



# THE PILGRIMAGE OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Basilica of Santa Croce  
in Gerusalemme





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



MINISTERO  
DEL TURISMO  
REPUBBLICA ITALIANA

# THE PILGRIMAGE OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Jubilee journeys

## The Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme

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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 Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme

## *Reasons for a pilgrimage*

Empress Helen, the mother of Constantine, can, in many ways, be considered the first archaeologist. Even though she didn't use modern scientific excavation techniques, she, like her son, wanted to find the exact place of Christ's resurrection from the tomb. So, she set about excavating in the area where the emperor Hadrian (117-138) - who had strongly opposed the Christian faith - had built over the site Christians considered to be the place of the passion and resurrection. Hadrian constructed a temple there, dedicated to Jupiter and Venus above the Christian holy places - to hide them as Eusebius of Caesarea and Saint Jerome explain in their writings.

The unforeseen result of his efforts was that he left us with a very precise idea of the location of the tomb of Jesus. The Rotunda of the Holy Sepulcher, which was excavated by Helen, is now the subject of studies and excavations by archaeologists from La Sapienza University of Rome.

Everything seems to confirm that Helen and Constantine decreed the demolition of Hadrian's temple so as to build in its place a shrine on the rock of Calvary which emerged during the excavations and create the rotunda of the *Anastasis*

(the Greek word for Resurrection), on the rediscovered tomb.

Some of the excavated soil was transported by Helen from Jerusalem to Rome as a relic and placed in the new basilica of *Santa Croce in Gerusalemme* (so-named because whoever stepped on its floor could consider himself to be setting foot in the Holy Land itself).

According to tradition, during these digs and construction works, Helen Augusta, mother of the emperor, found the remains of the very wood of the Cross of the Lord on Golgotha. Such precious relics deserved special attention and the empress therefore decided to build a chapel in Rome to house them in the *Sessorianum*, her private residence, where the empress had a layer of earth from Calvary spread, "stained by the blood of the Lord".

## Visiting the basilica

Today the pilgrim to *Santa Croce in Gerusalemme* enters through one of the masterpieces of the late Roman Baroque – the 18th-century façade. The appearance is that of an open reliquary, expanded to gigantic proportions, with four large pillars which divide the façade into a central section, onto which the portal and the large oval window open, and two convex lateral sections.

(fig.1) At the top there is a balustrade surmounted by statues: at the extreme

Gregorini and Passalacqua for the 1750 Jubilee, but he also wanted to complete the work of his predecessor Sixtus V who had linked the Basilica of St Mary Major with straight roads to the Lateran and to *Santa Croce*. Now *Santa Croce* was to be linked by a straight line to St John Lateran's too.

In this way, the three basilicas which were already united at a devotional level were also linked in terms of urban planning. Since the Middle Ages, the three fundamental moments of the life of Christ had been venerated in these three



fig.1

left Saint Helen with the Cross, at the opposite extreme Constantine the emperor with two angels adoring the cross and the four evangelists. The basilica is accessed via an oval-shaped atrium – one of the favorite shapes of Baroque architecture.

Pope Benedict XIV not only commissioned this new façade from the architects

churches: the Nativity in St Mary Major's, the Passion in *Santa Croce* and the Resurrection in St John Lateran's, the Basilica of the Savior. From the square in front of *Santa Croce* today's pilgrim can see both St Mary Major's and the Lateran Basilica, thus embracing the three greatest mysteries of faith with a single glance.



(fig.2) Entering the basilica you are immediately struck by the apse painting. It was Pedro González de Mendoza, Archbishop of Toledo and Primate of Spain, who, as titular cardinal of the basilica from 1478 to 1495, commissioned it from the great painter Antoniazio Romano.

The lower band carries a representation of the discovery of the true cross, according to the Golden Legend by Jacopo da Varazze, a medieval text “to be read” on the various liturgical feasts.

To the left of the fresco, the Empress Helen with her crown and halo, sent by her

son Constantine to Jerusalem, questions a Jewish man called Jude whose father Zacchaeus, a relative of Saint Stephen, had passed on the secret of the exact place of the crucifixion. Jude - who later converted and became, according to the Golden Legend, Cyriacus, the bishop of Jerusalem - then reveals to her the location of Golgotha.

In the second scene we see the excavations and the discovery of the three crosses, those of Christ and the thieves.

To establish which was the cross of the Lord among the three, in the third scene, we see Jude laying the corpse of a young man on each of the three crosses and, miraculously, upon contact with the cross of Jesus, the dead man comes back to life and gives glory to God right in front of the eyes of

the holy empress in prayer.

At the center of the fresco is the rediscovered Cross, held on the right by Saint Helen, and adored on the left by the kneeling



fig.2

The central area of the painting is occupied by the Redeemer in glory, surrounded by a cloud of cherubs, against the background of a starry sky.

cardinal who commissioned the work.

On the right of the fresco the second part of the legend is depicted. According to this account, the Cross, deposited in Jerusalem, was stolen by Khosrow, Emperor of the Persians. The Christian emperor Heraclius, in 610, waged war against him to recover the relic.

It was decided to settle the conflict with a single duel between Heraclius and Khosrow. In the first scene on the left the two are seen facing each other on a bridge.

The narrative then continues, in the second scene, with the victorious Heraclius who goes on horseback to Jerusalem to restore the relic to its proper place again. The fresco shows the apparition of an angel (painted glowing on a cloud on the far right), warning Heraclius not to enter Jerusalem with the pomp of a sovereign. And, in fact, the last scene shows Heraclius again, this time on foot and stripped of his finery, carrying the cross on his shoulder to restore it to Jerusalem.

Leaving the church, you descend from the right nave into the Chapel of Saint Helen, the oldest part of the basilica. (fig.3) *Santa Croce* was also known in times of old by the simple name of *Hierusalem*, because people knew that just under the floor of the Chapel of Saint Helen lay the soil of Calvary. The custom of carrying home items from the holy places as relics and reminders of a pilgrimage was very common and therefore this tradition is highly plausible.

The Chapel of Saint Helen, built into the structure of the ancient imperial palace, was perhaps intended to serve as the empress's private oratory, but the recent discovery of an early Christian baptistery there suggests that it was in public use even in ancient times.

The descendants of Constantine, the



fig.3

emperor Valentinian III, together with his mother Galla Placidia and his sister Honoria, decorated the Chapel with mosaics between the years 425 and 455. This was redone by Baldassarre Peruzzi

in 1507-1508, at the request of the titular cardinal who succeeded Mendoza, Bernardino Lopez de Carvajal as a result of the enthusiasm aroused by the discovery of the *titulus* [the wooden panel nailed above Christ's head on the cross]. The ceiling of the chapel is today one of the few examples left in Rome of Renaissance mosaic work. The vault is divided by frames and festoons inspired by ancient mosaics (typical of the fashion for imitation of classical imagery of the time). In the central circle we see Christ blessing and smiling, holding the book with the writing *Ego sum lux mundi* in his hand; the four evangelists stand in the ovals. In the lunettes, can be seen various scenes of the "legend" of the cross. Starting from the one placed to the left of Christ, we can identify the miracle of the young man resurrected from the true Cross, Saint Helen adoring the wood of the cross, Saint Helen ordering it to be divided into three parts, and finally Heraclius entering Jerusalem in procession.

You can also admire a statue of a classical pagan goddess reworked as an image of Saint Helen with the cross, under which the ancient floor with the earth brought back from Jerusalem is visible.

#### *The relics of the Holy Cross*

The relics were originally kept in the Chapel of St. Helen. During the medieval renovation works ordered by Pope Lucius II in 1144, they were placed in a lead box, and walled up at the top of the triumphal arch. During the subsequent renovation,

ordered by Cardinal Mendoza, the box containing the now forgotten *titulus* was found on 1st February 1492, the same day on which news reached Rome that the Catholic kings in Spain had forced Granada to surrender. The last Arab stronghold in Europe had fallen, and Spain was now



fig.4

entirely Christian again. (fig.4)

Pope Innocent VIII rushed to venerate the relic. Alexander VI issued the Papal Bull *Admirable Sacramentum* in 1496 with which he authenticated the discovery and granted an indulgence to anyone who visited the church on the anniversary. The relics, therefore, once more came to be



venerated in the Chapel of Saint Helen, and so it was until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when a new chapel for the relics was inaugurated in 1930 which can be accessed from the right nave.

The various relics are displayed in the case at the back of the chapel. The most impressive is undoubtedly the *titulus*, the inscription that was placed on the cross of Jesus (cf John 19.19-22).

On the *titulus* that is venerated in *Santa Croce* you can still read part of the Latin text *US NAZARENUS RE* in the lowest line, with the characters that the Romans used for the laws posted on praetorian noticeboards, and above, the same wording in Greek and in very deteriorated Hebrew characters. The Latin and Greek writings run from right to left following the custom of Hebrew writing.

Also displayed in the reliquary are three

fragments of wood which tradition holds to have been part of the true Cross, preserved in a single reliquary, as well as a fourth fragment believed to belong to the cross of the good thief. This fragment was certainly part of a Roman *patibulum* (the horizontal arm of a cross used as an instrument of execution). The chapel also preserves a nail that may have been used for the crucifixion, a phalanx of the finger of Saint Thomas and two thorns from the Crown of thorns placed on Jesus' head.

In 1825 some small stones from the Bethlehem caves and the Holy Sepulcher were added to also become part of the *Santa Croce* treasury

The entire complex of relics is a precious reminder that when we consider the incarnation and death of Christ on the cross for the love of sinners, we are recalling reality and not myth.