Santi Vito e Modesto

Santi Vito e Modesto is a 15th century parish and titular church in the rione Esquilino, but the actual entrance is on the Via di San Vito on the other side of the arch. The church dedication is to Sts Vitus and Modestus, 4th century martyrs. The church itself is sometimes referred to by its old name, Santa Maria Maggiore in San Vito.

History

Old city walls, and Arco di Gallieno
The church stands just by an ancient gate, the Porta Esquilina in the 4th century BC Servian Walls, and stone blocks of the latter were found in excavation under the floor during the church's recent restoration. Very interestingly, remains of a much earlier, sixth century BC wall were found under the later one. This was actually built using the local tufa, cappellaccio, the stuff out of which the catacombs were dug and which is really quite pathetic as a building material. The archaic Romans cut the blocks for the wall very carefully, so that the whole thing did not fall down straight away. They could only get hold of decent building stone by conquering their neighbors, and the later wall is of Grotta Oscura tufa which is much stronger.

These 4th century BC defensive walls enclosed a much smaller area than the present 3rd century AD ones, and the gate was reconstructed in its entirety by the emperor Augustus. It had the present arch for wheeled traffic, and a pair of smaller flanking arches in the same style for pedestrians. In 262 one Marcus Aurelius Victor had an inscription added to the emperor Gallienus, replacing the earlier dedicatory inscription (he did not build the arch). The two smaller archways were presumably demolished when the church was built. The surviving arch has survived quite well; although cracked in an earthquake, it has re-settled itself into a stable configuration. You can see a bit of the Servian Walls sticking out of a modern building in the Via Carlo Alberto to the north of the church.

First church
It used to be surmised that the church was palaeo-Christian, perhaps of the 3rd or 4th century. This theory has now been abandoned, as the recent excavation shows no sign of any earlier church under the present one and documentary evidence for the church's foundation is entirely lacking. The church has its first mention in historical records in the Liber Pontificalis for the reign of Pope Leo III (795-816). The name then was San Vito in Macello Martyrum or "in the market of the martyrs". A macellum was an ancient Roman indoor market, and it is thought that the local Macellum Liviae may have been the one referred to (however, the exact site of this remains unknown).

The church is recorded as a diaconia in the 11th century, which is to say that it was a centre for the Church's charitable activities. This implies that it was founded when there was still a local residential population, and would have been a diaconia from the start. The 6th century is a reasonable guess, as the Esquiline started to depopulate after then.

The first cardinal deacon known was Leone di Montecassino, a Benedictine monk who took possession in 1088. This hints that there was a Benedictine monastery here by then, but if so it was only a small one. There are no cardinals on record from 1159 to 1387. Cardinal priests were appointed in the 15th century, but the church fell into complete and hopeless ruin about 1450.

In the Middle Ages, the church was at the south edge of the small built-up area surrounding Santa Maria Maggiore, which in turn had open countryside in all directions. However, it was on a main road which passed through the arch. This was one of the two routes within the walls available to travellers on the Via Prenestina and Via Casilina, the two great roads that started at the Porta Maggiore. They could either go via the Colosseum and the Via Labicana, or through the Suburra, along the Via in Selci, past the church and the Trofei di Mario and so to the gate. Also, before what is now called the Via Merulana was built, the only route between Santa Maria Maggiore and the Lateran meant going through the arch to the Trofei di Mario, then south along a winding country lane across the site of the present Piazza Dante and so to the Lateran. This ancient route was suppressed when the grounds of the Via Palombara were laid out in the 17th century.

The saints, and the confusion over them
The original dedication was to St Vitus, a genuine martyr of Sicily or Lucania perhaps of the early 4th century. He became very popular in the Middle Ages as a patron of those suffering from epilepsy, as well as of actors, dancers and jesters (mediaeval stand-up comedians with other talents). As such, he was one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers. In England and other countries his name was mutated into Guy (as in Guy Fawkes), which in Latin became Guido as people forgot where the name came from.

In the 11th century an unhistorical legend describing the martyrdom of St Vitus became popular, and this story associated him with two other martyrs called Modestus and Crescentia. They were meant to have been a married couple, the tutor and nanny of the young Vitus. As a result, the church was renamed San Vito e Modesto in Macello Martyrum, which was also the name of the cardinalate. Later in the Middle Ages the cardinalate was renamed San Vito, Modesto e Crescenzia, but the church became simply San Vito e Modesto as the Macello Martyrum was forgotten. This causes confusion.

The latest twist in the name is that the revision of the Roman martyrology has kept Vitus, but deleted Modestus and Crescentia as unhistorical. Apparently as a result, there is a tendency to call the church simply San Vito. However, the official name remains Santi Vito e Modesto. This seems to be the only example among Roman churches where the names of the church, parish and cardinalate

are all different.

Church rebuilt, and the Cistercians
Nobody knows where the old church used to stand, although it is presumed to have been somewhere near. When it fell down, Pope Sixtus IV had the present one built in 1474. The recent excavation under the floor of the edifice found no trace of an older church, contrary to expectations, so it had to be concluded that the rebuilding was on a new site. It may well have been at this point that the side arches of the Arco di Gallieno were demolished, but this is unclear. The new church was given to the Cistercian Order, which founded a very small monastery (hardly more than a large house) to the left of the entrance in Via di San Vito. It was on the corner of Via di Sant'Antonio all'Esquilino, and was a two-story edifice around three sides of an inner court with a garden at the back. There are modern buildings on the site now. This establishment became the residence of the so-called "procurator", who was the representative of the Order at the Holy See; the nearest actual abbey, at Tre Fontane, was rather far from the city centre.

You should distinguish these Cistercians, later called the "Common Observance", from reform movements such as the Trappists (the "Strict Observance") or the Feuillants, now extinct, who were at San Bernardo alle Terme.

From 1789 the little community here were Polish, and were refugees from the Partitions of Poland. For their neighbors they had the nuns at Santa Maria della Concezione delle Viperesche, just to the west.

18th century church
At this time, the entrance façade was decorated so as to have two stories, even though the church lacks aisles. A pair of Corinthian pilasters flanked the doorframe, with a third on the left hand corner (the right hand corner was occupied by the left hand side of the archway). These pilasters supported an entablature with plinths above the capitals, which in turn supported a pair of Doric pilasters flanking the large oculus in the second story. This pair held up a little triangular pediment which fitted into the gable end. A coat-of-arms with swags was above the door, and the oculus was decorated with volutes. Outline sweeping curves flanked the pair of Doric pilasters of the second story, maintaining the fiction that the church had aisles; the nave wall above these sweeps looked incongruous. Finally, the tip of the pediment bore a finial of three stylized mountains which is a Benedictine motif.

The monastic community did not survive the French occupation, which left the church without a function.

Urban church
The parish was established in 1824, and the church was restored by Pietro Camporese in 1836. This restoration involved the removal of the architectural detailing from the entrance façade, leaving it plain and stuccoed except for an entablature over the doorframe.

Urban development of the area began in earnest after 1870, and a further restoration was undertaken at the end of the 19th century. It was thought convenient to reverse the orientation of the church, and to provide a new entrance through the apse so that the church could have a civic presence on the Via Carlo Alberto. Hence, a hole was knocked through the apse wall and a neo-Baroque façade added in 1900. This seriously confuses visitors.

Seventies restoration
The final restoration took place from 1973 to 1977, under the direction of the Soprintendenza delle Antichità di Roma. This entailed another reversal of orientation, back to what it was in the first place, and a removal of so-called post-mediaeval architectural detailing and internal decoration apart from the 1900 façade and a chapel fresco inside. The entablature over the entrance was removed.

This was seriously criticized. The date of the building of the church, 1474, is described as late medieval but is actually early Renaissance and is of the same period as, for example, the façade at Sant'Agostino. Art historians pointed out that the stucco scraped off the entrance façade might actually have belonged to the original 15th century church design. Also, this restoration left the interior in a very bleak and boring condition.

Cardinals
Notable cardinal deacons have been Ascanio Maria Sforza, Reginald Pole, St Carlo Borromeo and Francesco Maria Mancini. The penultimate was Umberto Cardinal Betti who died in 2009, and the current one is Giuseppe Bertello who was appointed in 2012.

Exterior

Fabric
The church is a simple structure, having a nave and an external semi-circular apse. It is rather high for its width. The fabric is a mixture of red brick and small travertine stone blocks which look re-used; bits of white marble are also incorporated here and there.

There are three round-headed windows on each side, each with stone tracery dividing the window into two lights. These medieval-style survivals were restored in the 1970's.

Entrance façade
The façade was stripped of all stucco in the recent restoration. As a result, all it has is the oculus which now lacks a frame, and the original marble door frame which is approached by a short flight of stairs. There is a railing fence protecting the entrance. The gable has triple dentilation in brick, and the original finial survives although damaged. The damaged coat of arms of Pope Sixtus IV appears on the lintel of the marble entrance door frame.

Neo-baroque end
The neo-Baroque façade at the back of the church looks like the main entrance, especially as it faces onto a little piazza which is now neatly paved with sanpietrini. Don't try to enter the church here.

The fabric is in travertine, and has two stories. The composition is off centre, leaving a screen wall to the left which reaches the full height and has banding in grooves. The first storey has a pair of Doric pilasters on high plinths, supporting an entablature decorated with triglyphs which are part of the canon of the Doric order. The door case has a semi-circular lunette window above, flanked by a pair of small blank tondi. The lunette is crowned by a finial device containing two rosettes surmounted by a trefoil.

The second story has a horizontal rectangular window in a Baroque frame decorated with thin curlicues and topped by a putto's head with four wings -rather like a mutant butterfly. Thin swags seem to be emerging from the putto's ears.

The façade is crowned by a dentillate triangular pediment, and on top of this is a finial consisting of a cross on top of an acanthus leaf on a crown of thorns containing a scallop shell.

The campanile is on top of the screen wall to the left, and has an octagonal plan formed by chamfering a square. The long sides have round-topped sound holes with triangular pediments, and the short sides have recessed square and rectangular panels topped by a small blank tondo each. The last is a motif of the overall design.

Interior

The whitewashed bleakness of the interior can come as a shock. There is hardly any color. The modern ceiling has recessed panels, rectangular around a central irregular octagon, and is in the natural wood.

The main altar, in the whitewashed apse, is a small table against the wall which is supported by a pair of marble pillars carved as angel caryatids with rose garlands and terminating at the bottom in volutes. Another altar has been place at the front of the apse, facing the congregation, in accordance with Vatican II.

Two unusual chapels are found occupying niches on each side of the church. They are crowned by protruding floating canopies having gables over arches which themselves spring from corbels. The right hand one has a Renaissance fresco showing *Our Lady and Child with Saints*, which is attributed to

Antoniazzo Romano. She is flanked by SS Modestus and Crescentia, and in the panels below are (left to right) *Sebastian*, *Margaret* and *Vitus*. In the intrados of the arch is a tondo with *Christ Giving a Blessing* by the same artist, interesting because it shows early versions of the putti which became so common in the Baroque.

The left hand chapel has a 19th century fresco showing *Our Lady Giving the Rosary to SS Dominic and Catherine of Siena.*

The so-called "Stone of Iniquity" (pietra scellerata) can be seen on the right hand side, protected by an iron grating. It was believed to have been used as an instrument in the martyrdom of many Christians, but it is in fact a Roman funeral pillar with a damaged inscription. The old tradition was that scrapings from it were a preventative for rabies should one be bitten by a mad dog. Nearby there is an interesting ex-voto showing a coat-of-arms of Prince Federico Colonna of Paliano, who was grateful for being so protected in 1620 and made a donation towards the church fabric (as described on the tablet).

Other items of note are an attractive 19th century painting of the *Immaculate Conception* by Pietro Gagliardi, the tomb of Cardinal Carlo Visconti of 1565 and a fragment of the 19th century wall decoration in one top corner. On the right wall is a 19th century painting of the *Sacred Heart*, and a statue of *St. Francis.*

The set of diminutive Stations of the Cross are good-quality modern metalwork.

Other artworks formerly here seem to have migrated, notably the picture on the main altar which was Our Lady and St Bernard by Andrea Pasqualino Marini da Recanati and which belonged to the old monastery. What has replaced it is a copy of a 14th century crucifix by the Master of the Fogg Pietà (or Figline Master) in the church of Santa Croce in Florence.

Artists and Architects:

Pietro Camporese the Younger (1792-1873), Italian neoclassical architect
Antoniazzo Romano (1430-1510), Italian Early Renaissance painter
Pietro Gagliardi (1809-1890), Italian painter

Burials:
Carlo Cardinal VISCONTI, (1523-1565)
Fabio Cardinal OLIVIERI, (1658-1738)
Giuseppe Cardinal LIVIZZANI, (1688-1754)

Location:
Addr: 47 Via Carlo Alberto, 00185 Roma
Coord: 41° 53' 45"N, 12° 30' 5.8"E

Info:
Telephone: 0039 06 4465836
The church is open:
Weekdays, 7:30 to 8:30, 17:00 to 19:00. No morning opening, July to September.
Sundays and solemnities: 9:30 to 13:00, but closes an hour earlier July to September.
Mass times:
Weekdays, 8:00 and 18:30.
Sundays, 10:30, 12:00.
Mass in Bengali is at 17:00 on the third Sunday of the month.
From July to September, the weekday morning Mass, the mid-day Sunday Mass and the Bengali Mass are not said.

Links and References:

[Roman Churchs Wiki](#)

[Italian Wikipedia page](#)

[Parish website](#)

[Info.roma web-page](#)

[Roma SPQR web-page with gallery](#)

["Romeartlover" web-page](#)

[De Alvariis gallery on Flickr](#)

[Arch of Gallienus on Livius.org web site](#)

[www.060608 web site](#)

[Amoroma blog](#)

[Cardinals of the Church web site](#)