

The Basilica

It often comes as a surprise to people when they learn that St Peter's is not the Cathedral of Rome, and that indeed the Vatican only became the residence of the Pope relatively late in our history.



The Cathedral church of Rome, in a sense, the mother church of the whole Church is this church of St John Lateran. And alongside it is the Lateran Palace, for 1000 years the home of the Popes.

There were churches in Rome before this one but they were 'house churches' established from the beginning in private dwellings. The area of the Lateran was property which belonged to the Emperor's family and was donated by Constantine to Pope Melchiades (311-314). The new style of church building - the basilica style - had a very public character and was based on the form of building used for law courts.

This basilica was dedicated to the Saviour by Pope Sylvester in 324. The dedication to John the Baptist, and later to John the Evangelist was made in the 10th and 12th centuries.

The present facade dates from 1735. It incorporates a mosaic of the Saviour from the original facade, (see above).

The Lateran Palace was the home of the Pope from the 320s until the Papal Court moved to Avignon in 1304. On the return to Rome, the popes made the Vatican their home.

Five ecumenical Councils were held at the Lateran, between 1123 and 1512.

B. The Baldachino

This Gothic altar and baldachino was created in 1367, by Giovanni di Stefano, with frescoes by Barna da Siena from 1369.

Behind the grille in the upper part are two gilded silver busts, believed to hold relics of the heads of Ss Peter and Paul.



Look around you...

Unless you are very lucky, you are probably sharing this place of pilgrimage with many other people. Are they pilgrims or, by desire or misfortune, are they tourists?

This sheet is designed to help you spend quality time here as a pilgrim, and to engage prayerfully with the reason this place is here.

A Pilgrim's Worksheet for St John Lateran



C. Apse and Cathedra

Cathedrals take their name from the *cathedra*, the seat of the bishop, and in the case of this *cathedra* in this cathedral, it is the seat of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope. When a Pope speaks *ex cathedra*, he speaks with the full authority of the Church, guaranteed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. (Incidentally, the *cathedra* of St John Lateran served as a model when designing that in use in Westminster Cathedral.)

The apse mosaic of St John Lateran was significantly restored in 1292, but it is believed that the artists sought to incorporate in it significant parts of the original 4th C. mosaic, including the upper portion which shows angels adoring Christ.

The lower part of the mosaic shows a jewelled cross over which the Holy Spirit hovers, and from the foot of which flows the four rivers of Paradise in which deer and sheep find refreshment. Those waters flow down into the Jordan where children and animals play.

Gathered around the Cross are, from the left. St Paul, St Peter, St Francis (of whose link with the Cathedral there is more below), Pope Nicholas (a Franciscan, who commissioned the repair of the mosaic), Our Lady, and on the other side of the Cross, St John the Baptist, St Antho-



ny of Padua, St John the Evangelist, and St Andrew.

The mosaic sets before us a reminder of the wonder of God, and the goodness shared with us through God's grace, poured out on us through the gifts of faith and baptism

- What blessing of God comes to your mind as you stand here? Take a moment to offer a prayer of thanksgiving, united with the saints and angels.

C. The Tabernacle and relic of the table of the Last Supper

If you are looking for a quiet place to pray, then here is a place to pause.

The altar was designed in 1599, and features four large fluted, bronze columns, that are believed to have come from the Temple of Jupiter in Rome's Forum. The tabernacle is decorated with jasper and lapis lazuli.

Above the tabernacle is a bronze relief of the Last Supper, and behind the relief is reserved a piece of wood believed to have come from the table used by Jesus and the apostles at the Last Supper.

O Jesus, present in the sacrament of the altar, teach all nations to serve you with a willing heart, knowing that to serve God is to reign. May your sacrament, O Jesus, be light to the mind, strength to the will, joy to the heart. May it be support of the weak, the comfort of the suffering, the wayfaring bread of salvation for the dying, and for all, the pledge of future glory. Amen.
A prayer of Saint John XXIII

D. The Apostles

The nave of the Cathedral is adorned by statues of the apostles. Each stands in an aedicule, above which is a dove, symbol of the family of the Pamphili, the family of Pope Innocent X. The statues are the work of various sculptors, members of the school of Gian Lorenzo Bernini, and were carved between 1700 and 1719.

- Take the opportunity to walk around the nave and thank God for the work of the apostles, who first handed on the faith, and reflect on how others have handed the faith on to others, who handed it on to others, who handed it on to you.
- What have you received through this faith?
- How does it help you live?

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love.

If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my own joy may be in you and your joy be complete.



This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you. A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.

You are my friends, if you do what I command you. I shall not call you servants any more, because a servant does not know his master's business; I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father. *John 15.9-15*

E & F. Holy Years and the Holy Door

In coming to Rome we follow in the footsteps of countless pilgrims over the centuries.

One of the things that has particularly encouraged pilgrims to travel to Rome have been the Holy Years, invitations to focus on the love and mercy of God. The first Holy Year was proclaimed in 1300 by Pope Boniface VIII.

A fresco fragment by Giotto depicts this very first proclamation of a Holy Year. It was painted in the loggia outside the Lateran Palace, and when the loggia was removed this fragment was moved here.



A key element in the keeping of the Holy Year is pilgrims coming prayerfully to enter the church, passing through a Holy Door, to symbolise their having passed into the Church in baptism, and their call to live as faithful disciples with the Church.

The outside of the Holy Door at St John Lateran shows Jesus on the cross, and Mary his mother holding the child Jesus can pointing to the crucified One. The door also bears the words *Christus Hier Hodie Semper - Christ yesterday, today, forever.*

- You might like to pause here and pray for your self and others, the following prayer, based on that used by Pope John Paul when opening the Holy Door of St Peter's on Christmas Eve 2000



'Oh God, grant us the grace to live in joy, you knock always on the door of our hearts, so that we may welcome you in.

May our hearts always be open to you, and may you always hear our prayer.

Hear especially the prayers of those who ask you for forgiveness and help us to walk faithfully in life according to your Son's Gospel ...

G. The Ancient Senate Doors

The main doors of the Basilica were removed from the Curial Senate house, *Curia Julia*, in the Forum. They are 1600-1800 years old.

The *Curia Julia* is still standing, but the doors were removed and installed here in 1660 by Pope Alexander VII.

They were slightly too small! So, they were enlarged by bronze strips bearing a star, the heraldic device of Pope Alexander.

H. The Treasury

The Treasury of the Basilica is well worth a visit. It contains a variety of items, vestments,



sculptures and publications. Particularly notable, are relics of the tunics of Mary and Joseph of Arimethea (splashed with the blood of the Lord as they stood at the Cross) and the chalice of St John the Evangelist.

I. Cloister

Also well worth paying a small entrance fee to visit is the Cloister. It dates from 1215, and has beautifully decorated arches. Note in particular the fragments of the tomb of Riccardo Anniabale.

- What would you like people to remember of you when you pass from this life? What are you doing to make that wish come to pass?



O God, who knows all men will die, but who keeps from us the hour of our death, grant that I may pass my days in the practice of holiness and justice, and that I may deserve to leave this world in the peace of a good conscience, and in the embrace of Your love. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.



J. Baptistry

To reach the Baptistry you will probably need to leave the Cathedral from the main portico, back past the Holy Door, and walk around the outside, past the Lateran Palace and past the loggia.

As you go, look out for the statue of St Francis which commemorates his coming here to receive the

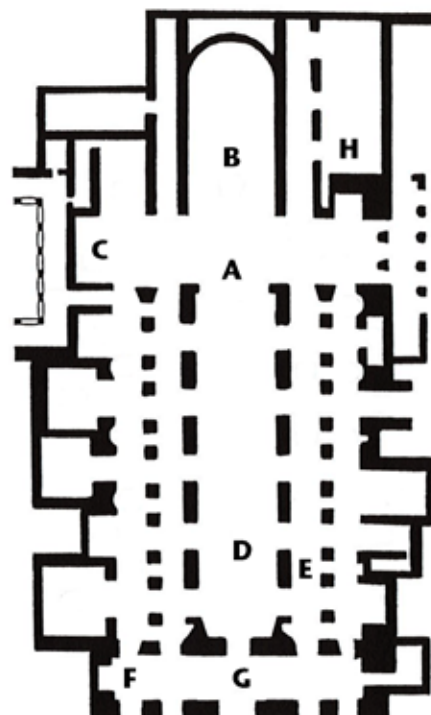
Pope's approval of his proposed Rule for the community of brothers who were gathering with him to live as imitators of Christ.

The Baptistry was built by Constantine at the same time as the basilica. It was restored and transformed into a 8-sided building by Pope Sixtus III in the 430s.

Inside the Baptistry, The colonnade of porphyry columns ere taken from the Imperial palace, and the Latin inscription around the octagonal architrave is by Pope Sixtus and dates from the 430s.



In translation they read: Here is born in Spirit-soaked fertility/ a brood destined for another City,/ begotten by God's blowing/ and borne upon this torrent/ by the Church their virgin mother./ Reborn in these depths they reach for/ heaven's realm,/ the born-but-once unknown by felicity./ This spring is life that floods the world,/ the wounds of Christ its awesome source,/ Sinner sink beneath this sacred surf/ that swallows age and spits out youth./ Sinner here scour away down to innocence,/ for they know no enmity who are by/ one font, one Spirit, one faith made one./ Sinner, shudder not at sin's kind and number,/ for those born here are holy" Translation by Aidan Kavanagh, OSB in *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation*, p49f)



- A Baldachino
- B Apse and cathedra
- C Tabernacle and relic of the table of the Last Supper
- D Statues of the Apostles
- E Fresco of Pope Boniface
- F Holy Door
- G Ancient Senate Doors
- H Treasury
- I Cloister
- J Baptistry

Mercy and Justice

Often mercy is contrasted with justice: 'Justice demands this, but I'll be merciful: I'll let you off'.

Pope Francis offers a different understanding. An understanding which sees love as restorative, healing. Justice alone will not heal, but the mercy that accompanies us through our conversion both heals and brings us to new life, not alone but in a still deeper communion with the God who is love.

Mercy is not opposed to justice but rather expresses God's way of reaching out to the sinner, offering him a new chance to look at himself, convert, and believe...

Saint Augustine says: 'It is easier for God to hold back anger than mercy.' And so it is. God's anger lasts but a moment, his mercy forever.

If God limited himself to only justice, he would cease to be God, and would instead be like human beings who ask merely that the law be respected. But mere justice is not enough. Experience shows that an appeal to justice alone will result in its destruction. This is why God goes beyond justice with his mercy and forgiveness. Yet this does not mean that justice should be devalued or rendered superfluous. On the contrary: anyone who makes a mistake must pay the price. However, this is just the beginning of conversion, not its end, because one begins to feel the tenderness and mercy of God. God does not deny justice. He rather envelopes it and surpasses it with an even greater event in which we experience love as the foundation of true justice.

Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 21

In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God makes even more evident his love and its power to destroy all human sin.

Reconciliation with God is made possible through the paschal mystery and the mediation of the Church. Thus God is always ready to forgive, and he never tires of forgiving in ways that are continually new and surprising. Nevertheless, all of us know well the experience of sin. We know that we are called to perfection (cf. Mt 5:48), yet we feel the heavy burden of sin. Though we feel the transforming power of grace, we also feel the effects of sin typical of our fallen state. Despite being forgiven, the conflicting consequences of our sins remain. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, God forgives our sins, which he truly blots out; and yet sin leaves a negative effect on the way we think and act.

But the mercy of God is stronger than even this. It becomes indulgence on the part of the Father who, through the Bride of Christ, his Church, reaches the pardoned sinner and frees him from every residue left by the consequences of sin, enabling him to act with charity, to grow in love rather than to fall back into sin.

Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 22

- Why do we find it difficult to believe in the mercy of God?
- How can we share that mercy with others, so that they might believe in it?

The corporal and spiritual works of Mercy

It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty. And let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God's mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples.

The Corporal Works

Let us rediscover these corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead....

We cannot escape the Lord's words to us, and they will serve as the criteria upon which we will be judged: whether we have fed the hungry and given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked, or spent time with the sick and those in prison (cf. Mt 25:31-45). Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 15

- Why do we have a responsibility for these sorts of works?
- Where do we see them most carefully carried out?
- What works against proper care for those in need?

The Spiritual Works

And let us not forget the spiritual works of mercy: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead.

We will be asked

- *if we have helped others to escape the doubt that causes them to fall into despair and which is often a source of loneliness*
- *if we have helped to overcome the ignorance in which millions of people live, especially children deprived of the necessary means to free them from the bonds of poverty*
- *if we have been close to the lonely and afflicted*
- *if we have forgiven those who have offended us and have rejected all forms of anger and hate that lead to violence*
- *if we have had the kind of patience God shows, who is so patient with us; and if we have commended our brothers and sisters to the Lord in prayer.*

In each of these 'little ones,' Christ himself is present. His flesh becomes visible in the flesh of the tortured, the crushed, the scourged, the malnourished, and the exiled ... to be acknowledged, touched, and cared for by us. Let us not forget the words of Saint John of the Cross: 'as we prepare to leave this life, we will be judged on the basis of love.' Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 15

This worksheet is one of a series prepared to accompany times of pilgrimage in the UK and overseas.

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