

Catacombs of Saint Callixtus



The most ancient cemetery of Roman Christian community: founded around the middle of the 2nd century, in the beginning the Catacombs of St. Callixtus were private burial sites, but, throughout 300 years they became larger and larger up to contain 75.000 Christians; some of the wide cemeteries cells were used for religious observances, others for funeral banquets. The transformation from Catacomb into Basilica was ratified by the Edict of Milan" in 313 AD, with which Emperor Constantine recognized freedom of worship to Christians.

The Catacombs of St. Callixtus owe their name to the deacon head of the Cemetery who became Pope during the III century

and enlarged the underground area that became the official burial site of Rome's Bishops for 200 years: the Crypt of the Popes, now empty, once contained the remains of 9 Popes and of 8 Bishops of the 3rd century; Callixtus was, however, the first Pope to be buried there in 222 AD : Pope Pasquale I discovered this tomb in 821 and the bodies were moved into the Church of St. Cecilia in Trastevere under the High Altar, where is shown the original statue of St. Cecilia by Maderno. The catacombs were abandoned after the Barbarian invasions, when the Popes, from 7th century DC, decided to transfer the Martyrs bodies into the churches within the town walls, as pilgrimages outside were dangerous because of the Barbarians.

The Catacombs of St. Callisto were re-discovered in 1849: they spread over 10 square km., creating tangled grids 20 km. long, extended on five levels. On the walls signs, graffiti, symbols of Christian faith and Greek inscriptions made on the gypsum sealing the tombs. There is also a Latin inscription with the word martyr".

The Catacombs, called coemeteria" (cemetery) till 1400, had developed mostly along the suburban ways, especially over the Appian Way, because the Law of the Twelve Tables" prohibited the inhumation of the dead in town, also for hygienic reasons. Early Christians, maybe in order to imitate the burial of Christ, whose body had been laid in a room hollowed into the rock, preferred inhumation to the cremation practiced by Romans. The body had to be preserved for the future return of the soul in the day of resurrection: hence the cult of martyrs and saints.

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