



JUBILEE CHURCHES

Church of Santa Prisca





DICASTERY FOR EVANGELIZATION

SECTION FOR FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS
REGARDING EVANGELIZATION IN THE WORLD



MINISTERO
DEL TURISMO
REPUBBLICA ITALIANA

JUBILEE CHURCHES

Jubilee journeys

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4 themed routes to follow

The Jubilee is a great event for all peoples during which each and every pilgrim can immerse themselves in the endless mercy of God.

It's the Year of return to the essence of fraternity, mending the relationship between ourselves and the Father.

It's the Year that calls us to conversion, an opportunity to take stock of our lives and ask the Lord to direct them towards holiness. It's the Year of solidarity, of hope, of justice, and of commitment to the service of God, living in joy and peace with our brothers and sisters.

But, above all, the Jubilee year has at its center the encounter with Christ.

For this reason, the Jubilee asks us to get moving and to overcome the confines in our lives. When we move we don't just change place physically, but we transform ourselves too. For this reason, it's important to prepare well, to plan the route and



have a clear sight of our destination. In a sense the Holy Year pilgrimage begins before the journey itself: its starting point is the decision to do set out on the path.

To fully experience the 2025 Jubilee, through walking and prayer, four routes have been prepared for pilgrims within the city of Rome, each with its own theme.

Europe in Rome

The Pilgrim Path of the Churches of the European Union, includes visits to 28 churches and basilicas, historically linked to EU member countries for cultural or artistic reasons or because they served as places of welcome for pilgrims from individual member states of the European community.

Pilgrimage of the Seven Churches

Originally the idea of Saint Philip Neri in the 16th century, the pilgrimage of the Seven Churches is one of the most ancient Roman traditions. It's a 25 km route winding through the streets of Rome.

Jubilee Churches

This is one of the churches designated as a meeting place for pilgrims. Catecheses will be held in these churches in different languages to rediscover the meaning of the Holy Year. They will also offer the sacrament of Reconciliation and host events aimed at nourishing the faith with experiences of prayer.

Women Patrons of Europe and Doctors of the Church

This is a pilgrimage that involves stopping in prayer in those Roman Churches linked to Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein), Saint Brigid of Sweden, Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus, and Saint Hildegard of Bingen.

The Church of Santa Prisca

We are visiting one of the oldest places of Christian worship in Rome, perhaps even the oldest (a title it shares with the basilica of *Santa Pudenziana*). The church was built on a house where, according to tradition, a girl named Prisca lived, together with her devout parents Aquila and Prisca. The Apostle Paul speaks of the parents with recognition and gratitude in his Letter to the Romans (16, 3-5):

“Greet Aquila and Prisca, my collaborators in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives to save my life, and not only am I grateful to them, but to all the Churches of the pagan world. Also greet the community that gathers in their house.”

This is a typical description of the life of the first Christian communities. Believers in Christ, not yet able to build churches or buildings for gatherings, met together in private homes (the so-called *domus ecclesiae*, or meeting house) to listen to the preaching of the Word of God, celebrate the Eucharist and discuss the problems that were gradually emerging. Later, with the freedom granted by the Emperor Constantine in the year 313, they were able to gather in public buildings, and these were often built on the sites of already familiar places. This is exactly what happened in this case, the church came into being between the 4th and 5th centuries and therefore appears to be the oldest of those built on the

Aventine, one of the seven hills of Rome. More complicated is the question of who exactly Saint Prisca was. Various traditions have grown up over the centuries ... First, that she was the daughter of Aquila and Prisca, martyred at the time of the emperor Claudius (41-54 AD) and buried in the catacombs of Priscilla on the Via Salaria. But there is also the story of another girl with the same name who was killed for her faith at the time of Claudius II known as the Gothic (268-270) and, finally, some believe that the church may be dedicated to the wife of Aquila named by St Paul. Whichever woman it was, tradition tells us that the saint was condemned to be torn to pieces by lions in the Circus Maximus, but when the savage spectacle came to pass, the beasts crouched at her feet. She was therefore ordered to be burned at the stake, but having also survived this ordeal, she was finally beheaded. Aside from Prisca's precise identity, however, what is worth highlighting is her extraordinary coherence in living her faith to the full, even in the presence of discrimination and persecution: indeed, her very name (*Prisca* in Latin means ‘first’) highlights the fact that she was the first woman to shed her blood for her loyalty to Jesus Christ.

Her relics were found by Pope Eutychian (275-283) and moved to the site of this church, which, as we can clearly see, in its overall structure and ornamental appear-

ance, has undergone profound changes over time, particularly in the 15th and 17th centuries. It has, however, preserved some traces of the past and, above all, the memory of that ancient and venerable “community house”. Basilian monks, then Benedictines, then Franciscans, then Dominicans and later Augustinian friars have all been entrusted with the church over the years and have carried out their apostolate from it, while also taking care of its fabric and decoration. It was for the Jubilee of 1600, that the architect Carlo Lombardi from

the cornice, the two gables, the capitals and the volutes are in travertine marble. Two granite columns, dating back to the time of the Roman Empire, mark the entrance, above which there is an oculus inserted in a marble frame. The frieze, in the dedicatory inscription, refers to the Jubilee of 1600 and Cardinal Benedetto Giustiniani, who was the titular cardinal of the church at the time, and who oversaw the restoration work. Giustiniani together with his brother Vincenzo, was one of Caravaggio's main supporters. His works were



fig.1

Arezzo gave the church the sober baroque imprint which can still be seen today.

The façade dates back to that period. It is accessed through the churchyard, between the Augustinian convent on the left and the sacristy on the right. Lombardi designed it using a very simple plan: the dominant material is brick, while the base,

followed by many others and each century has left its own structural or stylistic imprint, right up to the present day, as we can see in the small bell tower which dates from as recently as 1961.

The interior (**fig.1**) is divided into three naves by two rows of pillars which include ancient columns, surmounted by round

arches (fig.2, 3). The wall is decorated by frescoed figures of Angels carrying the instruments of the Passion of Jesus, and of saints who in some way had a relationship with this church. Starting from the entrance on the right wall, we can admire the angels carrying the whips, crown of thorns, cane and sponge from the Passion



fig.2



fig.3

of Christ, and then saints Romuald, John the Evangelist with his symbolic eagle, and Paul with his sword. On the opposite wall are St Benedict of Norcia, the Apostle Andrew with his cross and St Peter with the keys, accompanied by angels carrying nails and a hammer, and finally St Veron-

ica's veil and the centurion's spear. The artist behind this sequence of paintings, which is striking due to its almost statuary purism, was the Florentine painter Anas-tasio Fontebuoni, who was active at the beginning of the 17th century.

The 19th-century wooden ceiling is sober in design, but on close examination you can see the monogram of Christ – XP – that of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the symbol of the Augustinian Order (a pierced heart resting on a book and a belt) which alludes to a vision of Our Lady by St Monica, the mother of Augustine.

The walls of the side naves are enriched by the *Via Crucis* by Mario Barberis, dating back to 1938.

Moving along the right nave, we come to the sacristy, created from four bays of the church, which houses fragments of frescoes by Giovanni Odazzi, an 18th-century painter, depicting the *Immaculate Conception* and *Angels*. Next to the sacristy, a plaque from 1834 commemorates the restoration work carried out in 1738 thanks to the extraordinary generosity of Pope Clement XII. Next, we come to a very unusual baptismal font (fig.4). It is in fact an ancient capital which has been refashioned for liturgical use. Here a medieval engraving *BACTISMUM (sic) SANCTI PETRI* recalls the activity St Peter carried out in Rome, in this place, the house of Priscilla and Aquila, where he baptized the girl saint whose name the church now bears. The lid, with decorative elements and the bronze group of the *Baptism of Christ*, is



fig.4

a work from 1948 by Antonio Biggi. This is followed by a painting of St Anthony of Padua; then the altar of St Rita, with a 17th-century altarpiece depicting the *Ecstasy of the Saint* during which a thorn from Jesus' crown struck her forehead; there follows yet another painting depicting St Augustine and, finally, a chapel (fig.5) with 20th-century paintings of the *Sacred Heart of Jesus*, *Saint Joseph* and



fig.5

the *Virgin Mary* who is depicted as both immaculate and sorrowful at the same time, since her heart is pierced by a dagger. We reach the sanctuary area next (fig.6), under an arch on which the coat of arms of Pope Clement XII can be seen clearly.



fig.6

The main altar (**fig.7**) houses the painting by Domenico Cresti (known as Passignano) depicting *Saint Peter baptizing Prisca* in an elegant marble aedicule. The apostle, flanked by two clerics and dressed in a blue tunic and yellow cloak, is shown in the act of pouring water on the head of the young woman kneeling in front of him who is accompanied by her mother and other friends, while her



fig.7

father appears behind St Peter. The composition is perfectly balanced both in the organization of the levels and in the distribution of the characters; the center of the scene, towards which the dynamic lines converge, focuses our attention on the sacramental act. The action takes place between the arches of

the house which is flooded with a sacred light coming from above between two little angels in flight. A rich array of allegorical images, frescoed by Fontebuoni, 'explodes' before our eyes: a whirlwind of colors and movement, characters and symbols, among which we can recognize St Augustine at the top in the center between two angels holding the cross and the Petrine keys, above which is a papal tiara and, on the left, St Prisca with the lion, together with figures alluding to the events of her martyrdom.

There are also two plaques, which, respectively, record restorations carried out in 1456 during the pontificate of Callixtus III and the contribution of the aforementioned Benedetto Giustiniani (who was titular Cardinal of St Prisca from 1599 to 1611).

On the left wall of the sanctuary area we can admire the scene of the *Martyrdom of St Prisca* (**fig.8**). Fontebuoni shows the girl surrounded by lions in the arena, while Emperor Claudius appears at the top left and decrees her death, meanwhile heavily-set soldiers seem relaxed and indifferent despite the drama that is taking place. Below is a plaque commemorating further renovation works, and a monochrome mirror with the *Conversion of Prisca*, showing the saint abandoning the idols of paganism. The right wall, repeating the same scheme, shows the *Transport of the Saint's relics* by Pope Eutychian and the martyrdom of Prisca. The next chapel, which leads us to the



fig.8

left nave, is dedicated to the *Madonna della Cintura*: the Blessed Virgin Mary accompanied by the baby Jesus gives her belt to Saints Augustine and Monica, as a sign of a singular bond and total belonging. Two other great Augustinian saints are featured in this chapel: St Nicholas of Tolentino and Blessed Stefano Bellesini. Next comes the altar of the *Crucifixion* and, near the door of the bell tower, a fragment of a late medieval fresco depicting the *Annunciation*, attributable to the school (if not actually to the brush) of Benozzo Gozzoli, a Florentine painter who worked in Rome from 1447 to 1450.

The pipe organ that is built over the entrance dates back to 1953. The two plaques on the counter-façade commemorate the Augustinian theologian Luigi Sepiacci, who died in 1893, and the

17-year-old girl, Maria Franca Gargiullo, who died in 1940, and in whose memory relatives two years later offered the holy water fonts.

Below the church of this holy martyr, in addition to the crypt under the sanctuary, are a series of buildings, ruins of houses from the time of the Roman Empire similar to the house of Aquila and Prisca. Archaeological excavations carried out during the 20th century allow us to identify a *mithraeum* (fig.9), (a space where the cult of the god Mithras was celebrated) dating back to the 1st century AD. In other words, practically from the same time as that of Peter and Paul, Prisca and Aquila. We can thus see how Christianity spread throughout the world, sometimes co-existing with other religious tradi-



fig.9

tions in almost the same place and time. This is the very meaning of the Gospel: a seed planted in soil which, in different ways and measures, will sooner or later produce its fruits.