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Dedication of the basilicas of Saints Peter and Paul

SAINT OF THE DAY

18_11_2020

Saint Peter's Basilica

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Erected on the tombs of Saints Peter and Paul, not far from the places where they suffered martyrdom under Nero, the basilicas dedicated to them are remembered in a single commemoration. By reading the Roman Martyrology, “the fraternity of the Apostles and the unity of the Church are symbolically expressed”.

St Peter's Basilica was built by Constantine during the pontificate of Sylvester I (314-335). According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, the Pope suggested the construction to the Emperor, who with the edict of Milan in 313 had consolidated freedom of worship for Christians (already recognised in 311 by Galerius' edict) and favoured the building of numerous churches, first of all the Lateran Basilica. In order to erect St Peter's Basilica, Constantine had almost all the mausoleums that stood on the Vatican necropolis razed, buried the funeral chambers under landfill and levelled the entire area called the *platea Sancti Petri*. All this was done so that the high altar would coincide perfectly with the tomb of Peter, marked by a small aedicule, known as the “aedicule of Gaius” (from the

name of the Christian who wrote to the heretic Proclus: "If you go to the Vatican or on the Via Ostiense, you will find there the trophies of the founders of the Church").

In its present form, the basilica was rebuilt between the 15th and 17th centuries and consecrated by Urban VIII on 18 November 1626. Archaeological excavations in the 20th century (carried out under the pontificate of Pius XII) confirmed that the basilica was built immediately above the tomb of the Prince of the Apostles, surrounded by several other tombs oriented towards it and bordered by a wall covered in graffiti bearing the names of Christ, Mary, and Peter several times.

The Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls in turn stands on the tomb of the Apostle of the Gentiles, on the Via Ostiense. Here Constantine had a small basilica built, consecrated by Sylvester I on 18 November 324, but then completely rebuilt under Theodosius and Valentinian II to better accommodate the large number of pilgrims. That structure remained substantially intact until the fire of 1823, as a result of which the reconstruction that gave the basilica its present form was carried out.

The fact that Peter and Paul preached in Rome and here concluded the course of their earthly life with martyrdom - the first crucified upside down and the second beheaded - illuminates why the Church is indissolubly Catholic, apostolic and Roman. Precisely when speaking of Rome and the glorious presence of Peter and Paul in accordance with the divine will, Saint Leo the Great said in a famous sermon: "These are the saints who promoted you to such glory, that being made a holy nation, a chosen people, a priestly and royal state and the head of the world through the blessed Peter's Holy See, you attained a wider sway by the worship of God than by earthly government. [...] what your toils in war subdued is less than what the peace of Christ has conquered".