

Heritage Choir Newsletter #26 – Rome, Italy

It's Monday, October 14th, during your 2019 Rome, Italy Performance Tour. This morning, we will visit the Rome Catacombs of St. Callixtus.....



The Catacombs of Rome are former underground burial grounds that date from the second to the fifth century and were principally used by Christians and Jews. The catacombs possess a huge number of subterranean passageways that form real labyrinths that are several kilometers long, along which rows of rectangular niches were dug out.

The Christians did not agree with the pagan custom of burning the bodies of their dead for which reason to solve problems created from a lack of space and the high price of land they decided to create these vast underground cemeteries.

The word catacomb, which means “next to the quarry”, comes from the fact that the first excavations to be used as a place of burial were carried out in the outskirts of Rome, next to the site of a quarry.

The catacombs of St. Callixtus are among the greatest and most important of Rome. They originated about the middle of the second century and are part of a cemeterial complex which occupies an area of 90 acres, with a network of galleries about 12 miles long, in four levels, more than twenty meters deep. In it were buried tens of martyrs, 16 popes and many Christians.

During the barbarian invasion of Italy in the 8th century many catacombs suffered continuous lootings, for which reason the Popes caused the still remaining relics to be transferred to the city’s churches. After these transfers, some catacombs were abandoned completely and forgotten for centuries.

The exploration and scientific study of the catacombs started, centuries later, with Antonio Bosio (1575-1629), nicknamed the "Columbus of subterranean Rome". In the last century the systematic exploration of the catacombs and, those of Saint Callixtus, was carried out by Giovanni Battista de Rossi (1822-1894), who is considered the father and founder of Christian Archaeology.

Roman law at the time prohibited the burial of the deceased in the interior of the city, for which reason all the catacombs were located outside of the walls. These separated and hidden places below ground constituted the perfect refuge in which the Christians could bury their own, freely using Christian Symbols.

Next, we will continue with some of the Christian Symbols and Art you may view at St. Callixtus Catacombs.....to be continued in next week’s Newsletter.

Rome “Fun Fact” #26– The Christians referred to their dead as asleep, so these catacombs were first called cemeteries, which means ‘places of sleep’. They believe that these asleep bodies will be awakened during the resurrection.