The Holy Land in Rome

The Jubilee in Rome has been an alternative to Jerusalem as a destination since 1300. We asked Antonio Olivié, Director of the Rome Reports television agency and author of a breathtaking documentary on the Holy Land in the Eternal City, to describe a pilgrimage route following in Christ's footsteps in the heart of the universal Church.

Since December 24, the Catholic Church has been celebrating a special year to commemorate the 2025th anniversary of the birth of Christ. The Jubilee is part of a tradition within the Church that can trace its origins to Jewish culture, with Jerusalem as the centre, since it was there that Jesus Christ was crucified. The pilgrimage to Rome is more recent, commencing 725 years ago.

In history, Pope Boniface VIII proclaimed the first Jubilee in Rome in 1300. His decision was no accident, nor the result of any particular insight; instead, it was driven by circumstances. In 1291, nine years prior, the last stronghold of the Christian presence in the Holy Land, Acre, had fallen into the hands of Muslims. Therefore, the road to Jerusalem became unsafe for pilgrims, as they would have risked being enslaved in a territory where they were considered infidels.

The current situation in the Holy Land, which has been marked by violence since 2023, makes Israel once again a country not easy for travellers. For 725 years, Rome has hosted and been enriched by the relics and objects related to Christ’s life and Passion. Therefore, a pilgrimage to the Eternal City can be consdered a pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem, where the Order of the Holy Sepulchre has played a decisive role in preserving the traces of our faith.

The loss of Jerusalem as a Christian territory was preceded by the fall of Constantinople in 1453, which added another chapter to the historical context. The Ottoman conquest of this territory led to many of the relics stored in the city's temples to be taken to various Italian cities, particularly Rome.

Therefore, the capital of Christianity today preserves the relics of the nails used in Christ's crucifition, the cross, the lance that pierced His side, the column where He was scourged, and Jesus' manger in Bethlehem. There are also the steps of the staircase from Pilate's palace that Jesus probably ascended before being condemned to death, as well as soil from Jerusalem brought to Rome by Saint Helena.

FIVE APOSTLES IN ROME

These relics linked to the Passion and life of Christ are in addition to the remains of the apostles who lived with Him. Alongside the tombs of Peter and Paul in the Vatican and Saint Paul Outside-the-Walls, the Eternal City also holds the remains of three other apostles, which many forget.

The Church of St Bartholomew on the Island in Rome dates back to 998, when the German Emperor Otto decided to build a church to house the relics of the apostle St Bartholomew, whose remains are also preserved in the city of Benevento, in Southern Italy. Today, all 20th century martyrs are venerated in this church on the Tiber Island too.

The Basilica of the Holy Apostles, near Piazza Venezia, is another of the Roman temples where the remains of those who accompanied Jesus during His life are preserved. Inside the basilica, the bodies of the apostles Philip and James the Less are kept. Tradition holds that their relics have been venerated on this site from the 4th century. However, the church in the heart of Rome where they were originally placed was destroyed by an earthquake in the 14th century. The current church on the site, and home to the relics, was built by the Colonna family in the 15th century on the site, and is considered a Baroque masterpiece.

HOLY CROSS IN JERUSALEM

If there is a church in Rome that is particularly connected to the Holy Land, it is the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme. The Basilica is part of the traditional seven-church route recommended for pilgrims visiting the capital of Christianity. Its history is closely tied to Saint Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine, as the original church was built within her palace.

Historians place Saint Helena's journey to Jerusalem at around 325. While there, the emperor's mother discovered the relics of Christ's cross and the thieves condemned alongside Him, which she decided to bring to Rome. The relics include that of the cross, some of the nails used to crucify Christ, the remains of the crown of thorns, and some Calvary soil, which she wished to lay as the foundation of the Roman church.

Alongside these relics, which have been venerated since the 4th century, a box was discovered in 1492 containing the remains of the Titulus Crucis, the inscription of Jesus' condemnation. The inscription, in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, has since attracted the attention of pilgrims.

THE LANCE OF PEACE AT ST PETER'S

The four pillars supporting the dome of St Peter's Basilica contain relics and four large sculptures related to the Passion. Next to St Peter's tomb, the great temple of Christianity houses a piece of wood from the Holy Cross brought back by Saint Helena, a cloth attributed to Veronica, who wiped Christ's face on the Via Crucis, and the lance with which the centurion Longinus pierced Christ's side on the Cross. In addition to these three objects, it also housed until a few years ago the relic of the head of the apostle Saint Andrew, which Pope Francis decided to return to Constantinople. However, a large statue of the apostle remains in its place.

Of these four relics, the most revered by pilgrims is Longinus' lance. This piece of metal was venerated in Constantinople until a diplomatic agreement between Pope Innocent VIII and Sultan Bayezid allowed its transferance to Rome at the end of the 15th century. The agreement was contingent upon the detention in Rome of one of Bayezid's brothers, his rival for the throne. In this manner, the Pope secured the friendship and peace with the Turkish Sultan. This marked the beginning of a period of stability in the Mediterranean.

THE HOLY STAIRS

A few steps from the main entrance of Rome’s St John Lateran Cathedral, lies the Holy Stairs, which is one of the traditonal pilgrimage sites in the Eternal City. This area was created to house the 28 steps that once provided access to Pontius Pilate’s palace in Jerusalem,which Jesus had to ascend before His Passion.

Pilgrims ascend these steps on their knees, in contemplation of the Passion of Christ, within a construction that permits them to descend other stairs, so as not to walk on the same ground that Christ walked upon. Tradition holds that the steps were brought from Jerusalem during the time of Saint Helena, in the 4th century. The current building, designed by Domenico Fontana, was constructed in the 16th century.

SAINT MARY MAJOR AND SAINT PRAXEDES

Saint Mary Major, which is one of the four Papal Basilicas, houses the remains of Jesus' manger found in Bethlehem. The wood of its construction from Palestine is preserved beneath the central altar of the church, which dates back to the 4th century, then rebuilt in the 5th century.

The basilica's connection to the birth of Christ led to the Pope celebrating the Christmas Mass in this church for many years. The Basilica of Saint Praxedes is located near Saint Mary Major. This small church houses an element that is closely tied to the Passion. In a side chapel of the church, a column associated with Christ's scourging is preserved. It was brought from Jerusalem to Rome by a member of the noble Colonna family, who wished to preserve it in one of the churches under their protection. The Basilica is dedicated to Praxedes, a young Roman woman who was martyred in the 2nd century.

These elements combined serve to strengthen the bond between Jerusalem and Rome. These two cities are united by the blood of Christ and His successors, as well as by a Church founded in Jerusalem and consolidated in Rome.

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