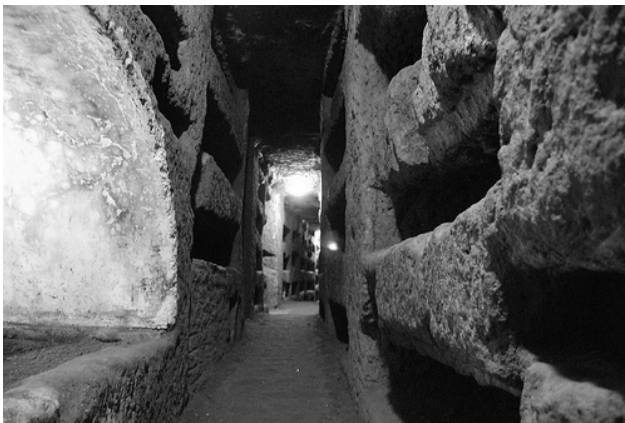


Pilgrimage to the Catacombs of St Callistus

On Sunday morning there was another early start as the pilgrims had reserved a tour to visit the Catacombs of St Callistus. These Catacombs are finest of the many which surround the ancient city of Rome. Here in these subterranean tunnels the remains of Rome's Christians were buried for centuries, among them many of those who suffered martyrdom for the faith. The Catacombs of St Callistus, called after Pope St Callistus, was the resting place of a number of the early popes and many martyrs among them St Cecilia.

The group left the Casa La Salle by bus and was taken along the Via Appia, Ancient Rome's most important road. Many historical sites line the road and as the bus negotiated its way through the narrow streets and corners, we passed the Circus Maximus where many of the martyrs died (and where the chariot race for the movie *Ben Hur* was filmed), the majestic ruins of the Baths of Caracalla, the Church of the Quo Vadis marking the spot where Jesus appeared to St Peter, and passing along the magnificent walls of Rome, many of which are still standing.



The Catacombs were created first by the Jews of Rome and then Christians to bury their dead – pagan Roman cremated their dead, but this was unacceptable to the early Christians. As they could not afford tombs, they simply burrowed into ground, into the soft rock, to hollow out the various burial chambers. Over the centuries as more space was needed, they simply dug down deeper, and so each set of Catacombs consist of many levels. In the Catacombs of St Callistus only a couple of levels are open, the others are unsafe and some of them still have to be excavated properly.

The Catacombs are extensive, and so pilgrims must be accompanied by a tour guide. A long steep staircase brought us into the cool, dark corridors in



which are lined with empty tombs or loculi. While most have been opened, the remains most likely turned to dust, there are quite a number which are still sealed. Punctuated along the corridors are various chambers – family burial vaults.

One of these vaults is the Crypt of the Popes where nine popes were buried – all of them martyred. This chamber leads into another in which St Cecilia was first laid to rest. Her incorrupt remains were translated to a basilica built in her honour in 821. A copy of the famous reclining statue of the saint occupies the niche which was once her tomb.

The visit proved to be a grace-filled experience as the group touched for a moment the beginnings of the Church, the heroism of the martyrs and the faith of the many unknown Christians who lived and suffered for their faith in difficult times. The tour ended in one of the vaults with Fr John leading the group in prayer, remembering in particular the martyrs who had been buried there.



Sr Paula, Brigid Hogan and Anne Barden at the Catacombs