direction of Dr. Pietro Zonder, again restored the interior and exterior of the church, and many of the decorations were removed due to humid conditions in the church.

Exterior

The single-story façade is in the Baroque style of the early 18th century. A pair of tripletted blind pilasters (no capitals) support an entablature, and a crowning triangular pediment. The entablature is brought forward over the pilasters as a pair of posts, and the pediment side angles are also brought forward. On the entablature frieze in between the posts is a simple dedicatory inscription -*S. Stefano Protomartire*. The tympanum of the pediment has the coat-of-arms of Pope Clement XI in stucco relief. [1]

The 12th century carved marble door case was preserved in the rebuilding, and is decorated with vine-scrolls and the Lamb of God with the Cross in a relief on the lintel. The intricate carving on this is still crisp, hinting that the mediaeval church had a porch before the 18th century remodeling. Above is a floating cornice, then a tablet with a dedicatory inscription, and above that in turn is a horizontal rectangular window with a Baroque frame. [1]

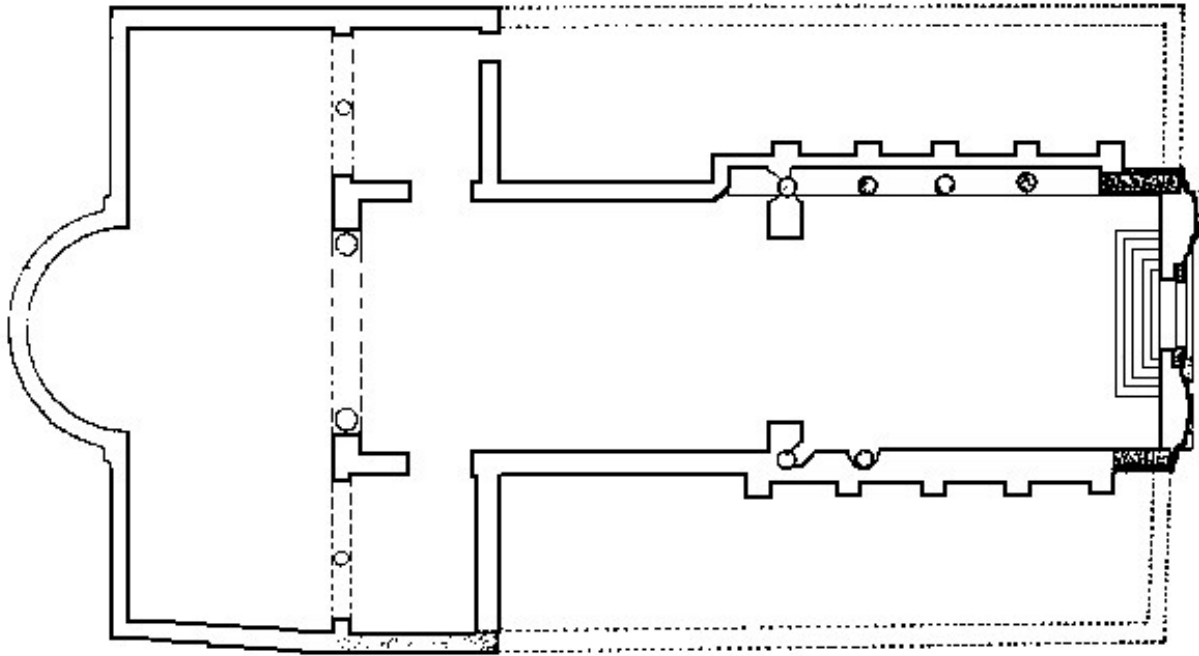
The inscription reads:

"Clement XI, Pope, restored this church which had been constructed by Pope Leo the Great with its monastery, then given to the Ethiopians [*that is, Nubians*] and Abyssinians [*that is, Ethiopians*] and several times put in order. He also rebuilt the adjacent houses and garden from the foundations and decorated them."

There is a small campanile or bell cote over the left hand nave side wall, halfway down. [1]

The church is isolated in a grassed area planted with mature trees.

Plan



Interior

The church has a single nave, ending in an apsed sanctuary which is embedded in sacristy. The walls are bare, the only decorations a frieze running round the interior below the roofline, which is decorated with a geometric motif featuring circles, rectangles and lozenges. The nave has six round-headed windows high up on each side. The third and fourth bays are separated by a large transverse arch with a brick archivolt, springing from piers incorporated into the side walls. Interestingly, this arch is not centered on the church's major axis but is displaced slightly to the left. This arch contains a set of spiked metal railings with a gate. The arch divides the nave roof interior into two, which are open with rafters. There are no ceilings. [1]

In the rear half of the nave are ancient Corinthian columns supporting an entablature fragment from the mediaeval church embedded in the side walls, that had been embedded in the fabric of the wall. Three of the columns were apparently previously in the sacristy. These are described as being of *marmo lesbio*, in other words from the island of Lesbos in Greece, and are fluted. There is another dedicatory inscription on a marble tablet over the entrance, and some epigraphs on the side walls. [1]

Two side chapels are entered through arches in the far ends of the side walls, the portals being defended by iron gratings.

The right hand side chapel is dedicated to Pope St Silverius, a unique dedication in Rome. It was provided with an altarpiece of the pope by **Biagio Puccini** in the 18th century rebuilding. Here is a torso sculpture of Pope Clement XI, over an epigraph tablet recording his restoration of the church. [1]

The left hand chapel is dedicated to Our Lady. The most important work of art is a fresco of the *Madonna with Child* in the Roman style from the 15th century. It has enrollment in Ethiopian and Arabic. There is a wooden statue of the Madonna and Child on a plinth in the corner outside this chapel. [1]

Sanctuary

The sanctuary is 20th century, using pre-existing bits. The triumphal arch also has a brick archivolt, but here it is supported by a pair of ancient columns in cipollino marble. One has an Ionic capital,

and the other Doric and these support molded impost. The columns were recorded as having been in the sacristy beforehand, and it is thought that they might have belonged in the arcades of the mediaeval church. [1]

There is a ciborium over the altar with four columns supporting a canopy in a yellowish marble with four arches, a cornice and a pyramidal cap. This looks mediaeval, but again is 20th century using three ancient columns in *pavonazzetto* marble and one in *bigio antico* (grey marble). The altar itself has two stone candlesticks in Cosmatesque style. There is an inscription below the canopy cornice in Ge'ez. The altar pedestal appears to be an ancient Roman tombstone. It is inscribed in front with a cross. The back is inscribed in Latin, translated as "*Marcus Junio Sabiniano most affectionate brother*". [1]

The sanctuary is raised over a little semicircular crypt, which is actually the foundations of the ancient Roman circular temple. The crypt extends under the apse and was cleared out in the 20th century. There are three lamp-niches under a marble cornice, the right hand one of which contains a fragment of epigraph dating back to Pope Leo IV: "*Temp[ore] domn[i] Leoni[s] qu[arti]*" ("In the hands of the gods, to Marcus Iunius Sabianus his most dutiful brothers erected this memorial"). [5] [a] [b]

Special note

The feast of St Stephen is celebrated with great solemnity on 26 December. It is now used mainly for weddings and celebrations of pilgrims of particular significance for the clergy serving in the Vatican.

Location:

Address: Largo San Stefano degli Abissini, 00120 Roma (C. di Vaticano)

Coordinates: [41° 54' 6.5"N 12° 27' 7"E](#)

Artists and Architects

Antonio Valeri (1648-1736), architect

Gustavo [Giovannoni](#) (1873-1947), Italian architect and engineer

Biagio [Puccini](#) (1673-1721), Italian painter

Links and References:

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
 2. [English Wikipedia page](#)
 3. [Italian Wikipedia page](#)
 4. [Article from L'Osservatore Romano 21 August 2009](#)
 5. [Article from L'Osservatore Romano 19 July 2009](#)
- a. Conversation with Dr. Pietro Zander, Director of the Fabbrica di San Pietro, March, 2010.
- b. Communication with Dom Basil Watkins, O.S.B.