

The First Christians In Rome

During these five days we will dedicate our time exclusively to the lives of the first Christians in Rome, who suffered intermittent persecution at the hands of Roman Emperors were granted freedom of worship by Constantine in 313 with the Edict of Milan. We will visit the Catacombs, the first Christian cemeteries outside the town walls. We will see, under some churches, the remains of *titoli*, houses of Roman nobles of the Imperial Period. Having become Christians, their homes were at the disposition of their co-religionists for cultural meetings. We shall see numerous examples of the early Christian basilica, the earliest formal place of Christian worship, which has survived to this day, although with some modifications.

Day 1

Arrival in Rome. Brief bus tour of the city with panoramic views from the Gianicolo Hill. Afternoon free for rest & leisurely individual sightseeing. Dinner at a local restaurant followed by an evening walk around Rome's historic center: Piazza Navona, the Pantheon, Campo dei Fiori & Piazza Farnese.

Day 2

Our visit will begin with the archaeological complex of the church of S. Giovanni & Paolo, including the house of the two martyrs, where the first Christians met to pray. We then follow the Via Appia, historically linked to the first Christians. We will linger a while at the small church Domine Quo Vadis, which is where St. Peter met Christ. Along the Via Appia, one finds the church of St. Sebastian, under which stretches one of the larger complexes of catacombs in Rome, where, according to tradition, the bodies of the Saints were kept here for a period of time. After lunch, we will visit the Basilica of St Paul's outside the Walls on the Via Ostiense, which the Emperor Constantine had built over the Saints' tomb. The rest of the day free in the center of Rome.

Day 3

Morning visit to the excavations under the Basilica of S. Clemente, one of the most interesting archaeological complexes in Rome. It is a stratification of elements of 3 levels: Roman buildings, an early basilica of the 4th century and that of the 12th century. At the lowest level is a mithreum, a place of worship dedicated to Mithras, a divinity from western Asia. This religion entered Rome from the east as did Christianity and a rivalry between the two developed. Nearby we will see 5th century S. Stefano Rotondo, one of the oldest churches in Italy. Circular in shape, this church contains a string of moving and bloody frescoes, representing the lives of the Martyrs and Saints.

Afternoon visit to the Basilica of St. John Lateran, also of great antiquity, which Constantine built by expropriating all possessions of the noble Roman family Lateran, who were adverse to Christianity. Until the Avignon period it was a residence for the Popes, and as seat of the Bishop of Rome, it still remains the

extraterritorial property of the Vatican. We will see the early Christian Baptistery, built by Constantine on a Roman nympheum, which became the prototype of many baptisteries to follow. Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, one of the seven churches visited by Pilgrims in Rome holds the relic of the Cross carried to Rome by St. Helena, mother of Constantine. The last visit will be to Basilica of S. Lorenzo, also built by Constantine in 330, on the tomb of S. Lorenzo. It has a very interesting floor plan, consisting of two basilicas which are joined at the apses. Catacombs lie below. Dinner and overnight.

Day 4

We will begin the day with a visit to St. Peters, the greatest of all Christian churches, dedicated by Pope Silvestro I, on the tomb of the Saint, as Constantine wished. The tomb of St. Peter is believed to be located in a cemetery near Nero's Circus, where he was martyred. Then a visit to Santa Maria in Trastevere, one of the earliest churches of Rome, with its early mosaics still in good condition. Before lunch, we will pass in front of the smallest church in Rome, S. Benedetto of Piscinula, which has a beautiful Romanesque bell tower. After lunch we will visit some early churches on the Aventine Hill, which in ancient times was a traditional "working class" area. Before walking up the hill, we will see the Church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, which rises in the old cattle market. The church belongs to the Greek Catholics, who escaped persecution in the Orthodox East. The church of Santa Sabina represents the ultimate in Christian Basilicas of the 5th century. According to tradition, Santa Prisca was erected on the house of the Christian couple, who had received St. Peter as their guest. Beneath the church: the crypt, an antiquary with finds of the Roman era and a mithreum. On to San Saba and the oratory of Santa Silvia, and the church of Santa Balbina, behind the Baths of Caracalla. A great hall of the Roman Imperial era was used as a plan for this church: the original structure is still easily recognized.

Day 5

A visit to S. Martino ai Monti, a 3rd-century church, which like other early churches, was built on the site of a private house, converted to an oratory. We shall visit the excavations beneath the church. Passing near-by the church of S. Vitale, erected in 402 in the basilical style with its three aisles. S. Vitale is presently located below today's street level. The church of S. Pudenziana is one of the oldest churches in Rome and was built on the site of the house of Senator Pudente, where St. Peter is said to have been a guest. Our visit continues with the church of S. Prassede, very interesting for its various early works of art, chiefly mosaics. A porphyry disc is a reminder of where the Saint Praxedes collected the remains and blood of martyrs.

After lunch, a visit to the "Liberiana Basilica," Santa Maria Maggiore, the fourth of the Patriarchal basilicas of Rome, with centuries of history, which are embodied in the building itself and the numerous works of art, among which, the stupendous mosaics. Along the via Nomentana, we find the early church of S. Agnese. St. Agnes was martyred in a brothel next to the Domitian Circus, (the present Piazza Navona) and buried outside the town walls on the site of the church

which bears her name. Brief visit to the near-by catacombs. In the vicinity can be found the Mausoleum of S. Costanza, Constantine's daughter, with its beautiful 4th-century mosaics. They are a magnificent example of early Christian craftsmanship. To end our tour we will visit the Catacombs of Priscilla, one of the most famous of Rome, with frescoes, painted plaster reliefs (an art form that the Romans excelled at) and sarcophagi.

Day 6

Departure for return flight home.