

Pilgrimage to the Basilica of St Sebastian



Further along the Via Appia, not far from the Catacombs of St Callistus, lie the Catacombs of St Sebastian over which the Basilica of St Sebastian Outside the Walls was built. The Catacombs are called after their more famous martyr, St Sebastian, and the basilica contains his remains. The Basilica is also one of the seven Pilgrim Basilicas of Rome and it contains numerous relics and works of art, among them the stone slab from the Via Appia reputedly preserving the



footprints of Jesus, imprinted during the Quo Vadis apparition to St Peter.

The story of St Sebastian's martyrdom is well known and often depicted in works of art, although many think he died from the arrows. In fact he survived this assault, was nursed back to health by a holy woman, Irene. It was when he returned to Rome after his convalescence that he was captured again and this time beheaded. The saint's body now rests beneath a magnificent tomb on which is a marble sculpture of the martyr depicted in the tradition manner – pierced with arrows.

The basilica is almost hidden away on the Via Appia – you come upon it suddenly. The group's short visit comprised of some time in prayer before the tomb, a brief tour of the basilica and a moment or two to look at the relics enshrined there. Apart from an arrow reputedly to be one of those used to strike Sebastian, the Relics Chapel also holds the actual slab from the Via Appia on which Jesus' footprints are said to be imprinted – the slab in the Church of the Quo Vadis is a copy. The basilica is also renowned for its magnificent ceiling at the center of which is a relief depicting St Sebastian's martyrdom.



Stone with what is believed to be the imprint of Jesus' feet

Below the basilica are the catacombs of St Sebastian where the martyr was originally interred. These catacombs also held the bodies of SS Peter and Paul for a short period of time during the Emperor Valerian's persecution in 258, being considered inconspicuous enough to avoid pillage. Later, however, in the 9th century, the remains of St Sebastian himself had to be evacuated and taken to St Peter's Basilica for safe keeping for fear the advancing Saracens would desecrate them. Although the group did not have time to visit them, the catacombs can be accessed quite easily. One of the smallest of the catacombs around the Rome, these are also, unfortunately, one of the least preserved.