



THE PILGRIMAGE OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Papal Basilica of San Paolo
Fuori le Mura





DICASTERY FOR EVANGELIZATION
SECTION FOR FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS
REGARDING EVANGELIZATION IN THE WORLD



MINISTERO
DEL TURISMO
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THE PILGRIMAGE OF THE SEVEN 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.

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Reasons for a Jubilee pilgrimage

It was not St Paul who invented Christianity. Indeed, he is the proof that Christianity already existed and was a new phenomenon right from the start. Indeed, he persecuted the Church and even took part in the martyrdom of Stephen who had proclaimed that Jesus was the son of God.

Paul, like the Sanhedrin at the time of Jesus' trial, clearly felt, that as a proper Jewish teacher, what Jesus said about himself was unacceptable: Jesus was not a rabbi, but rather someone who placed himself on the same level as the living God.

For this reason, he firmly opposed Christianity, even volunteering for the task of persecuting Christians in Damascus. Paul himself is proof of what Christianity was, from its origins.

It was not Paul who changed Christianity, it was Christ who changed him.

Saul was not a man searching for something, he was not dissatisfied with his faith in the Law. Jesus appeared to him by a special grace – this was the last appearance of the Risen One. It was an unexpected gift, as the miracle of God's revelation always is.

That meeting on the road to Damascus marked an epochal change for Saul: he

became blind, he realized that he had never fully seen before being baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

In the first letter to the Corinthians, he expresses that transformation in very powerful words: «Last of all he appeared to me as to one born abnormally [in some translations 'at the wrong time']» (1 Cor 15:8). From that day on his previous life appeared to him as a kind of miscarriage, a life never properly born, and only from Baptism onwards does he consider himself to be fully alive.

To depict this dramatic change, Christian art added a horse to the scene, a horse which is not actually mentioned in the three different versions of the apostle's conversion found in the Acts of the Apostles – he repeated the story three times, because it was so important for him. Antiquity had always depicted authority figures seated on horseback – one only has to think of the famous Marcus Aurelius statue on the Capitoline Hill. The great painters such as Velasquez also painted powerful men astride their horses.

The artistic invention of Paul being thrown from his horse, of being pinned under the animal – as in Caravaggio's version – speaks of reversal: Christ literally overturns Paul's certainties and transforms him.

From that moment, the discovery of that gift that pre-existed him made of him an apostle. Henceforth, Saint Paul lived his entire life aware of having to pass on the gift of that unexpected grace that had caught him by surprise. In an opening passage of the letter to the Romans written even before arriving in Rome, the apostle writes: "I am indebted to the Greeks as to the barbarians, to the wise as to the ignorant: I am therefore ready, as far as I can be, to proclaim the Gospel to you also who are in Rome» (Rm 1,14-15). Debt is usually regarded as something terrible, the idea of owing money to others. For Paul, however, being in debt to the Romans whom he doesn't even know, is all about having received such a great gift, the encounter with the Lord, that he will always be «in debt» as long as there is someone on earth who is still unaware of it. In fact, Paul also wanted to go to Spain to «pay back» this debt to everyone: to Greeks, to barbarians, to the wise and the ignorant.

Pope Francis, echoing his predecessors, recalled, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, that the discovery of God's mercy in the cross of Jesus encourages the Church to proclaim it, and he has repeated several times Paul's exhortation, which Pope Paul VI made his own: "Proclaiming the Gospel is not a boast for me, it is a necessity that imposes itself on me: woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel!" (1 Cor 9,16).

The Pope also underlined that passing

on the gift of faith is something that everyone «rich» in faith is required to do: "I want to say, with regret, that the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. The great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God, and we must not fail to offer them his friendship, his blessing, his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith. Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care.» (EG 200).

It is estimated that St Paul traveled 16,500 km on foot, on horseback or by boat in his three apostolic journeys and on the fourth journey, towards Rome, he was imprisoned, such was the urgency he felt to bring the Gospel where it was not yet known. When he finally arrived in Rome it was, for him, the culmination of a long-cherished dream.

The desire to meet the Christians of Rome is already evident in his Letter to the Romans. In it he teaches that both Jews and pagans cannot achieve salvation by their own efforts. The wound of original sin is so deep that man is unable to love with the love he would like to have, and so finds himself doing what he knows to be evil, that is, committing sin. In short, he consciously commits the evil he does not want to commit. God's mercy, however, does not abandon man and is capable of changing his heart and granting him forgiveness and justification.

It was in Ephesus, during the third missionary journey, that Paul first declared that he wanted to come to Rome: «After having been in Jerusalem, I must also see Rome» (Acts 19:21). And it was on his return from this trip that the opportunity arose for him to preach in Rome too. Paul was arrested and falsely accused in Jerusalem. In order to escape the efforts of a group of Jewish fundamentalists who had vowed to fast until they killed him, and to escape an unjust trial, he appealed to Rome (Acts 22:27; 25.10-12), as was his right as a Roman citizen.

The persecution thus became an opportunity for Paul to «pay off the debt». It was Jesus himself who appeared to him, as on the road to Damascus, while he was imprisoned in the Holy City, in the Antonia Fortress, and who encouraged him. In the night «the Lord came to him and said to him: «Courage! As you have testified in Jerusalem to the things that concern me, so you must also bear witness in Rome» (Acts 23:11). This is the only recorded time in the New Testament that the word 'Rome' is spoken by the Lord.

Paul was thus able to «take the Gospel to the ends of the earth». Rome, of course, is not geographically on the extreme edge of the earth (*finis terrae* was regarded as Spain, after which the great Ocean began), but, since the city was the heart of the Roman Empire, reaching Rome meant for the apostle reaching the heart of the «people» who did not know the Gospel.

“When they arrived in Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself with a soldier on guard” (Acts 28,16). In modern parlance, one might say Paul was placed under house arrest. Tradition places this house on the spot where the church of San Paolo alla Regola now stands, but the exact location may have been elsewhere. From his base Paul will proclaim to the city: “Let it therefore be known to you that this salvation is now addressed to the pagans and they will listen!” (Acts 28.28).

Paul's martyrdom probably took place at the Acque Salvie, where the Basilica of the Tre Fontane now stands. He was decapitated, the death sentence reserved for Roman citizens. Paul died in a dark place, far from the crowds, ironic for a man who was known throughout the world. Indeed the obscurity of that site is the main indicator that this was his place of death, and is only found later in the sources. His body was then moved to the basilica dedicated to him.

But Paul is also the apostle of long letters, written to Christian communities who had already received the kerygma, letters that even today nourish Christian communities around the world who see their struggles and their hopes mirrored in them.

In his letters, Paul, as a real theologian, offers a detailed reflection on faith. Just think of the praise of charity in 1 Cor 13. Both the beloved disciple, John, and Paul, use the term *agape* – love – to indicate the very heart of God. Both know how not to

distort, but rather to summarize in an extraordinary way the full novelty of the Christian message summed up in the cross of Christ.

Over the years, the Basilica of St Paul has increasingly become a place of poignant prayer for Christian unity. It is right here in St Paul's Outside the Walls that on January 25th, every year, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity ends, with the Pope and delegations of different Christian denominations present.

Very often in his life and in his writings, Saint Paul exhorted the Christians of his time to unity. One only has to think of the so-called Council of Jerusalem or his words about the division in the Church of Corinth or even the passages on the 'one faith and one baptism' in the letter to the Ephesians.

Saint John Paul II recalled that ecumenism is not an 'extra' in church life but is an integral part of the mandate left by Jesus. In particular in *Ut unum sint* he underlined the changed attitude generated by Vatican II: "This is what Pope John XXIII believed about the unity of the Church and how he saw full Christian unity. With regard to other Christians, to the great Christian family, he observed: 'What unites us is much greater than what divides us'» (*Ut Unum sint* 20).

The pilgrimage to St. Paul's Outside the Walls reminds us that all Christians share faith in Jesus, true God made man. But since Jesus is the Son, then God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And since God is Trin-

ity, then we receive life through Baptism in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The ecumenical movement has helped all Christians rediscover the truth that believing in the Incarnation, believing in the Trinity and believing in Baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are three aspects of the same faith that unites us: the communion that unites us it is greater than any difference that divides us.

Visiting the basilica

Almost nothing remains of the ancient basilica: everything was destroyed by a fire that broke out in 1823. The surviving columns were re-erected outside the left transept. The baldacchino, the Easter candle holder and a small part of the apse were saved. Since the concept of a 'conservative' restoration didn't seem to exist at the time, everything was redone from scratch, repeating the iconography of the previous basilica in the triumphal arch and apse.

The original church was built in 324 (a few years after the Lateran Basilica) by the emperor Constantine, who wanted to distinguish it, among the many sites that recalled Paul's time in Rome, as a privileged place for the veneration of Apostle of the Gentiles.

The oldest reference to the burial of Saint Paul on the Via Ostiense is found (together with references to the burial of Saint Peter) in the Ecclesiastical History of Eu-

sebius of Caesarea. The precise circumstances of Paul's martyrdom in Rome remain controversial but are undoubtedly linked to Nero's persecution.

The archaeological excavations carried out between 2002 and 2006 brought to light the apse of the small Constantinian basilica which had an opposite orientation to the current one – the layout of this original apse is visible when going down to venerate the tomb of the Apostle. The excavation works have also brought to light the sarcophagus which is believed to contain the body of the Apostle the front of which is now visible. The decision to open the tomb has not yet been taken, partly due to the fact that any such undertaking would require the dismantling of a large part of the altar above.

In Roman times this area was open countryside along the Via Ostiense and was used as a burial ground. Excavations carried out in the 18th and 19th centuries under the confession and around the basilica brought to light funerary structures, tombstones, and sections of a paved street. Tradition has it that the body of the Apostle was buried by his disciple Timothy and a Roman woman named Lucina (a woman of this name is mentioned several times as a helper of Christian martyrs in Rome, so much so that it has almost become a literary cliché).

In 386 the emperors Valentinian, Theodosius and Arcadia gave the basilica its current orientation and enlarged it: this building is called by scholars the «basilica of the three emperors».

Popes Leo the Great and Gregory the Great embellished it further with the mosaics of the triumphal arch and added more decorative elements to the tomb.



fig.1

Honorius III (1216-1227) had the new apse mosaic created.

The most important find to prove the Pauline dedication of the building came during the reconstruction works of the last century, carried out by the architect Vespignani. The marble slab that was placed under the altar, on the tomb of the Apostle bears the inscription *Paulo Apostolo Mart(yri)*, i.e. «To the Apostle Paul martyr». It is not clear whether this dates back to the Constantinian period of the basilica or that of the «three emperors». The slab is now in the art gallery attached to the cloister. Holes had been made in it which are due to the popular

custom of pushing into the holes linen or aromas which would then be preserved as relics because of the «contact» between them and the saint's tomb.

The Basilica of St Paul is the only one of the four Roman Jubilee basilicas to still have a quadriportico (**fig.1**). This structure, in the early Christian era, was a connecting area between the cosmopolitan city outside and the Christian community inside. Catechumens who participated every Sunday in listening to the Word together with the rest of the faithful, thus participated at Mass even before being baptized. However, they left when the liturgy of the Eucharist began and the catechists instructed them in the quadriportico, while the songs and prayers of those already baptized could be heard a short distance away. Once the liturgy was over, everyone gathered together in this space which was liturgically very significant.

Today's monumental quadriportico has at its center the 19th-century statue of Saint Paul (**fig.2**), which depicts him in a form dating back to the first centuries of Christianity. He holds a sword which represents the instrument with which he was beheaded. In his other hand he holds a volume commemorating the letters that God inspired him to write and which would become his Word for the life of believers.

In a corner of the quadriportico, is a statue of Saint Luke. The evangelist Luke accompanied Paul to Rome, as is clear from the so-called «we/us» sections of the Acts of the Apostles - those passages in which the author of the book, Luke, accompanies the Apostle. The symbol



fig.2

of the evangelist Luke is the bull. Rather than trying to fathom out why this particular animal represents Luke, it is worth remembering that the four living beings used to symbolize the evangelists, represent in Ezekiel and in the Apocalypse the four cardinal points that the glory of God reaches, without hindrance, so that the Lamb of God might be adored everywhere. In short, those four symbols, when applied to the Gospels, indicate that the announcement of faith is for the whole world.

The central door was built by the then-abbot of the basilica, Father Schuster: it



fig.3

bears a large cross and images of the life and martyrdom of Peter and Paul.

On the far right is the Holy Door (**fig.3, 4**). It is very ancient, and to fully admire its decoration you have to go inside the church. Created in Constantinople by Staurachio di Scio in 1070, it is composed of 54 engraved bronze panels, arranged over nine registers, and reveals an iconographic arrangement in typical Byzantine style. The first 12 panels above illustrate the 12 feasts of the Byzantine liturgy and help us rediscover the great richness of the Christian East with an ecumenical spirit. For example, the third panel of the fourth row represents Pentecost: the 12 Apostles are gathered around a door from which the Kosmos emerges, an image of the world emerging from darkness to hear the announcement of salvation from the Church. It was the liturgy, with

its feasts, in the East and the West, that highlighted the «mysteries» of Christ, that is, the main events of his life, which form part of the exegesis and Christology of the Church. Whoever knows them, knows Jesus Christ.

The monumental triumphal arch, inside, repeats the iconographic schema present in the ancient basilica but this time with 19th-century workmanship, and represents the most important chapter of the Apocalypse, the fifth. Christ is at the center – in the Apocalypse, in the form of a lamb, here with a radiant face – and is adored by the four living beings and the 24 elders, representing the four corners



fig.4

of the earth and the people of God, heirs of the 12 sons of Jacob and the 12 apostles of the Lord. (fig.5)

The original apse basin, whose iconography the current one replicates, was built under Pope Honorius III (1216-1227), who is depicted at the feet of Christ. In the center stands Christ delivering a blessing, carrying a book with the phrase: «Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world» (Mt 25.34).

On the left can be seen Saint Peter, accompanied by his brother Andrew, and on the right Saint Paul is next to the evangelist Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles and witness to Paul's Roman evangelization. In the lower band can be seen two angels and the other apostles, each with a scroll that carries a phrase from the Gloria, starting from the first angel on the right whose scroll reads: «Gloria in excelsis Deo».

At the center of the band stands the Etimasia, that is, the throne of God with the instruments of the passion alluding to the final judgment in which the cross of Christ will serve as a «counterweight» for the salvation of sinners. Near the throne we can spot the two

sponsors (the sacristan Adinolfo and the abbot Giovanni Caetani). From below the depiction of the Holy Innocents, the firstborn of Bethlehem killed by Herod, is



fig.5

not visible. The lower part of the mosaic, showing the feet of Christ and the prostrate Pope, is much more beautiful than the rest - it is the only part which survived the fire. The splendor of its tiles is very different from that of the extensive renovation all around it.

The focus of the basilica is the tomb of the Apostle above which the altar stands,

since in the Eucharistic celebration the Church in heaven and the pilgrim Church on earth are united. (fig. 6)

Going down to the lower level we can now see Paul's tomb with our own eyes. The

of Saint Paul, and Timothy, Paul's most faithful disciple.

On the spandrels of the arches, together with the offering of the baldacchino to Saint Paul by Abbot Bartholomew, three

pairs of characters from the Old Testament are depicted: Adam and Eve committing their original sin, Cain and Abel sacrificing the flocks and the fruits of the earth to God, and David and Solomon. The Paschal candlestick represents the victory of Christ's light over sin and death. It was sculpted by the Vassalletto family of marble workers between the end of the 12th and the beginning of the 13th century and was saved from the fire of 1823. The base features four figures holding pairs of symbolic animals (sphinxes, rams and lions) which are worn around their necks to be in-



fig.6

apse of the small primitive church from the Constantinian era can also be seen, facing in the opposite direction to the current one. The baldacchino was sculpted by Arnolfo di Cambio around 1285. Its function is to highlight the presence of the altar. In addition to Saints Peter and Paul, Saint Benedict (or Abbot Bartholomew) and Saint Timothy are represented, recalling the founder of the Benedictine order which still looks after the Monastery

interpreted as a representation of the defeat of evil.

This is followed by some decorative strips with animal and plant motifs. The figure of a grape harvester recalls the cyclical nature of man's work, illuminated by the history of salvation.

Above we can see three «historic» bands. The first depicts the capture of Christ by armor-wearing guards who are accompanied, to the left of Jesus, by two faces de-

picting the high priest and Judas (almost a demonic figure) in reference to the plot that led to Jesus' arrest. The story continues with Caiaphas in the Sanhedrin who, with the sacred book in his hand, judges Christ to be guilty. This is followed by the mockery of Christ, depicted while bound hand and foot to a throne, holding a cane as a scepter, and being ridiculed by the soldiers.

The band above depicts Christ being brought by Caiaphas to Pilate. Pilate washing his hands is followed by the Crucifixion with the two thieves on the smaller crosses, Mary on the right and John on the left of Jesus, and characters bearing the symbols of the passion.

The last narrative register depicts the Resurrection: the soldiers sleeping near the tomb are confused and we see angels holding the mandorla within which the Ascension is shown, where Christ appears in all his majesty, sitting on the rainbow, with one hand raised in blessing and a scepter in the other.

The inscription at the bottom reads: *Arbor poma gerit. Arbor ego lumina gesture. Porto libamina. Nuntio gaudia, sed die festive. Surrexit Christus. Nam talia munera p[rae]sto [The tree bears fruit, I am a tree that brings light. I bear gifts. I announce joy on the feast. Christ is risen. And I offer these gifts].*

Depicting the various stages of the life of Saint Paul, a cycle of 36 frescoes runs along the upper part of the walls of the central nave and the transept. These

were painted at the behest of Pius IX in 1857. (fig.7)

Where this cycle of frescoes begins, a series of portraits of the Popes down through the ages is depicted in parallel, starting from St. Peter. The sequence obviously does not have an endpoint, because it is updated with the image of each new Pope when he is elected.

The first chapel to the left of the apse preserves the crucifix from the end of the 13th century (attributed by some scholars to Cavallini), which, according to tradition, 'spoke' in 1350 to Saint Brigid of Sweden, one of the saints who championed the desire for Christian unity around the pontiff. In the same chapel, in 1541, before the icon of the Virgin and Child, which is still visible, Ignatius of Loyola and his first companions made their religious profession as Jesuits.



fig.7