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ROME BELONGS TO YOU, TOO! A SERIES OF HISTORICAL ESSAYS EXPLORING CHRISTIAN ROME

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Our good friend Don avoided traveling to Rome for most of his life. He was raised a Pentecostal and had, like many in his generation, assumed Rome was hopelessly corrupted by Catholic culture and cultic devotion to the Pope. He had dreamed of traveling to Israel to visit Biblical sites associated with the life of Jesus and to Turkey and Greece to follow in the footsteps of Paul. Even though Rome was the place where Paul and Peter ended their lives and ministry, he assumed there was little of interest for him there. Reluctantly he agreed to join a study tour of Rome led by his friend.

A year later he was enrolled at Harvard Divinity School studying early Christianity with the intent of leading evangelical Christian tours to Rome. "I feel cheated!" he exclaimed after visiting the catacombs filled with early Christian symbols, house churches from the 1st century, and 2nd century Christian sarcophagi decorated with Biblical art. "Rome is full of early Christian artifacts and historical sites. It is my heritage, too, and all these years people have steered me away from this incredible resource for learning about the earliest generation of Christians! Rome belongs to me, too!"

Don is representative of a wave of pastoral leaders who are discovering how transformative travel to Rome can be for Christians. Protestant, evangelical, reform and non-denominational Christians – such as Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, and Anglicans are finding that Rome is a perfect venue for adult education and faith formation events.

Illume has engaged its in-house scholar to write a series of articles on early Christian Rome. A new essay will appear each month and include historical as well as practical information about visiting these sites. The essays, introductory in nature, are intended for those involved in pastoral ministry and adult education rather than for specialists in early Church history.

The focus of this series is to profile sites of interest for Biblical and Church history in and around Rome. Illume believes this will encourage Protestant and Evangelical leadership to regard Rome as an important place for exploring their own heritage, inspire educational and spiritual growth, and foster interest in preserving these Roman sites as part of their own heritage.

CHRISTIAN HERITAGE IN ROME

The two most defining contexts for the development of early Christianity were Judaism and Roman culture.

The life and ministry of Jesus was deeply immersed in the events of 1st century Judaism and its problematic relationship with the Roman Empire. In some instances, Jesus was portrayed as the ideal Jew, as one who came to fulfill the Torah perfectly and who was hailed as the long awaited Messiah. In other instances, Jesus was portrayed as provoking the Jews. He socialized with Roman officials, he broke with Jewish tradition in how the Torah was to be applied and lived out, and he clashed with Jewish authorities.

Jesus organized a group of followers that alarmed the Romans as well. He empowered lower socio-economic classes of people to share material and spiritual resources with each other in ways that shortcircuited the Roman system of patronage.ⁱⁱ They formed a community that was not organized along ethnic lines (as the Jews were) and anticipated a coming Kingdom that would invert the world order of the Roman Empire.



We know from several New Testament texts that Peter, James and Paul disagreed seriously over whether Christian discipleship required a strict adherence to the prescriptions of the Torah or whether one could be a follower of Jesus without becoming a Jew.ⁱⁱⁱ This led to serious tensions between Paul and Jewish leaders throughout Asia Minor and Greece. This came to a head when the Emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome in the year 49 because the followers of “Chrestos” were instigating problems.^{iv}

Paul is an interesting figure with respect to Judaism and Roman culture. On the one hand, he prides himself on his Jewish credentials and envisions a faith that is thoroughly monotheistic. However, he argues that the salvation offered through Jesus is no longer tied to Jewish sectarian practices. This is quite appealing to the so-called god-fearers, Greco-Romans who were drawn to Jewish monotheism but were unwilling to adopt all of the prescriptions of Torah, particularly circumcision and dietary and purity codes.

Paul is a citizen of the world. He benefited from the cosmopolitan culture of the Roman Empire and was able to travel about easily and freely. He was at home debating with the philosophers in Athens and with local officials in urban centers around the Mediterranean. But he was also critical of the Pax Romana. Many people believed that Rome was in the process of realizing one of the greatest human civilizations ever – with prosperity, technology, trade, learning, and political order uniting disparate lands and peoples into a single worldwide peaceful realm. But as Dominic Crossan notes, Paul challenged imperial propaganda by

arguing that true peace does not come through power but through justice.^v Moreover, he argued that a culture founded on false belief (Roman pagan religion) was doomed to corruption as one’s moral compass was disoriented.

Since the defining contexts of early Christianity were Judaism and the Roman Empire, Rome is a perfect venue for understanding Biblical and early Church history. Between 20,000 and 50,000 Jews lived in Rome during the 1st century. It was one of the largest communities of Jews outside Palestine and quickly became the place where different approaches to Christianity were worked out.

Prior to Claudius’ expelling of the Jews in 49, most followers of Christ were probably associated with the large network of Jews in Rome. After the edict, those that remained would have been non-Jews. When Jews were allowed back in Rome several years later, the relationship between Jewish Christians (returning) and non-Jewish Christians (who had remained and were practicing their faith as non-Jews) was tense. It is no accident that Paul and Peter both come to Rome to play a significant role in shaping the future of Christianity. After their deaths (in the 60s) and after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70, there was a more definitive distancing of Jews and Christians in Rome.^{vi}

Rome was, of course, the umbilical cord of the Roman world, where the ideology of Roman civilization was forged and propagated. Despite centuries of neglect and pillage, Rome dazzles visitors with vast archaeological parks that contain intact Roman buildings including the Colosseum, the Circus Maximus,

ceremonial arches, temples, the Senate building, the Roman archives, the Pantheon, and opulent bath complexes. Roman statues depicting both idealized forms of the emperors and non-idealized images of average citizens fill the museums of Rome. Short day excursions offer even more tangible evidence of Roman life – whether in Pompeii, Herculaneum, or Ostia Antica where vast archaeological parks make entire Roman cities accessible to modern visitors.

It is easy for contemporary Christians to imagine the beliefs, practices and culture of ancient Rome as they walk along the very streets and in the very buildings that the 1st generations of Christians did. Visiting Roman sites make great learning opportunities for considering how Christians witnessed to a new faith and value system in their cultural milieu. What did ordinary Romans think of Christians? How did Christians participate in everyday Roman life when this often meant engaging in local practices that were either at odds with Gospel values or involved contact with pagan cult? How did Roman culture shape early Christianity in terms of gender roles, family life, and social organization? And, if by the time of Constantine the Christian population was sizeable, what had Romans seen in Christianity that appealed to them and how did this begin to shape Roman culture?

Beyond Jewish and Roman heritage sites, visitors find that Rome has the most extensive collection of archaeological evidence for early Christian life in the world. This includes several excavated sites allowing us to visit 1st and 2nd century buildings used as house churches and meeting places for early Christian worship. These sites tell us a lot about the sociology of early



Christianity and the type of worship and organization early Christianity followed. It is a powerfully moving experience to stand in the very rooms that the earliest Christians used for their gatherings! It is even likely that Peter, Paul or other leaders such as Prisca and Aquila may have met with congregations in these sites so that we are literally standing in their footsteps!

Catacombs (underground burial galleries) scattered around the city are quite accessible and tell us a lot about the neighborhoods Christians lived in and their relationship with other ethnic groups – particularly the Jews.^{vii} Many of the catacombs include some of the earliest examples of Christian art in the world. Some of this is symbolic and helps us learn more about the expression of Christian belief.^{viii} There are interesting places where this art incorporates Jewish and Roman symbols into new Christian themes and form. There are some early frescos that help us learn a lot about the form of early Christian worship and the kind of people who led these gatherings. There is a large collection of pre-Constantinian sarcophagi in Rome, marble tombs that include elaborate carvings of Biblical stories that tell us much about the increased number of wealthy Romans who began to convert to Christianity and who celebrated their faith in ways that were consistent with their status.

Rome also offers sites that confirm Biblical references such as an excavation and church where Prisca and Aquila hosted a congregation in their home and the Three Taverns site on the Via Appia where Paul met believers after landing at Pozzuoli. There are sites that confirm extra-Biblical stories about early Christians such as evidence of the great fire of

Nero in 64, a prison where Peter and Paul may have been held, and sites associated with Peter's martyrdom in the Circus of Nero/Caligula and Paul's beheading on the Via Ostiense.

Rome offers another compelling reason for protestant, evangelical and reform Christians to visit. For better or worse, Rome was at the center of the events of the 16th century that led to the Reformation. In the 1400s and 1500s, Rome was a spiritual destination for Christians who wanted to explore their heritage but could no longer travel to Jerusalem due to the Ottoman Empire's occupation of the Holy Land. The great apostles Peter and Paul were buried in Rome and were an important reason for Rome's popularity as a pilgrimage site. Although Martin Luther came to Rome on business for his Order, he also was excited about the spiritual value of traveling to Rome. But he, like many, was scandalized by the corruption and moral decay he discovered while visiting Rome.

At that time, Rome had more prostitutes per capita than any other European city. Clergy were notorious for patronizing brothels, keeping concubines and sexual misbehavior in general. Church Cardinals lived as Renaissance princes, competing with each other in building and artistic projects. Many were part of family dynasties, giving church properties and benefices to nieces and nephews.

At the end of the 1400s, Rome was a moral embarrassment and a crumbling hovel of deserted buildings and fetid streets. Popes began to envision the rebirth of Rome as part of a project of reasserting the pre-eminence of Rome as the Christian capital. As Renaissance artists

uncovered important Roman works of art and studied Roman architecture, many wondered why Christian Rome shouldn't surpass ancient pagan Rome in both cultural virtues and architectural and urban beauty. The dream of urban renewal was born.

St. Peter's Basilica, originally built by Constantine in the 4th century, was at risk of collapse. Pope Julius II commissioned Bramante to begin work on constructing a new basilica. The project would eventually take more than 100 years to complete. During its initial stages, Popes raised money by selling indulgences. This and the moral corruption of Rome scandalized Martin Luther (among others) and inspired him to call for a debate about a number of beliefs, practices and institutions that characterized Roman Christianity.

The loss of large numbers of evangelical and reform Christians from the Roman Catholic Church, the Papacy's diminished prestige among many European leaders, and the discovery of vast new worlds of non-Christians in the Americas and Asia encouraged the Popes to do even more to reclaim Rome as the center of the world. The completion of the new basilica with its massive dome and the edification of other important monuments in and around Rome was done out of response to the Reformation and other cultural shifts of the 1500s and 1600s. Whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, visitors to Rome cannot help but be impressed and dazzled by St. Peter's Basilica, the Vatican Museums, the Sistine Chapel, and the array of urban projects completed in the late 1500s and early 1600s. However, they are also an important backdrop for dialogue and conversation about the events that led to the Reformation, the similarities and differences



between Roman Catholic and Evangelical and Protestant Christianity, and opportunities for greater understanding and cooperation between Christians as we explore our heritage together.

The first site that will be explored in this series is the Basilica of San Clemente. It is a 12th century church built on a 4th century church that is built on 1st and 2nd century Roman

buildings. All of these levels are accessible and provide an unbroken record of Christian life at Rome. The 1st and 2nd century buildings include a warehouse where early Christians met. The site provides important clues about the make up of 1st and 2nd century Christians. It is very easy for visitors to imagine early Christians meeting there and, due to its location near the Forum, it provides an

opportunity to discuss the socio-cultural context of early Christian life.

The article on the Basilica of San Clemente will be available in mid-September, 2006.

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ⁱ This paper is in memory of Don Baker and his passion for early Christian history.

ⁱⁱ Dominic Crossan. *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Galatians.

^{iv} Seutonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, Claudius 25.

^v Dominic Crossan. *In Search of Paul*.

^{vi} *Judaism and Christianity in First Century Rome*. Ed. Karl Donfried and Peter Richardson.

^{vii} Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*.

^{viii} Graydon Synder, *Ante Pacem*.

For additional sources, visit Illume's bibliography at:

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