

SAN RAIMONDO AL REFUGIO

A small church in the via del Refugio (off via Roma) with a beautiful marble façade and a heavily decorated baroque interior. Worth a visit if passing. It used always to be shut, but recently a cultural offshoot of the Touring Club of Italy, “Aperti per Voi”, has arranged for volunteers to be there on certain mornings to allow for visits – see church door for details (at present – winter 2019 – it is open 09.30-13.00 Wednesday mornings).



A member of a rich Siense banking family, Aurelio Chigi, left money and instructions for the building of this church in his 1596 will. The present gleaming white marble façade was not added until 1660, after it was commissioned by Pope Alexander VII, another member of the Chigi family. It is not clear why Aurelio chose St Raymond of Penafort as the patron for his church – St Raymond was a 13th century Spanish lawyer who became a Dominican friar and drafted part of the Catholic Church’s canon law. The “Refugio” refers to an institution in the same street for the destitute daughters of impoverished nobility of which Aurelio was the director. The church is cleverly sited so that the façade can be seen from via Roma (the former main road to Rome) at the end of a vista down via di Refugio. It was damaged in the big Siense earthquake of 1798, but no trace of the damage remains.

The façade follows classical principles, with the three orders of capitals – doric, ionic and corinthian – on succeeding floors. On the third level, the coat of arms of Pope Alexander VII, with the papal keys and crown, is splendidly displayed. The Chigi crest with its six superimposed hills and star above can be seen on either side, topping the corners of the church.

The interior is quite different. It was decorated in the early 1600s when the fashion was for heavy baroque decoration covering every part of the church. Specially designed gilded frames surround gloomy paintings by 17th century Siense masters showing scenes from the lives of St Raymond, St Catherine of Siena and San Galgano (whose family palazzo is just round the

corner), and St Catherine of Siena. The overall effect is oppressive to modern eyes, but there is no doubt of the skill of the work. The handsome white marble tombstone of Aurelio Chigi is in the middle of the aisle.



In the sacristy at the back of the church, along with the usual collection of old church paraphernalia, there are two painted wooden sculptures – a St Catherine of Alexandria lacking an arm, said to be by the most famous of Sieneese Renaissance sculptors, Jacopo della Quercia (c.1374-1438); and a charming Virgin and Child by Lorenzo di Mariano (aka Il Marrina) (1476-1534) – see photo below.

