



# ART IN ROME: 313–1300 A.D.

## Recognition, Reconstruction, Restoration

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*by Louisa C. Ngote*

Rarely is it possible to pinpoint one time, one place and one person who changed the history of the world, (and the history of art) but that's just what happened on 28 October 312 AD at the Milvian Bridge when the Emperor Constantine (Fig. 1) fought Maxentius for control of the Roman world. The battle took place two miles north of Rome on the old bridge across the Tiber and ended with the death of Maxentius.

Maxentius had been a great builder during his short six-year reign. He had totally remodeled Hadrian's Temple of Venus and Roma and a formal audience hall later to become SS. Cosmas and Damian. His most expensive project was repair work on the city walls. The Emperor Aurelian had built the walls to protect the city in 272 and Maxentius raised them to almost twice their original height. Maxentius also built a new law court or basilica on the eastern end of the Forum. It was designed as a massive rectangular hall with two sets of triple barrel vaults on either side (only one set of which has survived) which supported enormous concrete groin vaults. There was a rounded apse at the west end and an imposing entrance facing the Temple of Venus and Roma to the east. This "Basilica Nova" was partially completed when the devastating events of the Milvian Bridge occurred.

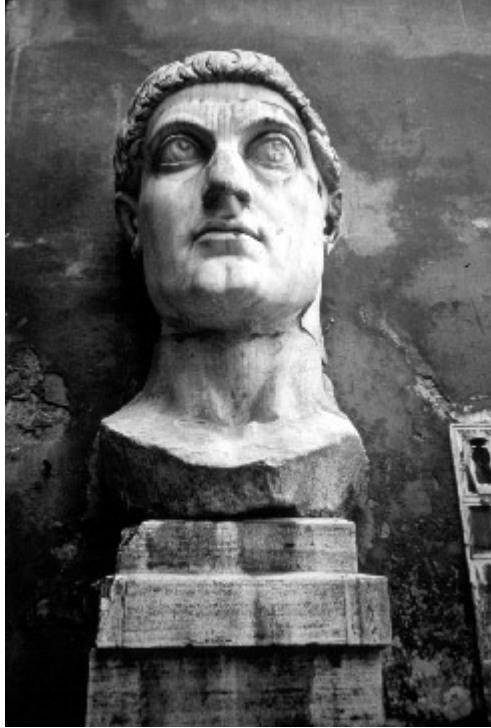
The death of Maxentius made Constantine the sole ruler

of the Roman world for the next 25 years. He was acutely aware of his responsibilities toward the city and continued many of the earlier building projects. He completed the “Basilica Nova” (today it is known as the Basilica of Constantine) and had his own image placed in the apse. Pieces of this colossus are still on display in the Capitoline Museum. Constantine also reoriented the main entrance to the south facing the Via Sacra as it ran through the Forum, connecting his own prestige with the grand Roman past.

This link with the past was reinforced by the construction of a triumphal arch on the main avenue just east of the Palatine Hill. The Arch of Constantine (Fig. 2) was a public secular monument. It was specifically erected to commemorate Constantine’s victory at the Milvian Bridge and included rather poor reliefs of those events. More significant was the “borrowing” of earlier victory panels from monuments of Hadrian, Trajan, and Marcus Aurelius. The victory was “completed” when Constantine addressed the crowds from the Rostra or speaker’s platform directly in front of the Senate building. Of particular interest was the inscription on the upper panel of the arch. It gave specific credit for Constantine’s victory to the “divinity”—*instinctu divinitatis*. Although Constantine was already supporting the new Christian religion, here in the public area of the city, he refrained from alienating any of the older religions and kept his language general and official. He seems to have gone to great lengths not to offend the older gods. In these new public projects, he represented the values and ideals of the good emperor. It was, however, his religious policies which changed art and history.

Christianity had entered the Roman world in a quiet, unobtrusive manner when Peter came to Rome and established the new religion. As a mystery religion, Christians shared with other mystery cults a belief in death and resurrection, baptism, communal sharing of commemorative meals, and most importantly, the bond of their shared experience. As the name implied, members of a mystery religion were under a vow of secrecy never to divulge the beliefs and practices of

*Figure 1: Constantine*



*Figure 2: Arch of Constantine*



their religion to an outsider. Numerous mystery religions were practiced throughout the Roman world during the imperial period. In a polytheistic world, one could find the Cult of Mithras or Cybele practiced next door to the Temple of Isis and down the street from the Cult of Dionysos. Judaism and Christianity were simply two more recent arrivals. The government's official policy toward these religions was open toleration, as long as they paid their taxes and didn't cause trouble. However, Christian teachings focused on only one God, love, forgiveness and equality, and Christians became the conscientious objectors within the empire. They refused to burn incense before statues of the gods and the emperor, and it was the Christians who were frequently hauled into court to face charges of blasphemy and treason. Given a choice of burning incense or facing death, many Christians did burn the incense. However, many others were not willing to compromise their faith and were willing to face death. The horror stories of Christians being fed to the lions are true, with a slight alteration . . . lions did not care what the victim's religious preference was, and this form of public execution (dare I say entertainment?) was used for Christian and non-Christian alike. At first the persecutions were sporadic and individual, but soon the government felt compelled to step in and outlaw this anti-social organization. Some of the most intense persecutions actually happened under emperors considered to be the "good" guys, enforcing the laws for the good of the state, such as Marcus Aurelius and Diocletian. Most government officials, however, simply chose to ignore the situation and left the Christian community alone even though the laws were still on the books.

This Early Christian community continued to grow throughout the first four centuries after the birth of Christ. The community owned property, and would meet either in their private homes or small community centers. They must have fit into their neighborhoods in the same way they do today in any urban setting, . . . small, unobtrusive buildings you would never know were churches if they didn't have signs

out front, or a modest cross or steeple. They most definitely did not stand out in any architectural sense. None of the Roman buildings survive, but they were the first *tituli* or “titled property” which belonged specifically to the Christian community. They were named after the property owner, and when converted to churches, the term “saint” was simply attached to the name . . . for example, S.Sabina or S.Pudenziana. The only art which has survived from these times is funeral art in the catacombs and hundreds of decorated sarcophagi.

This brings us back up to the point where we started, the events of the Milvian Bridge and the Emperor Constantine. According to tradition, Constantine had a dream the night before the conflict and heard a booming voice stating that “*in this sign ye shall conquer.*” The following morning, he had his soldiers place the *Chi-Rho* monogram (the first two letters in the name of Christ) on their shields, and by evening he had defeated his enemy. Having credited the Christian God for his victory, Constantine now threw his support to this new religion and transformed it into a respected and imperially supported faith. Whether or not Constantine actually converted or was baptized on his deathbed a few years later was not relevant. What was important was his change of imperial policy. Christianity was now legitimate.

The first thing the new church required was official headquarters. The private early community centers were now inappropriate. The church required majesty, space, and presence. By 315 Constantine had decided to donate some of his wife’s property (the *domus Fauste*) for a new church as the official residence of the Bishop of Rome, S.John Lateran (Fig. 3). According to some, he had ulterior motives. Apparently he had had his wife murdered and this church was to atone for his sin. The next decision was choosing the proper prototype for their churches.

The great Temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill and smaller buildings like the Temple of Fortuna Virilis (Fig. 4) were dotted all over town and still in use. However, aside from their “pagan” connotation, they were never designed for the



type of rituals used in the mystery religions. The official temples were for public worship. The crowds gathered outside facing the building and witnessed the sacrifice of the bull, sheep, and pig on an altar in front of the stairs. The temple interior only held a statue of the divinity. Mystery religions, on the other hand, required secrecy and an internal meeting place for the faithful. Few examples survive, like the original meeting hall of the Cult of Mithras below modern S.Clemente in Rome.

The only magnificent public building which could hold large crowds inside and not be tainted with “pagan” connections, were the law courts or basilicas. The best known was the Basilica Ulpia in the Forum of Trajan with its two great attached libraries. Incidentally, this building continued to be used for its original purpose well into the Middle Ages. The basilica with its large open central hall flanked by side aisles and flat timber ceiling became the source for the new Christian church.

In addition to official headquarters and meeting halls, funeral halls were also needed to commemorate the first Christian martyrs. They had all died in different parts of town and had been buried in local cemeteries outside the walls in accordance with Roman law. These cemeteries attracted many visitors who came to pray and make small donations in memory of the saints. This often encouraged local administrators to build small covered porches or funeral halls over the more famous graves. The most important was the burial place of S.Peter to the west of the city (Fig. 3).

Nero apparently martyred Peter in the old circus built on imperial property west of the Tiber. His remains were then buried in the nearby cemetery on the slope of the hill and a small split-level aedicula constructed over the box containing his bones. This incidentally was excavated in 1939 and found to contain a mixture of bones (human and animal) dating to the appropriate period. In 319 Constantine launched the first major building campaign on the site (Fig. 5). Protective walls were built around the tomb marker, and then the slope of the



*Figure 4: Temple of Fortuna Virilis*



*Figure 5: St. Peter's Church, Interior*

hill was excavated on the north side, with the dirt filling in the southern slope. This became the foundation for Constantine's basilica. The floor level was carefully adjusted so that the upper half of S.Peter's tomb was visible above the finished floor of the church, providing a spiritual as well as visual focus. Today's church carefully maintains this sacred spot. Constantine's basilica, like S.John Lateran, had a nave with double side aisles, apse at one end and enclosed atrium at the other. Here, at last, was a church with a confident public presence. Constantine's building was completely torn down in the 16th and 17th.c. but Oakland University's new science building can give some impression of the grand scale of S.Peter's. From apse to front door, S.Peter's was 410' long; the science building is 412'. S.Peter's nave was 140' high; the science tower is only 117'. Both are at the top of a slope and both truly dominate the surrounding landscape.

The interior decoration was incredibly rich with its beautiful marble columns, all carefully selected from disused Roman buildings. Some of the twisted columns from the original canopy over the altar were later reused by Bernini and inserted high on the huge piers built by Michelangelo. Bernini's baldacchino itself marks the original location of S.Peter's grave and reuses the theme of the twisted columns. A list exists of the fabulous donations which Constantine made for the furnishings of the church which included a gold altar, 10' tall silver and brass candlesticks, 3 gold chalices, 20 silver chalices, 2 gold pitchers, a censer of purest gold . . . etc.

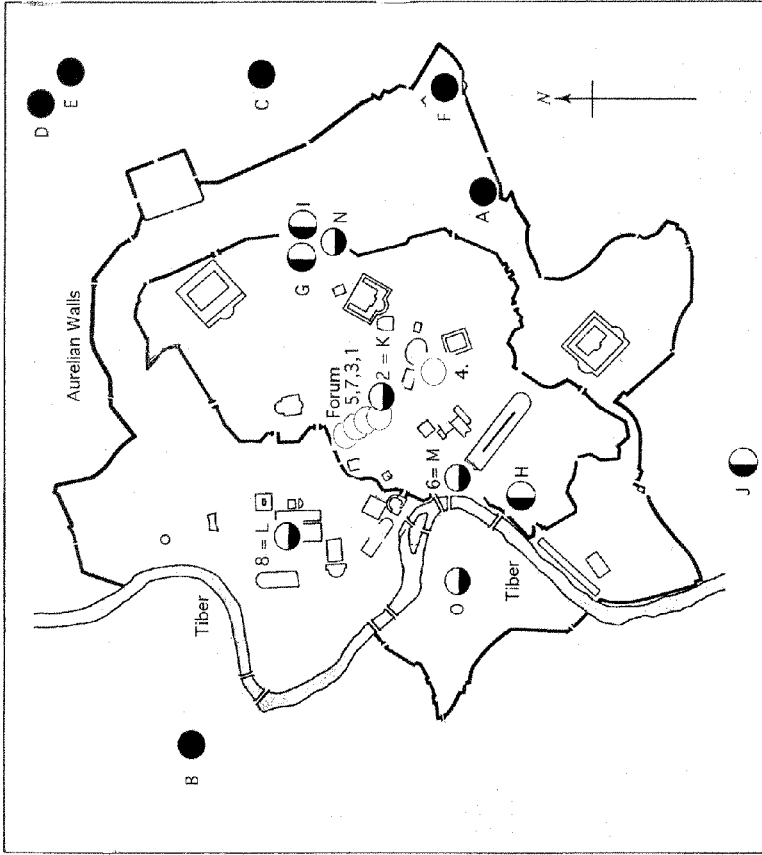
Constantine sponsored other funeral halls such as S.Lorenzo fuori-le-mura and S.Agnese fuori-le-mura in the old cemeteries outside the city walls and the imperial family received lavish tombs. The first imperial Christian mausoleum was for Constantine's mother Helena and another charming mausoleum was constructed for Constantine's daughter, Costanza. This little mausoleum has been converted into a church and is still used today for services. I first saw S. Costanza years ago, when much to my embarrassment, after taking the tour of the connected catacomb, I returned to the

main room and there was a coffin on the floor. I had walked right into the middle of a funeral service, but that was after all its original purpose.

Although Constantine will always be remembered as a great builder, he was equally concerned with the inner workings of the church. He presided over the first church council at Nicaea, and set the precedent of the emperor personally involving himself in the conduct of the church's affairs. At the same time, he was a *Roman* emperor and most of his citizens were not Christian. The leading governing body, the Senate, was decidedly non-Christian, if not actually anti-Christian. When looking back over Constantine's building program, it becomes apparent he went out of his way not to antagonize the citizens of Rome. His secular program was all located in the traditional "show-place" of imperial might (Map), the Forum with its Basilica and Arch of Constantine. All of the Christian buildings were located outside the city walls. The only exceptions, S. John Lateran and his mother's church of S. Croce in Jerusalem (Fig. 3) were on imperial "private" property at the edge of the city. For an emperor who truly wanted to support the Christian church, but at the same time maintain peace in the administration filled with "pagans", it must have been a difficult time, and this may have been part of his decision in 330 to transfer the capital from Rome to Constantinople, a truly Christian city from the start.

This relationship with the non-Christian community was to change dramatically within the next two generations. As late as 331, Junius Bassus, Sr. built a civic basilica on the Esquiline Hill. A few marble fragments show the emperor riding his chariot and details of exotic Egyptian rituals still practiced then in Rome. In 346 public pagan worship was prohibited, and in 356 the temples were closed and their revenues confiscated. In 359, Junius Bassus, Jr. died and was buried in a fully Christian sarcophagus but could still have the pagan god of the sky with his billowing cloth beneath the feet of Christ. Two years later, in 361, Julian the Apostate became emperor and

# Map of Rome



## Ancient Roman Sites

1. Temple of Venus and Roma
2. Audience Hall = K
3. Basilica Nova  
later Basilica of Constantine
4. Arch of Constantine
5. Temple of Jupiter, Capitoline Hill
6. Temple of Fortuna Virilis = M
7. Forum of Trajan
8. Pantheon = L

## Christian Churches

### Era of Constantine-early 4th c. AD

- A. S. John Lateran
- B. S. Peter
- C. S. Lorenzo - fuori-le-mura
- D. S. Agnese-fuori-le-mura
- E. S. Costanza
- F. S. Croce

### The Next Generations, 5th c. AD

- G. S. Pudenziana
- H. S. Sabina
- I. S. Maria Maggiore
- J. S. Paolo-fuori-le-mura.

### Early Medieval-6-9th c. AD

- K. SS. Cosmas and Damian  
former (2) Audience Hall
- L. S. Maria Rotunda  
former (8) Pantheon
- M. S. Maria Egiziaca  
former (6) Temple of Fortuna V.
- N. S. Pressede
- O. S. Cecilia

officially reversed this trend and closed the Christian churches. The old religions were still strong.

The decisive return to Christianity came in 384 when the now Christian Senate voted to remove the pagan symbol of victory from the senate chambers and replace it with the Christian cross. The tide had turned, and it was the Christian faith which was to dominate Western Europe from then on. 408 saw new legislation which stated that all temples were to be put to new use. They were, however, not transformed into churches. They became state property and often generated revenue as tourist attractions . . . this time paganism was no longer seen as a threat. Classical and pagan buildings were simply used for non-religious purposes, much like a former church in Pontiac, which is now an entertainment center.

New religions required new art, and the new status of Christianity demanded richer and more magnificent art than ever before. The best surviving example is in the church of S. Pudenziana (Fig. 6). It was originally a *thermae* or bath hall and some of its original walls and columns can still be seen in the nave. Unfortunately, at a much later time it was decided to add a dome just in front of the apse and finding the walls inadequate, the apse was cut back and reinforced. It was also unmercifully restored during the Renaissance, but at least the basic composition and the original middle still remains. The Church of Rome now wanted to stress its *Roman* origins. Growing differences had been developing between the various factions of the church, particularly between Rome and Constantinople. Out of this tension, a new and dynamic image of Christ was invented. No longer the adolescent Good Shepherd of the catacombs, Christ was now seen as a bearded, mature adult, wearing Roman imperial regalia and seated on an imperial throne. His apostles were no longer Judean peasants but Roman senators in their togas. Christian symbols of supremacy were developed, the architecture of heavenly Jerusalem, the red and blue clouds of paradise, the ALOE (Angel, Lion, Ox and Eagle) of the writers of the Gospels, and above all the *Latin* cross dominated the heavens. All were new.

Even the lavish use of glass and gold mosaics indicated the new proud imperial status of the church. As Prof. Krautheimer so nicely put it, “. . . Peter and Paul, the Princes of the Apostles, replaced Romulus and Remus as the new founders of the city, a Christian Rome; . . . [it was they who] guaranteed the rebirth of Rome, the *renovatio urbis*.”

All this building and growth came to a grinding halt in 410. Throughout the 3rd and 4th centuries the barbarians had been on the move and it all hit Rome in August of 410 when Alaric, the chieftain of the Visigoths, sacked the city. Aurelian's walls had been raised recently and there were plenty of towers. But there were virtually no troops to man the walls and help never arrived, either from Constantinople or from Ravenna, the seat of Byzantine power in the West. In contrast to popular legend, however, there was no general massacre of the citizens. Alaric was a Christian after all, even if he was an Arian Barbarian. Although there was burning and looting, the churches of SS. Peter and Paul were both set aside for asylum and their treasuries spared.

Rome survived and soon building projects were resumed. Many of the private community centers were transformed into basilicas. The best was an old titulus, now rebuilt as the basilica of S. Sabina. It was started around 425 and consecrated in 432. Its attractive proportions and detailing included a matched set of Corinthian columns taken from a second century building. This renewed taste for classical proportions also extended to the dedication inscription over the entry wall. The letters are in the same elegant style used on ancient Roman public monuments like the Arches of Titus and Constantine. The two personifications at either end representing the Churches of the Circumcised and of the Gentiles are shown as true Roman matrons. The original carved wood doors have survived and contain an extensive set of Christian stories which include the oldest known Crucifixion. It is from this time that the first images of Christ on the Cross appeared, over 400 years after His birth.

As soon as S. Sabina was completed in the south side of

the city, S.Maria Maggiore (Fig. 3) was started on the east side of town around 432 AD. It was also designed as a traditional basilica with the same wonderful classical touches as in S.Sabina. Here the architects used a straight classical architrave over the forty matching columns with Ionic capitals. This was one of the few churches in which the original decoration survives to any degree. Above the space between each set of columns are mosaic panels with Old Testament stories, like the *Abraham and the Three Angels* near the modern high altar. The designer still used a style of art with its roots in the classical Roman past, the illusions of a third dimension, realistic landscape details, and a sense of movement and freedom not to be seen again until the Renaissance. Also important were the surviving mosaics on the original arch in front of the apse showing scenes from the youth of Christ. Their significance lay in the particular emphasis given to the Virgin Mary, here seated as an imperial woman on a throne and wearing a crown. She is the "Theotokos," the Mother of God, a role confirmed for her by the Council of Ephesus in 431, where previously she was hardly mentioned. It was the purpose of these various Church Councils to clarify points of dogma in this manner and the artists were expected, with the advice of the clergy, to give proper visual form to this theology.

It was at this time that a great redecorating program was undertaken in the major basilicas. S.Peter's was given a set of Biblical scenes for the nave wall. S.Paolo fuori-le-mura (Fig. 3) was similarly redecorated following earthquake damage in 441 and S.John Lateran received new nave pictures. Significant changes had occurred since Constantine. Church building and decoration was no longer a local matter or sponsored by wealthy individuals. It was the pope who took a leading role in art patronage and there was now a papal building plan with a consistent message linking the authority of the church with the classical grandeur of ancient Rome. *Figural* art was now seen as necessary to present this message of authority. At S.John Lateran the earlier simple gold apse mosaic was replaced with an image of the bearded Christ. The location of

new churches also changed dramatically. Although Constantine's churches all received attention, the new construction was now well within the city walls but still at the outer edges of the "downtown" area (Map).

In 455 the barbarians attacked again. This time it was the Vandals. The most dramatic event of those days was when Pope Leo I (the Great) negotiated directly with Attila the Hun to convince Attila to spare the Eternal City. Most significantly, it was the pope who spoke for the people of Rome. The Church had become the de facto ruler of Rome. The barbarians never get the credit they deserve in these events. It was their very threat which put the Church into the supreme position as defender of the people. The Church became the Resistance Movement while the emperor sat helplessly in the East.

In the contest between Empire and Barbarian, the Barbarians won. Wave after wave moved into Italy. For some time various peace treaties between the popes and the chieftains prevailed, but more often it was a matter of continued raiding and burning of the countryside. The population of Rome dropped from around 800,000 in 400 AD, to a low of only 30,000 after the Gothic wars of the mid 6th century, and up slightly again to around 90,000 people in 590 due to a major influx of refugees from the countryside, but still only about 10% of its former size. Large areas of the city had been abandoned, especially the eastern half, which is unfortunately exactly where S. John Lateran found itself stranded, more or less. Large urban areas became farms, vineyards, or just wild areas—the *disabitato*.

It was this time of troubles which marked the first takeover of pagan public buildings by the Church. The old audience hall in the Forum was transformed into the Church of SS. Cosmas and Damian in 526 and redecorated to reflect its ecclesiastical function with elaborate mosaics on the apse vault (Fig. 7). It presents the same message as S. Pudenziana. Christ at the Second Coming flanked by SS. Peter and Paul presenting the patron saints Cosmas and Damien, S. Theodore and the original donor Pope Felix IV. In the exact center is the



*Figure 6: S. Pudenziana*



*Figure 7: S.S. Cosmas & Damien*



*Figure 8: Prima Porta Augustus*

sublime vision of the imperial Christ, against a gorgeous deep blue eternity with banks of flaming red sunset clouds at his feet. Interestingly, the pose of Christ is specifically related to the image of Imperial majesty and power, best seen in the famous Prima Porta Augustus Caesar (Fig. 8).

As before, it was the pope who helped to rebuild Rome during these troubled times. Gregory I (also a Great), who became pope in 590 AD, was one of the best administrators of the church. He felt it was his job to get the city back on its feet. He transformed many old warehouses into welfare centers to help feed the city, repaired the water supplies, and generally built up Rome's prosperity. He seemed hesitant to simply take over pagan buildings, since they were technically imperial property; but must have found it necessary and, for the first time, in 609 a Roman temple was transformed into a Christian church. This was no less than the Pantheon. An altar was placed in the main niche opposite the great bronze doors. It was now the spiritual light of the Christian God which lit up the interior of the great building. The temple where all the gods had been worshiped was now dedicated to the Virgin Mary. It would be almost 300 years before the next one, the Temple of Fortuna Virilis (Fig. 4), would be exorcised and rechristened as S.Maria Egiziaca in 872. Surprisingly, it was only in the 12th and 13th.c. that this became almost standard practice.

Another phenomenon appeared around the time of Pope Gregory I, major pilgrimages. Rome attracted a continuing number of visitors because of the graves of so many martyrs. According to *Roman law*, cemeteries and burials were inviolate. Even during the worst persecutions, there was no damage or vandalism of the catacombs. Once buried, it had to remain untouched. According to *pilgrim law*, the closer you could get to the actual burial, the more powerful its spiritual aura, and if you could actually possess a part of it, better yet. More and more reports came to Pope Gregory that bones were missing, tombs had been ransacked, pilgrims were taking everything . . . bones, dust, cloth, chips of stone, it didn't mat-

ter. If it was found near a holy tomb, it was fair game. There are many wonderful stories about the antics some people pulled to possess these spiritual treasures. Pope Gregory, however, was not amused, and had to deal with the problem. First were the hoards of people. Pilgrim centers were built, hostels, medical facilities, food distribution points, anything that would help these pilgrims as they prayed near martyrs' shrines. Then there was the congestion inside the churches. Even S.Peter's (Fig. 5) was modified to deal with this flood of pilgrims. To prevent congestion around the high altar, and remove the temptation of touching the grave, Pope Gregory had the apse completely rebuilt. A passage was excavated downward following the inner curve of the apse to the level of the base of the original grave of S.Peter. A second passage, at right angles led from the center of the curve to the tomb and stairs ascended at the other end of the curved passage leading back up to the main nave level. A floor was laid a few feet above the nave level over this new annular crypt and the altar and baldacchino relocated to the new higher level. An opening at the front of the altar allowed special visitors to view the tomb from above. In Constantine's church, the upper half of the actual tomb was surrounded by a small wall and covered by a baldacchino supported by four twisted columns. These twisted columns were rearranged on the new higher level into a single line, others added, and an elaborate entablature placed above. I'm not comfortable with the reconstruction often shown where a straight entablature spans across all the columns. Every example I've seen in other art works focuses on an arch over the central space. This would recall the magnificent framing devices used in "presentation" rituals and found in artworks like the platter of Theodosius the Great, or the front of the Temple of Hadrian at Ephesus. Pilgrims in S.Peter's could focus on this spectacular framework when participating in the mass while standing in the nave, proceed forward and to the right, down the stairs, around the curve, pause in front of the passage showing the grave (still visible), say a prayer, leave an offering, and continue around and out

of the church. This annular crypt and traffic pattern soon became a standard feature of medieval churches throughout Europe.

Rome was now starting to regain its prosperity. Although many pilgrims were extremely poor, even they provided employment and growing economic opportunities for the Roman people, running hotels and restaurants and selling souvenirs. This flood of tourists was intensified when Jerusalem fell to the Moslems in 640. Eastern immigrants brought with them Eastern religious practices, icons, and relics. The crib of the infant Jesus was brought to Rome and dedicated in S.Maria Maggiore. They also introduced the custom of "translation" of bones, common in Eastern communities. Suddenly, bones were flying everywhere, everyone wanted one, and processions passed back and forth through town, transferring sacred martyrs' bones to this church and that, many still visible in the glass window under so many altars.

In the Carolingian era of the 9th.c.AD many of the older remaining community centers were torn down and new churches built over the site such as S.Pressede, commissioned by Pope Pascal I. S.Pressede was a modest version of the old Constantinian-type basilica with single side aisles and as before, used old Roman spolia. Across town another old tituli was replaced by a church, S.Cecilia, a simple basilica with many later restorations also commissioned by Pope Pascal I. A quick look back at the location of these new churches (Map) also underscores the new prestige of the papacy. Slowly, we have seen major churches constructed first in the outer rim of ancient Rome, then within the city walls but well beyond the population centers. Now finally, in the Carolingian era, the church has arrived in downtown. Soon every nook and cranny of Rome was going to have its own church.

What struck me most in all this rebuilding and restoration was the continuity with ancient Rome. Over and over it was imperial Rome that inspired Christian art. Equally amazing was its incredible modernity. A walk down the streets 700 years ago would not have been that different from a walk in

the spring of 1999. Construction scaffolding and repair work on the churches was going on continuously throughout the city. This brief survey also showed how important political considerations and specific individuals were. It was the emperors, kings, popes, and private citizens who set policy, financed construction, and selected the best artists available. It was their personal efforts and vision that set the scene for the Rome of Michelangelo and Bernini (Fig. 5).