
ROME FOR THE HOLIDAYS: POMP AND HISTORY OF THE VATICAN ADD DRAMA TO CHRISTIANITY'S HOLY CELEBRATIONS

Published: Sunday, December 23, 2001

Illustration: Photos (5)

Dateline: ROME

Source: BY PETER DELEVETT, Mercury News

Jerusalem for Yom Kippur. Mecca for the Hajj. There are certain holy cities, centers of the world's great religions, and to visit them during sacred occasions is an especially moving experience -- no matter your religious leanings.

This time of year, many Christians traditionally head to Bethlehem, the West Bank town where Jesus was born. Another city almost as closely linked to Christ is Rome, which draws tens of thousands to St. Peter's Square for the celebrations of Christmas and the spring Holy Week. My wife and I spent last Easter in Rome, observing Christianity's highest holiday in one of its holiest places.

Springtime normally is a good time to visit Rome, before the summer-vacation crowds invade. Easter weekend, of course, is an exception; most of the hotels book up well ahead of the holiday, and the local B&B association raises its rates 20 percent. Even a week before Easter, on Palm Sunday, more than 50,000 people crowded St. Peter's Square this year for Mass.

We arrive in town the evening of Good Friday, when the Catholic church begins the weekend's solemnities at the Colosseum. Legend has it that thousands of early Christians lost their lives here; tonight, it's the site of the Via Crucis, or the Stations of the Cross, an observance by which Christians recount Jesus' path to Calvary.

The place where we're staying is just blocks from the Colosseum. We hurry over after dropping our bags, the streets streaming with pilgrims. The Colosseum lives up to its name -- it is truly colossal. As we gawk, two Czech men pass by, and one points at the hulk and says something that includes "Russell Crowe."

Torches flicker in every stone archway, giving the massive building a mystical gloam. The plaza between the Colosseum and the nearby ruins of the Temple of Venus and Rome are jammed with people, many holding aloft paper lanterns in the shape of tulips. More torches line the rampart in front of the temple ruins, where a flaming cross flickers.

Against the Colosseum wall opposite, a lone protester holds a banner urging PACE, Italian for peace.

At last a sudden rushing murmur, growing quickly in volume: "Il Papa," the Catholic priest next to me says in Italian, pointing toward the rampart. Indeed, the tiny, hunched figure in white has appeared at the railing, supported on either side by red-capped cardinals. Applause and flashbulb light wash over Pope John Paul II, who raises a hand in greeting.

Back before age and infirmity set in, the pope himself used to lead the Via Crucis. Now, a small cluster of cardinals and acolytes slowly make their way from inside the Colosseum, carrying a light wooden cross through the crowd and toward the rampart. The name of each station is read over the public-address system in Italian, English, French, German, seven languages in all: "Jesus falls for the second time," "Jesus mourns for the women of Jerusalem." At the end of each station, the fragile pontiff wobbles to his knees while a prayer is read; then, the multitude recites the Lord's Prayer in Latin. The chills up my spine owe nothing to the cold night breeze.

Neither my wife nor I am Catholic, but it's impossible not to be moved by the pope's presence, especially given his frailty. His devoutness and humility are palpable.

It's also impossible not to be struck by the juxtaposition: on one side the Roman Colosseum, proudest symbol of the empire that crucified Christ and later persecuted his followers; on the other side, the pope, Christianity's high priest, a direct successor to the first man to hold the job, St. Peter. Indeed, this whole city has been claimed, converted, just as the former Roman centurion Paul was converted -- the vanquished rising up and supplanting the victor.

Museum tour

The next day, Saturday, is a quiet time for Rome's official priesthood, marked by Easter vigils at the Vatican and other churches. We and thousands of other visitors use the day to squeeze in less contemplative activities. The Vatican museums and their legendary Sistine Chapel will be closed Sunday and the next day, Easter Monday, so we wake up early and wait nearly an hour in a line that snakes around the block. The light drizzle turns heavy, and we begin to fear for tomorrow's open-air service in St. Peter's Square. Right in front of the entrance to the museums, we're shocked to see a sign advertising a nearby McDonald's.

Art lovers probably could spend a week in the Vatican museums. The collections cover more than four miles and some 1,400 rooms, crammed with Renaissance art and antiquities from the ancient Etruscans, Rome's earliest inhabitants. But we beeline through the place, feeling vaguely like Philistines, to reach the main attraction: Michaelangelo's Sistine Chapel.

I'm surprised how small the room is. I'd always pictured it as cathedral-sized, but despite the fact that it took Michaelangelo four years to paint the densely detailed ceiling, the rectangular chamber is smaller than an average hotel banquet room.

The colors, too, are surprisingly bright and vivid after a restoration in the 1980s; the Old Testament figures high above us look almost three-dimensional. Unfortunately, no photos are allowed here. Despite the early hour, the chapel is crowded with chattering tourists, shushed every minute or so by the guards.

Our next stop is nearby St. Peter's Basilica, ground zero for papal authority. The massive cathedral hums with activity, workers moving stacks of chairs, tourists gaping at the famous sculptures. Outside, workers twine palm fronds around the cathedral's great central columns, while boxes of live tulips, azaleas and hyacinths wait for gardeners to put them into place.

We pass confession booths where penitents can seek forgiveness in any number of languages and finally stop near the huge main altar, built atop the site where St. Peter is buried. Normally one can visit the underground crypt to see his tomb and those of other popes, but the excavations are closed for the holiday weekend.

Sprinting for seats

Easter morning breaks sunny and cloudless, something of a minor miracle given the season. Tickets (free of charge) are required to attend the papal Mass; we got ours by faxing a request a few days before Easter to the Prefettura della Casa Pontificia (see "Seeing the Pope," Page 1G). Even with tickets, getting good seats requires planning and a bit of luck. The crowds begin forming more than two hours ahead of the 10:30 a.m. mass. We begin to fret when the police start opening other gates before the one where we're penned in, and we watch helplessly as pilgrims sprint for seats. Finally the cops start letting our group through, a slow process as bags are checked and metal detectors passed over bodies. As crowds behind shove me forward, I try not to jostle the pack of tiny Filipina nuns ahead of me.

The Mass truly becomes a mass, the entire square behind us a sea of bobbing heads. The hordes of faithful pass the time by singing songs in Spanish, Swedish, Portuguese. They wave flags and unfurl banners, blow horns and beat tambourines. The place has the feel of a World Cup soccer match. For many of these people, this is a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage, the crowning moment of a creed.

Finally, with a martial blare of drums and trumpets, two columns of the Swiss Guard march into the square, one group decked out in red uniforms and plumed silver helmets, the other company in blue. Dozens of cardinals, bishops, priests, deacons and dignitaries flow out of the cathedral doors and into seats on either side of the pope's throne; the pontiff appears tired and seems to doze during parts of the service, but his voice is strong

during his lengthy sermon. Other parts of the liturgy are delivered in English, Spanish, Russian, Chinese and Arabic.

Oversize TV screens project images of the service for the crowds further back, and a huge camera boom sweeps over the crowd, like at a rock concert. And when Holy Communion is served, lines of white-robed clerics file into the congregation, delivering eucharist wafers to a jostling crowd big enough to fill several football fields.

At the end of the Mass, the pope rides through the crowd in his specialized "Popemobile," giving even those pilgrims in the far end of the square a close-up glimpse.

In the afterglow of this highest of high masses, it occurs to us that we haven't seen a single colored egg or chocolate bunny this Easter. We don't miss them a bit.

SEEING THE POPE

Free tickets are required for public Masses and for the pope's weekly audience, Wednesday mornings except during July. Request them one or two weeks in advance from:

Office for U.S. Visitors to the Vatican, Casa Santa Maria, Via dell'Umilta 30, 00187 Rome; phone 011-39 (06) 690011, fax 011-39 (06) 6791448.

Prefettura della Casa Pontificia, Citta del Vaticano, 00120 Rome; fax 011-39 (06) 6988 5863. Mail or fax request only; confirmation of acceptance can be given by phone, 011-39 (06) 6988 3273.

Church of Santa Susanna, www.santasusanna.org. Online form for Mass and audience tickets -- but the church (the home of the American Catholic Church in Rome) no longer handles requests for Christmas or Easter Mass.

Jesuit Guest Bureau, Borgo Santo Spirito 8, 00193 Rome; phone 011-39 (06) 687 5800, fax 39 (06) 687 5101, www.sjweb.org/english/bureau.htm. Provides assistance for Jesuits and their friends and family.

OTHER OPPORTUNITIES

For private Masses or to get front-row seats for the Wednesday audience, go through your bishop.

The pope administers a blessing every Sunday at noon from his apartment window over St. Peter's Square (except summer, when he gives his benediction at Castel Gandolfo). No ticket required.

For more information on the pope's schedule, Masses and Vatican museums, see www.vatican.va/phomeen.htm

LODGING RECOMMENDATIONS

Casa d'Accoglienza, a pensione inside a convent with bright stucco walls and a quiet garden. A quick bus ride from the Vatican. Single and double rooms with private bath cost \$34 person in high season. Phone +39 (06) 6-32264; fax +39 (06) 6-383808.

Hotel Margutta, a small hotel near the Spanish Steps, comes highly recommended. Rooms start around \$86. Phone +39 (06) 322-3674; fax +39 (06) 320-0395

The B&B Association of Rome is a clearinghouse for more than 50 small bed-and-breakfasts, with prices starting at \$54 for a double room. Phone +39 (06) 55302248, fax +39 (06) 55302259, www.b-b.rm.it.

The Jesuit Guest Bureau has lists of hotels, pensiones and long-term housing at www.sjweb.org/english/bureau.htm.

The American Catholic Church in Rome has a list of recommended convents that accept lodgers, at www.santasusanna.org/comingToRome/convents.shtml.

IN VENICE, A SOMBER CHAPTER OF JEWISH HISTORY

AFTER W.W. II, ONLY SEVEN RETURNED TO ORIGINAL GHETTO

Published: Sunday, December 23, 2001

Dateline: VENICE, Italy

Source: -- Peter Delevett

Italy is a devoutly Catholic country. Almost all her great sights -- the Renaissance treasures in Florence's Uffizi Gallery, the Leaning Tower behind Pisa's cathedral, Venice's St. Mark's Square -- bear Christian themes.

But Venice also is home to one of Europe's most historic Jewish sites. Not far from where St. Mark, author of the first Gospel, lies buried in the sumptuous cathedral that bears his name is the Ghetto, where the city's Jews were forced to live from the early 1500s until 1797.

Venice's Jewish population was an important part of the city's commerce and culture; witness wealthy Shylock, the title character in Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice," who asks the famous question, "Is not a Jew like any other man?"

The city's Jews had good reason to ask that: Centuries before Hitler, the Venetian government forced Jews to identify themselves with yellow badges sewn onto their clothes. Ironically, it was another European dictator, Napoleon, who freed the Jews from the Ghetto when he took the city at the turn of the 19th Century. But most Jews remained in the neighborhood, and the neighborhood retained its name. The very word "ghetto" was coined here, thought to be a derivative of the Italian word for the foundries that once stood nearby.

Enforced Jewish enclaves in Rome, Poland and elsewhere took on the name. And like many of them, the Venice ghetto has a story with an unhappy ending. During World War II, fascists rounded up more than 200 of the neighborhood's residents and shipped them to concentration camps; only seven returned.

Today, the Campo Ghetto Nuovo is a quiet square with a few telltale mezuzahs (prayer boxes) on the doorways. There's a Hebrew museum, stores selling Hannukah menorahs and maps of Israel, several kosher restaurants and half a dozen synagogues, most of them tucked away out of sight. (Tours can be arranged by calling the Museo Ebraico, or Jewish Museum; +39 (041) 715-359).

On several walls of the square are iron sculptures depicting the freight cars that carried the people away, and lists of the names of those killed. But sadly, the place has the feel of a relic that's losing its relevance. Only about 500 Jewish people live in Venice today, just 30 of them in Ghetto, down from 4,000 people in its 17th-century heyday. Gondoliers now troll the square for fares, and kids use the entryway to one old synagogue as a soccer backstop.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

Find information online at www.ghetto.it and www.jewishvenice.org

Caption: PHOTO: KIM DELEVETT -- SPECIAL TO THE MERCURY NEWS

During the 17th century, 4,000 Jews lived in the Venice Ghetto; today about 30 remain. The neighborhood gave its name to similar Jewish enclaves across Europe.

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