

Pilgrimage to the Basilica of St Lawrence Outside-the-Walls

The pilgrimage to the Basilica of St Lawrence Outside-the-Walls was to complete the Fraternity's observance of the traditional Roman spiritual exercise of visiting the Seven Pilgrim Churches. However, as the Scots poet Robbie Burns put it: *"The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft a-gley"* (or as paraphrased in English *"The best-laid plans of mice and men / Go oft awry"*): the rain which had fallen the couple of days before had led to flooding in the basilica and so when our guide, the intrepid Marina found the church closed. Hence the spiritual exercise for the visit had to be conducted on the bus in the hearts of the pilgrims. However, a "virtual visit" is still called for.



The basilica houses the tomb of St Lawrence the famous deacon martyr of the third century. St Lawrence was believed to have been Spanish by birth, and came to Rome and was converted to the Christian faith. When St Sixtus became Pope Lawrence was ordained deacon and took his place among the seven deacons of Rome. In 258 the Emperor Valerian began his persecution of the Church and Pope St Sixtus and the other six deacons were arrested at a ceremony in the catacombs: they were beheaded on the 6th August 258. Lawrence was not with them and so escaped capture for a short time, but that was remedied quickly. On the 10th August Lawrence was burnt to death on a gridiron, dying in good humour. Devotion to him spread quickly throughout the Church and when his relics were transferred to the basilica dedicated to him it quickly became a popular place of pilgrimage.



In the 580's Pope Pelagius II began the construction of a church in honour of the martyr building it around a small oratory which the Emperor Constantine had erected. Later in the 13th century another church was built in front of it and eventually the two were united into the one building. The tomb of St Lawrence is to be found in the confessio beneath the High Altar. Believed to be in the tomb with him are the relics of St Stephen, the First Martyr of the Church. Also buried in the basilica is Blessed Pope Pius IX whose incorrupt body lies in the apse chapel behind the high altar.



Tomb of St Lawrence and St Stephen the Proto-Martyr

The Basilica suffered a great deal of damage during the Second World War when its façade was destroyed by the Allied bombing of Rome on the 19th July 1943. It also witnessed the devastating outcome of that attack where many Romans were killed, their homes destroyed and even the remains of the dead in the nearby Campo Verano Cemetery were blown out of their tombs: on that occasion, as on others, Pope Pius XII himself rushed to the area to tend to the dying and injured and to distribute aid. The façade was rebuilt after the war, but the ancient frescos which had decorated it were beyond repair or preservation and were lost.



Tomb of Blessed Pope Pius IX

With a busy day ahead the bus set off for the next port of call which was Tre Fontane, which was outside the city. Fingers crossed, the pilgrims were hoping the rain would not prevent a visit to the two shrines there.