



# THE PILGRIMAGE OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Papal Basilica of San Giovanni  
in Laterano





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



MINISTERO  
DEL TURISMO  
REPUBBLICA ITALIANA

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Jubilee journeys

## Papal Basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano

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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 San Giovanni in Laterano

## 1. Reasons for a Jubilee pilgrimage

The Basilica of St John Lateran (*San Giovanni in Laterano*) is said to be '*omnium urbis et orbis ecclesiarum mater et caput*' (mother and head of all the churches in the city and the world). Thus states the inscription on both sides of the central entrance.

In reality it is the Apostolic Church which is our true "mother", since everyone receives faith and grace from the one Church founded on the twelve apostles of the Lord. Just as life is handed down through the generations not only from our own parents, but from forebears who have succeeded one another over the centuries from the first human couple onwards, so we receive faith from those who administered baptism to us and who, in turn, received it from the first to baptize in the name of the Lord, namely the apostles. We are all children of Holy Mother Church.

The Church of Rome, of which St John Lateran is the cathedral, can, however, be called the 'mother' of all, because anyone who is in communion with Rome is certain of having received the faith from Mother Church, due to the

special role of the Bishop of Rome to represent and guarantee the unity of the faith.

Pope Francis has said several times: "Can a person baptize themselves? No. No-one can baptize themselves! No-body. We can ask for it, desire it, but we always need someone to confer this Sacrament on us in the name of the Lord." Our gratitude to the Church is the gratitude of a child to his or her mother: faith is the acceptance of a gift that precedes us.

(fig.1) The Baptistery was built at the same time as the Cathedral of St John (the cathedral dedicated to the Savior soon added the dedication to St John the Baptist because of the baptistery, and subsequently, also added the title of John the Evangelist too). Originally



fig.1

the Christians of Rome were baptized in running water in the River Tiber, but then baptisteries started to be built and, among them, the first and most important was that of the Lateran, an expression of the motherhood of the Church. Even today catechumens in Rome go to the cathedral for the rite of election before Baptism.

The Basilica houses the Pope's chair, (or 'cathedra') which is a sign of his teaching. Teaching is one of the most beautiful forms of charity. "Counseling the doubtful," "teaching the ignorant," "correcting sinners" ... all these are listed as spiritual works of mercy. The Bishop of Rome - and with him the Church - received from Christ the task of preaching and teaching, because mankind needs a Word that lights up the individual's life and needs God who speaks to the heart. This need is felt especially today, in a time of confusion similar to Christ's own: "Jesus saw a large crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things" (Mk 6:34).

Pope Benedict XVI, in his first visit to St John Lateran as Pope, said: "The teaching office [of the bishop of Rome] frightens many inside and outside the Church. They wonder if it does not threaten freedom of conscience, if it is not opposed to freedom of thought. But this is not so. The power given by Christ to Peter and his successors is, in an ab-

solute sense, a mandate to serve. The power to teach, in the Church, involves a commitment to the service of obedience to the faith. The Pope is not an absolute sovereign, whose thoughts and will are law. On the contrary: the Pope's ministry is a guarantee of obedience towards Christ and towards his Word. He must not proclaim his own ideas, but rather constantly bind himself and the Church to obedience to the Word of God, in the face of all attempts at adaptation and watering down, as also in the face of all opportunism".

## ***2. Visiting the Basilica***

Before Constantine came to power, Christians had already started building churches. There is written evidence of this, but there is also a surviving building dating back to before the year 256 in Dura Europos, which is in modern-day Syria, which has a baptistery and frescoes. The catacombs of St Callistus were certainly being used by the Roman Christian community by the year 200 AD. The sarcophagi and frescoes present in the catacombs show how Christianity, although persecuted, was so alive and active that it needed places to gather and a means of expression. With the Edict of Milan in 313 Constantine granted freedom of worship, but subsequently he also encouraged Christian construction work. In Rome, in particular, he subsidized the construction of

the Basilica of the Savior – later called *San Giovanni in Laterano* – as well as several other basilicas. He did the same in Jerusalem, where St Helena, who can almost be considered the first archaeologist, had the places of Jesus' crucifixion, burial and resurrection excavated and brought to light, recognizing the spot because it was under the Temple that Hadrian had built precisely to prevent the site's veneration, as Eusebius of Caesarea recalls.

Constantine donated the land of Maxentius' private barracks for the construction of the Basilica of the Savior, later St John's. The phrase 'in Laterano' continued to be used because it had previously belonged to the Laterani family.

St John Lateran's is the first Christian Basilica built explicitly to gather the entire city community around its bishop. The Creed that was proclaimed in 325 in Nicaea, today's İznik, near the ancient Nicomedia, then capital of the Eastern Empire (Constantine only founded the new capital – Constantinople – in 330) echoed in this basilica. The Popes resided in the Lateran until the Avignon period. St John Lateran's experienced something of a turning point in recent times when Pope John XXIII made the Lateran Palace the

heart of the life of the Diocese of Rome, and when Pope Paul VI reorganized the Vicariate of Rome insisting on the role of the Pope as Bishop of Rome. In a 1975 speech, held in the basilica, Pope Paul recalled the state of desolation of the buildings, prior to John XXIII's changes: "I remember that the first time I came to Rome (I was eight and a half years old) it was with my family and we came on an excursion to *San Giovanni in Laterano*; I still remember very well the sense of desolation that surprised me in that huge house ... gloomy, closed up, abandoned all around... and they told me: this is the *mater et caput* [...] I then remember all the times that, when I came to Rome, as a young student, as soon as Holy Mass was over, I had the opportunity to pass in front of this building, which



fig.2

was beautiful but crumbling: you could see it from the windows and closed doors, and from the impossibility of getting inside. Ever since then, children and young people have dreamed: from now on we must give life back to the Roman Church.” Subsequent Popes have carried forward his insights.

**(fig.2)** The Holy Door is the last one on the right in the portico and is the first to have been opened in the history of the Jubilees, during the Holy Year of 1423. It was Pope Martin V – who is buried in front of the high altar – who highlighted the act of passing through the Door which has since become the sign of the Jubilee pilgrimage... a sign of passing through the true door, which is Christ, to welcome the gift of his grace. It was at Christmas in the year 1499, that Pope Alexander VI instituted the practice of opening the Holy Door in St. Peter’s.

The layout of the basilica is the same as it was under Pope Innocent X (1644–1655) for the Jubilee of 1650. The Pope wanted Francesco Borromini to preserve, in the baroque re-ordering, the Constantinian walls – so that everything was seen to be in continuity with history.

**(fig.3)** The central nave seems like the interior of the heavenly Jerusalem, described in the Book of the Apocalypse as having twelve doors characterized by the twelve apostles. In fact, in the niches twelve doors are depicted, and in front of each of them there is a statue of one of the apostles. Whoever par-

ticipates in a liturgy in the basilica must feel they are among the saved, within the Jerusalem that has come down from heaven. The doves above the tabernacles and in the entrance vault, in addition to commemorating Pope Pamphilj, also represent the Holy Spirit.



fig.3

Borromini preserved the medieval floor, the work of the Cosmati masters. The ovals where he had left the wall exposed, as a reminder of the ancient church, were covered in the 18th century by paintings representing the prophets, while the stucco bas-reliefs, which Borromini’s wanted to be just a temporary feature, illustrate biblical stories of the history of salvation, characteristic of the Christian faith and expressed in the liturgy and catechesis. Each episode of the Old Testament is seen as prefiguring the New Testament. For example, in the second set of stuccos (starting from the altar), Noah’s ark is a prefiguration of Baptism.

Behind the third pillar of the right nave, a fragment of a medieval fresco, known

as the Loggia of Blessings (**fig.4**), has been located, depicting Pope Boniface VIII taking possession of the Lateran

and calling the Jubilee. Its attribution to Cavallini or Giotto is disputed.

The transept was totally renovated during the pontificate of Clement VII in time for the Jubilee of 1600, and it was he who gave it its mannerist appearance. Giacomo della Porta directed the architectural renovation, while the Cavalier d'Arpino took care of the decoration with his collaborators, depicting stories of Constantine.

Inside, in the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, on the left of the transept, there is a piece of wood which tradition has it was part of the table used by Jesus at the last supper.

In the center of the transept stands the Gothic style papal altar (**fig.5**). Inside it is concealed the wooden altar on which, tradition says, Saint Peter himself celebrated Mass. Pope Urban V commissioned the new ciborium from Giovanni di Stefano in 1368, where precious reliquaries containing the heads of Saint Peter and Saint Paul are kept. The twelve paintings surrounding the tabernacle, 15th-century works by Antoniazio Romano and his school, depict the Crucifixion, Jesus the Good Shepherd, the Virgin and Child



fig.4



fig.5

and the Coronation of the Virgin Mary, surrounded by various male and female saints. Against the back wall, behind the altar, Nicholas IV placed a new papal throne where the iconography of Christ and the Church can be recognized as defeating and trampling Evil, represented by four demonic figures at the Lord's feet – the asp, the viper, the lion and the dragon, in reference to Psalm 91.13: "You will trample down lions and vipers, you will crush young

13h-century mosaic was carried out, keeping its iconography but irreparably corrupting its stylistic impact. The 13<sup>th</sup> century mosaic had been commissioned by Pope Nicholas IV (1288-1292), the first Franciscan friar to be elected pope, and was the work of Jacopo Torriti who had, in turn, modified the original 5th century mosaic.

(fig.6) The apse mosaic represents the face of Christ at the top - which tradition says miraculously appeared to St. John - and



fig.6

lions and dragons". This base is still the original medieval one, while the rest of the chair is of more recent construction. The apse is now set back from where it was in the ancient structure. In 1884, Leo XIII wanted to expand the sanctuary area. In accordance with the questionable artistic criteria of the time, a reworking of the

below him the dove of the Spirit. It is likely that, originally, the hand of the Father was represented above the face of Christ thus completing the Trinity. All the mercy of the Trinity is revealed in the gemmed cross below. It seems to be surrounded by light that turns into water. At the center of the cross there is an image of the Baptism of Jesus.

The Incarnation reveals that Jesus is the beloved Son of God, but it also reminds us that in Baptism we are united with Him to become God's children too.

(fig.7) At the base of the cross there is a heavenly mountain from which water flows and is divided into four rivers, a reminder of the fruitfulness promised in Genesis and realized in the heavenly

Jerusalem (Gen 2.10-14 and Rev 22.1).

Two deer and an infinite number of creatures drink from the water and draw life from the Trinity revealed in the cross. In short, here we can see an image of the whole Church, the sacrament of humanity, drinking from the source of life. The Church is represented by the jeweled walls of the heavenly Jerusalem pro-



fig.7

tected by the archangel Michael who is depicted under the cross. The apostles Peter and Paul are on its golden towers, while in the center you can see the Arabian phoenix, a medieval symbol of immortality. To the right of the cross the Virgin intercedes for the kneeling Pope Nicholas IV, then can be seen Saint Francis, smaller in size, accompanied by Saints Peter and Paul; on the left is John the Baptist, followed by Saint Anthony, also small, and by Saints John and Andrew. The base shows us the other nine Apostles and two small figures in Franciscan habits - Jacopo Torriti, the artist of the mosaic, and Jacopo da Camerino who helped him.

### ***Saint Francis and the medieval Lateran***

Francis of Assisi came to Rome several times to meet the Pope. In those days the Pontiff resided at the Lateran. St. Peter's became a residential palace only after the Papacy's return from Avignon. In fact, in the Franciscan stories and in the frescoes that are based on them, the Pope dreams of Francis holding up the Basilica of St John Lateran and not that of St Peter.

Francis was a total innovator in Christian spirituality. As he wrote in his Testament: "After the Lord gave me friars, no one showed me what I should do: but the Most High himself revealed to me that I had to live according to the form of the holy Gospel. And I simply had this written down in a few words, and the

Pope confirmed it for me." On the other hand, he was so rooted in tradition that he was always faithful to the Pope and the Church. Later in his Testament we read: "The Lord gave me and still gives me so much faith in the priests who live according to the form of the holy Roman Church, because of their order, that if they were to persecute me, I would want to have recourse to them. And even if I had as much wisdom as Solomon, and I met poor priests of this world, in the parishes where they live, I would not want to preach against their will. And these and all the others I want to fear, love and honor as my lords, and I do not want to consider sin in them, since in them I see the Son of God and they are my lords. And I do this because of the Most High Son of God, I see nothing else corporeally, in this world, other than his most holy Body and Blood which they alone consecrate and they alone administer to others."

The saint from Assisi knew that his way of life was not the ordinary form of Christian life, so he founded the Franciscan Third Order, which lay people and priests who are inspired by his message can still join today. Even if, due to their professional vocation, they have family, civil and ecclesial responsibilities and therefore have to handle money, they follow the saint's insights while living the Gospel seriously in their daily lives.

The surviving medieval parts of the Lateran complex allow us to imagine the life of Francis and his friars ... first of all the



fig.8

magnificent cloister (**fig.8**) which can be visited through the entrance from the left nave of the basilica. The poor man from Assisi may well have walked in this spot with the Pope. The cloister itself still preserves the medieval papal chair, and the tomb sculpted by Arnolfo di Cambio for Riccardo Annibaldi, who was the uncle of that other Annibaldi, who was a disciple and friend of St Thomas Aquinas.

St Francis certainly went to the Papal Palace. Only the Papal Chapel remains of this structure today. It is known as the *Sancta Sanctorum* because it housed the holiest relics in Rome. The Chapel with the icon of *Christ Acheropita* (i.e. not painted by human hands) has frescoes, completed after the time of Saint Francis, commissioned by Pope Nicholas III between 1277 and 1280. It is at the top of the Holy Stair-

case (the *Scala Santa*), which according to tradition is the staircase from Pilate's Palace in Jerusalem, the same one that Christ climbed to be judged by him. Traditionally, pilgrims ascend it on their knees. All the saints of antiquity, who came on pilgrimage to Rome, climbed it in this penitential manner.

The frescoes of the *Sancta Sanctorum*, which have been revealed following the recent restoration works, are probably by a Roman painter, influenced by the buildings in Assisi. Starting from the altar wall, we see Pope Nicholas III accompanied by Peter and Paul, presenting the model of the Chapel to Christ. The right wall houses two panels with the Martyrdom of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. On the wall in front of the altar there are two frescoes representing the Martyrdom of Saint Stephen and Saint Lawrence. The two panels on the left recall the Martyrdom of Saint Agnes and the Miracle of Saint Nicholas. St Francis is explicitly commemorated in the apse of the basilica. Nicholas IV, the first Franciscan Pope, wanted to see the two great Franciscan saints (Francis and Anthony), depicted there. They are thus portrayed, only a few decades after their deaths, in the mosaic.

### The Lateran baptistery

(**fig.9**) Although the story of Constantine's baptism by Pope Sylvester is legendary, it is true that the emperor wanted a monumental baptistery to be built next to the basilica. Constantine was in fact baptized on his

deathbed, in the year 337, in Nicomedia.

The baptistery was subsequently remodeled by Sixtus III (432-440), the same Pope who built the basilica of St Mary Major. He was responsible for the octagonal plan. The octagon symbolically recalls Easter, the eighth day, in which creation is brought to completion, by receiving eternal life.

On the architrave we can read verses, perhaps written by the future Pope Leo



fig.9

the Great, with which Pope Sixtus III wanted to stress the value of the grace of baptism during the Pelagian dispute (Pelagius believed, unlike Augustine, that man could live the Gospel with own strength, without the grace of God):

*Born from this divine seed  
a people to be sanctified  
that the Spirit gives birth to  
from this fertile water.*

*Immerse yourself, sinner, in the sacred river  
to be purified.*

*The water will renew*

*what before was old*

*There is no more distance*

*among those who are reborn,*

*one source, one Spirit*

*one faith unites them.*

*Mother Church gives virgin birth in this water*

*To the children who were conceived in  
death.*

*If you want to be innocent, purify yourself  
in this bath*

*whether the sin of your parent (Adam) op-  
presses you, or your own.*

*This source is life and saves the whole world,  
starting from the wounds of Christ.*

*Hope in the kingdom of heaven*

*you are reborn at this source.*

*The fulness of life does not await those  
who were born only once.*

*Nor does any number or form of one's own  
sins cause us fear:*

*for whoever is born in this river will be holy.*

*Along the covered passage there are five  
17th century frescoes showing: the ap-  
pearance of the Cross to Constantine, the  
battle of the Milvian Bridge, the triumphal  
entry into Rome of the victorious Constan-  
tine, the exaltation of the Cross and the  
demolition of idols, and finally the Council  
of Nicaea.*

In the Chapel of Saint Venantius, built by Popes John IV (640-642) and Theodore (642-649), can be seen the image of the newly baptized neophytes received Confirmation on Easter night, before solemnly entering the basilica in procession to celebrate the Eucharist.