

Pilgrimage to Tre Fontane



Tre Fontane is the traditional site of St Paul's martyrdom. According to the story he was led out of the city and beheaded. When his head fell from his body it bounced three times upon the ground and at each bounce a spring appeared, hence the name Tre Fontane – Three Fountains. Two shrines are to be found in Tre Fontane, the first is the ancient sanctuary of St Paul preserving the column on which he was beheaded, and three altars built over the three springs from which water still gushes. The second shrine is that of Our Lady of Revelation, marking the spot where Our Lady is said to have appeared to a man who was plotting the assassination of Pope Pius XII.

The site of St Paul's martyrdom is marked by a Cistercian Abbey; the Cistercians, have been the custodians of the shrine for many centuries, first appointed during the lifetime of St Bernard himself. The history of the Abbey is fascinating in that it reflects the trials and tribulations of the Church. The Emperor Charlemagne endowed the Abbey and hence the main gate is known as Charlemagne's Arch. Behind the arch lies a tranquil courtyard which brings the visitor into the sanctuaries. Three churches occupy the complex, the Abbey Church of St Vincent and St Anastasius, the Church of Santa Maria in Scala Coeli and the Church of St Paul in which the column and three fountains are preserved.

The nearby shrine to Our Lady of Revelation marks the place where in 1947 the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared to Bruno Cornacchiola. Cornacchiola, born a

Catholic, had converted to Protestantism, but had also embraced anti-Catholic bigotry and was convinced that the papacy was the source of all mankind's ills. By 1947 he was a committed communist and actively plotting the murder of Pope Pius XII whose ministry communists saw as a threat to the advancement of the socialist revolution.

On the Easter Saturday, 12th April 1942 he took his three children to Tre Fontane for the afternoon: he was no lover of the Abbey, but its homemade chocolate is renowned. As the children were looking for a lost ball, Bruno went into a nearby cave to find his son on his knees staring at something and saying "Beautiful Lady". Bruno saw nothing, but when the two other came in and saw her, he was afraid and in desperation and exasperation shouted out "God help us!" at which point Our Lady appeared to him. During the apparition Our Lady, referring to herself as the Virgin of Revelation, called on him to return to his faith and renounced his plans to kill the pope whom she called "the Supreme Pastor of Christianity". Cornacchiola was converted on the spot.



Grotto of Our Lady of Revelation

The spot quickly became a shrine and a preliminary investigation by the Vicariate of Rome returned a positive judgement. A statue of Our Lady of Revelation was blessed by Pope Pius XII in October 1947, and two years later, the pope received Cornacchiola in audience during which the man begged the pope's forgiveness. The shrine is presently in the care of the Franciscans. A definitive judgement has not yet been made by the Church due in part to Cornacchiola's claim of further, more apocalyptic apparitions which raise suspicions. These later claims do not nullify the original apparition, as the case of La Salette shows, but they do call for the Church to be prudent for the moment. Until that decision is made, the original positive judgement of the Vicariate of Rome remains in place.