

Rome in the First Century, and later

Between September 2nd and 9th a Newman Pilgrimage toured Rome

By Barry Riley

Newman pilgrimages have visited Rome several times before but this time we proved deeper. We ventured into the depths of the cellars beneath Roman villas, into the lowest levels of Emperor Nero's palace and into Jewish catacombs which few have entered for the past 1,600 years. We also descended to the level of gloomy basements where in the First Century Roman soldiers once worshipped Mithras, a God who came to earth to slay a bull.

The group of some 25 pilgrims also, however, visited some more conventional attractions. Our chaplain, Mgr Patrick Kilgarriff, said Mass for us in the Crypt of St Peter's (actually in the Irish Chapel there) and afterwards we had a guided tour of the basilica, with indications of where a number of Popes were buried. Interesting facts were pointed out to us, such as that almost all the pictures in St Peter's are mosaics rather than paintings. Later in the week we returned to the Vatican for the evening opening of the Museum. This gave us the chance to visit the Sistine Chapel and there the tired Newman pilgrims sank gratefully on to the benches at the sides. Sitting, it was much easier to gaze up at the magnificent ceiling. All around hundreds of other visitors milled about, occasionally warned by guards to keep silent and not to use cameras.

Jewish history in Rome

A main theme of the pilgrimage was the early history of the Jews in Rome. Over the centuries the Jews have had a chequered history in Italy, as in many other countries, but there was a good beginning in 161BC with the Rome-Jewish Treaty signed by Judas Maccabeus at a time when the Jews were in serious conflict with the Greeks and the Persians. Later the Jews were favourably regarded by Julius Caesar, and our guide around the Jewish Museum, Ursula, remarked that to this day Cesare is a common first name for Jews in Rome.

The next day we went along the Appian Way to explore the Jewish Catacombs of Vigna Randanini, and unexpectedly it was the fast-talking Ursula who turned up again as our guide. Here we were far away from the normal tourist trail, exploring tunnels which are not normally open to the public and have scarcely been developed: we had to wear hard hats and carry our own lights with us. It was moving to see so many holes in the walls of the tunnels, spaces dug for bodies to be laid in, each covered only by a cloth so that nothing remains many centuries later. It was especially sad to see so many little spaces, meant for small children and often babies: the infant death rate at the time was very high. These catacombs were in use between the 2nd and 4th centuries and were then forgotten until they were accidentally rediscovered in 1859.

Decorations are rare in the Jewish Catacombs but occasionally there were stones inscribed with names, and occasionally with indications of the professions of the deceased. But there were several depictions of the menorah, the seven-branch candelabrum which became the symbol of early Judaism. And we were shown one or two burial chambers where the walls had been plastered and paintings added, including of peacocks and, in one case, of a palm tree complete with fruit.

The fortunes of the Jews fluctuated, however, and in the area of the Roman Forum later in the week we were taken to the Arch of Titus which celebrates the victory of the Romans over the rebellious Jews in Jerusalem in 71 AD and the destruction of the Temple there. A frieze on the Arch depicts a golden menorah seized as booty and being carried in triumph. It was displayed as a war trophy until 455 AD but after the sack of Rome by the Vandals it disappeared without trace.

Although the later history of the Jews in Rome was not strictly on our agenda our guides Ursula and Michelle were very keen to tell us of the dramatic events. In 1555 Pope Paul IV placed restrictions on the Jewish community in Rome, requiring them to live in a ghetto which was next to the River Tiber and liable to flooding. This restriction lasted for three centuries until the Papal States were taken over by the Kingdom of Italy in 1870. After this most of the buildings in the Ghetto were demolished, new river embankments ended the flooding and then, in 1900, a grand Synagogue of Rome was erected, which we visited.

The worst part of the story was still to come, however, under Nazi occupation during the Second World War. Even though the Jews of Rome paid a ransom of 50 kilograms of gold some 1,000 people were seized and deported anyway to Auschwitz on October 16, 1943. We were shown the sad little brass nameplates now embedded in the pavements all over the Ghetto area to commemorate the lost individuals.

Our guide Michelle told us how the Ghetto people could only afford vegetables in the markets which were unwanted by others, which often meant artichokes. A common dish in the Ghetto was therefore fried artichokes, and when the Newman pilgrims ate lunch at a kosher restaurant what else did we eat but fried artichoke? The response of our members was somewhat mixed.

But our priority was to return to the First Century and explore the unfortunate experiences of the two Jews in particular, We visited Tre Fontane, a tranquil site south of Rome where St Paul was taken for execution by the order of Emperor Nero in 64AD. As a Roman citizen he was able to choose beheading rather than crucifixion. Legend has it that his head bounced three times and in each place a spring appeared. Today there is a Trappist Monastery nearby and a Church of St Paul of Three Fountains stands on the exact site of his martyrdom (Though the spring appears to have dried up).

Peter and Paul

Back in central Rome we visited the Mamertine Prison where both Peter and Paul were held before their executions. By Christian tradition St Peter also died in 64 AD, at a time when Nero was anxious to blame Christians for the Great Fire of Rome. He chose to be upside-down when crucified to demonstrate his humility compared to Jesus Christ. Today the altar of St Peter's Basilica is located directly above the site of Peter's crucifixion.

Nero was a focus again on our programme when we visited the ruins of his extravagant villa, the Domus Aurea, or Golden Palace. At one place we were fitted with virtual reality headsets so that we could experience the grandeur and space, including impressive gardens, which the palace provided for Nero's privileged guests. But soon after Nero died the palace was buried as later emperors built their own extravagant monuments: indeed, the Colosseum was built a few years later on part of the site.

Perhaps the most impressive visual experience came when we assembled beneath Trajan's Column to visit the remains of 4th century patrician villas which were later buried beneath 16th century buildings but have recently been excavated and turned into a showpiece. Walking on the sheets of thick glass we could see underneath us the baths and luxurious mosaic floors of these sumptuous homes. The full decorative splendour of the villas was projected on to the ruined remains. This recreation of Roman extravagance was followed up by a video of one of the last conquests of the Roman Empire, when Dacia (today's Romania) was attacked and eventually swallowed up. The details of this vicious campaign in the early 2nd century, under Emperor Trajan, are represented in a sculptured frieze which spirals all the way up Trajan's Column.

There were other memorable experiences. One evening our pilgrimage organiser Anthony Coles escorted us to the nearby Colosseum where, in the absence of the daytime crowds, he was able to explain some of the features and history of the stadium which could accommodate 50,000 bloodthirsty spectators. But he insisted that there was no historical evidence that Christians were actually fed to the lions there, which oddly some of us found slightly disappointing.

We belong to the Newman Association, but unfortunately we are five weeks too early for our patron's canonisation on October 13th. Our pilgrimage included, however, a visit to Cardinal Newman's titular church, San Giorgio in Velabro, where Fr Pat, our chaplain, said Mass and delivered a wonderful homily on the life and achievements of St John Henry. The church was humble but on the wall was a grand engraved stone dedicated to "Ioannus Henricus S.R.E Cardinalis Newman AN. MDCCCLXXIX – AN. MDCCCLXXX". At the end of Mass we sang a rousing chorus of Newman's hymn Praise to the Holiest in the Height.

We are very grateful to Fr Pat for his daily Masses, for instance in the Basilica of St Paul's Outside the Walls as well as in St Peter's and for his constant help and guidance which reflected local knowledge he gained in the years he spent in Rome as Rector of the Venerable English College. We also thank Anthony Coles for his splendid organisation of the Pilgrimage and his ability to cope with cancelled flights on the way out and a British Airways pilots' strike on the way back.