



# THE PILGRIMAGE OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Basilica of San Pietro  
in Vaticano





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

## Basilica of San Pietro in Vaticano

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Section for Fundamental Questions  
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## 4 themed routes to follow

The Jubilee is a great event for all people 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 San Pietro in Vaticano

## **Reasons for a Jubilee pilgrimage**

Some people today criticize the Church, saying that modern Christians are nothing like Jesus. But this is a criticism that could also have been made right back at the Church's origins: after all it was Peter and the apostles who betrayed the master. If it had been left to them the Church would never have been born.

The very name 'Peter' helps us see that this criticism is not valid. Neither the Aramaic name *Cephas*, nor the Greek counterpart *Petros*, were used as personal names in Jesus' time. It was Jesus who gave Simon, his apostle, the name Cephas/Peter, a sign that he intended the birth of a "construction", namely his Church: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church". Even the number of 'twelve' apostles indicates the clear intention of Christ. Before the twelve sons of Jacob, there had been the patriarchs Abraham and Isaac, but only with those twelve sons was the "people" of Israel born. Jesus, calling the Twelve, wanted to indicate that the birth of the "people of God" was taking place.

What we know is that Peter, after a long journey along a route we can't be sure of, arrived in Rome. And in the city he was martyred. There is no doubt about this, all the ancient sources state his death was in Rome, and no other ancient church boasts of possessing his relics.

Just as in Nazareth or Jerusalem they say "*Hic*", "Here" ... "Here the Annunciation took place, here the death and resurrection", the same is said in Rome: "Here Peter was martyred".

This event changed Rome's destiny forever. If Peter had been killed in another city *that* place would have become the seat of the bishop who succeeded the first of the apostles and Rome would have been a different city.

Rome, however, is the see of Peter's successor and the presence of the Pope is the most obvious sign that he was killed right here.

We might say that the role of Rome in the life of the Church is a divine choice, because not only is there a *history* of salvation, but there is also a *geography* of salvation which has very specific stages and locations. It would be wrong to suggest that the special role of Rome in the history of the Church is simply explained by the fact that it was the capital of the empire. God's plan is "mysterious" in this case. Just as it is not possible to explain exactly why a particular woman should be a certain man's wife or whether a certain boy should become a priest ... every choice of God has an element of "mystery" which is known only to God, but whose effects we can contemplate, because a particular person or place has been chosen for us.

Rome certainly owes its identity to its

classical past but it is also a very modern city which shows how powers and ideologies are transitory. The splendor of Rome fell into decadence and only crumbling stones remain of that power. Thus, Rome stands as a reminder to the world that every historical power is destined to disappear over the centuries and millennia. But Rome also owes its identity to the presence of Peter and Paul who, in many ways, renewed the original foundation of the city by Romulus and Remus. Christian memory was added to classical culture and the city has been, since then, the seat of Peter's successor.

This is why we come to Rome and to Peter's tomb to confess our faith. To confirm that our faith is the faith of the Church. The profession of the Creed has always resonated at his tomb, confessing that Jesus is the face of God and that therefore God is love - the good news of Christianity.

Peter and Rome say to every man, who in every time and place has tried to "see" the face of God, that whoever knows the love of Christ knows the love of God. Whoever sees Christ sees God.

Before the Incarnation it seemed that it was possible to have only a vague idea about God. Great religious men had always said that God was too great, too mysterious for men to know. Some believed that God sent down to man his commandments written on tablets of stone, but they had no notion that God could also call us friends and make himself known to us as only a friend can.

Peter confessed, however, in Caesarea Philippi that Jesus was the Christ - the one whom God had promised, and that Jesus was the Son of God - the one in whose face it was possible to finally see who God really was. Peter confessed that same faith in Rome by means of his martyrdom.

We come on a pilgrimage to Peter's tomb because we recognize that only through his preaching and that of the apostolic Church has the cry, "God is love" resounded throughout the world.

For this reason - and very appropriately - the iconography used to represent Peter's role in history, uses the symbol of the keys, basing itself on the words of the Lord: "To you I will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven: everything you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:19).

Only two keys are portrayed, one to "open" and the other to "close". To open to the truth as well as to close to those idols who want to present themselves as the true God.

Here is the role of the Petrine magistratum: to confirm in faith those who confess that God is love and that he has the authority to grant resurrection and, on the other hand, to disavow those who claim that God is violence or impotence.

But the keys also remind us that the power to forgive has also been given to men on earth and that the forgiveness dispensed by the Church is also valid in heaven.

The keys entrusted to Peter thus remind



us that the Apostle must safeguard the memory of the true face of God as revealed to us by Christ, so that no one might distort it. But, since that face is one of love and mercy, Peter is also entrusted with the mission of demonstrating, through forgiveness, that God is love. Peter and his successors are to absolve people's sins, having been entrusted with the keys of readmission to full communion with God and his Church.

In short, the Petrine keys open wide both the door of truth and the door of forgiveness and, together, they denounce both the false images of God and the sins that offend man. God is love and truth - *agape* and *logos* (the two terms used by the evangelist John to announce Christ to us). If love were eliminated, faith would become a mere cold profession of the existence of

a God. And if truth were eliminated, love would not be the heart of the universe, but only a romantic illusion destined to be eternally disappointed in life.

Peter is, however, reminds us that God has revealed to us the key to life, the truth of his love.

### **Visiting the basilica**

To reach the entrance to the basilica we must first pass through the colonnade which is the work of Bernini (**fig.1**). The form of the colonnade is obtained through building in two concentric circles. The shape expresses the Church's embrace of all those who gather in St. Peter's Square and, this embrace is symbolically extended to the whole world.

Some pencil sketches, perhaps by a di-



fig.1

sciple of Bernini, draw the colonnade as if it were made up of two arms and the basilica as if it were the head, demonstrating the symbolism the great Baroque architect had in mind when he designed it. This meaning is recognized by modern scholars such as Paolo Portoghesi, who

pontiff, and every time the faithful gather there they unite in prayer with their bishop or to listen to his word. Without that space it would be impossible for many pilgrims to see the Pope looking down from the window to bless them. In recent years, indeed, Pope Francis has had facilities such as toi-



fig.2 ©Fabbrica di San Pietro In Vaticano

writes of “the direct, happy, allegorical reference to the welcoming gesture of the arms, which gives this image a communicative opening, constituting the greatest testimony to Bernini’s qualities as an architect, revealing a profound adherence of faith to the ideals represented”.

**(fig.2)** The spaces between the columns are intended to give the idea of a closed off but at the same time open area. The square has its own precise function and for this reason the colonnade was never considered to be ‘too much’, but rather a gift to the city of Rome. The people of God gather in it at the election of the new

lets and showers built under the colonnade to welcome the homeless.

Looking up from St Peter’s Square to the right of the basilica, the outline of the Sistine Chapel with its famous smoke chimney is clearly visible (**fig.3**). When a new pope is elected, white smoke is rele-



fig.3

ased from that chimney and people know that in a short time the new pontiff will appear from the balcony above the central door of the basilica.

In the center of the piazza stands the ancient obelisk from the former Nero's Circus (fig.4). It was in that very circus that Peter and the other early martyrs of the Roman Church bore witness to the Gospel with their lives. It is easy to imagine their last moments of life, in front of that monument, as they died praying for their persecutors.

On the right side of the square, just before the connection point between the colonnade and the basilica, a small plaque on the ground commemorates the place where John Paul II was shot in an assassination attempt from which he was spared, he said, through the prayers of Our Lady. It was Renaissance men who decided to reconstruct Constantine's basilica, but the façade of today's basilica bears, like the colonnade before it, a very baroque look, because the works lasted for a very long time. The ancient Constantinian façade was only demolished in 1605 to allow Maderno to complete the new basilica with the extension of the naves. Michelangelo's original project had envisaged a church in the shape of a Greek cross, with a clearly visible dome. He, though in a different way from the later baroque architects, wanted to express the same meaning as they did, namely that of a place open to the world, in every direction. The beautiful dome by Michelangelo is still visible and even to those



fig.4



fig.5



outside the basilica it indicates the precise location of Peter's tomb, while inside the large arches around the altar follow the design of Bramante.

Five doors open from the portico. The one on the right is the Holy Door (fig.5). To the left is a reproduction of the Bull with which Boniface VIII announced the first Jubilee in 1300.

The central door is the only one that survives from the ancient basilica: it was built by Filarete between 1439 and 1445. In addition to Christ and the Virgin, and Saint Paul and Saint Peter we can see represented the Armenian patriarch, who arrived in Italy for the Council of Ferrara-Florence, a sign of the perennial desire for unity in the Church, since the papacy does not exclude the college of bishops, but rather depends upon it, just as the bishops depend upon the papacy. A further plaque commemorates the lifting of the excommunications between Rome and Constantinople.

On the far left is the Door of Judgment, also known as the "Door of Death"(fig.6), a 1964 work by Giacomo Manzù. On it, the different ways in which death strikes animals and human beings are represented, but everything is given context by the two large panels showing the death of Christ, taken down from the cross, and that of Mary who, as soon as she dies, is assumed into heaven, so as not to know the corruption of the tomb. A vine branch and sheaths of wheat show the earthly realities which, when offered and consecrated,



fig.6

become the food and drink of eternal life.

In front of the central entrance, there is a monumental mosaic known as the *Navi-*



fig.7

*cella* (fig.7), which represents the Church at the mercy of a storm. It is a 17th-century remake of Giotto's original work whi-

ch had been on the internal facade of the large *quadriportico* in front of the Constantinian basilica which was demolished in 1605. It is certain that Giotto was in Rome for the Jubilee of 1300, even though, according to some scholars, the original mosaic was commissioned from him after the departure of the Popes for Avi-

(or little window) which allowed one to look down at Peter's tomb, used to stop in prayer, the sources say, right in front of the Giotto mosaic, to pray for the Pope's return from Avignon to Rome.

As soon as you enter the basilica, on the right, you will find the chapel which houses Michelangelo's *Pietà*, the first of three he sculpted. **(fig.8)** He sculpted it when he was aged just 23, in 1498. The body of the naked Christ powerfully expresses the physicality of his Incarnation and his death. The iconography of Mary is unusual, for she seems younger than her Son. Mary is, as Dante said, the "Virgin Mother, daughter of her Son".

**(fig. 6)** Like the square, the size of the basilica is extremely functional and useful to the life of the Church. It is not about grandeur as an end in itself ... this can be understood well by imagining the unfolding of the Second Vatican Council in the central nave of St. Peter's. For that event benches were built on both sides of the central nave and it is lovely to imagine the 3000 or so bishops who sat there from 1962 to 1965 to listen to the breath of the Spirit. Some Vatican II benches are still used in the nearby church of *Santi Michele e Magno*, to which they were moved after the Council closed

The First Vatican Council is also so-called because it took place in the basilica, but with a much smaller number of participants. We often visit the great basilicas when they are empty, or crowded only with tourists, and we forget that in the



fig.8 ©Fabbrica di San Pietro In Vaticano

gnon. Given that historical context, one can see the appropriateness of the image which is intended to evoke the stormy path of the Church and at the same time the providential guidance of Christ. Saint Catherine of Siena, proclaimed co-patron of Europe by John Paul II, after going every morning to pray at the "*fenestrella*"

great liturgies for solemn feasts, or for events such as priestly ordinations, they are still too small to house the very many people who would like to participate.

The four Vatican II Constitutions written by the Council Fathers allow us to reread the faith of the Church with a renewed vision that goes to the heart of the person of Christ.

In *Dei Verbum*, which deals with divine revelation, the Council Fathers wanted to underline the fact that God reveals himself in person and that Jesus is the Word of God, because Christianity is not a religion of the Book. The Word of God “comes before and moves beyond Scripture” as Pope Francis has said.

*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, which addresses the theme of the liturgy, similarly states that in the liturgy it is Christ himself who continues to be present, it is He who gives himself, and the Church celebrates its liturgy as his living body.

*Lumen Gentium*, deals with the living Church and shows how it is the sign and sacrament of union with God, his chosen people. The popular dimension of the Church is highlighted in a special way by Pope Francis, who insists that it is not made up only of a narrow intellectual circle, but rather of ordinary people – the “middle class of holiness”, as he called it. *Gaudium et spes* focuses on the mission of the Church in the world and starts from the absolutely new perspective on the human person offered by revelation: namely that every person, is created in the image

and likeness of God and is therefore endowed with an indelible dignity. *Gaudium et spes* recalls the role of lay people who are called to bear witness to Christ in their everyday lives and to share the path of history with all men, without remaining shut off from the rest of society.

In the central nave of the basilica, on the



fig.9

right, is the bronze statue of Saint Peter (fig.9), whose venerable age is clear to all who see it, with the well-known detail of the foot worn away by the devotion of the faithful. Yet an energy seems to emerge from the hardness of that bronze: the right arm is raised solemnly, while the other arm grips the keys with gre-





fig.10



fig.11 ©Fabbrica di San Pietro In Vaticano

at firmness. The history of this statue is the source of some controversy. There are two hypotheses that have always divided scholars: the first is that it is of ancient origin (4th-6th century), the second maintains that is a Gothic work, dating back to around the 13th century: nowadays most scholars are more convinced of its medieval origin though it would clearly have been inspired by the classical world.

The dome (fig.10) marks the heart of the basilica, with the altar known as the Confession, which rises right over Peter's tomb. "Confession" means testimony, profession of faith. It is the altar that stands on Peter's profession of faith, made in Caesarea Philippi with the words "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" and then repeated in Rome through Peter's martyrdom.

In 1624, Urban VIII commissioned Bernini to erect a large canopy over this altar (fig.11), to underline the centrality of the Eucharistic celebration following the insights of the Council of Trent: it was the first commission entrusted to the artist for St. Peter's, which was then followed by the colonnade and finally the Chair. The final result gives such an impression of lightness that it is easy to forget the massive quantity of bronze used in the work. It is absurd that, when faced with



such a marvel, some scholars limit themselves to recalling the saying written to mock the Barberini by comparing them to barbarians. [*Quid non fecerunt barbari fecerunt Barberini - The Barberini did what the barbarians did not do*]

Calvesi, however, writes about it as a true art historian: "Instead of the traditional forms of ciborium and tabernacle, which were fixed architectural structures, Bernini uses the idea of a canopy conceived as if it were made of wood or fabric, that is, as a transportable, mobile element. This large device is therefore not 'built', but 'placed over' the tomb of the Apostle. It has the appearance of having been carried by hand and left there at the end of an imaginary procession." The canopy also bears the symbols of the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. On the four marble bases you can see phases of childbirth - a baroque *divertissement*: the seven faces of a woman express the progression of labor until the last face, that of a smiling newborn baby.

The vigorous twisting style of the four columns recalls not only the ancient columns erected in that shape by Gregory the Great, but also vine shoots, a Eucharistic symbol. In the apse is the great *Cathedra* or Chair

of Saint Peter (**fig.12**), a grandiose "devotional element" by Bernini, built between 1656 and 1666, about 30 years after the altar canopy. The work is in fact a gigantic reliquary, which once contained within it an ancient throne, on which, tradition has it, the Prince of the Apostles sat - today



fig.12

that relic is in the Museum of the Basilica. The reliquary is supported by four monumental statues depicting two doctors of the Latin Church - Saint Augustine and Saint Ambrose - and two of the Gre-

ek Church - Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Athanasius - symbolizing the unity of faith and its rooting in Tradition.



fig.13

The Chair and the papal ministry are illuminated by the Holy Spirit represented, in the form of a dove, at the center of the alabaster window above.



fig.14

This grandiose reliquary must also be appreciated from the perspective of the canopy or *baldacchino*. It is no coincidence

that an autograph study by Bernini shows the Chair seen through the columns of the canopy, thus revealing how the artist considered the two monuments as a single work. The remains of the canonized popes are nowadays moved up to the basilica floor and thus the altars with the bodies of Saint John XXIII (fig.13), Saint Paul VI

(fig.14) and Saint John Paul II (fig.15) are found here.

Going down to the Vatican Grottoes you reach the tombs of the other Popes who

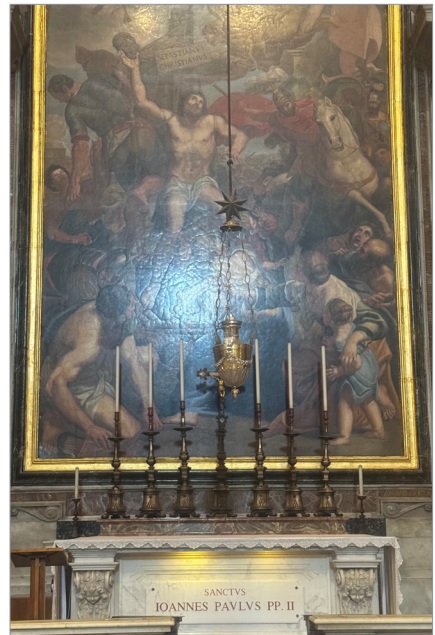


fig.15

are not housed in the basilica above, but more importantly from here you can reach the place closest to the tomb of the Apostle Peter. It is possible to pray right in front of the place of his burial which is indicated by the *Nicchia dei Palli*, a modern version of the “trophy of Gaius”, which was the first solemnization of the place of Peter’s burial. Finally, it is possible to visit the Vatican Necropolis, under the basilica, to reach Peter’s tomb. However, you must book this visit in advance at the *Scavi Office*, which can be accessed from the *Arco delle Campane*.

After crossing the foundations of the Constantinian basilica, which are still visible, you walk along the ancient pre-Constantinian path, flanked on the right and left by pagan I mausoleums, with sarcophagi and remains of mosaics and frescoes still visible. Some mausoleums reveal a Christian presence, such as that of *Valerius Hemna*, in which a tombstone appears with the monogram of Christ, and the mausoleum known as “Christ the Sun”, in whose vault Christ is represented being drawn by white horses, like a sun rising to enlighten humanity.

At the end of the path, you ascend the small slope that led to “*campo P*”, which was once outdoors, where you can still glimpse one of the two columns of the “Trophy of Gaius”.

### ***The place of Peter’s martyrdom***

A detailed history of the persecution that led Peter to martyrdom exists, even thou-

gh his name does not appear in it, because it was not known to the historian who wrote it. Tacitus describes the relationship between pagans and Christians in the time of Emperor Nero, and the first great persecution against Christians unleashed by him. The exact place of martyrdom, indicated by Tacitus, is Nero’s Circus which stood next to the Vatican hill.

In the year 64 AD a large fire broke out in Rome, starting in shops located in the Circus Maximus area. The fire spread throughout the city and wreaked havoc for nine days. When it subsided, Rome had been devastated and there was great desperation among the survivors. Nero, who was in Anzio at the time, returned to the city to organize relief efforts. The idea of a new Rome took shape in his mind. This idea reached the people, and the rumor began to spread that the fire had been ordered by Nero himself to allow him to undertake his megalomaniacal reconstruction plan. The *Domus Aurea*, Nero’s imperial residence on *Colle Oppio*, was, in fact, built by requisitioning land on which the fire had broken out. Later the Flavians returned the area to the Roman people, and where Nero had created an artificial lake for his gardens they built the Colosseum, constructed with lootings from the Temple of Jerusalem. Nero, to calm the bad atmosphere in the city, found a scapegoat to blame: the Christians.

This is the story as told by Tacitus in the *Annals*: “*Nero invented a people to blame and subjected to very refined punishments*

*those who the people called Christians [...] Their name came from Christ, who under the reign of Tiberius had been led to execution by order of the procurator Pontius Pilate [...] A great multitude were arrested [...] Those on their way to die were also exposed to mockery: covered in animal skins, they died torn to pieces by dogs, or were crucified, or burned alive at random, made into torches that were used to illuminate the darkness when the sun had set. Nero offered his gardens to enjoy this spectacle, while he announced the games in the circus and as a charioteer he mingled with the people, or stood on the chariot. Therefore, although those tortures were against guilty people who deserved such original torments, a sense of pity was still generated towards them, because they were sacrificed not for the common good, but for the cruelty of a prince".*

The theater of the bloody spectacle was the Circus of Gaius and Nero in the Vatican area. The Circus was located where today the *Arco delle Campane*, and the *Piazza di Santa Marta* and the left naves of St. Peter's Basilica stand. Halfway along the "*spina*", that is, the wall that divided the two parts of the track, stood the obelisk brought by Caligula from Egypt, the only remnant of the ancient circus that can still be seen. However, the obelisk is no longer in its original position, but was moved forward, in front of the basilica, in 1586, even before Bernini's colonnade was built. The other remains of Nero's construction are buried under the current buildings.

A tradition has it that Peter was crucified upside down at his own request, in order to demonstrate, even at the point of death, his own unworthiness before the Lord. Alongside the Circus ran *Via Cornelia*, which started at *Castel Sant'Angelo* and then climbed up the Vatican hill. Along this street, on the right side, there was an open-air burial ground. Among the lined tombs someone buried Peter's body in a humble grave.

In the Roman liturgical calendar the feast of the Roman Protomartyrs is celebrated on 30 June, one day after the solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, which is marked on 29 June. The Church thus unites the Roman martyrs, killed together by Nero, to the martyrdom of Peter and Paul. It was the Church of Rome gathered around Peter which testified with her people's lives to the hope they had placed in the Lord.

#### *Peter's tomb*

The story of the discovery of Peter's tomb began in 1939, when, following the election of Pius XII, work was undertaken in the Vatican Grottoes to create space for the tomb of the new Pope's predecessor Pius XI. What happened is that a veritable necropolis was brought to light, one that was in use until the 4th century AD, when Emperor Constantine leveled the burial ground to build the first St. Peter's Basilica. The most important area of this necropolis is a small clearing called "*campo P*".

Right below the main altar of the current basilica, on one side of this clearing, the-



re is a humble tomb on the ground ... the tomb of Peter (fig.16).

All subsequent interventions have left this humble tomb unharmed, or rather protected. From the excavations it appears that, around the year 160, when more and more burial mausoleums were being created there, the area of Peter's tomb was fenced off with a wall, which was plastered red (which is why archaeologists later called it the 'red wall'). This wall, however, was built in such a way as to respect the burial site, visible throu-

of Caesarea, a theologian and historian, and eulogist of the Emperor Constantine. Eusebius cites a writing by "a man of the Church named Gaius", who lived in Rome at the time of bishop Zephyrinus [i.e. between 199 and 217AD], who found himself in dispute with Proclus, head of the Montanist community of Rome. Writing to prove the authenticity of the apostolic traditions of the Christians of Rome, he states: "I can show you the trophies of the apostles. If you go to the Vatican or to the Via Ostiense, you will find the trophies of



fig.16 ©Fabbrica di San Pietro In Vaticano

gh a small niche. At the exact spot of the tomb, a small aedicule was created, with two columns, to make it more recognizable.

The oldest literary reference to the burial of Saint Peter in the Vatican is found in the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius

the founders of the Church."

The aedicule found by archaeologists was later called the "trophy of Gaius" based on the testimony of Eusebius. A trophy (*tropaion*) is something which recalls a victory, but the ultimate victory (the victory over death obtained through martyrdom)

indicates that the tombs of the apostles are also - and above all - monuments to that victory. Gaius' testimony, confirmed by excavations, shows that, around the year 200, the Christians of Rome knew the location of the tomb well: too little time had passed since the martyrdom for the memory to have been lost.

Around 250 a new change occurred: the building of a wall, known as the "G wall", immediately to the right of the aedicule. Although the reason for this construction is not clear, it is certain that it immediately became linked to the cult of devotion to Peter. In fact the wall was soon covered by a forest of graffiti, in which the name of Peter continually appears, a sign of veneration and a reminder of the prayers of intercession addressed to him. Among the graffiti, which were buried at the time of the construction of the first basilica and are therefore older than that first building, there is also the Constantinian monogram, an abbreviation of the name of Christ and, above all, a famous inscription which has been interpreted as "Peter is here".

When more peaceful times arrived for the Church, Constantine, after the victorious battle with Maxentius, promulgated, together with Licinius, the so-called *Edict of Milan*, with which freedom of worship was granted to Christians, and he undertook a series of works intended to celebrate the Christian faith. Perhaps encouraged by his mother St Helen, and the Pope of the time, Sylvester, Constantine decided to "monu-

mentalize" the aedicule even more and to erect a basilica on top of it.

The Constantinian 'memorial' enclosed the 2nd century aedicule and "wall G" between slabs of precious marble while leaving one side open, so that the niche with the two columns remained visible.

Above this 'memorial', Constantine undertook the construction of a basilica: this is an extremely important detail because it offers further confirmation of the now widely-accepted tradition that Peter's tomb was located there. An important argument in favor of this being Peter's burial place is the fact that the construction of the basilica was carried out overcoming huge obstacles of various kinds, so that the tomb could be at the heart of the building.

First of all, there was the problem of the location: the Vatican hill had such a steep slope that, to create the esplanade on which to build the basilica, they had first of all to carry out a huge excavation on one side, and an equally huge burial operation on the other. Add to this the fact that the area to be flattened included the necropolis, still in use at the time of Constantine, and that meant making this area inaccessible while it was still frequented by the relatives of those buried there - an act bordering on sacrilege.

The basilica plan already existed in ancient Roman times and was originally conceived as a meeting place. It was usually rectangular in shape, with the entrance on one of the long sides and, the-

refore, with multiple apses. Constantine's architects integrated this idea but with a new orientation: the faithful, upon entering, walked, symbolically, towards the apse area, which represented the light of Christ coming towards them.

The Vatican Basilica constitutes another innovative step, both as a place of worship but also as a monument to the martyrdom of Peter. The apse, under whose arch the commemorative monument was located, needed a transit area that would facilitate the flow of pilgrims coming to venerate the relics. Thus was born the transept, which has since become a characteristic element of church architecture.

A further change occurred with Pope Gregory the Great (590-604), who had an altar built on the 'Memorial', so that the Eucharist could be celebrated right on Peter's tomb. In the Middle Ages, Calixtus II (1119-1124) superimposed a new altar around the original altar of Gregory

the Great. Finally in 1594, during the lengthy works which finally saw the disappearance of the Constantinian basilica and the construction of the current one, Clement VIII built the altar we see today, exactly on the point where the previous altars had been built. This succession of construction works finds its culmination in the bronze canopy, designed by Bernini in 1626, which recalls in the motif of the twisted columns, as already mentioned, which had decorated the monument at the time of Saint Gregory the Great.

In short, an impressive succession of buildings built one above the other speaks of a veneration which remains unchanged over the centuries: Peter was buried right there. Myth have no evidence relating to place or time. The Christian faith, on the other hand, is based on historical facts: *hic*, 'here'. Here in Rome Peter was martyred and buried.