

Rome and Celio

Arrival | Three Thousand Years | Visual Archeology on the Metro | Celio and Gentrification | Mothers & Daughters | San Clemente & Mithraeum: A Palimpsest of Rome | The Gesù | The Colors of Rome | Italian Dining | Christmas Bells at Midnight | Santi Giovanni e Paolo | Roman Ways and *Convivenza* | New Year's Eve Fireworks | Long Perspectives and Broad Foundations

Roma Caput Mundi

“One never goes to Rome for the first time; one only returns.”

Jorge Luis Borges (1899 - 1986)

BENVENUTI A ROMA

I arrive at Leonardo da Vinci International Airport -- which everyone calls Fiumicino -- and am greeted by my friend G, an Italian-speaking American expatriate living in Rome. I suggest we take a taxi, though G had planned that we would take the train into the city. He negotiates with a taxi driver and we get in his car. All the way into the city, G and the driver carry on an animated conversation about the latest twist in the political kaleidoscope..

As we speed along the *autostrada*, I get my first glimpse of Italy: new, reddish-pink, eight-story apartment buildings that line the ridges just beyond the highway. The transition from fields to urban density is abrupt and could not be more different from the low-density industrial and suburban sprawl that rings American cities. Medieval-looking towers crown the hilltops. Here and there are old stone farm buildings falling into ruin as farms atrophy ahead of the seaward lava flow of Roman urbanization. (The real country you are visiting is in the unvisited blur between the airport and the city-center tourist sites.) We pass some ultramodern complexes including the former Esso headquarters, a radically modern megastructure that looks like an expandable letter rack designed by Julio Lafuente and Gaetano Rebecchini in 1978. Closer to the city, Mussolini's EUR appears on the horizon with its Palazzo della Civiltà del Lavoro, a cubic composition of arches, and its foil, the dome of the Moderne Church of Saints Peter and Paul. (The Esposizione Universale di Roma of 1942 was intended to showcase Italian Fascism but was preempted by World War II.) We pass over the yellow Tiber, but the river is not fully visible from the highway. Rome is situated at the first place where the Tiber could be forded. That ford below Tiber Island, in the heart of the city, was the point of contact between the Latins on the left (city) bank and the Etruscans on the right (Vatican) bank.

As we enter the city great chunks of history appear scattered among the press of modern buildings. We pass pagan-looking Saint Paul Outside the Walls with its colonnaded forecourt added in 1893 and giant statue of the militant evangelist with his divisive sword of Truth looking like a Roman war god. As we pass up the Viale Aventino, the white Pyramid of Cestia suddenly appears at the side of the road. Next is a now-isolated bastion of the old city walls, then the

sunken Circus Maximus looking like a soccer pitch. I glimpse the tawny Arch of Constantine to the left, pass the gray, pockmarked hulk of the Coliseum, and then quickly ascend the gentle Colle Oppio (Oppian Hill) to G's apartment block that faces the Parco Oppio, the site of mad Nero's buried but never forgotten Golden House.

As G hops out of the taxi to retrieve my bag from the trunk, the fare on the meter reads €49 and I hand the driver a €50 bill. The driver then punches a button and the fare jumps up to €59. G comes back and a dramatic squabble, full of shouting and gesticulations, erupts over the fare. I wait for my cue from G and then give the driver another €10 note. The owner of the café in the ground-floor corner of the building comes out to watch the show. With harrumphs all around, the driver hands me a shiny €1 coin and speeds away. The coin features Leonardo da Vinci's circa 1490 nude *Vitruvian Man* on the reverse, his arms and legs outstretched to measure the world.

MY HOTEL IN THE VIA MARCO AURELIO

My budget hotel is in Rioni Celio, near G's apartment but across the wildly busy street that rings the Coliseum. Streetcars, buses, trucks, cars, motor scooters and motorcycles round the oval bend like the chariot race in *Ben Hur*. There are white stripes at crosswalks, and vehicles do slow down or even stop for pedestrians, but it's a bold move to step out into the fast-flowing torrent of metal and rubber and crazed Italian drivers. G warns me that the Romans can smell fear and that you just have to plunge in. Well, okay, when in Rome . . . even if only briefly.

My hotel is on the ground floor of a marvelously ancient-looking building with a Mannerist façade, big louvered shutters, and plants and classical statues sprouting from the terraces on its top (fourth) floor. The hotel is a recent insertion into the solid pile; the upper floors are still apartments. My room is small but immaculate, with a bath paneled with slabs of marble. It seems to want to be a Roman bath. The new doors, hardware, and double-pane windows with white metal frames are all very well made. The room is outfitted with a desktop computer and free Internet access but no telephone. I have been in touch via email with the manager, V, who speaks some English. He and his wife, B, who is the housekeeper, having observed the many books I stack on my small table and my laptop, soon figure out that I am a writer. A few days into my stay, B rearranges the coins on my desk, putting the €2 coin with Dante's head on its front and center. At Christmas, I buy a red poinsettia for the front desk. V puts his hand on his heart and bows slightly when he thanks me. My window faces Via Marco Aurelio, a narrow street that is blessedly peaceful. I find comfort in living on a street named after the last of the five good emperors, the Stoic who wrote his immortal *Meditations* between 170 and 180 CE. The carabinieri occupy a late nineteenth-century mansion with a rose garden next door. They get their name from the short rifles called carbines issued to them when they were founded in Turin in 1814 on a military model.

THE DRAMATIC PULSES OF ROMAN GROWTH AND DECLINE

Almost three thousand years of continuous occupation have made Rome one of the most complex urban sites in the world. The history of Rome is one of dramatic growth in the classical period as she conquered the world. The Roman Empire reached its peak under the reign of Trajan in 98-117 CE with a probable population of 75 million. Rome itself had from 1 to 2 million at its imperial height. The city suffered a spectacular decline after invaders cut her aqueducts during the Byzantine-Gothic war of 535-553. By about 1347 CE, the city had only about 17,000 residents which nonetheless made her one of Europe's largest cities. There was sputtering recovery under the Renaissance and Baroque popes who rebuilt the aqueducts, then stagnation under later papal rule. The city began growing again after Italian unification in 1870 when Rome became the capital of the new nation-state. There was marked growth from 1870 to about 1920, followed by accelerated growth after 1920. The years between 1945 and 1970 saw tremendous growth as postwar Italy boomed and the city expanded greatly in extent. Growth plateaued in the 1970s and began to decline after 1990. Today, it is growing slightly again. By 2020, the population of the city was 2.8 million. (Italy as a whole had a population of 60 million in 2020.) About 90 percent of Romans are Italian and the rest are immigrants. Before about 1970, the newcomers were from central and southern Italy. Today migrants from the Philippines, Romania, Egypt, Bangladesh and China predominate. The metropolitan area reached 3.8 million in 2020. Italians are having fewer children, a trend visible in the city since 1870. As the city becomes ever more expensive, families are becoming smaller. The shape of Rome's population pyramid has changed radically since 1950. What was a typical distribution of ages with many young people has changed dramatically as the much lower fertility rate of the last thirty years reshapes Italian society. Today, fewer Romans are under the age of twenty and the number of children is only a little over half what it was in 1950. Romans are also older and, as is typical of nonindustrial cities, there are more women than men. There has been a drastic decline in those with only a primary school education and a marked increase in university graduates. This, too, is typical of gentrifying post-industrial capital cities.

Streets, ruins, buildings and open spaces from many eras crowd Rome's historic center in a bewildering jumble. The juxtaposition of great chunks of history with modernity is *the* essential Roman experience. The layers visible in the Roman urban fabric include classical Rome; medieval or early Christian Rome; papal Rome in its Renaissance, Baroque and Neoclassical expressions; the post-1870 Rome of the unified Kingdom of Italy and the Liberal era; the Rome of Mussolini from 1922 to Fascist Italy's defeat in 1943; and contemporary Rome, the mostly unplanned city that expanded enormously after 1945. In this book, I sort out the architectural landmarks of Roman history chronologically in order to make sense of them. But many notable sites fuse elements from several eras and my sorting by periods is only approximate. Rome also has the distinction of containing within itself a separate state: the Vatican City State and its various extraterritorial enclaves. The Vatican is the center of the globe-spanning Roman Catholic Church and makes Rome a double-yoked egg.

VISUAL ARCHAEOLOGY: THE BEAUTIFUL FACES OF THE ROMANS AND DIONYSUS IN THE SUBWAY

I take the Metro from Termini back to the Coliseum station near my hotel. It's rush hour and the trains are packed. But Romans smile and don't act rude, even though no one except pickpockets can like these sardine-like conditions. The train is filled with well-dressed women, silver-haired businessmen, and cool-looking young dudes in racing jackets. Traveling the Metro and trams of Rome is visual archaeology. Here and there are living Romans with the coarse faces of Roman Republican busts or refined Renaissance portraits. Since Rome is at the center of Italy, equally between the north and the south, and since she has always drawn Italians to cushy jobs in the capital, there are faces both northern and southern in this city. Some youths have blond hair and green eyes and make me think of the Alps and Botticelli's sweet angels. Other visages are dark and swarthy with black eyes and jet hair and link Rome with Calabria, Sicily and North Africa. Now and then I spy a profile that's ineffably noble. It's stunning how beautiful some of these Roman faces are. Some of the smiling old are as beautiful as the young.

As I pass out of the station, I once again see the Dolce & Gabbana ad that's stuck in my mind. It shows a partially clad Dionysian hunk with long dark hair, a pouty mouth, and a sultry look, dressed in tight black leather pants. From his belt hangs a silver chain, a high-fashion version of a Hells Angels's wallet chain. A dozen silver Neapolitan *cornuti* (phallic horns) are suspended from the chain. This languid, sexy, pagan demigod pops up across the city on billboards and subway hoardings. Pagan tastes bubble up in today's seductive Italian advertising. No one seems to notice, but everyone probably does.

CELIO: A ROMAN NEIGHBORHOOD OF THE 1880s–1890s AND GENTRIFICATION

“The dominant style of [United] Italy was derived primarily from the developed style of the high Renaissance, which had been perfected in Rome by Sangallo, Michelangelo, and Vignola. . . . In a sense the sixteenth century had never entirely died in Italy. . . .”

Carol L. V. Meeks quoted in Luigi Barzini, *From Caesar to the Mafia* (New York: The Library Press, 1971), 245.

“What the various enemies of Rome did not succeed in achieving, neoliberal economics and especially a rampantly speculative housing market, along with a declining birthrate, are now putting into effect. . . . [T]he restructuring [restoration and updating] of old palazzi [apartment buildings] has brought into the zone a considerable number of absentee landlords and small, wealthy families, while there is some evidence to suggest that the declining population actually reflects a deliberate policy of gentrification designed to turn the entire historic center into a preserve for the privileged.”

Michael Herzfeld, *Eviction from Eternity: The Restructuring of Modern Rome* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 39. Gentrification and social change in Rione Monti which abuts Rione Celio.

The name Celio memorializes an Etruscan king. Its small grid of rectangular blocks is draped across a gentle slope. It is a small island surrounded by wide rivers (the busy main roads). It is framed by the Coliseum; the narrow Via San Giovanni in Laterano (an extension of the Forum's Via Sacra) leading to Saint John Lateran, the bishop of Rome's cathedral; the Via Claudia with the ruins of the Temple of the Divine Claudius in a bluff-top park across the street; and the walled compound of the Military Hospital of Celio. The Coliseum is to the west, the verdant hill of the Parco de Traiano to the north, the massive bastion-like apse of Santi Quattro Coronati to the east, and the green hilltop of the Parco del Celio to the southwest. The Via di San Giovanni in Laterano along the northern edge of the neighborhood links the Coliseum with the bishop of Rome's cathedral. The Via Celimontana, lined with commerce, bisects the neighborhood.

The buildings in the Celio are mostly six stories, with shops along the narrow sidewalks and apartments upstairs. The stucco façades boast heavily framed windows with louvered shutters. Most of them date from the 1880s and 1890s. Many now have modernized interiors, like my first-floor hotel, though you wouldn't know it by looking at the buildings' romantically patinated façades. A liberalization of real estate law in 1998 allowed building owners to impose four year leases renewable for a single further four-year period after which landlords could refuse to renew leases and raise rents to what they will. If the building was in serious disrepair, as many were after decades of low rents and no investment, the building could be emptied with no right of return for tenants. Traditional landlords (including religious confraternities and churches that had been willed properties) began selling their run-down buildings to big investors and real estate companies who could afford to wait to boost rents. A wave of upgradings and evictions has squeezed out the old artisanal and working-class population and replaced it with middle-class professionals. Modern apartment buildings built on corner lots have open balconies and parking garages in their basements. Their rents are set by whatever the market will bear. Rome being Rome, building regulations are constantly being flouted. Italy being Italy, periodic *condoni* (pardons) allow scofflaws to pay a small fine to legalize their transgressions.

There are a few luxurious reworkings of old buildings, such as the Hotel Capo d'Africa, an essay in contemporary high style Italian design. Its Christmas decorations attached to its entry posts look like Expressionist coral branches. The small bar, one wall of which is studded with black leather rosettes, is ultramodern. But mostly Celio houses middle-class Romans who pop in and out of the local cafés and stand and talk at intersections as they go about their lives. The businesses are a mix of restaurants serving tourists on the wide street facing the Coliseum and trattorias and stores for locals on the narrow inside streets. A post office, small cafés, shops, bank branches, and a Suzuki motorcycle agency enliven the various ground floors of the buildings. There are also tobacconists, grocery stores, a small supermarket, tiny luxury-goods shops, a print shop, and and small art galleries. A few artisanal operations survive as well: an upholsterer and a printing plant. Over the many years of my repeat visits, gentrification has slowly squeezed out the artisans. Celio has two police stations, one on each side of my hotel, and there is less graffiti here than in other parts of Rome. (Graffiti—alas, an Italian word—is contemporary Rome's blight.) Several transit lines serve the neighborhood and the Coliseum Metro station is a short

walk away. Varied and lively, yet quiet, clean, and safe, Celio is an ideal inner city neighborhood, though sadly lacking in children.

In the northwest corner of the neighborhood, across the busy road surrounding the Coliseum, are the ruins of the Ludus Magnus, a training school for gladiators. About half its oval practice arena is excavated. It is smaller but with the same orientation to the sun as the monster stadium across the street to which it was once linked by a tunnel. Here, trainers taught tough men the various kinds of extreme fighting that the sadistic Roman mob loved and that ended in death. It feels sinister. Across the narrow street, over its unexcavated half, is Celio's one gay bar and bistro, Coming Out, with a rainbow signboard. It attracts a young crowd that spills out onto the sidewalk that looks down into the sunken ruins of the gladiator school. Traditional Rome has only a handful of gay bars and saunas. Modern Milan to the north is the center of gay activism in contemporary Italy.

THE CAFÉS IN CELIO AND THE ALL-KNOWING BARISTA

My hotel provides me with a ticket each morning good for coffee and a pastry (*cornetto*) at one of the cafés around the corner on Via Celimontana. I usually get my breakfast at the Twin Bar. The coffee is good and the price is reasonable, only eighty cents. The fresh-squeezed orange juice is sweet and pungent—a revelation! Most mornings I take my laptop to the empty back room of the café, its walls lined with contemporary paintings of Roman faces in vivid acrylics, and record my previous day's experiences. All day long, Romans drift into the café and stand at the narrow marble bar where they face the *barista* with his shiny chrome machine behind him. He sets a small saucer, cup and spoon before them and they order. He executes a practiced performance with coffee and steam and produces a perfect cup of stimulating elixir. This ritual brings people close together in changing configurations from morning through the afternoon. It's mostly men who frequent this café, though some women drop by as well, sometimes with children in strollers who are served steamed milk.

The radio here, as in so many Roman cafés, is permanently tuned to the American soft rock station and English lyrics drift through the air. The *barista* sings along softly in snatches of English. Occasionally a patron will be quite dramatic in recounting some incident to the *barista*. He will step away from the bar into the center of the room, wave his arms, raise his voice, and make his point. At that moment, the café assumes its role as a small theater in which the day's news is recounted. The *barista* must know everything that's going on in the Celio.

Cops are constantly in and out of my café. One morning, a fine-looking, black-haired carabinieri stands next to me at the bar. I notice his well-tailored black uniform with blood-red piping on the tunic and a wide crimson stripe down each trouser leg. He's packing a serious, modern handgun in a black leather holster but has none of the random junk that American cops collect around their thick midsections. His smart black cap is adorned with a silver emblem of a flaming bomb, while his epaulets are silver with red edging. Italians love uniforms.

AUTOMOBILES, MOTOR SCOOTERS, AND DUCATI MONSTERS: CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN IDOLS

Prosperous Rome is overrun with vehicles, with seventy-two cars for every one hundred Romans. Small cars seem permanently parked along the narrow streets of the Celio. Some are small indeed: space-efficient, two-seater Smart cars that look like enclosed golf carts slotted between parked vehicles. Big American SUVs are never seen. At night, drivers park diagonally at the four corners of intersections. Motor scooters are stuffed into every nook and cranny. Here and there are sleek motorcycles: Cagiva, Moto Guzzi, Aprilia, MV Augusta, Suzuki, Kawasaki, BMW, Triumph, and rarer marques. The most eye-catching machines are the “naked” Ducati Monsters designed and manufactured in Bologna. A muscular reinterpretation of the motorcycle, Monsters—as in *monstrare*, or “to show”—have lightweight lattice frames that openly display all their mechanical parts. Fulvio Carmagnola, their designer, says Monsters are “Power as language, as forceful utterance.” They are also the height of modern Italian design—kinetic art parked on the street—and are among the most beautiful inanimate things I see in Rome.

ITALIAN MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS AND ITALIAN MEN WALKING TOGETHER

Italians adore children and treat them with tenderness. The Madonna and Child was a felicitous import from Byzantium that the Italians softened and developed. Children are becoming scarce in once fecund Italy. This makes them even more precious. There are still some children in Rome, and it’s lovely to see how mothers talk to their little ones constantly using tender terms of endearment. Mothers are never harsh, certainly not in public. Every single Italian smiles at every single baby or toddler he or she encounters. No wonder Italians grow up liking people and smiling after every transaction, from serving dinner to taking your money in a shop to meeting you in the hallway of the hotel.

The happiest of all Italian relationships, as far as I can tell, is between mothers and daughters, nowadays usually one daughter, occasionally two. I see them—arm in arm, conversing—in the vestibule of my building as they come out of the apartments above my hotel. They walk so closely together that they seem like a single animal with three legs. They are perfectly in sync with each other. This mother-daughter link seems more solid, more secure, more real than any relationship I’ve ever witnessed. They’re conspiring together, I think, passing on whatever it is that is the secret of being Italian: woman to woman, flesh to flesh, spirit to spirit. (Later, however, I learn that Italian mothers rarely teach their daughters how to cook. Mothers seek to retain control over the family through food. Their daughters have to learn how to cook on their own.) *Mama mia* is not said in vain in Italy; it is whispered like a magic incantation, expressed as an exclamation, said in weary resignation, or gasped in wonder.

The Italian men in my neighborhood are another clustering species. Older men walk down the very narrow sidewalk on Via Marco Aurelio arm in arm and three abreast in a tight phalanx talking and gesticulating. From behind they, too, look like those costume horses with four legs with two men inside. I can see how Romans made great fighting units when combat was hand-to-hand. Italian men cultivate solidarity with their friends. I'm sure they make ferocious enemies in bureaucracies and boardrooms.

THE BASILICA OF SAN CLEMENTE A LATERANO ON A RAINY MORNING: A PALIMPSEST OF ROME

→ Google images for san clemente rome

Just two blocks from my hotel, and about three hundred yards from the Coliseum, is one of the ultimate Roman historical experiences: the Basilica of San Clemente and what lies underneath it. Here, in one place, are the layers of the palimpsest that is Rome: classical antiquity of the first to fourth centuries and its cult of Mithras and Apollo; early Christianity from the fourth to the twelfth centuries and the early papacy; Roman Catholicism since the twelfth century with its saints, relics, pilgrimages, and Baroque explosion; all pulled together by nineteenth and twentieth century scientific archaeology now incorporated into contemporary touristic Rome. Here are encapsulated almost twenty centuries of Roman religious and scientific history.

San Clemente lies in the valley between the Esquiline and Caelian Hills and between the Coliseum and the road that rises to the Cathedral of Saint John Lateran with its papal palace and great Egyptian obelisk. As the buildings of successive centuries crumbled and were rebuilt one on top of the other, the level of the ground here rose by 13.7 meters (45 feet). San Clemente's history continues to unravel backward through time as excavations continue. In the sacristy where I buy my ticket to the lower levels, I purchase an excellent, large-scale guide with transparent parchment overlays that "peel back" the layers of this complex archaeological treasure. The postcards here are also excellent with good details of the rich mosaics and underground treasures. It is also the Celio's parish church adjoining the walled monastery of the Irish Dominicans.

The church is named for Saint Clement, the third bishop of Rome who reigned from 88 to 97 CE. His is a story of exile and martyrdom. He was banished from Rome by the Prefect Mamertinus, who dismissed him with the words, "May the god you worship bring you relief in your place of banishment." Clement became a wonder worker and discovered a miraculous spring where he baptized new Christians. Trajan had him executed by tying him to an anchor and throwing him into the sea. Legend has it that his disciples prayed that his relics might be given to them. With that, the sea receded and disclosed a marble chapel, not made by human hands, containing the saint's tomb. His relics were brought back to Rome by Saint Cyril, Apostle to the Slavs, who died in Rome and was buried next to Saint Clement in this place. The first church here was begun sometime between 350 and 400 CE. In May 1084, the Normans sacked Rome under Robert Guiscard during the reign of Pope Gregory VII Hildebrand. It was the worst assault the shriveled

city ever experienced. The disgraced pope was forced to evacuate Rome and died in exile in Salerno in 1085. (This Norman assault was far more destructive than the infamous Sack of Rome by Lutheran imperial troops under Charles V in 1527.)

The present-day church dates from 1108 and has a central nave and two aisles. Columns recycled from classical temples flank the nave. The twelfth-century church reused elements from the previous church that lies underneath it. Among the numerous treasures from many centuries that embellish the church is the vivid twelfth-century mosaic in the apse. There, the central crucifix grows out of a great acanthus plant. Stags drink from the four streams that gush from under the flourishing plant. Peacocks, ancient symbols of immortality, flank the stags. Spiraling tendrils from this great *Tree of Life* swirl across the curved space, creating circles containing flowers, birds, and saints. Twelve doves decorate the cross with its Byzantine-style corpus. Mary and Saint John flank the crucified Savior. Along the bottom of the apse is a blue band with twelve sheep, with one haloed sheep, Christ, in the center. It's a rich and joyous vision of the unity of plant, animal, human and divine life.

→ Google images for cosmati pavements

The other remarkable feature in the medieval church is the rectangular schola cantorum that occupies about half the nave in front of the altar. This marble-walled enclosure was brought up from the older church that lies under this one. San Clemente and Santa Maria Antiqua, which stands below the Palatine Hill on the southern side of the Forum, retain more details of early Christian churches than any of the other nine hundred churches in Rome. The elaborate, richly colored marble floor is the work of the Cosmati family of stoneworkers who learned to rework bits of ancient marble recycled from classical Roman palaces and temples into intricate patterns. (The Vassalletto clan of masons was also adept at this work.) A favorite motif is a chain-like design with inset disks. There is infinite variety in the abstract patterns they created. Thirteenth century Cosmatesque pavements incorporate bright green, immensely hard serpentine from Greece; yellow *giallo antico* marble from Tunisia; porphyry from Egypt; granite from Aswan and Sardinia; and a rainbow of other semi-precious stones from the far-flung empire.

There are many other treasures from later centuries in the church including the chapel dedicated to Saint Catherine with fine frescoes painted by Masolino da Panicale in 1425. One chapter in the saint's life depicted here has her disputing fifty classical philosophers in Alexandria. Another shows the torture wheel to which she was condemned broken by an angel. The last panel shows her being decapitated with a sword and three angels laying her in a sarcophagus on Mount Sinai. Over the nave is a flat, coffered ceiling with a central panel showing Saint Clement being borne up to heaven added by Clement XI Albani in 1702–15. Pope Clement also added both the simplified Baroque façade that faces the intimate, four-sided forecourt and the understated Baroque bell tower of 1715. Given the great rise in the level of the streets all around it, San Clemente sits in a small depression.

Innocent XI Odescalchi granted San Clemente and its convent to the Irish Dominicans in 1677 while they were being persecuted by the Protestant English in Ireland. They remain here today in a snug and modernized monastery with a walled garden attached to the ancient church. In 1857, Father Joseph Mullooly, then prior of San Clemente, began excavations under the medieval church. He discovered the fourth-century basilica directly underneath the twelfth-century church and the remains of an older Roman imperial structure underneath that. Excavations in 1912–14 by Father Louis Nolan showed that under the third stratum of building was a still older fourth layer of buildings destroyed by Nero's catastrophic fire in 64 CE. The early Christian basilica under the medieval church dates from the fourth and fifth centuries and was inserted in an older third-century structure. The Normans under Robert Guiscard pillaged the basilica in 1084. Its shell was filled with rubble to the tops of its pillars and the medieval church was built atop it. This early basilica was excavated beginning in 1857. Patchy fragments of early frescoes survive in the excavated space.

Underneath this early basilica is yet another layer discovered in 1867 and accessible through ancient stairs. At this level there were two buildings, a very large structure built of great tufa blocks around a large courtyard, and, across a very narrow alley, a brick building, possibly an *insula*, or apartment block. The tufa structure was part of the imperial mint that was moved here from the Capitoline Hill. The brick structure across the narrow alley had a grotto nymphaeum that was converted into a Mithraeum about 200 CE. Here, the reputedly Persian rites of Mithras were conducted. A god born of a rock on December 25, Mithras was destined, at Apollo's command, to redeem mankind. His cult was popular with Roman army officers and flourished at the same time that Christianity was crystalizing in Rome. In their costly initiation rituals, army officers lay in a pit while a bull was slaughtered over them drenching them in the virile animal's warm blood.

The Mithraeum under San Clemente is intact. Two raised areas on either side of the rectangular room accommodated reclining celebrants who took part in ritual meals. In the center is the stone *Altar of Mithras* that depicts the god slaying a bull. On the back of the square altar is an image of a serpent. In a niche at the back of the room, facing the altar and the entrance, is a small stone statue, the *Birth of Mithras*. He is depicted as a naked youth with long hair wearing a pointed cap emerging from a rock. Also discovered in the excavations was a bust of Apollo with tousled hair. An antechamber with a fancy stucco ceiling and what are presumed to be ancillary rooms for the cult complete the complex. This Mithraeum continued to flourish until the end of the fourth century. After Theodosius outlawed blood sacrifices and decreed in 392 that "no one is to go to the sanctuaries, walk through the temples, or raise his eyes to statues created by the labor of man," Christian fanatics sacked the temples and the classical age came to a violent end. The final phase of the "conversion" of pagan Rome was not through love and persuasion but through mob violence. The Mithraeum was filled with rubble to support the apse of the early Christian basilica constructed over it, and that is what preserved it. This archaeological site was often underwater until the construction of a drain in 1914. As I explore these clammy depths, I hear the constant sound of rushing water. In one of the ancient underground rooms at this deep level I peer into a

cistern. There, clean water gushes forcefully out of the rock and flows into a channel to the Cloaca Maxima, the ancient sewer that drains the Forum and is still in use. This abundant spring was the reason why people began building here long, long ago.

THE SHRINE OF POPE JOAN:
THE MEMORY OF A SCURRILOUS LEGEND

→ Google images for shrine pope joan rome

Rome is a compound of history, legends and myths. Near San Clemente and about three blocks from my hotel, at the intersection of Via dei Santi Quattro and the Via dei Querceti, is a small shrine about the size of a phone booth. Attached to the side of a building and behind a locked iron gate, it is the unmarked Shrine of Pope Joan. Weathered and sad, a flaking plaster statue of the Sacred Heart sits on a shelf inside the shrine gathering dust. On the back wall is a faded fresco of the Virgin and Child. When I visit the shrine, a long-stemmed rose and some mistletoe in a cellophane packet are stuck into the iron gate. This little-noticed shrine marks the intersection linked to the legend of Pope Joan. In 872, so the story goes, a brilliant young man was elected pope and took the name John VIII. While riding the papal mule from Saint Peter's to Saint John Lateran, the pope fell from "his" saddle and, to everyone's amazement, gave birth to a child in the street! Both she and her child were instantly killed by the mob and hastily buried nearby. This shocking story gave the street the nickname Vicus Papisse, or "Lane of the Popess." In actuality, Pope John VIII reigned during the chaotic years (872–82) when the Saracens were coming up the Tiber and raiding Rome. John was poisoned and then clubbed to death in 882, the first pope to be assassinated. Nothing in the historical record indicates why.

This salacious story gave rise to a second popular legend which claims that newly elected popes undergo an examination in the *sedia obstetrica* to verify the pope's sex. "*Habet testiculos!*" (He's got balls!) announces the groping cleric to the assembled cardinals. Colorful, but not true. Rome is filled with stories, some true, some elaborated, some not true, and all fascinating.

MY FIRST EXPERIENCE OF THE *CENTRO STORICO*
AND THE JESUIT CHURCH OF SANTISSIMO NOME DI GESÙ

→ Google images for gesu rome

"The Piazza del Gesù is considered to be the most draughty place in Rome. The legend runs that the devil and the wind were one day taking a walk together. When they came to this square, the devil, who seemed to be very devout, said to the wind, 'Just wait a minute, *mi caro*, while I go into this church.' So the wind promised, and the devil went into the Gesù, and has somehow never come out again—and the wind is blowing about in the Piazza del Gesù to this day."

Augustus J. C. Hare, *Walks in Rome* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1905), 17th ed., 76.

G is well versed in Roman history, and my first outing consists of walking from his apartment down the Colle Oppio to the Coliseum, then up Mussolini's wide Via dei Fori Imperiali, past the sunken ruins of the imperial Forums, the bombastic monument to Victor Emmanuel II, and the Piazza Venezia to Chiesa del Santissimo Nome di Gesù (Church of the Holy Name of Jesus), known as Il Gesù. This is, appropriately enough for a Jesuit-educated Roman Catholic, my first church interior in Rome. Opulent Cardinal Alessandro Farnese financed it and, in 1568, selected Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola to design it. (Farnese was later elected Paul III, the Renaissance pope who formally approved the Society of Jesus, summoned the reforming Council of Trent, and commissioned Michelangelo to paint the *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel.) Il Gesù represents the opening blast of Counter-Reformation church design.

Vignola's plan took the traditional Latin cross interior with a dome over the crossing and altered it to suit the new post-Council of Trent liturgy, with its emphasis on preaching, not just ritual. By truncating the transepts (the "arms" of the cross), abolishing side aisles, widening the nave, and placing a pulpit high along the sidewall, Vignola created a "room church" and improved the audibility of sermons. Those interior innovations introduced a church form that swept Roman Catholic Europe and that the Jesuits exported around the world.

Cardinal Farnese preferred Giacomo della Porta's imposing design for the Baroque façade, so Vignola was replaced by the younger architect. The much-copied 1575 travertine façade is undergoing restoration, and like all major restorations in Rome, the scaffolding is hidden behind a scrim that displays a giant blowup of what the restored façade will look like—plus, of course, a huge advertisement for a bank credit card. Della Porta's forceful two-story façade heralds the beginning of Baroque architecture. Its central entrance is framed by two aediculae placed one inside the other: a triangular gable nested within a segmented (semicircular) gable. This creates a massive and impressive portal. Over the entrance, on the second story, is another aedicula with a triangular gable sheltering a large, arched window that lights the nave. Two side entrances flank the central portal. Scroll brackets appear at the two sides of the narrower upper story of the grand façade. A plain triangular gable brandishing the Farnese coat of arms caps the powerful composition.

We go inside. The original interior of white stucco and gray stone trim was later encrusted with alabaster and precious marbles in a rainbow of colors. It is an explosion of worldly wealth and splendor, something that became a Jesuit hallmark. This decoration, which dates from 1858 to 1861, was the gift of Prince Alessandro Torlonia of the infamous family of rack-rent landlords. The barrel-vaulted ceiling of the nave dissolves in a fantastic vision of the *Triumph of the Name of Jesus* painted by Giovanni Battista Gaulli between 1672 and 1685. (Gian Lorenzo Bernini may have also had a hand in the wildly theatrical design.) A flood of light seems to blow a hole in the roof. The sacred sign of the name of Jesus—IHS for Iesus Hominum Salvator—draws angels, prophets, saints, and kings upward and scatters devils, demons, and Protestant heretics to the dark periphery of the crowded scene where they tumble and fall through space down into hell

or to splatter on the marble floor from which we look up in astonishment. This ceiling combines painting and stucco statuary in a Baroque artwork that fuses architecture, sculpture and painting.

→ Google images for tomb of ignatius of loyola gesu rome

The side chapel in the left “arm” of the church contains the spectacular tomb of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, born Iñigo Lopez de Recalda, Lord of Loyola and Oñaz, in 1491 in Azpeitia, Spain, and who died in Rome in 1556. This colossal composition was designed by Andrea Pozzo and begun in 1695. Two pairs of composite columns rest on a curved base behind the altar. The columns seem to move apart to reveal a large niche with a great silver statue of Saint Ignatius. The statue is covered by a painting of the saint ascending to heaven that is periodically rolled away in a light-and-sound show to reveal the gleaming statue. All around this altar is a rising, swirling, churning hurricane of statuary and ornament. An ornate gilt bronze casket adorned with precious stones set under the resplendent altar contains the saint’s remains. To the left, an enormous statuary group, *The Triumph of Faith over Idolatry* by Jean-Baptiste Théodon, depicts Faith as a triumphant woman holding aloft a chalice, with her foot crushing a serpent, and Idolatry as a vicious old woman trying to prevent a barbarian king from worshipping the True Faith. The pendant group to the right of the altar, *Religion Overthrowing Heresy* by Pierre Le Gros the Younger, is a Baroque collision in which Religion is represented by a woman with a cross in her left hand and gilded thunderbolts in her right. Two falling, ugly figures represent Heresy, while to the side a cherub energetically rips pages out of a heretical book. The pediment high over the altar is also split and from it surges a statuary group, *The Trinity in Glory* by Bernardino Ludovisi. This side altar is rich and splendid beyond all imagining. It far surpasses the main altar with its indifferent Alessandro Capalti painting of *The Circumcision* showing a Jewish priest in the temple accepting the baby Jesus at his bris. (One of Rome’s invented relics was the foreskin of Jesus, but it was lost in 1527 when imperial Lutheran troops sacked the city and played football with it.)

→ Google images for sacro cuore pompeo butoni

The right-hand side chapel features a glorious altar with paired classical columns flanking *Saint Francis Xavier Carried into Heaven by the Angels*, a Baroque vision by Carlo Maratta. A gilded reliquary with a hovering angel over the altar contains the arm bones of Saint Francis Xavier in the gesture of blessing. Sensational Baroque angels brandishing the monogram IHS line the marble altar rail. Tucked into the armpit of the right “arm” of the seemingly cross-shaped church is a tiny and fervent circular chapel with an inset, golden lamp-embellished altar and a small, intense, well-lit painting of Jesus offering the viewer his Sacred Heart in his outstretched hand. Beams of light radiate from the flaming heart. It is Pompeo Batoni’s 1760 work *Sacro Cuore di Gesù*. In this warmly glowing chapel, fervor displaces bombast. Two devotees rapt in prayer kneel before the radiant image. Across the nave, in an opposite tunnel-like space, are glass cases dim with the age of centuries and crowded with the relics of Jesuit martyrs and saints. It reminds

me of the trophy case in the vestibule of my all-boys, sports-mad Christian Brothers of Ireland high school in suburban New Jersey.

The superior general, or head, of the Society of Jesus is addressed as His Paternity. He used to be known as the “black pope,” for the color of his clerical garb—in contrast to the white cassock of the pope. He is the head of the worldwide Jesuit “conspiracy” that has so alarmed Protestants and freethinkers—and some Catholics as well—down the centuries. Under pressure from Charles III of Spain, Clement XIV Ganganelli suppressed the Society of Jesus in 1773. Jesuit priests were secularized (that is, placed under the control of local bishops) and the General of the Society, Lorenzo Ricci, was imprisoned in the Castel Sant’Angelo where he was left to die. The Church of the Gesù was turned over to the Franciscans. (The missions in distant Spanish colonial California were also transferred from the Jesuits to the Franciscans.) Only in 1814, after the fall of Napoleon and the beginnings of the Restoration, did Pius VII Chiaramonti restore the Society of Jesus and return the Gesù to them. The order did not revive until the energetic Generalship of the Dutch Jesuit Jan Philipp Roothaan (1829-53).

The state of the Jesuits is now more an issue inside the Roman Catholic Church than outside it. Long known as among the best-educated Catholic orders, it has harbored progressive tendencies much out of favor with recent popes. Its liberation theologians in Latin America have been suppressed or murdered. The “out” gay Jesuits in the United States have been silenced. The superior general of the Jesuits hasn’t been much in the news since John Paul II Wojtyla stepped in and appointed his own man to clamp the lid on years ago. Things are quieter now under Pope Francis Bergoglio, the first Jesuit ever elected pope. The Jesuits at the all-male, coat-and-tie Georgetown College of the 1960s nurtured in me a thirst for knowledge and reform—as they did in Voltaire.

THE *CENTRO STORICO*:
THE BREAD, NOT THE RAISINS

Although the great palazzi and churches of the *centro storico* are familiar to me from my studies of architectural history, nothing has prepared me for the extraordinary beauty of the urban fabric of Renaissance and Baroque Rome as a whole—the rich bread in which these sweet raisins and citron pieces are embedded. Every single “ordinary” building here is monumental and elegant. While varying in width, window frames, doorways, cornices, colors, and the like, they are similar in height and come together creating street walls with elegance, power, and clear definition. It is not just the parts that are great: it is the *tout ensemble*. What gives the whole its excitement and dynamism is the ancient, crazy glaze pattern of the street plan. Every street seems slightly different in its width, length, or orientation. Blocks have irregular, trapezoidal shapes, with buildings built out to the narrow sidewalks. Piazzas occur frequently, usually in front of church façades or particularly important palazzi, creating outdoor “rooms” roofed by the peerless Roman skies. Narrow alleys branching off main streets offer access to small *larghi* reminiscent of variably shaped back rooms. Bell towers or slices of ornate Baroque church

façades terminate the vistas down many short streets. Walking and looking here is like passing through a slowly twirling architectural kaleidoscope, with every step revealing new configurations and changing the aspect of what you've already seen. It's the small, hidden spaces I like the most: the slender alleys and sudden *larghi*. This old city is endlessly fascinating, rich, random, and full of surprises. It makes walking on these narrow, suddenly disappearing sidewalks and painful, black basalt Sanpietrini cobblestones worthwhile. My feet hurt but my heart soars!

STILL THE CAPITAL

What's key about the historic center of Rome is that it is still the capital of Italy. It has not become an inundated tourist ghetto like Venice or holiday Florence. It is, and will always be, the seat of the national government, with politicians and civil servants working, lunching, and wheeling and dealing in the old core. When Italy was unified in 1870, the royal government expropriated many of the ancient papal palaces, convents and monasteries and installed governmental bureaus in them. The pope's magnificent summer palace, the Palazzo del Quirinale begun in 1583 and its vast, walled gardens on the Quirinal Hill, became first the king's palace and then, after 1945, the official residence of the president of the republic. The Palazzo Montecitorio, begun by Bernini in 1653, with a massive Art Nouveau addition of 1902–27, is now the Chamber of Deputies, and the nearby Medici Palazzo Madama, which saw major renovations and a new Baroque façade completed in 1642, houses the Italian Senate. Although ponderous neo-Baroque structures for government ministries were erected on the Esquiline plain along the Via Nazionale and the Via XX Settembre, no new segregated governmental enclave was built divorced from the dense fabric of the inherited city. Foreign powers bought old palaces for their embassies.

This secular reoccupation preserved the buildings of Renaissance, Baroque, and Neoclassical Rome. It also preserved the *function* of the historic city core as the political center of the nation, not just an embalmed cluster of historical monuments and museums. Paradoxically, national unity divided Rome. It became a "bipolar" city, with the Italian state ensconced in the historic core and the world-spanning government of the Roman Catholic Church a "prisoner" inside the Vatican walls across the Tiber. This standoff was not resolved until Mussolini's Lateran Treaties of 1929.

ROMAN TRAVERTINE AND BRICK UNDER CHANGING LIGHT

The traditional building materials of Rome are brick and mortar and local travertine, a mottled, porous limestone. Many old buildings have travertine door and window frames and quoins and stuccoed brick walls. Tawny travertine is a remarkably chameleon-like stone; it changes color under different skies and different lights. At dawn, it glows rose and pink; at noon, it glares white; in the late afternoon, it is suffused with yellow; at sunset, it turns gold; at twilight, it slips into purple shadows; and in moonlight, it is an ethereal silvery color. Roman brick also changes

under changing light, from red or yellow to magical gold. Old Rome is constantly changing depending on the time of day when you gaze upon her.

THE “CORRECT” COLORS OF CONTEMPORARY ROME

The colors of the buildings in the *centro storico* have changed over time and continue to change today. After unification, when Rome became the booming capital of the new nation-state, the Piedmontese painted many historic Roman buildings their standard yellow, *giallo di Torino*. In the 1920s and 1930s, Mussolini favored strong earth tones, the colors of the countryside: dark ocher, terra cotta, and burnt sienna. Fascist buildings sought a sense of weight and solidity. Dark colors make buildings seem visually closer and streets smaller. These colors, much faded and rain washed, gave twentieth century Rome its characteristic tawny palette.

But since the 1980s, as *restauro* became more scientific, architectural historians scraped back the layers of grime and paint and discovered that Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo architects had a more subtle color sense than Mussolini did. Architects of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries favored lime washes of light blue, pale yellow, rose, and gray. Baroque architects used pastel colors to make the imposing volumes of their buildings appear lighter than they are. Light blue-gray washes on their stucco walls made their buildings seem to recede and made streets feel more open. Those colors reflected the sky and the water in the fountains. Rococo colors were even lighter: whitewashes with just a touch of black, blue, rose, or yellow. They were airy and transparent. This new knowledge of Rome’s historic colors, plus subsidies from the municipality for sprucing up for the Year 2000 Jubilee, encouraged a return to the pale blues, light pinks, soft grays, and yellows used in the past. The ocher that was so common in the twentieth century as an inexpensive expedient is being supplanted with more historically appropriate tints, including silvery blue, peppermint pink, and eggshell white. Some Romans, emotionally attached to the colors they grew up with, think the restored pastels are robbing their city of its warmth. But the new-old tints are creating a lighter, lovelier Rome with a softer look.

A TAVOLA: THE DAILY ITALIAN RITUAL

“One will not become old around a table.”

Italian saying.

The table in a Roman restaurant, like the Roman way of dining, is rigorous and well-thought-out. When I sit down to dine at my neighborhood restaurant, a napkin, a fork, a knife, and two glasses, a larger one for water and a smaller one for wine, are before me. Nothing else is on the table. Soon a basket of bread appears. This will justify a reasonable €2 cover charge. I am first asked what type of water I want, *aqua naturale* (still) or *con gas* (sparkling)? *Con gas* is my preference, along with a carafe of *vino della casa*, white or red? Wine is still inexpensive in expensive Italy, and it is a point of pride to serve decent wine in restaurants without soaking the diner as is so common in the United States. I now have before me water, wine, and nourishing

bread, a sacred and sufficient meal. They are the elements of the Mass. The name for the wineglass, *calice*, is the same as “chalice” in English. There is no butter or olive oil and you are not expected to ask for them. The bread is to be eaten by itself or used to sop up the delicious sauce in whatever you order.

To an American, what is noticeable is what is *not* on the table. There is no spoon, no salt, no black pepper, no sugar, no ketchup and no mustard. You are not expected to doctor your food. You are not the cook; the cook is the cook. When your dish requires a condiment, it will come without asking for it. Not every pasta dish requires grated cheese and it will be provided only when appropriate and will be taken away when no longer needed. Olive oil, vinegar, and a saltshaker will appear when you order grilled vegetables or a salad. You will get a spoon when custom dictates, for example when ordering soupy pasta and beans. You are expected to roll your spaghetti, linguine, or other long pasta using only your fork. Employing a spoon is bad form. The waiter or waitress will never gratuitously grind black pepper all over your food from some gigantic pepper mill. If black pepper is required, it will be cooked into the dish you ordered. When your dish includes clams or mussels, an empty plate will be provided for the shells without having to ask for it.

Now *la lista* (the menu) is handed to me, perhaps with a simple mention of the specials of the day without the annoying American habit of listing all the ingredients in their preparation in the future tense: “Your halibut will be drizzled with a spicy honey-and-peanut sauce and will be served on a bed of brown rice and cranberries.” The menu is organized in a never-varying form. It is the libretto for the opera you are about to enjoy. You are not expected to skip acts. The order and sequence of the modern Italian meal follows that of the ancient Romans: *gestum (antipasto)*, *mensa prima (il primo)*, *mensa secunda (il secondo)*, *dulcis in fondo (dolce)*. First there are appetizers (*antipasti*, before the pasta); then the *primi piatti*, the first courses, always a choice of variously and deliciously prepared pastas or risottos; then the *secondi piatti*, the main courses, often divided into fish and meat dishes; then the *contorni*, side dishes of vegetables or salads eaten by themselves and not contaminated by the flavor of the main dish (*contorno* comes from the word “frame”); then a fruit and cheese course; and last the *dolci e caffè*, desserts and coffees. Romans usually have either a cheese course *or* a dessert, not both. Pasta by itself is not considered a proper meal, and ordering only pasta will confuse the waiter. He will keep suggesting a *secondo piatto* until you surrender. This is not done to pad your bill but to provide you with a complete meal. Elaborate dinners double the courses and lengthen the process: *antipasto*, *il primo* (soup), *il primo secondo* (pasta or risotto), *il secondo* (meat or fish), *il secondo secondo* (a different meat or fish), then *contorni*. In such meals, there is one *contorno* for the *secondo* and another for the *secondo secondo*, then *insalata* (greens dressed simply with vinegar, oil, and salt), *dolce* (assorted cheeses and honeys), *dolce secondo* (torte), and *digestivo* (coffee served with hard candy and then grappa or *limoncello*).

Restaurants will rarely rush you through your lunch or dinner. Course follows course at a stately pace with a decent interval between them, just like acts at the opera. The purpose of the Roman

sequence of dishes separately enjoyed is to permit the diner to experience the distinct flavors of each carefully prepared dish and to talk about it. The controlled, absolutely invariable structure of the Italian meal is like the qwerty keyboard: it is meant to slow you down and keep you from going too fast. By doing so it makes time for sociability, something as important to the Italians as the food.

Roman cooking is essentially simple. It depends on manual dexterity and split-second timing with light sauces and no fussy adornments except, perhaps, a laurel leaf or sprig of sage when appropriate. Flavors are not to be mixed or confused. Food is not to be consumed in excess. Although second helpings are sometimes offered in homes, it is not good form to overindulge. Italian audiences are known to sometimes stop an opera and demand an aria be repeated; this doesn't hold for dining. One thing at a time, and always in the prescribed sequence, is how Romans dine. Dishes, implements, and condiments are all taken away at the end of each course to prepare for the one that follows, just as stage scenery is changed for the next act at the opera. Dessert and coffee often come with a spoon smaller than a teaspoon to emphasize their specialness. A truly complete meal will be concluded by a tiny glass of grappa, a powerful distillate of grapes, or *limoncello*, as a digestive. The potent grappa is sometimes served in a miniature glass boot that's been iced to emphasize its kick. Romans rarely overeat or become drunk. Their ritualized way of dining has no place for such a *brutta figura*. In Italy, the host does not usually pour the wine. Each diner serves his or her own wine and does so sparingly, carefully watching the glasses on the rest of the table.

When dinner is over, everything will be taken away except for the empty wineglass and the water glass and carafe. They are relics of the dinner you have just enjoyed and in their mute way say that you are expected to return to resume the process in the future. *Il conto*, "the bill," will come only after you ask for it. The waiter never slaps the bill down on the table while he rushes to serve someone else. A modest service charge will be added to your bill. Tips are not expected unless the service has been unusually outstanding. A cultured person never leaves a restaurant without thanking the proprietor (if present) or the waiter. Compliments are remembered, and no doubt bad behavior as well.

Conversation accompanies the complete meal in a restaurant or a home. It is supposed to be pleasant, polite, and general. Talking a little about the food you are presently enjoying is expected. You do not eat the meal in front of you and talk about the last meal you ate or the next one you expect to eat. *Be Here Now* is the correct approach to Italian dining. Consuming good food without talking about it is unthinkable rude. You will not be invited back to dinner if you do not articulate your gustatory enjoyment of *this* meal as you enjoy *it*. The Romans are, of course, right about this.

Romans—and all Italians—know the difference between eating and dining and never confuse the two. They've had thousands of years of practice at this and do not expect you to tamper with the beautifully balanced architecture of a proper Italian meal. Romans have developed a disciplined

and elegant way of dining and rightly expect you to follow the rules. If only they drove with the same sense of order, decorum, and leisure they display *a tavola!*

S's CHRISTMAS EVE DINNER

Time in a Roman year is a fusion of the classical and the Christian. The main festival of *Sol Invictus*, the invincible sun god, was the day of the winter solstice, December 25th. In the fourth century CE, the Christians adopted it as the birthday of Christ. S is an American antique dealer living in Rome. He cooks a delicious Christmas buffet of risotto with wild mushrooms and what Italians call "meat loaf," which is light and flavorful. His cozy top-floor apartment has classical decorations, antique engravings of Hercules, a choice collection of small tabletop bronzes of famous Roman buildings and statues, and a prized, giant, idealized plaster head of Juno on the floor of his bedroom. There's a tastefully trimmed Christmas tree in a corner with shiny red and gold balls and gently pulsating lights--quite beautiful. The *presepio* consists of small ceramic figurines that S made when he was fourteen in Ohio. S has a tall, dark-haired, sultry Italian boyfriend named J. I get to meet more Americans living in Rome. N, a teacher of fashion, and C, a stately, Italian-speaking African American woman, make lively conversationalists. After a wonderful Christmas dinner, we go to the roof of their apartment building to hear the Christmas bells of Rome.

MIDNIGHT AND THE CHRISTMAS BELLS OF ROME!

At midnight on Christmas Eve, all the bells in all the 900 churches of Rome begin pealing joyously to announce the birth of the Savior. I step out onto the terrace of S's apartment atop the Colle Oppio and drink in the urban symphony. Down below the city is absolutely still, not a car is moving on the streets nor a pedestrian on the sidewalks. The sounds are coming from all directions, blended yet distinct, washing over the capital of Christendom. Every great church has its own carillon and its own distinct pattern of tolling. I can hear quite clearly the deep bells of Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome's tallest bell tower. All the ancient stones of Christian Rome are singing; her churches and monasteries have become giant musical instruments in a cacophonous citywide concert. The sounds reverberate in my head and in my soul. After about half an hour, the lovely sounds die away in patches and the night is still.

F's CHRISTMAS DAY FEAST

G told me when I first decided to come to Rome that he would take me to his good friend F's Christmas party. F is a retired banker who once worked at the Monte di Pietà. He was born in Viterbo, north of Rome, and has made it his avocation to know Rome better than the Romans. His special love is sculpture, and when we are introduced in his richly furnished and decorated top-floor apartment, he points to his tabletop sculptures and affectionately calls them *miei peccati*. He's sophisticated and charming and has a bright twinkle when he smiles. His study and bedroom are crowded with photographs of people, including several of himself as a young man

and one with Federico Fellini, a friend of his from long ago. But F's real art are the Italian arts of friendship and cooking and for combining the two. We bring him potted flowers—mine is a splendid poinsettia and G and his lover's is a pink clematis—which he accepts and places on the table facing the entrance to his apartment, arranging them near the elaborate *presepio* (crèche) with its cascade of tiny angels. The Bambino has a small golden sunburst placed over him because he has not yet been born.

Slowly the guests arrive. They are a mixed company of older heterosexual couples and gay couples, the latter often pairs of older and younger men. Everyone speaks Italian, but a few speak English, and they take care to talk with me so I'm not left out. They don't talk about work, business, computers, or real estate. They talk about friends, travel, America, food, a little politics, the latest banking scandal, and other general topics. How congenial! As the evening progresses, the guests divide, with the straight couples in a U of couches at one end of the room and the gay blades on side chairs at the other end.

In the middle of the room, pushed to the side, is the dining-room table set with plates and flatware. A steady stream of delicious dishes emerges from F's small kitchen. First is spiral pasta with wild mushrooms. Sensational! Next comes a green risotto with pesto in a mound decorated with green beans and pink shrimp. Now it's small, tasty meatballs. There is dish after dish of homemade specialties. Then an artistic platter of fresh fruit and vegetables emerges. I choose the *finocchio* (fennel) that tastes to me like spring in winter. My palate is cleansed. Dessert consists of a scrumptious apple torte. Last are small, fried rice cookies with citron and raisins, a Saint Joseph's Day treat from a recipe from F's hometown. *This is Italia!*

MIDNIGHT MASS AT THE BASILICA DI SAN CLEMENTE:
NATALE DEL SIGNORE NOSTRO GESÙ CRISTO

Walking back to my hotel through the momentarily quiet city, I decide to pass by San Clemente to see if there is a schedule for Christmas Day Mass. I find that the door is open and enter. Midnight Mass has just begun. I find a seat on the side toward the front from which I can see the glorious twelfth-century mosaic in the apse with its green vines and celebration of all creation against a glowing gold background. I can also see the gold-vested celebrant at the ancient altar under the stone baldacchino. Parishioners are seated in the marble enclosure of the sixth-century schola cantorum retained when the "new" church built in 1108. Deep in the ground under the church, I know, is the Mithraeum with its altar depicting the sacrifice of a bull from the first century BCE and the small statue of the *Birth of Mithras*, a Persian god born from a rock on December 25th.

The church is filled with older people from the neighborhood and only a handful of children. The ceremony is solemn, stately, and slow. An attendant priest dressed all in white lights the censer and incense perfumes the space as it has for a thousand years. This has been the church of the Irish Dominicans in Rome since the seventeenth century and the priest speaks Italian with an

Irish brogue. The small choir sings beautifully. The “Sanctus” is lengthy and lovely. “Silent Night” sounds so soft in Italian. At the conclusion of the Mass, everyone stands as the celebrant and three concelebrants, including a very dark-skinned priest, take a small statue of the Bambino from the foot of the altar and carry it in procession to a side altar where the *presepio* is waiting. The priest places the Child in the manger and blesses it. All the people crowd around the scene to look at the Christ Child, cross themselves, and say a prayer. *Luce dona alle menti, pace infondi nei cuor.*

CHRISTMAS DAY ON THE CELIAN HILL: THE COUNTRY IN THE CITY

→ Google images for villa celimontana rome

→ Google images for ss giovanni e paolo rome

Christmas Day in Rome in 2006 was sunny and almost spring-like. Since all the museums and businesses are closed for this national holiday, I decide to explore the green hill visible from the end of my block, the Celian Hill. It is a patchwork of large parks studded with functioning churches and monasteries. My first stop is Santa Maria in Dominica on the Piazza della Navicella, where Mass is being said. I stand in the back of this elegant basilica and admire the famous ninth-century apse mosaics of the enthroned Virgin and Child surrounded by angels. Pope Pascal I, with a square halo that signifies he was still alive when the apse was decorated, kneels before the Virgin and Child.

I walk around the church to the entrance of the Villa Celimontana, a large park that was once the property of the Dukes of Mattei. The 1580s villa is now the home of the Italian Geographical Society. Wandering through the park I come across the church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo. The small piazza in front of the church has a Christmas tree hung with red bows and gold plastic cherubs. A tall, square Romanesque bell tower looms over the church. A huge Passionist monastery completes the complex. The bowl-like piazza in its sylvan, isolated setting seems far from the city. The sober exterior of the porticoed church gives no hint of the luxury inside.

SANTI GIOVANNI E PAOLO

Mass is ending as I enter. The spacious, lavish interior is lit by a heaven of crystal chandeliers. Elaborate, temporary candleholders with gold-painted magnolia leaves from last night’s Christmas Eve Mass line the aisle. Gilded ballroom chairs set in rows serve in place of pews. This ancient church was redecorated in 1715-19 and feels like a palace ballroom—what the nineteenth century would have called “a church of fashion.” This is sacred space as a luxurious interlude, an aristocratic moment from a lost world preserved here in this remote emerald enclave. The sumptuous side chapel with its lofty dome added in 1862 contains the remains of Saint Paul of the Cross, the eighteenth-century founder of the Passionist congregation of priests, in a glass shrine under the altar. The altarpiece here is a painting of Saint Paul floating in the air

toward a crucified Jesus whose right arm is loosed from the cross to embrace the black-clad priest. Paul is kissing the lance wound in Jesus's side. It is strangely moving.

This is one of Rome's oldest places of Christian worship. The first church here was built in 398 on the site of the house of Giovanni and Paolo, two Christian brothers and soldiers martyred under Julian the Apostate in 362. The Christians buried them secretly in their house, a violation of Roman law and custom. Early Christians gathered here to worship. The successive churches built here were sacked by Alaric in 410 and the Normans in 1084. The fine, square, brick bell tower was added about 1150 atop the great travertine foundations of the Temple of the Divine Claudius. Replicas of Moorish plates with Arabic inscriptions decorate the restored campanile (the fragile originals are now in the church's museum). In 1887, the ruins of three Roman houses from the second and third centuries were discovered underneath the church. These ruins, with pagan and early Christian frescoes, were excavated and are now known as the Case Romane and are cared for by the Comune di Roma.

As I leave the church and walk down the incline of the Clivo di Scauro, the ancient Roman Clivus Scauri, under the arched buttresses alongside the church, I pass the modern bronze door that leads to the excavations under the church and the remains of two ancient dwellings. One contains a large fresco that may represent Proserpina's return from Hades. Another fresco from the early Christian period shows an *orante*, a man praying with his arms outstretched. A small space some archaeologists think was used as a confessional has frescoes from the beginning of the fourth century that depict the martyrdom of two men and a woman, perhaps Crispus, Benedict, and Crispianua, who died for the faith under Julian the Apostate. Three nearby openings in the bedrock may have been their tombs. About 410 CE, a Christian basilica with a nave and two aisles was begun here that has evolved over the ages into this opulent Passionist church.

Further down the hill is the magnificent Baroque façade of San Gregorio Magno al Celio atop a flight of steps that looks like an Aztec pyramid. This church was founded by Gregory the Great in 575 CE and reconstructed with a Baroque façade in 1629–33 under Urban VIII Barberini. I walk up the path next to it to the locked gate of the adjoining monastery. A few grape trellises and old fruit trees on this sun-facing slope make this place feel far from the city. It is an evocative reminder of the long postclassical centuries when mighty, bustling Rome shrank drastically, her hills became unpopulated, and vineyards and truck gardens flourished. It seems a miracle that this patch of agrarian Rome survives in the center of the modern city. It is quiet and peaceful here on this Christmas Day in a Mediterranean winter-spring. I sit for a moment and bask in the warming sun and contemplate the fresh green grasses sprouting all around me. It brings me the calming reassurance that the earth has awakened once again and that life continues.

LUNCH AT RISTORANTE CARIOLANO: ROMAN CIVILITY IN PRACTICE

When G and I are seated in a refined, but not especially luxurious, restaurant on Via Ancona near Santa Maria della Vittoria, the *patron* welcomes us and tells us that next week will be the fifty-fifth anniversary of his restaurant. The room is quiet and elegant, with white tablecloths, old-fashioned flatware, and, on the walls, woodcarvings of garlands of fruit and a fine Bavarian cuckoo clock. He puts us at a table near the back of the long, rectangular room. We are on American time eating lunch at noon; his regular customers are on Roman time and begin arriving about two o'clock. All are elegantly dressed, with the men in dark suits, coat and tie. They must be from the nearby Ministry of Finance, a cushy gig now and always. As he seats his guests, not just his customers, I notice that he is placing the couples and triples along the periphery of the room so they are all facing one another, with no one's back to anyone else. Although we all have separate tables of various sizes, we are all facing toward the central aisle and one another, making Ristorante Cariolano (Cariolano is the name of the *patron*) subtly communal. When I note this and mention it to G, he pays me the great compliment of saying that I "get" Rome.

Indeed I do because I am sensitive to this inclusive treatment that wants people to be together, not apart. The food is superb—truly ambrosial. The house wine is outstanding. The one waiter is attentive but not intrusive. As we depart, the *patron* helps us with our coats. We thank him for a perfect repast. It's been a blissful interlude of intelligent conversation and excellent food. What the Romans do with people they also do with ideas and beliefs: no one is to be excluded; all have a place at the communal banquet of life. *This* is what makes Rome an enduring civilization.

ROMAN WAYS AND *CONVIVENZA*

Having experienced all that history can bring, both good and bad, and having been ruled for so long by a worldly, knowing Church and then by a succession of coalition governments, Romans have evolved a way to live with one another and with authority that lacks idealism but is rooted in realism. As anthropologist Michael Herzfeld notes, a sense of cohabitation is the rule, what Italians call *convivenza*. Romans are skilled at managing conflict and keeping things from getting out of hand. Two Romans might argue fiercely over politics or soccer and then go off to dinner together. Romans preserve a sense of *civiltà*, of good manners and tact. Romans see life as imperfect and that it will always be necessary to make compromises to get by. They pursue a strategy of "letting things go" (*lascia correre*). Roman women are not necessarily demure. And Roman men control their tempers. It is not considered manly to lose one's self-control. That would not be intelligent, or useful. Romans are pragmatic. They cultivate an ironic directness that other Italians take note of. Romans take the long view. It comes from living among the memories of so many civilizations past.

AUGURI!

NEW YEAR'S EVE FIREWORKS OVER ROME

“O double-faced god, it is from you that the year begins to run its silent course; you, who without turning your head, sees what no other god can see. . . . You see what lies before you and what lies behind. . . . ‘Everything my eyes can encompass—the skies, the Ocean, the clouds and the earth—to my hand has been given the power to open and close them; I have been entrusted with guarding the vast universe; I am the one who makes it turn on its hinges.’”

Publius Ovidius Naso [Ovid], 43 BCE–17 CE, *Fasti*.

On the first day of the year, the feast of Janus, the ancient Romans gave one another gifts of sweets and copper coins with two-headed Janus on one side and a ship on the other. The Christians later made the day the Feast of the Circumcision, Jesus’s bris. My parochial grammar school never told me what circumcision is because of their horror of penises. Since the Second Vatican Council, it’s called the Feast of the Presentation in the Temple; more evasion.

We celebrate New Year’s Eve as the Romans do, with a dinner at G’s home on the Colle Oppio featuring seafood, in particular an antipasto of chewy octopus that I like so much. The brick ruins of the Baths of Trajan stand in the park across the street. The park itself is full of Rome’s Latin American migrants celebrating the New Year separate from the Italians. The apartment is close to the Coliseum where the city stages an outdoor concert at midnight, so compact cars are double, triple, and quadruple parked all over the neighborhood. After our late dinner, just before midnight, we go upstairs to S’s apartment where we gather sparklers and Prosecco and climb to the roof terrace. It is a crystal clear night with stars and planets spangling the dark sky. I can look down and see the tops of the columns of the Temple of Venus and Rome in the Forum to the south against the dark mass of the Palatine Hill. The tower of the Palace of the Senators dominates the Capitoline Hill. The two floodlit quadrigae atop the Vittoriano ride proudly above the skyline. In the opposite direction, the square bell tower of Santa Maria Maggiore rings in the New Year.

Cherry bombs have been exploding randomly since nightfall. At eleven thirty, the full-scale bombardment begins. Fireworks shoot up all along the horizon from the many different neighborhoods of the city. The showiest fireworks erupt from the outlying areas around the historic core: Trastevere, Ostiense, and other districts where working-class Romans live. The display goes on for more than a half hour until all the rockets are spent. Then the big show begins with the launching of professional fireworks from inside the Coliseum. They are magnificent—a rainbow of colors and effects that explode and fill the dark sky. Some fireworks are patriotically Italian in red, white, and green to celebrate the 150th anniversary of modern Italy. Others are showers of glittering gold that fall gently and then vanish. Big green bursts with purple accents look like chrysanthemums. The arrested motion effects of the big chrysanthemum fireworks are dramatic. It feels like we are moving toward them as the exploding blossoms open

out. The sharp explosions echo against the surrounding stone buildings and bounce back. The gorgeous pyrotechnic display and the loud booming go on and on and on. We all light and wave our sparklers and toast one another with Prosecco. All around us the city's bells are ringing in the new year as timeless Rome lies at our feet. Once all the rockets have been spent, we go back downstairs to eat again! This time it's a simple, good-luck dish of delicate lentils cooked with sausage. I ask F if Italians make New Year's resolutions. He says that no, they don't. He adds that perfection does not exist. I agree and say that what does exist is accommodation. F likes that very much. Accommodation to human needs seems to be the essence of the humane and gracious Italian way. Another year ends and another year begins in eternal Rome. *Auguri!*

NEW YEAR'S DAY:
ROME WITHOUT ROMANS

"Be-bop-a-lula she's my baby."

First song of the New Year heard in my neighborhood café in the Celio, January 2, 2008.

Rome, and all of Italy, shuts down as tight as a drum on Christmas Day and New Year's Day. If I don't have dinner invitations, I stock up on food to eat in my hotel room as the new business year doesn't begin until the morning of January 2. That's when the *bariste* fire up their espresso machines and resume the injection of stimulating caffeine into the nation's nervous system. I am tired from my travels, so I sleep much of New Year's Day. The cold and rainy city looks grim with all its steel shop shutters pulled down and no one on the sidewalks. Rome without Romans is just stones.

CONCERTO PER L'EPIFANIA DEL CORO DELL'AVENTINO AT SANTI GIOVANNI E
PAOLO AL CELIO: THE ITALIAN RELIGION OF JOY AND SMILES

Tonight I've come to hear the Coro dell'Aventino perform their free Epiphany concert in a church that looks like an eighteenth-century ballroom. There are many stout Roman matrons in fur-trimmed hats and silver-haired gentlemen in the professorial cape-like overcoats with a single pleat running down its back. At precisely 6:30 p.m., the crystal chandeliers burst with light and the orchestra and chorus file in. A winsome young Korean soprano, Minji Kim, takes her place to the side. She is elegantly attired in a black sheath with rhinestones framing her neckline. Her hair is piled up in a chic twist. Her smile comes from deep within. The musical director, Fabio Avolio, a young and handsome man with brown hair, a fine face, and a genuine smile, is the last to enter. He raises his hands and calls everyone to attention.

There is a beautiful, empty moment of expectation: art is about to evoke the Spirit. I'm sitting about six rows from the orchestra and can see everyone, especially the conductor, very clearly. Maestro Avolio is the perfect conductor: good-looking, graceful, quick but not too quick, modest, and radiant. His hand gestures are beautiful, masculine, and direct. He is quite obviously a

genuinely happy man and a confident artist. He knows he is about to make all of us in the audience—and his musicians and singers—as joy filled as he is.

Truly, this is Epiphany: the Spirit has been made manifest in the world and we have come together to mark this eruption of the divine that makes all creation incandescent. Through music, art, grace, and community we all together touch the deep strain of joy in life. There are happy, sincere Italian smiles all around. As I listen to the sacred music, I look up into an apse painted with pastel clouds and filled with beautiful angels playing cellos, violins, and an organ and singing in unison. This is not like heaven; this *is* heaven! This is the eternal Italian religion of beauty, grace, and joy.

The cycle of short songs comes from seventeenth-century France, Vivaldi, ancient tradition (“Adeste Fideles”), Germany (“Stille Nacht”), Schubert, Scotland (“Deck the Halls”), early nineteenth-century France, Irving Berlin (“White Christmas”) and Handel (“Joy to the World” and the Hallelujah chorus from the *Messiah*). The “Adeste Fideles” brings tears to my eyes. I am again, for a moment, a pious boy at St. Cecilia’s in Englewood, New Jersey, at midnight Mass. The song that touches the audience the most is Saint Alfonso de’Liguori’s “Tu scendi dale stele” (From Starry Skies Descending). Everyone knows all the words. Its melody is based on a Neapolitan bagpipe carol. It recounts the divine Bambino coming into this world cold and poor.

PARCO DEL CELIO IN THE SPRING

Rome in mid-May is already warm. Next door to my hotel, the white roses in the unkempt garden of the mansion of the carabinieri are in full bloom. They, and the jasmine across the street, fill the night air with their perfume. After my morning *cappuccino* at my neighborhood café, I look for a place where I can read outdoors in peace and quiet. Rome has many secluded pockets inherited from the properties of the church, aristocracy, and the state. I cross Via Claudia and head for the wooded valley with the church of Santi Giovanni e Paolo. I continue walking alongside the massive brick church down the Clivo di Scauro and its great brick buttresses. I find a stone doorway where I can sit and watch the light play on the looming apse at the back of the church. The Roman bricks record an indescribably complex pattern of construction and repairs. I can hear masons working on the ancient church. Some of Old Rome must be rebuilt every day.

I walk back up the hill to the Parco del Celio, an old-fashioned, walled park. It has mature sycamores, expansive lawns, white gravel paths, and a stone fountain where pigeons alight to drink. A nineteenth-century neo-Gothic folly with three pointed arches shelters an ancient Roman altar. A bride in her bridal gown and her bridegroom in a snazzy, metallic-gray suit are here with their photographer having their pictures taken. A mother sits on the grass breastfeeding her child. Five young boys laugh and run around kicking a soccer ball under the trees. An Eritrean man leads a little boy perched on a patient donkey down the gravel path, around the fountain, and back again. An old man sits slumped in a wheelchair while his young Central American minder does pushups on the grass. Every stage of life is here.

ROME'S LONG PERSPECTIVES AND BROAD FOUNDATIONS

“In Rome, in the eternal city, I feel nearer to my own past, and to the whole past and future of the world, than I would in any cemetery or in any museum of relics. Old places and old persons in their turn, when spirit dwells in them, have an intrinsic vitality of which youth is incapable; precisely the balance and wisdom that comes from long perspectives and broad foundations....”

George Santayana, *My Host the World* (New York: Scribner's, 1953), 131-32.

Just up the hill in Celio was the Irish Roman Catholic convent and hospital to which Harvard philosopher George Santayana retired before his death at eighty-nine in 1952. He is entombed in the Pantheon of the Cimitero Monumentale del Verano in this city that he loved. “Long perspectives and broad foundations” are exactly what I experience in Rome, as well as the profound changes from antiquity to modernity through all the twists and turns of Italian history.

14,350 September 22, 2023