

VISIT TO THE BASILICA OF SAN ZENO, VERONA

Since my first visit to The Parish of St. Mark in July 1976 when I played my University of Portland masters' degree organ recital on the Bosch organ, I have heard about this jewel of a church in NW Portland, being modeled after the northeast Italian basilica of San Zeno in Verona. St. Mark's parishioners often mention this history and the church's website makes references to this Italian connection. I've since been curious to know more about the link between St. Mark's architecture to that of the San Zeno basilica.

This fall my husband and I traveled in Greece to attend the christening of our grandniece in a Greek Orthodox church in the mountain village of Agio Lavrentios near the town of Volos in the Pelion Peninsula. After five days in Greece, we hiked for a week in the Julian Alps of Slovenia and then had just a few days left in our trip to pass through a corner of Italy as we made the loop back to Frankfurt for our return flight. We spent two days in Padua where the highlight was visiting the famous Giotto frescoes of the Scrovegni Chapel. With just one more day to spend in Italy we had a perfect excuse to take the train to Verona to visit the Basilica of San Zeno.

Our window of time allowed us just Sunday morning to experience this massive, amazing Romanesque church, constructed between 967 and 1398 AD. The good news was that the basilica of San Zeno is in fact a very active parish, with multiple well-attended masses on a Sunday morning. The unfortunate news was that tourists are not allowed in the basilica during the morning masses and our train left Verona at 1:30. We were, however, able to photograph San Zeno's exterior well. Two guards were stationed at the basilica door to deter tourists from entering, but they acquiesced to my entering to attend the mass, though with no photography permitted. That being said, during the service, I offered *mea culpas* for having clandestinely captured a few interior photos using my iPad, cleverly camouflaged in my hymnal.

The Basilica of San Zeno is in fact one of the most beautiful and best-preserved examples of Romanesque architecture in all of northern Italy and was a model for Verona's many subsequent churches. It sits northwest from the historic town center in a less crowded and less tourist-congested portion of the city. From the spacious piazza in front of the church, there is an unobstructed view of the basilica, the Benedictine abbey to its left, and the impressive bell tower from 1045 to its right. The tower is mentioned in Dante's Divine Comedy canto on Purgatory.

The church's interior design of a wide, tall, central nave flanked by two side aisles with lower sloping ceilings is reflected in its exterior. The early 13th century "Wheel of Fortune" rose window floats above the 12th century portico with its exterior bronze doors and the two massive, worn marble lions at the base of its pillars, symbols of Law and Faith. The crypt beneath the altar houses the tomb of San Zeno, the first bishop of Verona. It is also traditionally known as the place where Romeo and Juliet were married. In looking up, one observes the 14th century high "ship's keel" wooden ceiling. The nave is divided into a raised upper presbytery a third of the length of the nave and a longer lower nave two-thirds of its length. Frescoes from the 12th and 14th centuries adorn the nave walls. The high altar's polyptych painting of the "Majesty of the Virgin" is Andrea Mantegna's Renaissance masterpiece from 1456-59. The

colorful alternating layers of pink and white tuff stone in the walls and arches are striking and typical of stonework in Verona's buildings.

In perusing these photos of San Zeno, one notes immediately similarities to the architecture of The Anglican Parish of St. Mark with its central nave "high ship keel" ceiling, flanking side aisles with lower rooflines and pillars, Romanesque arches, alternating courses of red and white brick in the walls and pillars, "wheel of fortune" rose window, portico paneled door with tympanum, painted murals, and towering campanile. The exterior long vertical lines of raised tuff stone that frame the San Zeno stained glass windows are mirrored in the vertical raised red brick lines flanking St. Mark's north and south side windows.

Visiting the Verona basilica in person is certainly the best way to experience this Italian architectural jewel, but on the website chiese.verona.it/en/our-churches/the-basilica-of-san-zeno there is an excellent virtual tour of the interior of San Zeno.

The city of Verona is a wonderful, walkable place to visit. With lodging in the city center there is no need for a car to experience the city. Its Roman amphitheater in the historic city center is the third largest ancient coliseum in Italy with 22,000 original marble seats. Numerous musical events are held in the coliseum, including the Verona Opera festival in July and August. A Roman theater from the 1st century BC also offers theater performances amidst ruins along the Adige River that curves through the city. On our one evening in Verona we were able to take in a performance of Rachmaninov's Second Symphony and Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto with soloist Julia Fischer and London's Royal Philharmonic Orchestra on tour at the more modern symphony center during which booming sounds from a rock concert in the nearby Roman arena were audible in quieter parts of the concert! Other places to include on a walk in Verona are Juliet's house and balcony made famous by Shakespeare, the large central Piazza Bra lined with cafes and restaurants, the Castle Vecchio, the traffic free Castle Bridge, the beautiful San Anastasia church and the Verona Cathedral.

Tim and I hope you enjoy our photographs from the San Zeno basilica in Verona and that you may be tempted to plan a visit to experience it firsthand.

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