



St Peter's Basilica

Places in Rome (2)

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St Peter was martyred during the persecution of Christians that took place under Nero following the great fire of Rome in 64 AD. St Peter had come to Rome a few years earlier, following our Lord's command as recorded in St Mark's Gospel: **"Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."**(1)

A lifetime spent in the service of the Church

The Christians in Rome must have regarded Peter with special veneration. He had been the first to proclaim our Lord's divinity; he had traveled with him for the three years of his public life and had received from the Master the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. He was the visible head of the Church, and his presence in the capital of the Roman Empire made Rome the center and heart of the growing [Christian Church](#).

When the persecution began, the first Pope understood that the time was approaching for the fulfillment of the prophecy that Jesus had made by the shores of Lake Tiberias. The scene described by St John was ever fresh in his memory. **"Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep. Truly, truly I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.' This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God. And after this he said to him, 'Follow me.'"** (2)

After a lifetime spent in the service of the Church, the time had come for Peter to follow Christ to the point of total identification with him. Very soon he was arrested and condemned to die by crucifixion; and he was crucified upside down, because in his humility he felt he was not worthy to die in the same way as our Lord.

The site of his martyrdom was probably the *horti Neronis* (Nero's gardens), a piece of land belonging to the emperor on the outskirts of ancient Rome, close to the Vatican Hill. Caligula had begun to build a circus there for his own entertainment, and this was continued by Claudius and completed in the time of Nero. St Peter may have been executed during one of the spectacles organized there. Nero sometimes opened the gates of his stadium to the inhabitants of Rome, and he himself would drive his chariot around it dressed as a charioteer, to the applause of the crowd. The historian Tacitus has left us a graphic testimony of the way such spectacles were celebrated during the persecution of Christians. "Their deaths were treated as a sport. They were wrapped in the skins of beasts and savaged to death by dogs, or they were nailed to crosses, or, at nightfall, they were burnt alive as torches to light up the darkness." (3)

A tomb in the bare earth

The Christians retrieved St Peter's dead body and buried it on the slopes of the Vatican Hill, close to Nero's Circus but outside his property. The tomb was dug in the bare earth, but from the first it was visited frequently by the Christians of Rome. The emotion they felt on recalling Peter's fruitful apostolate in Rome may easily be imagined. According to ancient traditions Peter had lodged on the Esquiline Hill, in the house of a Senator called Pudens, which was one of the first "*domus Ecclesiae*" – house-Churches – in Rome, and it was on this site that the Basilica of St Pudentiana was later built. St Peter must also have been a frequent visitor at the house of Aquila and Priscilla, the husband and wife who worked with St Paul and whom he mentions in his Letters. They lived on the Aventine Hill, where the small Church of St Prisca stands today.

The [early Christians](#) must have offered many prayers and petitions at St Peter's tomb, for fortitude in the Faith, a big heart to love Jesus as he did, and courage to keep beginning again from the beginnings. In their trials, they must also have been greatly helped by meditating on the episode of St Peter's denials, his repentance, and the thrice-repeated question, "Simon, do you love me?" with which our Lord entrusted to him the care of his Church. (4)

On this rock I will build my Church

It was natural for this veneration to be shown by enriching St Peter's tomb. As far back as the second century, a simple monument had been built over the original grave. Nor did the Christians of that era forget the words that our Lord had addressed to the apostle Simon, giving him his new name and new mission: "**You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.**" (5) Tradition says that the altar of Constantine's Basilica

of St Peter was built in the fourth century over the site of Peter's tomb, and exactly above that, surrounding and protecting the previous ones, were constructed the altars built successively by St Gregory the Great and Callistus II in the sixth and twelfth centuries respectively. Finally, when Pope Clement VIII had the present Altar of the Confession built in 1594, it was once again designed to cover the preceding ones.

Archeological excavations

For many centuries, pilgrims who came to Rome from all over the world were led by their faith and their reliance on this tradition to venerate the memory of the Prince of the Apostles in his Basilica, as the site of his tomb. Now, thanks to the archeological excavations carried out in the mid-twentieth century by the wish of Pope Pius XII, it is possible to go and pray before the tomb of St Peter itself.

These excavations served to confirm, point by point, the information that had been handed down by tradition. They uncovered Nero's Circus, a necropolis containing both pagan and Christian tombs, in an excellent state of preservation, and, most important of all, the humble monument dedicated to St Peter, which corresponded with the most ancient descriptions of it and which was indeed discovered immediately beneath the successive main altars of the Basilica. It was also found that this tomb was surrounded by many others, all dug closely around it as though to get as near to the central one as possible. An enormously revealing study was made of the *graffiti*, or inscriptions, found on the wall, because they showed clearly that this spot had been where Christians gathered for worship, and they included many acclamations of St Peter.

One of these inscriptions was engraved next to a small *loculus* or opening in the wall. This niche contained the bones of an elderly but robust man, which had at some stage been wrapped in a purple cloth with gold threads. The Greek inscription next to the niche read *PETROS ENI*, - "Peter is here".

At St Peter's Tomb

"Peter is here." On arriving in Rome for the first time, how the Founder of Opus Dei must have longed to go into St Peter's Basilica to pray before the tomb of St Peter! He spent the whole of his first night in Rome praying on the balcony of the apartment where he was staying with other people of Opus Dei, in the Piazza della Città Leonina, with his eyes fixed on the lighted rooms of the Holy Father in the Vatican nearby. The following day was June 24, 1946, which he dedicated entirely to working on the canonical solution for Opus Dei, which was his main reason for coming to Rome. Before embarking, he had placed this intention in our Lady's hands, traveling to the shrines of Pilar, Montserrat, and La Merced, in

Barcelona. "We had to open up a new path in the Church, and the obstacles seemed insuperable," he recalled in 1966. (6)

The founder of Opus Dei spent the whole of June 24 without leaving the apartment. Early in the morning he celebrated Mass on an altar which had been set up provisionally in the vestibule of the apartment, since the oratory was not yet ready. The rest of the day was filled with intense work with Don Alvaro del Portillo, his closest collaborator and afterwards his successor at the head of Opus Dei. St Josemaría decided to put off his visit to St Peter's, and to offer the delay as a sacrifice, one which cost him a lot, since from his early youth he had desired ardently to pray before the tomb of St Peter.

St Josemaría finally went to St Peter's in the morning of June 25. He walked in silence through St Peter's Square and into the Basilica, up to the Altar of the Confession, under which lie the remains of the Prince of the Apostles. There he stopped for a long moment of prayer. Only after this did he take time to look at the splendor of the Basilica. The content of his prayer is not known, but it may be supposed that he renewed the profession of faith by saying the Creed, as he always advised visitors to St Peter's to do, and also reaffirmed his unshakable confidence in and fidelity to the Pope and the Church.

Tour of the Basilica

In the almost thirty years he spent in Rome until his death, St Josemaría often went back to St Peter's to pray. He did not always follow the same route round the Basilica, although he did acquire the custom of stopping at certain fixed points. The first thing he did, as on entering any church, was to go to the Blessed Sacrament Chapel to greet our Lord in the Tabernacle, and make a spiritual communion. In St Peter's, the Blessed Sacrament Chapel is on the right-hand nave, halfway between the main entrance and the Altar of the Confession. The Blessed Sacrament was reserved in a monumental Tabernacle designed by Bernini, with a sculptured angel on each side adoring Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

Since the time of Pope John Paul II the Blessed Sacrament is perpetually exposed. There is a second Tabernacle in the Chapel of St Joseph, dedicated by Pope John XXIII in 1963, at the very end of the left transept. St Josemaría also sometimes went there to pray before the painting of St Joseph, which shows him as a young man, holding the Child Jesus in his arms.

After that, St Josemaría would unfailingly go and greet our Lady: he normally did

this before the icon of the *Madonna del Soccorso*, Our Lady of Succor. This chapel is in the right nave, past the Blessed Sacrament Chapel, and the eleventh-century icon was already in place in the earlier Basilica.

Naturally, St Josemaría invariably went to the Altar of the Confession, at the central point of the main nave and transepts. There he usually said a Creed, savoring the words. Beneath the altar lies the Confession, designed by Maderno, where ninety-nine votive lamps burn constantly, marking the resting-place of St Peter just a few meters beneath. From the balustrade the Niche of the Pallia may be seen, so called because it holds a chest containing the woolen pallia given by the Pope to Archbishops as a sign of unity with the See of Peter. Over the altar rises Bernini's majestic baldacchino: a work of notable grandeur, designed to help the faithful to raise their hearts magnanimously to the Lord.

Another place which St Josemaría made a point of visiting was the tomb of St Pius X, whose mortal remains rest in a casket under the altar in the Chapel of the Presentation, in the left-hand nave. They were finally placed there in 1952, although from 1945 to 1951, the year he was beatified, his body rested in this same Chapel, in the provisional place provided for deceased Popes. St Josemaría evinced great devotion to St Pius X, whom he made one of Opus Dei's intercessors, entrusting him with the relations of the Work and its faithful with the Holy See.

Since September 14, 2005

There is another part of St Peter's that has been visited by many of the faithful, Cooperators and friends of Opus Dei since September 14, 2005. In the left-hand nave, past the monument to St Pius X, is the entrance to the great Sacristy of St Peter's. The windows of the passage leading to the sacristy look out on a statue of St Josemaría, placed in a large niche on the outer wall of the Basilica. Pausing to contemplate his welcoming gesture is the perfect moment to pray to him to increase all the Christian faithful's love for the Church and the Pope.

Notes

1. Mark 16:15-16
2. John 21:17-19
3. Tacitus, *Annales XV*
4. Cf. John 21:15-17
5. Matthew 16:18
6. St Josemaría, *General Archive of the Opus Dei Prelature (AGP) P18*, p. 313