

2008

ROME 2008 PILGRIMAGE REPORT

Pilgrimage to the Tomb of St Genesius

Church of Santa Susanna



The Church of Santa Susanna, where the tomb of St Genesius is situated was the first port of call for the Fraternity pilgrims. After a good night's sleep, we had an early start with breakfast in Casa La Salle. Afraid that the early morning traffic rush would leave us late for Mass, which was scheduled for 9.30am, the bus left early. Caution paid off and the group arrived at the church just before it opened. With the few minutes to spare some pilgrims took the opportunity to visit the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria across the street from Santa Susanna, which was already open, to see the famous sculpture of *St Teresa in Ecstasy* by Bernini.



When Santa Susanna opened the group was brought to the Chapel of St Laurence to visit the tomb of St Genesius. The members of the Council brought bouquets of flowers and placed them at the tomb on behalf of the members of the Fraternity. All the petitions received for the novena in August were also

placed on the tomb. The tomb of the saint is enclosed in the wall on the left hand side of the chapel, marked with a simple cross and covered with a table altar. A series of frescos cover the walls above and around the tomb detailing the story of his martyrdom. On the other side of the chapel lies the tomb of Pope St Eleutherius, also a martyr; another series of frescos by the same artist, G.B. Pozzo, detail the story of his martyrdom which was just as cruel as St Genesius'. The main altar of the chapel is dedicated to St Laurence, with frescos by Pozzo decorating the wall and a magnificent painting of his martyrdom over the altar. Buried at the foot of the altar of St Laurence are the ashes of American actor Hugh O'Connor, son of the late Carroll O'Connor. It is in this chapel that the Blessed Sacrament is reserved.



Fr John celebrated the opening Mass of the pilgrimage at the main altar of the church. Welcoming all the pilgrims, he welcomed most especially the members of the Fraternity to their "spiritual home". The first reading was read by Irish actor Colin O'Donoghue. In the homily Fr John spoke about the idea of pilgrimage and the importance of Rome for the Catholics of the world. During the Mass Timmy Regan premiered his new hymn to St Genesius and it was noted by many that it was the perfect setting, singing the praises of our martyr saint whose tomb was just feet away. "*Genesius would have been chuffed*".

Following the Mass the pilgrims had a short tour of the church which is renowned for its frescos and ornate ceiling which is truly spectacular. The tombs of St Susanna, her father St Gabinus and St Felicity of Rome lie beneath the high altar, and pilgrims spent some time in prayer before them. A beautiful image of Our Lady graces the Lady Chapel.



Irish actor Colin O'Donoghue brings flowers for the tomb of St Genesis



Timmy Regan teaches the new Hymn to St Genesis to pilgrims



Fr John celebrates Mass at the main altar of Sta Susanna



Some of the pilgrims at the Mass

The Church of Santa Susanna A Brief History

The present Church of Santa Susanna stands on the ancient house of one Gabinus, supposedly the brother Pope St Caius, and Gabinus' daughter, Susanna. About 280 And the house became a place for Christians for the celebration of the Mass during the years of persecution. Such houses were known as House Churches and there were many of them scattered throughout the city. According to the Roman martrology Susanna and her father were martyred for the faith and house became a shrine to their honour. Under the peace established by Constantine, a church was built on the site in 330, and from at least 565 was dedicated to St Susanna. The building was restored a number of times, but the restoration which produced the Church which stands today was begun by Pope Sixtus V around 1585.



The Conversion of St Genesis, fresco over his tomb

In 1591 Princess Camilla Peretti, sister of the late Pope Sixtus V had the relics of two martyrs translated from the Church of San Giovanni della Pigna, which was now in a bad state of repair, to the newly restored Church of Santa Suzanna. Her brother had been restoring many of Rome's churches and buildings during his pontificate, and had commissioned the renovation of Santa Suzanna's. In memory of him, the Princess commissioned a chapel to be erected in honour of St Laurence, and as part of the spiritual beautification of the chapel, the precious relics of Pope St Eleutherius and the actor, St Genesis, were entombed on either side of the chapel. A young artist, Giovanni Battista Pozzo was engaged to paint the frescos in the chapel. The façade was constructed in 1603 by Carlo Moderno who went on to become one of the architects engaged by Pope Paul V in the building of the new St Peter's.

The church was originally under the care of a community of Cistercian nuns who have had a monastery attached to it for several centuries. In the 19th century it became the national church of American Catholics and the Paulists and Cistercians share the building.

Homily of the Father Director at Santa Susanna

When the Servant of God, Pope John Paul II came to Knock during his visit to Ireland in 1979, he said that he had come to the goal of his pilgrimage to Ireland. Here, on our first morning in Rome, we have come to one of the goals of our pilgrimage: to the tomb of our beloved St Genesius, the patron of our Fraternity. There are more goals to come, our pilgrimages to the tombs of SS Peter and Paul; our visit to the Holy Father in the Vatican, and our pilgrimage to honour our Holy Mother in the Basilica of St Mary Major. But it is appropriate to begin with Genesius so he may accompany us on our pilgrimage: he has invited us and so we follow him as he shares with us the wonders of his native city and the faith of his Church, which is our faith also.

First, a word on this beautiful building, the place Genesius has made his own. The Renaissance façade may fool you, this church is ancient; it is built over the house of St Susanna, one of the house churches of ancient Rome where Christians gathered in secret for Mass each Sunday. Contrary to the common belief, Christians did not go to the catacombs for weekly Mass – they went there on the anniversaries of the death of their martyrs, or to find refuge during serious bouts of persecution. Their regular meeting places were the homes of some of the faithful. This followed the Jewish custom of the Passover Meal and the Last Supper of the Lord which was not celebrated in the Temple or in a synagogue, but in the family home. So the first churches of the Christian faith were family homes: in the Holy Land the places where Jesus lived were transformed into places for the assembly of the faithful – Nazareth, Capernaum, Bethany and the house of the Last Supper. Roman Christians did the same for the same reason, but also out of necessity. Our churches today are still family homes – each parish church is the spiritual home of the Christians of that parish while being the House of God.

This church, the home of St Susanna, is also the spiritual home of a number of saints whose remains are venerated here. Beneath this altar, in the confessio, Susanna's tomb stands alongside that of St Gabinus, her father. They were relatives of the Emperor Diocletian martyred in 293AD: Susanna, who had taken a vow of virginity, had refused to marry a pagan at Diocletian's command: it was demanded of her to conform and offer a sacrifice to Jupiter: she refused. She was beheaded on the orders of the emperor himself. Her father, who had become a priest, was arrested and starved to death.

With the end of the persecution their home was transformed into a church and bodies were brought back in 330AD. Near their tombs is that of St Felicity of Rome who was martyred with her seven sons about a hundred and fifty years before Susanna and Gabinus. This St Felicity is the patroness of parents who have lost a child in death. Over to my right, in the Chapel of St Laurence where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, two tombs are to be found. On the right side of the chapel is that of Pope St Eleutherius, the twelfth successor of St Peter, who was martyred in the year 189AD, and on the other side the tomb of our dear patron and friend, St Genesius of Rome, Actor and Martyr. Genesius' tomb is simple: it is a wall tomb. Beneath a table altar you will see a simple cross on a marble panel – his relics rest behind that cross. In 1591 his remains were moved from the Church of San Giovanni della Pigna to decorate a chapel erected in memory of Pope Sixtus V by his sister. We might say that he is an accidental resident – perhaps. In this holy place, we are indeed in exalted company.

This city which we are visiting, the Eternal City is a city of saints. It is the mother city of our Church, the diocese of our Holy Father, the Vicar of Christ, the place of martyrdom and burial place of the great apostles, Peter and Paul. Over the next week we will visit those places which are dear to the hearts of over a billion Catholics; we will trace our roots, our origins and our apostolic inheritance. This city is our home, these churches our homes: we are coming home to claim our heritage. But lest we get caught up in the physical places, we must remember that they are symbolic of a heritage which is still ours even if this city was razed to the ground. They are symbolic of our faith and of our real home on earth: the Catholic Church. We do not come here as strangers, but as Catholics; children of Mother Church. As pilgrims we are here in the Eternal City to be renewed in the eternal, in our faith in Christ, founded on the Apostles, witnessed to by the martyrs, and lived by billions down the centuries: of a communion in Christ and as symbolised by his Vicar, Benedict XVI.

As members of the Fraternity of St Genesius, coming here with members of our families and friends, we come to the place where our patron, also a martyr of the faith, is buried. How wonderful that his witness and venerable resting place should be in the city which symbolises our union with Christ. This should remind us of the importance of our mission as members of the Fraternity: of the Church and

faithful to it as the Body of Christ, we live, work and pray within the Church to bring others to the Church, into the Body of Christ. As members of the Fraternity, we must see that we are participating in the mission of the Church: each time we offer our prayers and sacrifices, we do so as missionaries. As St Thérèse is patroness of the missions having never left her convent, but having prayed fervently and making sacrifices, we become missionaries in the same way. As members of Genesius' family we are the home which he is building for Christ and for all those who are under his patronage. Today, he welcomes you to his Roman home and now encourages you to welcome others into yours – into your hearts; into the spiritual home of the Church and into family he is building in the Fraternity: a family for Christ. Dear members of the Fraternity, welcome home!

Pilgrimage to the tombs of saints and martyrs is an ancient practice. In the early days, during the persecution, the Romans and discrete Christian visitors to Rome went to the Catacombs to venerate the remains of the martyrs – we will visit the Catacombs tomorrow morning. The practice continued. We all know of *The Canterbury Tales*: this work is set against the background of a pilgrimage to the tomb of St Thomas à Beckett in Canterbury. Those of you who know the work will know that some of the pilgrims turned out to be pretty strange creatures. Our lives are a pilgrimage: Vatican II takes the image of the pilgrim people as one for the Church. The daily events of life, the joys and yes, even the trials, are milestones along the way. Those we meet are fellow travellers, and our destination is the home of the Father – the kingdom of heaven – and so the symbolism of these churches is even deeper: they symbolise the life which is to come – heaven. The saints are fellow travellers, companions who have already made it home, and from their place in the Father's house, they guide us on the right road. In a pilgrimage to a shrine church and the tomb of a saint we are on a spiritual journey to our heavenly home, to the communion of saints, and so we make our churches beautiful to reflect the eternal home they symbolise. You will see many beautiful churches: they have been beautified over the centuries by countless Christians who wanted to create, as limited as it may be, a reflection of the beauty of the life to come.

And so we have come on pilgrimage here to honour Genesius. In his life we see one who was converted from the loneliness of the life of an outsider to the joy of life in the community of the Church. As the *Passio*, the Acts of his martyrdom tell us, he hated Christians. His parents and other relations had been

converted to the faith and this, it seems led to difficulties in their relationships: he tells us he hated them. While he seemed to have it all: talent, fame, perhaps even material rewards, his life was empty. He craved more fame, more money, and more honour: such cravings are always indicative of a person who is lonely, unsatisfied: something was missing from his life. He sought to ease his cravings and make a mockery of Christianity: it was then that Christ entered into his life: at the most unexpected moment. The solitary actor, the maverick, found his peace in the Heart of Christ. He longed for the sacrament of baptism which he was mocking, the sacrament of incorporation into Christ and his Church. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why he desires to have the Fraternity in the heart of the Church, participating in its ministry. Perhaps it is appropriate that he is buried across from a pope in a church built on the house-church of St Susanna.

Genesius speaks to the world of Jesus Christ and of his Church, and reminds us, first of all, to give thanks for the gift of the faith we have been given. Like many others he was born outside it and had to struggle to find it and enter it. We never had to search for it, although some of us may have had to come back to it to see its beauty. Genesius then reminds us of our baptism: of the day Christ reached down to us and brought us into his own life. We already have our place in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and in the Heart of his Mother: it is ours, but we may need to come to see what this means for our lives. In baptism we are commissioned to live holy lives, not merely for our sakes, but for the sake of the Church and for the world. In the holiness of our lives the Church is made truly beautiful, a divine ornament; in the holiness of our lives, men and women can come to recognise the face of Jesus Christ and come to know that he is seeking them out. Genesius says to us, not from the tomb, but from heaven: Christian know yourself; know and love your God; bring others to know and love him. As we begin our pilgrimage – while taking a few days for rest and relaxation, we may also use these days to be renewed in our faith.