

## Underground

### Overview

A staircase leads from the portico to the underground rooms where the remains of the ancient basilica are visible, consisting of six rooms, five of which were recovered between 1658 and 1662 by **Pietro da Cortona**, who restored and decorated them. The seventeenth-century arrangement (unfortunately irreparably spoiled by the excavations of 1905 and 1964) safeguarded a series of fresco wall paintings of extraordinary importance for the study of early medieval Roman art; however, due to the great humidity of the rooms, in 1960 the Central Institute of Restoration proceeded with the definitive detachment of the frescoes, now exhibited - after a long restoration - in the National Roman Museum - Crypta Balbi in Rome. [3]

The remains of a large ancient Roman structure, perhaps some 250 meters long, were tentatively mapped out, and the late 7th century chapel and diaconia (welfare center) that were constructed within this were identified. There are murals from the 7th to the 11th centuries, some of which have been detached from the walls and taken to the Crypta Balba to preserve them. Photographs have replaced these. [1]

The access is to the side of the entrance loggia. You have to pay an entrance charge; note that the custodian is not able to help with access to the church itself if it is closed. The staircase by which you descend is 17th century. [1]

What you can visit is a set of six rooms. It must be made clear that this is only part of the original establishment, which certainly extended into the unexcavated area under the loggia and very likely to each side as well. [1]

The chambers are given Roman numerals: Rooms I to VI, with I to III from north to south (the church's left to right) next to the foundations of the façade, and IV to VI in a corresponding row behind to the west (towards the altar of the church). [1]

### Room I

Room I is the traditional Prison of St Paul, and contains a small free-standing ancient Composite column which now has a marble cinerary urn with the Chi-rho monogram sitting on top. The column has a cross incised on it, and a spiral inscription that reads: Verbum Dei non est alligatum ("The word of God is not bound"). Marks of rust on the column indicate that it once had an iron chain wrapped around it, and the chain was actually found in the adjacent well in 2010. A legend tells that on this site that the column was used to chain St. Paul during his alleged imprisonment awaiting trial. [1] [2]

Towards the northern corner is the octagonal well from which the prodigious water would have flowed following the prayers of the Apostle. The well is, by legend, the one that St Peter used for baptisms. It has a crudely carved cylindrical well-head with an octagonal marble rim, and still contains water. [1] [3]

The rooms II and V correspond to the central nave of the ancient diaconia. [2]

### Room II

The second room is the original diaconia chapel, with a walled-off apse to the east (on the right as you enter from Room I). By the stairs to the next room (Room III) is a pluteus or marble panel carved with a cross motif on one side, and a cross-flower (crucifer) on the other. A fragment of another pluteus is also in this room, this one pierced. These slabs were used on-end as screens for church sanctuaries in the Dark Ages. [1]

In 1594, the floor of this room was raised by 1 meter and at the same time they got a new floor covering. Also the well in the northwest corner had the well casing elevated. It is possible that the south and north wall at the same time got new wall covering, which can explain the lack of frescoes on these walls. [4]

To the left of the pluteus is an ancient square masonry altar, located in the center of the northern wall. It has an opening located on the level of the table (to contain the relics) and the fenestella confessionis in the center of the surface front. [3]

Also, there is a second free-standing column. There were extensive ancient frescoes in this room, now badly decayed but a photo shows one that featured three popes or bishops to the left of the altar which was late 8th century. Above the altar there are the remains of a fresco depicting the Crucified Christ. [1] [2]

The wall containing the doorway to Room V had a palimpsest fresco of three layers featuring different themes, one of them being the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes, 7th to 8th centuries. [1] [2]

### Room III

In an arcosolium inside the room III, the fresco depicting the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane was found, coeval with the oldest paintings and today only comprehensible through the photographic documentation made at the time of discovery (1904-1905). [2]

### Room IV

Room IV is the room behind the room with the well. It contained an important fresco cycle of the Legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, 7th century. This was overpainted with a fresco of the martyrdom of St Erasmus in the 8th century. [1]

The west wall in here has an arched niche flanked by two late 8th century fresco figures who represent SS John and Paul. To the right of these there is a little structure consisting of two marble pillars with a lintel, possibly part of a former altar. One pillar has Cosmatesque decoration. [1]

To the south of this room is a known Room VII, which has not been explored. [1]

### Room V

This room was converted into the main underground chapel in the 17th century, and has a Baroque altar with a marble relief by Cosimo Fancelli showing SS Peter and Paul reminiscing while St Luke listens in order to write his gospel, with St Martial in the background. [1]

### Room VI

The last room in the second row of rooms, Room VI, was converted into a sacristy in the 17th century by re-facing the walls. The niche in the west wall now contains a fresco of that date depicting Our Lady between SS Peter and Paul; this apparently replaced an ancient fresco of the same theme. However, the north wall has been left untouched and consists of massive ancient limestone blocks. [1]

This room now contains an ancient free-standing altar (12th century) made by reusing an ancient cippus in whose visible faces a Cosmatesque decoration was inserted, made up of fragments of ancient marble (porphyry, serpentine, basalt). [3]

### Access

The underground area has separate opening arrangements, and access is at the right hand side of the entrance portico:

Tuesday to Sunday, summer 16:00 to 19:00. Winter 15:00 to 18:00.

Also Saturday morning, 10:00 to 13:00.

Closed Monday.

There is a small charge for entry. The above details supersede previously advertised arrangements.

Some frescoes from the early diaconia and church are on separate display at Rome's Crypta Balbi museum, necessary because they overlaid those here now.

## Links & References:

1. [Roman Churches Wiki](#)
2. [Bisanzio blog](#)
3. [cathopedia.org](#)
4. [Anna's Guide](#)

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