



THE PILGRIMAGE OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Papal Basilica of Santa
Maria Maggiore





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



MINISTERO
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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.

The Papal Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore

The first artistic expression of Christianity after it was set free by the edict of Constantine (313), was found in architecture. A new vitality emerged which was grafted onto the structures and forms of late Roman times, almost like a life-giving sap renewing Rome's classic, codified architectural language. The Basilica of Saint Mary Major, (*Santa Maria Maggiore* in Italian), is a powerful example of this cultural and stylistic innovation.

The very façade of the basilica highlights its long journey through the ages, evident in the historical traces that have been left there. Beyond the airy and light 18th-century portico, you can glimpse the splendid mosaic that Filippo Rusuti installed at the beginning of the 14th century and the great medieval bell tower, which is the tallest in Rome.

The origins of the basilica are to be found in an ancient tradition, according to which, during the night between 4 and 5 August of the year 358 (or 352) the Virgin Mary appeared in a dream to the Roman patrician John and his wife and revealed to them that on the Esquiline, one of the famed seven hills of Rome, a church should be built on the place where snow would fall the next day. The Pope, Liberius at the time, experienced the same vision. So, the next morning, the three visionaries met on the Esquiline, where, on the unseasonable fresh snow, Pope Liberius traced the plan

of the church. That is why it is known still as the *Liberian Basilica*. Subsequently it was given other names, of which the most famous are *Santa Maria della Neve* (Our



fig.1

Lady of the Snows), in memory of the prodigious snowfall; *Santa Maria al Presepe* (Our Lady of the Crib), because under the main altar the relic of the manger of Bethlehem has been kept since the year

642, and *Santa Maria Maggiore* (Saint Mary Major), because it is the most important church dedicated to the Mother of Jesus. Many architectural and artistic interventions have been carried out here over the years, to celebrate the greatest of all the titles attributed to Mary, that of “Mother of God”, solemnly proclaimed by the Council of Ephesus in the year 431.

In the atrium, the space before the entrance proper, we notice the bronze statue of Philip IV of Spain by Girolamo Lucenti (1692), recalling a sovereign who worked tirelessly for the decoration of the basilica. Three entrances into the basilica lie before us: the central one is the work of Ludovico Pogliaghi (1949), with scenes from the life of Mary. The one on the right, by Mario Toffetti (2006), depicts the Luminous Mysteries of the Rosary. We enter the basilica through the Holy Door (fig.1), on the left, a work by Luigi Enzo Mattei from 2001. On the doors we see Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, who indicates the crucified and risen Christ, the man of the shroud, while visitors are also invited to remember the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the aforementioned Council of Ephesus.

The pontificate of Sixtus III (432-440) took place right after that Council. His name appears inside the church, in the solemn triumphal arch over the main altar in the dedication “to the people of God: *Xystus episcopus plebi Dei*”. Sixtus III most likely completed a building previously begun at the time of Pope Liberius. The church we

see today is the result of further transformations, which took place over the centuries, by an array of world-famous artists and many humble craftsmen who worked within these walls.

The architecture initially appears grandiose, but it is also compact, and divided into various spaces which are clearly identi-



fig.2

able by their structural layout. We can walk through the individual spaces, recognizing them, but also enjoying them as part of the whole. The overall impact of the building offers a sense of welcome (fig. 2): it is a place which, like a mother's embrace, awaits pil-

grims for a community celebration or for the shedding of a silent tear.

The basilica, whose foundations are rooted in previous buildings from the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD is in the form of a Latin cross. The main worship space has an extraordinary array of mosaics and fres-

coes, various sculptures, and many ornamental features. Thus, through countless details, the building reflects the splendor of the Mother of God.

From the historical-artistic point of view, it should be noted that here, for the first time in a solemn form, individual epi-



fig.3



fig.4

sodes from the bible or the tradition of the Church are connected in a narrative sequence. This is how the Marian cycles were born, which were to undergo significant development in later iconographic works. Scenes from the Old Testament appear along the walls of the central nave (fig.3), especially focusing on the figures of Abraham and Moses, which culminate in the triumphal arch (fig. 4), with the episodes of Jesus' childhood, from the Annunciation to the Flight into Egypt. The Virgin Mary is presented as a *Queen* seated on a throne and draped in the imperial insignia of gold and purple. At the height of the Middle Ages (1295) the apse of the basilica must have 'exploded' in the dazzling mosaic by Jacopo Torriti of the *Coronation of the Virgin* (fig.5) and scenes from her life.

The main liturgical space is large, embellished by the Cosmatesque floor, the golden coffered ceiling, and the sequence of columns. The countless geometric, animal, and vegetal shapes decorating the basilica illustrate the participation of the whole world, from stone to gold, in its glorification.

The main altar, surmounted by a canopy by Ferdinando Fuga (1750), the same architect who designed the facade, sits at the center of the sanctuary area and of the entire liturgical complex (fig.6). In keeping with an ancient practice, the relics of the Martyrs and Saints – those who, with gentleness and great coherence of spirit, gave their lives for Christ and the



fig.5

triumph of his Kingdom – are kept and venerated in churches. In this basilica too, relics have a place of honor, in a space explicitly dedicated to them, the Chapel of the Crucifix in the right nave. But the most notable relic kept in the basilica is that of the manger of Bethlehem, the first cradle of the baby Jesus. This prestigious relic, preserved in a silver case created by Giuseppe Valadier (1802), is placed below the main altar, in



fig.6



fig.7

the so-called *confession area* (fig.7), where the statue of Pius IX by Ignazio Jacometti is also housed. The painting of the *Nativity* by Francesco Mancini (1750), framed by the columns of the canopy, shines in the circle of the apse. The basilica also houses the oldest nativity scene in the world – some statues by Arnolfo di Cambio, dating back to around 1292.

In addition to the aforementioned Chapel of the Relics and the Crucifix which is the second altar of the right nave, other important chapels are to be found in the basilica. Starting from the right nave, the Baptistry comes first, with the font by Valadier, the imposing marble relief of the *Assumption of Mary* by Pietro Bernini and the sumptuous paintings of the vault. The Sistine Chapel and the Pauline Chapel are both grandiose spaces, found on the transverse axis of the building. Here we see the baroque in all its glory ... a vortex of energy and architectural

impulses, undulating lines and shapes, and accentuated color schemes. The Sistine Chapel, built by Domenico Fontana and enriched with late 16th-century frescoes, takes its name from Pope Sixtus V and houses the monumental tombs of that Pope and his predecessor Pius V, together with a liturgical artefact of enormous importance – the tabernacle, which proclaims with solemnity the permanent presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.

The Pauline Chapel which faces it, on the other side of the basilica, was built by Flaminio Ponzio and owes its name to Pope Paul V. His tomb 'dialogues' in a certain sense with that of Clement VIII and together they frame the image of Our Lady, Savior of the Roman People, *Salus Populi Romani* (fig.8), a very famous medieval icon traditionally attributed to the evangelist Luke. A very grand pictorial and decorative work-



fig.8

ing underlines the historical and devotional importance of this image. After the Pauline Chapel, in the left nave are the Sforza Chapel and the Cesi Chapels. The former was no stranger to the genius of Michelangelo Buonarroti. In addition to the splendid mosaics, some images are regarded as being particularly important, both for their aesthetic value and for their religious and historical significance. Among them are the cycle of 18th-century paintings with the life of Mary set above the 5th-century mosaics in the central nave; the 17th-century painting by Giuseppe del Bastaro which illustrates the dream of the patrician John and his wife in the right nave; and the statue of the Madonna as *Regina Pacis* by Guido Galli (1918) on the left hand side as you enter the basilica. At the entrance of the building and along the naves there are various funerary monuments, some of Popes (Nicholas IV and Clement IX) and others in memory of other prominent persons. These monuments, in addition to the grandiose ones in the Sistine and Pauline Chapels, represent an often very high expression of funerary art, and illustrate a range of understandings and ideas about the meaning of death (and, consequently, of life). This is true of the more elaborate ones and also of the humbler ones, including the most humble of all, the tomb of Gian Lorenzo Bernini. It is moving to note how this man, who was the most famous artist of his era and one of the main architects of the majesty of Rome, chose for himself a simple tile next to the main altar on the right side!

The iconographic and decorative features are indeed sumptuous but even although the various features date back to eras which are chronologically and stylistically quite distant from each other, the paintings and sculptures harmonize with each other to contribute to creating a joyful and familiar atmosphere. The church, as a building of bricks and mortar, is also an image of the celestial Jerusalem, and therefore it seems fitting that it should shine like a precious gem. Earthly architecture reflects "heavenly architecture". In other words, our definitive salvation is revealed to us through the beauty of the building.

Before leaving, our gaze rises by the bright window on the main facade: created in 1995 by the Hungarian artist Jan Hajnal. Here we contemplate Mary among the symbols of the Jewish religion (the tables of the law and the seven-branched candelabrum) and the Christian religion (the cross and the chalice with the eucharistic host).

Finally, as we exit through the back door, there is one last wonder to behold: the external apse by Carlo Rainaldi (1673), solid and majestic, a triumph of lines and volume sitting atop the monumental staircase.

Santa Maria Maggiore is an encyclopedia of the history of a society. It seeks not to dominate its environment with pride, but exists to give it a meaning, a center, a direction, a hope. The beauty of this place is a symbolic anticipation of that future city, the one that awaits every one of us at the end of our earthly pilgrimage.