

The Rise of Christian Rome

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The Empire Becomes Christian

It was during the *Pax Romana*, the era of “Roman Peace,” when Christianity began to spread. But its story in Rome is so important that it deserves a closer look. The city’s transition from a pagan empire to the spiritual heart of Christendom is one of the most incredible transformations in history. When you visit Rome’s churches and holy sites, you’re not just looking at old buildings; you’re tracing the footsteps of its earliest believers who came here in a time of great danger.

The first Christians in Rome were a small, often persecuted group. They met in secret, often in people’s homes in the neighborhood of Trastevere, which today is still known for its narrow, winding streets and historic charm. This is considered one of the earliest Christian communities in the city, a quiet beginning for what would become a global movement.



Two of the most important figures in this story are the apostles Peter and Paul. You can find their influence everywhere in Rome.

St. Peter: The Rock of the Church

Peter came to Rome to spread the message of Jesus. He lived and preached in the city for many years, laying the foundation for the Roman Church. His journey and his eventual death are marked by several significant sites. He was martyred during the reign of Emperor Nero, likely in the area of Nero’s Circus. The Circus itself is no longer there, but its spot is where the magnificent St. Peter’s Basilica stands today. The altar of the basilica is directly over the site of his burial. Another powerful landmark is the Church of Domine Quo Vadis. The name means “Lord, where are you going?” and it’s said to be the place where Peter, while fleeing persecution, had a vision of Jesus, which convinced him to turn back and face his martyrdom in Rome.



St. Paul: The Apostle to the Gentiles

Paul also came to Rome, but as a prisoner. His letters to the early Christian communities, including his famous letter to the Romans, were a major influence on the religion’s development. While imprisoned in Rome, he was under house arrest, but he was still able to preach. His final resting place is at the magnificent Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, one of Rome’s most important churches. The basilica is built over his tomb and is a truly breathtaking sight.



Relics throughout Rome

In addition to the main basilicas, Rome is home to countless relics and sites that connect travelers directly to biblical figures. For example, the Church of St. John Lateran, the Pope's official cathedral, holds the relics of the heads of St. Peter and St. Paul. Another truly unique site is the *Scala Sancta*, or "Holy Stairs." This is a set of 28 marble steps that was a part of Pontius Pilate's palace in Jerusalem, which Jesus himself climbed on his way to trial. They were brought to Rome by St. Helena in the 4th century. Pilgrims today ascend them on their knees as an act of devotion, a powerful reminder of the passion of Christ. The city is full of these hidden treasures, and for a traveler who knows what they're looking for, they offer a direct, tangible link to the earliest days of Christianity.



Transformation of Rome

Ultimately, the story of Christian Rome is a story of profound transformation. The very empire that persecuted Christians eventually adopted their faith. Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in the 4th century, and by the end of that century, it had become the state religion. The popes, as the successors of Peter, took on a growing political and spiritual power that would fill the void left by the fallen Western Roman Empire. The city, once the capital of an earthly empire, became the spiritual capital of a new, global community of faith. When you walk through its ancient streets, you are walking through the layers of this history, from the pagan emperors to the humble apostles, all of whom left their mark on one of the world's most incredible cities.



On top of that, did you know that there are roughly 1,000 churches in Rome, many of which are the most famous and beautiful churches in the world. How many do you think you'll be able to visit when you're there?



Reflection Questions

1. Rome changed from a pagan empire to the center of Christianity. How might walking through Rome's old streets, knowing this history, make you feel like you're connecting with the Christian past in a powerful way, especially the likes of Peter and Paul?
2. Early Christians in Rome, like Peter and Paul, faced great danger. What do the stories about places like the catacombs or the Church of Domine Quo Vadis tell you about the bravery and faith of these first believers?
3. Peter and Paul are called two of the most important figures in the story of Christian Rome. How do the various sites in Rome connected to them (like St. Peter's Basilica or St. Paul Outside the Walls) help visitors understand their influence on Christianity?
4. Rome has more relics, that is, physical objects from early Christians, than perhaps any city on earth. How do these kinds of physical objects and sites offer a "tangible link" (a real, touchable connection) to the earliest days of Christianity, and why might that be important to someone visiting Rome?
5. Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity, and eventually, it became the official religion of the Roman Empire. How did this major change transform Rome itself, making it the spiritual capital of a new, global community of faith instead of just an earthly empire?

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