

Vatican Scavi by Father Llane Briese



Buried underneath Catholicism's largest and most famous Church lays a treasure even more precious than the gold, precious stone, and priceless artwork above. The bones of St. Peter are certainly among the most precious relics the Church has. After all, they are the bodily remains of the apostle who confessed faith in the Lord Jesus, denied him on the night of his betrayal, was reconciled to him after the resurrection, and faithfully fed his sheep for three decades after the ascension before finally suffering death at the hands of the Romans. Considering the value of these bones, it may be quite a surprise that they were only identified in 1968. What happened to them for the previous 1,900 years? The answer is complicated.

Christianity first arrived in Rome in the 40s A.D., about ten years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. It was a small religious sect, an offshoot from Judaism. Both Jews and Christians were quite unpopular in imperial Rome, largely due to their abhorrence of the ancient Roman gods. Therefore, in 64 A.D., when the great fire of Rome broke out during the reign of Nero, the Christians were an easy scapegoat. (It is generally thought that Nero, in fact, began the fire himself, desiring to destroy the city of Rome and build his own city. He was a bit of a narcissist and not exactly the sanest of Roman emperors!) In any case, the aftermath of the fire brought about the first great persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. Included in this first wave of martyrdoms for the Church were the great apostles Peter and Paul, who by this point had arrived in Rome and would have been the two most prominent targets of any persecution. Since he was a Roman citizen, St. Paul had the right to an appeal to Caesar before any death sentence was carried out, and once it was denied, was allowed a more humane death: a private beheading outside the city. St. Peter on the other hand, was not a Roman citizen, and so was eligible for the cruelest death the Romans had to offer: crucifixion. A tradition going back to St. Jerome (4th century) tells us the Peter chose to be crucified upside-down, desiring not to die in the same way that Jesus died.

The location of Peter's execution was Nero's circus, a building housing a number of competitions and other events during the 1st century. It was located adjacent to the Vatican Hill, just across the Tiber River and outside the main part of the city of Rome. On the side of the hill outside the circus was a necropolis in which families would construct elaborate tombs in which to bury their dead. At the center of the circus was the obelisk, imported from Egypt, which now sits at the center of St. Peter's Square. Hence, it is likely that the obelisk was one of the final things St. Peter saw before dying. After his death, as a condemned criminal, he would not have had the right to a proper burial; frequently crucified bodies were left on crosses to serve as gruesome public warnings not to challenge Roman authority. However, either by bribery or by stealth, desiring to safeguard the remains of the apostle, the early Christians took the body and buried it in a simple grave called the Poor Man's Grave, which would involve placing Peter's body in a small trench and covering it with six large tiles in the shape of a tent. Since the area around the Vatican Hill was rather marshy, the grave would have been surrounded by a small retaining wall around the perimeter in order to keep the body from washing away in the event of heavy rains.

The Great Fire of 64 A.D. touched off an intermittent period of persecution in the Church that would last 250 years until Constantine legalized Christianity in the Empire with the Edict of Milan. Even during this period of intense suffering for Christians, the grave of Peter did not go neglected. Around the year 150, Christians erected a simple monument over the Poor Man's Grave resembling a trophy, blending in well with standard Roman architecture, but of profound significance to Christians. The next two centuries saw the addition of two walls on either side of the Trophy, one of which still stands to this day. Over time, this wall became covered with Latin and Greek graffiti, thus earning it the moniker "Graffiti Wall". By the time Christianity was legalized, this gravesite of Peter had changed substantially from the time of Peter's burial.

As part of his favor to Christianity, as emperor, Constantine built a series of basilicas in honor of the great Roman martyrs, including the original St. Peter's Basilica on the Vatican Hill which was dedicated in 326. At this time, the Trophy was encased in a box of marble and porphyry and served as the centerpiece of the sanctuary in the new basilica. Two subsequent renovations would build large altars directly on top of St. Peter's grave. The original basilica was replaced by the current basilica in the sixteenth century, which placed the main papal altar high above the old altars. Hence, throughout the tradition of the Church, St. Peter was believed to be buried under the altar of the basilica; however, as the centuries passed, this belief became more of an accepted tradition rather than a proven fact.

Such was the case until the 1940s when after survey work in the grotto level of the basilica uncovered evidence of the ancient necropolis. After some discussion, Pope Pius XII appointed two Jesuit priests, Fr. Anthony Ferrua and Fr. Engel Bert Kirschbaum, to lead an excavation of the ancient necropolis under absolute secrecy. In addition, all of the work had to take place at night, thus leading to an unfortunate consequence: Msgr. Ludwig Kaas, head of the physical plant at St. Peter's and who was not a fan of the excavation project, believing the recently excavated bones were being treated disrespectfully, would have his workers go in to the excavation and remove recently uncovered bones and carry them into storage. This violation of sound archaeological procedure would have significant consequences on the project.

In 1950, the excavators, having secured the previously withheld permission to dig under the main altar, found the Poor Man's Grave. However, the bones found in this grave presented a problem: They could not be the bones of St. Peter. The bones found included parts of three human skeletons as well as a smattering of animal bones. Of the three human skeletons, only one was of an appropriate age and build to be Peter, and this skeleton was of a woman! The excavators were thus forced at the time to conclude their investigation was a failure.

Fortunately for the project in the fifteen years following this initial disappointment, a couple of scholars were able to uncover another set of bones that had originally been found in a hollow niche in the Graffiti Wall but had been lost for a couple of decades because Msgr. Kaas' workers had mistakenly removed the bones and placed them in storage. An examination of these bones, which were of an older (60-70 year old) male skeleton of a robust build and included bones from all major parts of the body except the feet, revealed that they were covered with soil matching that found in the Poor Man's Grave (an uncommonly light soil for the region). In addition, the bones were covered in the imperial Roman purple dye, a dye reserved for the emperor himself and other high-ranking Roman officials. Finally, a small piece of the wall next to the place where the bones were found was marked with the Greek words for "Peter is within." This evidence was the center of a report drawn up and sent to five disinterested scholars to ensure that the methodology was properly followed and the conclusions justified. All five approved of the conclusion that the bones found in the wall were those of the apostle Peter.

After the report was approved, it was submitted to Pope Paul VI, who in June 1968, accepted the report and placed the bones in a series of small boxes (along with the bones of a mouse that were also found in the same place as the human bones), which were all placed back into the Graffiti Wall niche, thus locating them a couple of stories underneath the main papal altar at St. Peter's. These bones are now visible to all who participate in a Scavi Tour at the basilica. To look at these bones and pray in front of the few material remains of the Prince of the Apostles always serves as a call to greater faith and a deeper commitment to the service of God.

