



THE PILGRIMAGE OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Basilica of San Sebastiano
Fuori le Mura





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



MINISTERO
DEL TURISMO
REPUBBLICA ITALIANA

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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 Catacombs and the Basilica of San Sebastiano Fuori le Mura

Reasons for the pilgrimage

'Catacombs', a term that came into use here at Saint Sebastian's

The pagans used the Greek word *necropoli* to describe their cemeteries, a word which literally means "city of the dead". The first Christians, however, preferred the word *cemetery*, which they themselves invented, and which derives from the Greek *koimào* which means "to sleep". The faith of Christians in the resurrection can be seen from the term they used. The word "catacombs", however, comes much later, from the place name *catacumbas* which indicated the location where the Basilica of Saint Sebastian now stands where there was a steep incline which

is much less visible today. (fig.1) From here, the only underground cemetery that pilgrims could visit until 1600, the term started to be used to indicate the other catacombs. Of course underground burials were not peculiar to Christians, indeed they carried on the practice from the Romans, and there are also Jewish catacombs in Rome.

Literary sources tell us that at the beginning of the 3rd century - a good 100 years before Constantine - the Christian community of Rome already owned the cemetery which would later be called "of Callixtus". In the work known as *The Refutation of all heresies*, traditionally attributed to Hippolytus Romanus (although the authorship is disputed), we read that Callix-



fig.1

tus, then a deacon, was given the task by Pope Zephyrinus, between 189 and 222, of looking after the catacombs which we now know as the Catacombs of St Callixtus.

That text reads:

"At the death of Victor, Zephyrinus, wanting [Callixtus] as a collaborator in the education of the clergy, honored [him] to his own detriment, and having transferred him from Anzio he gave him the role of overseer of the cemetery" (IX,12,14).

This text shows that the Church owned its own underground cemetery, and that it was for the bishop of Rome to designate the person to look after it. The Christian ownership of the place was so well known that in this same cemetery of Callixtus, about fifty years later, Pope Sixtus II with four deacons and subsequently Saint Lawrence, who was also a deacon, were arrested during the persecutions of Valerian in the year 258. This detail is extremely illuminating because it shows two things: firstly, that there was already felt to be a need to have properties for the use of the faithful, and secondly, the custom of embellishing such places for celebrations – basically the birth of early Christian art. Interestingly both of these things are independent of Constantine's rise to power. Rather they show a community that needed its own common spaces and artistic forms to express its faith. The iconographic images typical of Christian art developed from the frescoes of the catacombs and the

sculptures of the sarcophagi.

A faulty interpretation of the ancient sources gave rise to the legend that the Christian community sought refuge in the catacombs in times of persecution, celebrating the Eucharist there, hidden from their persecutors and even staying there for longer periods when the danger was greater. The idea that the catacombs were considered a place of refuge appears in the early writings of the Renaissance era. But the truth is, the catacombs were well known to the Roman authorities who evidently turned a blind eye to them and tolerated Christians going there for burials and prayers of intercession for the deceased. From literary sources, in particular from documentation on the Donatist crisis, it appears that by the time of Constantine, the Roman community already had forty churches in operation: they had no desire to remain hidden, but rather wanted to publicly profess their faith, and express it artistically. However, the link between the catacombs and the martyrs is a very real one, because the martyrs, regarded as witnesses killed for their profession of their faith in Jesus, were buried there, and so Christians wanted their loved ones to also be buried around these tombs.

Visiting the basilica

Saint Sebastian and the memory of Saints Peter and Paul

(Fig.2) The basilica of today bears the name of St Sebastian because his mortal remains are venerated here. The first references to this martyr appeared in the fourth century, but more fulsome descriptions (though perhaps less reliable ones) come from the *Passio sancti Sebastiani*, from the first half of the fifth century. Sebastian lived and

was martyred under Emperor Diocletian. The commander of a military cohort, he was condemned to death simply because he was a Christian. The tomb of the saint was placed at the centre of a large crypt and it quickly became a place of veneration. For fear of looting by the Saracens – the Arab-Muslims who, after having plundered the coasts of Italy and having established outposts for a future conquest, also attacked Rome twice in the mid-9th century – the Popes had the saint's relics moved first to the Vatican, in 826, and subsequently, under Leo IV, to the church of the *Santi Quattro Coronati*. In 1218, Honorius III had the martyr's remains transferred again, this time to the altar of the crypt, located under the current basilica. Cardinal Scipione Borghese and after him Cardinal Francesco Barberini, during restorations of the church in the Baroque period, gave the relics their current arrangement – they are now kept in a chapel to the left of the central nave, while in the chapel opposite, the column to which the saint would have been tied and one of the arrows used in his martyrdom are venerated. In the same chapel on the right, a stone is venerated which is said to be the original one on which Jesus left the mark of his feet when Peter said to him “*Domine quo vadis?*” In the church



fig.2

of that name, according to this tradition, a mere copy is kept. (fig.3)

Going down into the catacombs of Saint Sebastian, the most interesting place to

martyrs with the date of their commemoration, recalls that on 29 June 258, just a few weeks before the worsening of the persecution of the time with the martyrdom of



fig.3

visit is the *triclia* area. From the architectural layout it is believed that this was a covered area used *ad confrequentandam memoriam quiescentium*. In these places the deceased were remembered on anniversaries, prayers were offered for them, and light meals (*refrigeria*) were eaten in their memory. On the pillars of the portico and on the wall, along which a seat runs, there are around 600 graffiti, dating back to the second half of the third century, with invocations to the apostles Peter and Paul. One of them reads, for example, *Paule et Petre petite pro Victore*. An ancient document, the *Depositio Martyrum*, a catalog of

Pope Sixtus, Lawrence and four other deacons, the celebration of the feast of Saints Peter and Paul was held in a place called *ad catacumbas*, from the ancient place name (as previously noted, only later was the term 'catacombs' extended to mean all the various cemetery spaces).

Scholars debate why this celebration took place in this place at that time and it is suggested that, due to the ongoing persecution, the bodies of the two patrons of Rome were transferred here to save them from possible desecration. What is certain is that the Church of Rome did venerate Peter and Paul at the catacombs

of Saint Sebastian, entrusting itself to their protection, aware that through their martyrdom God had given a particular and unique grace to the city of Rome. In fact, a fourth century epigraph, sculpted for Pope Damasus at Saint Sebastian's, reads as follows: *"You who are looking for the names of Peter and Paul, know that the saints lived here in the past. These Apostles were sent to us by the East, we willingly recognize it, but by virtue of their martyrdom (following Christ up through the stars they came to the celestial regions and the kingdom of the just) Rome was able to claim them as its citizens. This is what Damasus wanted to say in your praise, O new stars."*

At a lower level of the *triclīa* you can see three mausoleums belonging to three wealthy patrons which were buried during the construction of the church and only found during excavations in 1922. The first belonged to a certain Marcus Clodius Ermete, the second belonged to the so-called *Innocentiores*, perhaps an association of the faithful, while the third mausoleum is called the Axe tomb, because an axe is depicted on the facade. *Bernini's statue of Christ the Savior*

(fig.4) In addition to the chapel which houses the relics of Saint Sebastian, the marble bust depicting Christ the Savior, which is displayed on the right, is well worth a stop. It has recently been the subject of new academic studies and can now definitively be attributed to Gian Lorenzo Bernini. It is the classic *Salvator mundi*, the great master's last work,

which he finished in 1679, shortly before his death. The artist's son wrote of his fa-

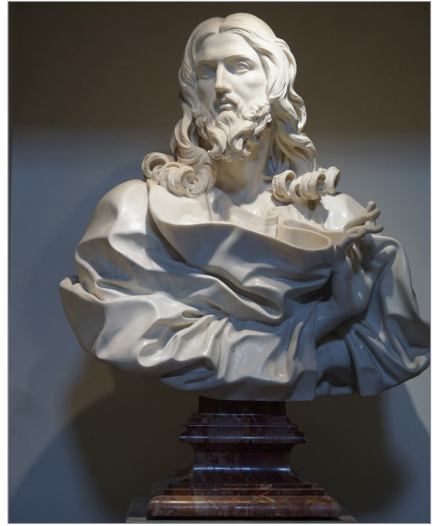


fig.4

ther: *"And now ... in his 82nd year ... having enjoyed excellent health allowing him to work with marble until he was 81, he ended with his sculpture of the Savior carved out of devotion"*. The great artist, who had dominated the artistic scene of his time, had wanted to sculpt that face once more before his death so that it would accompany him in the last moments of his life.

Saint Philip Neri and the catacombs of Saint Sebastian

One of the witnesses at his canonization process reported that, as a young man, Saint Philip *"went very often, alone, at night, to the Seven Churches, staying overnight in the said churches, and, also in the cemetery of Callixtus, and, when he*

found the churches locked, he stopped in the porticoes of said churches, to pray, and (...) sometimes to read some book by the light of the moon". The only catacomb open at the time was that of Saint Sebastian (it was wrongly believed that this was the heart of the cemetery of Callixtus). The tunnels were accessed from two entrances located on the sides of the Basilica of Saint Sebastian. (fig.5)

Saint Philip went there because that place evoked for him the powerful memory of the first Christian generations, their heroic profession of faith, the long line of martyrs, and the martyrdom of Peter and Paul. He confided to Cardinal Federico Borromeo, his friend and penitent, that he begged "the Holy Spirit to give him spirit". In 1544 he had a mystical experience which profoundly affected him. Although the episode is largely shrouded in mystery ("Secretum meum mihi, secretum

meum mihi" Philip would often repeat), several witnesses state that the saint confided to them that, while he was praying near the catacombs of Saint Sebastian, the Holy Spirit filled and expanded his heart: "This excess of heart, the flame and the spirit of God overflowed in him so much that it seemed to want to burst out of his chest, unable to be contained within the limits that nature had set".

The experience of Saint Philip Neri at the catacombs of Saint Sebastian allows us to understand the importance of reflecting on the history of the Church and its great figures in order to live a mature faith. Philip entrusted his first successor, Cesare Baronio, to study the history of the Church precisely so as to be able to explain how the Gospel of Jesus had been lived in the Church over the centuries and to counterbalance the negative criticisms that some Protestants promulgated at that time.

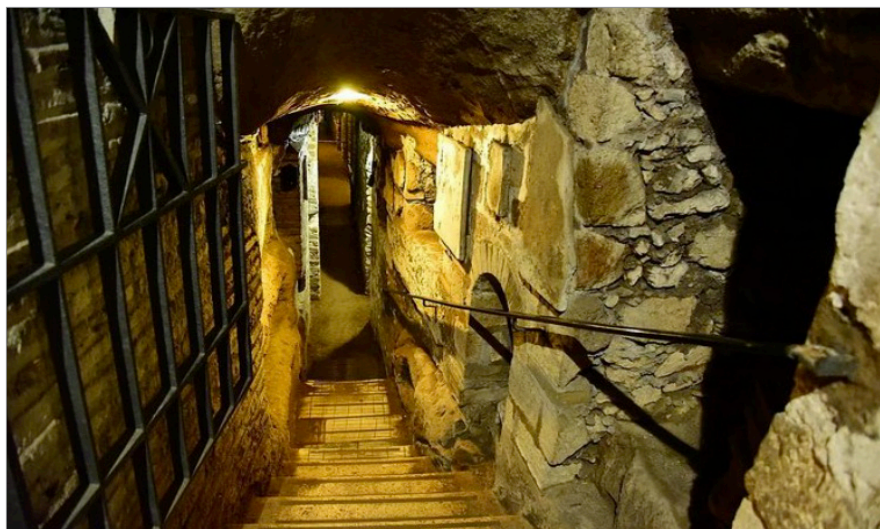


fig.5