

## Pilgrimage to the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme

### *Shrine of the Relics of the Passion*



As the Fraternity tour bus pulled up at the Basilica of Santa Croce, a team of motorcycle enthusiasts greeted the pilgrims. Bikes of all colours (the most startling was the canary yellow) provided a festal atmosphere in the Basilica square. A happy group entered the Basilica and almost as a reminder that when in Italy one can never make plans, the group discovered that an ordination ceremony was taking place and so a visit was not possible. Ever resourceful, the guide, Marina, reconfigured the itinerary and after a few moments of prayer in the vestibule, the group boarded the bus for an early lunch.



*The Welcoming Committee: the man on the canary yellow motorbike.*

Returning a couple of hours later, refreshed and keen, the Basilica was empty and the visit proper began. The Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme

(the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem) stands on an earlier Basilica constructed around the year 325 by the Empress St Helena as part of her palace. Returning from the Holy Land after her adventures had identified the Holy Places and yielded a whole host of relics, the holy empress and her son, Constantine were keen to construct a church worthy of the relics of the Lord and in which they would be enshrined for the veneration of the faithful: the present Basilica, restored in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, modified in the 16<sup>th</sup> and then restored and beautified in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, continues to fulfill this intention. The Basilica is small in comparison with the other major basilicas in the city.



*The Chapel of Relics*

The relics preserved in the Basilica are numerous and important. St Helena first had a layer of soil from Jerusalem poured out under the tiles so the Basilica could literally be built on the soil of Jerusalem (hence the title). In the Chapel of Relics the major Relics of the Lord's passion are preserved. Behind protective glass reliquaries contain pieces of the True Cross, two thorns from the Crown of Thorns, one of the Holy Nails, fragments of the Scourging Pillar and St Thomas' finger which is believed to have been one which touched the Lord's wounds. The Title which was placed over the head of Jesus on the Cross is also on display – the words, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, can be seen written in Hebrew, Latin and Greek, as the Gospel testifies.

Also preserved in the chapel is a piece of wood believed to be from the cross of St Dismas, the Good Thief, and a facsimile of the Shroud of Turin which is the centerpiece of an exhibit of the famous Relic.



*Reliquary of the True Cross (detail)*



*The Reliquary of the Title*

The Basilica also contains the tomb of the Venerable Antonietta Meo, the six year old girl whose Cause for beatification is at an advanced stage. Suffering from bone cancer, Antonietta experienced visions, dictated letters of profound spiritual wisdom and composed a prayer to Jesus in which she offered her sufferings to him. Her holiness impressed all who knew her, and with a number of miracles being attributed to her intercession, her Cause was opened. She died in 1937, and her remains were interred in the Basilica in 1999. A small museum near her tomb preserves a number of relics including some of her letters, drawings, clothes and toys.



*Reliquaries of the finger of St Thomas, fragments of the Scourging Pillar, and thorns from the Crown of Thorns.*



*The Venerable Antonietta Meo, and her tomb (below)*



*Close-up of the Reliquary of the Holy Nail*

