Pilgrimage and its Effects on San Paolo fuori le mura during the Middle Ages

Alisa Cotter

The purpose of this paper is to examine the history of San Paolo fuori le mura (Saint Paul's Outside the Walls), the basilica in Rome dedicated to St. Paul, and to demonstrate the overall impact that pilgrimage had on the development of the church and its interior ornamentation. Several factors played a key role in this basilica's significance as a pilgrimage destination throughout the Middle Ages. I will argue that the various methods employed by the papacy to promote its own supremacy from the time of Constantine were used purposely to attract pilgrims to the city. Political and economic gains were the incentives for the church's attempts to make Rome into a pilgrimage center.

In order to accommodate the number of pilgrims who visited St. Paul's burial site throughout the year, what was originally a small memorial chapel was, by the fifth century, transformed into a large, elaborate basilica. High-ranking church officials and members of imperial families were most often the patrons of such large scale building projects. The relationship between these two groups highlights the political support given to the church. The Emperor Constantine (307-337 C.E.) initiated this important relationship when he acknowledged Christianity and aligned himself with Sylvester, the bishop of Rome during his reign. Over the course of the next several centuries other bishops would find ways to assert Rome's primacy as the center of the Christian world. One of the most significant examples of the use of papal authority was the creation of the first Christian Jubilee inaugurated by Pope Boniface VIII in 1300 C.E., which caused an overflow of pilgrims traveling to San Paolo fuori le mura during this period.1 The commitment on the part of the pilgrims traveling to San Paolo fuori le mura, and the frequency with which it was visited, was noticed by church leaders in Rome. From very early on St. Paul's status was promoted by the top of the church hierarchy. As soon as Christianity acquired imperial recognition under Constantine, Rome became a destination for holy journeys second only to Jerusalem.2

After his own conversion Constantine gave Christians a distinctly improved status in Rome, compared to the persecutions that they had previously suffered.

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[1] Dickson describes the full weight of Boniface's issuing of the Christian Jubilee when he says, "the Jubilee was a medieval religious revival that was unlike any other pilgrimage in Christendom." Gary Dickson, "The Crowd at the Feet of Pope Boniface VIII: Pilgrimage, Crusade and the First Roman Jubilee (1300)," *Journal of Medieval History* 25 (1999): 286.

[2] Debra Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome in the Middle Ages Continuity and Change* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 1998), 23; Herbert Kessler and Johanna Zacharias, *Rome 1300: On the Path of the Pilgrim* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 1-2.

According to Eusebius, Constantine's conversion to Christianity occurred as he marched to Rome in 312 C.E.3 Praying for divine approval before the battle at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine had a vision of the Chi-Rho symbol in the sky accompanied by a prophecy indicating the symbol's divine properties.4 He believed it would aid in the battle against his enemy Maxentius and had the image placed on the shields of all his soldiers. He won the battle and proclaimed his triumph as having been divinely ordained.5 Due to his victory, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan (313 C.E.), which allowed the Christians to worship their god alongside the variety of pagan cults in Rome, thus beginning the gradual transformation of the ancient pagan Rome into the center of Western Christendom.6 Prior to Constantine's decree of toleration, Christians visited the spot believed to be the site of St. Paul's burial by locating the cella memoriae that had been placed there.7 As stated above, due to the vast numbers of pilgrims now allowed to come and worship in Rome alongside the burial sites of important Christian martyrs, the need arose for their shrines to be built up.

To demonstrate his munificence, Constantine began erecting places for Christians to gather and worship the Christian god who had favored him in his battle against Maxentius. Scholars disagree concerning what Constantine actually constructed at the site known as St. Paul's burial. However, the general consensus seems to be that Constantine built only a small memorial church rather than a grand basilica.8 That Constantine did construct something at the site is clear from a number of sources.9 For instance, the fifth century Acts of St. Sylvester, which contains a legendary account of Sylvester and Constantine's relationship, marks the date that a structure patronized by Constantine was built

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[3] Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., "Eusebius: Life of Constantine," in *Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 481-560.

[4] Schaff and Wace eds., *Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, 490-494.

[5] An inscription found on the Arch of Constantine, dedicated in 315 C.E., has been used to support the claim that his victory over Maxentius as having been divinely ordained: "To the Emperor Caesar Flavius Constantine Maximus/ Pius Felix Augustus, the Senate and the Roman People,/ Since through divine inspiration and great wisdom/ He has delivered the state from the tyrant/ And his party by his army and noble arms,/ Dedicate this arch, decorated with triumphal insignia." See Michael Maas, *Readings in Late Antiquity: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 105.

[6] "Each individual one of those who share this same wish to observe the religion of the Christians should freely and straightforwardly hasten to do so without any anxiety or interference." Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, trans. J. L. Creed (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1984), 48.4-5. Compare Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., "The Church History of Eusebius," in *Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994).

[7] Andrea Braghin, *The Jubilee Guide to Rome: The Four Basilicas The Great Pilgrimage* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 62.

[8] Kessler and Zacharias, *Rome 1300*, 159; Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome*, 34-35.

[9] June Hager, *Pilgrimage A Chronicle of Christianity Through the Churches of Rome* (London: Weidenfeld, Nicholson, 1999), 199.

and dedicated, closely linking his building programs to Sylvester, the bishop of Rome (314-335 C.E.).10

The Acts of St. Sylvester, among other accounts like it, helped to promote Constantine's own image as a devout believer in the teachings of Christianity. The legend describes Constantine having had a vision of Peter and Paul, who directed the emperor to go to Sylvester in order to be cured of leprosy. Constantine was miraculously cured and was baptized by Sylvester. Afterwards he allegedly gave a substantial amount of authority to the office of the bishop in addition to numerous allotments of land and property.11 Culminating with the reputation accorded to Constantine in the mid-eighth century text known as the Donation of Constantine, Roman bishops displayed an aura of superiority. The purpose of the Donation of Constantine document was clearly to reinforce the papacy's legitimacy and authority later on.

The earliest Christian basilicas in Rome surrounded the city, situated just outside its walls. This was purposely done, in part because of regulations against burials within the city.12 However, these outlying sites also functioned as a form of early Christian propaganda, as anyone leaving or entering the city would have come into contact with them. In addition, because Paganism continued to exist in Rome, political reasons also likely governed the decision to build these basilicas outside of the city. Because Constantine placed a great deal of his energy into the establishment of Constantinople, Rome was left largely unattended, to be run almost entirely by the senatorial class. These upper-class persons continued to worship the ancient pagan deities. Thus, it is fair to conclude that Constantine had little influence over the development of Rome into a large Christian city.

This changed when the Emperor Theodosius (379-395 C.E.) banned Paganism completely and made Christianity the official state observed religion. In turn, Theodosius commissioned a large scale rebuilding of San Paolo, turning the site into an elaborate basilica, but its reconstruction was left incomplete when he died. A dedication found on the triumphal arch inside the church declares the basilica to have been completed by his son, Honorius (395-423 C.E.).13 The Spanish writer Prudentius (348-413 C.E.) in his Liber Peristephanon, describes the glory of the renovated San Paolo fuori le mura carried out by Theodosius and his son. In it he gives a firsthand account of the grandeur a pilgrim would have observed coming upon the great basilica: "The splendor of the place is princely, for our good emperor dedicated this seat and decorated its whole extent with great wealth. He laid plates on the beams so as to make all the light within golden like the sun's radiance at its rising, and

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[10] Christopher Bush Coleman, *Constantine the Great and Christianity* (New York: AMS Press, 1968).
[11] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend.* trans. Granger, Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 74.
[12] Lucilius, *The Twelve Tablets.* trans. E. H. Warmington. In *Remains of Old Latin*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), X.1.
[13] The building project that these two emperors patronized stood until the early nineteenth century, when in 1823 the basilica was mostly destroyed by fire.

supported the gold-panelled ceiling on pillars of Parian marble set out there in four rows. Then he covered the curves of the arches with splendid glass of different hues, like meadows that are bright with flowers in spring" (XII 47-54).14

After Theodosius' proclamation granting official imperial patronage to Christianity it continued to flourish through the fourth century until the fall of Rome in 410 C.E. when the Visigoths attacked the city. The city fell further into decline prior to succumbing to the Ostrogoths in 476 C.E. The eminence with which the papacy in Rome was recognized throughout the Middle Ages went through several periods of ups and downs, which the church in Rome actively worked to overcome in order to establish and maintain its dominance.15

During the fifth century the Roman church began promulgating the cult of the Christian saints and martyrs in an attempt to establish its preeminence. According to Birch, "Rome was the richest of all the cities in the West in relics and shrines and thus the development of the cult of saints undoubtedly enhanced the city's importance as a pilgrimage center."16 The church in Rome gained popularity by emphasizing the intercessory powers of Christian saints and martyrs, largely because of what the city personally had to offer to a pious pilgrim, particularly because it controlled the shrines of two important Christian martyrs. While some sources claim that it was Pope Damasus (366-384 C.E.) who initiated the organization of the cult of the saints and martyrs, others claim that it was Pope Leo I (440-461 C.E.).17 However, it can be concluded that by the time of Leo I the cult of saints and martyrs reached a peak in its effectiveness.

At the basilica of San Paolo fuori le mura, in order to mark the revived image of the papacy, Leo I commissioned papal portraits to be placed in roundels lining both sides of the nave beginning with St. Peter. It was also during this time that fresco paintings were commissioned to run along each side of the nave.18 These frescoes included, on the right side of the nave, forty scenes illustrating important stories from the Old Testament. On the nave's left side were forty scenes representing moments of St. Paul's life, scenes largely adapted from the Acts of the Apostles. Such an iconological program as that commissioned for San Paolo fuori le mura, sheds light on the various functions of religious art at this time. Art produced during the Middle Ages was displayed with certain intentions. Art could serve both religious and political agendas. Political statements were often represented intertwined with religious imagery.

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14 Prudentius, *Perstephanon*, trans. H.J. Thomson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 326-327, note a.

15 Webb *Churches and Catacombs*, xvii-xviii.

16 Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome*, 23.

17 Webb, *Churches and Catacombs*, xx.

18 Kessler and Zacharias, *Rome 1300*, 167-174; Luba Eleen, "The Frescoes from the Life of St. Paul in San Paolo fuori le mura in Rome: Early Christian or Medieval?" *Canadian Art Review* 12 (1985): 251-259.

Such propaganda, observed by the lay community, was intended to convey an important message, and to foster certain reactions. These images aided the faithful in understanding the important doctrines and decrees that had been determined at ecumenical councils. They were also used to promote the status of particular individuals. In the case of the papal portraits the viewer would clearly recognize the authority inherited by the current pope from each prior pope, traced back to St. Peter.19

The church in Rome was again affected by the various invasions of the fifth and sixth centuries. As a consequence of the economic and political instability created by the invasions, the building of new churches began to diminish.20 However, renovations and gifts, mostly from wealthy patrons, continued to be given to the church throughout this time. In the case of San Paolo fuori le mura, the most significant donation came from Emperor Theodosius' daughter, Galla Placidia (388-450 C.E.) who funded the large, elaborate mosaic on the triumphal arch.21 The commissioning of this large mosaic took place with the support of Pope Leo I, who, as stated above, played an important role in the establishment of the cult of saints. St. Paul and St. Peter are shown on either side of the arch, demonstrating the equality of each. Pairing these two saints together aided the church in Rome in communicating the city's ancient ties to the earliest Christian martyrs, co-founders of the church itself.

When Rome's popularity as a pilgrimage destination created by the promotion of the cult of saints and martyrs began to wane, the papacy worked to develop a new method to reassert its dominance. Beginning with Pope Gregory the Great (590-604 C.E.) the papacy launched another attempt to regain its authority, this time, by emphasizing the primacy of holy relics. In order to substantiate claims professing the healing powers of a saint's relics, papal authorities looked to Acts 19:11-12 "God was performing extraordinary miracles by Paul's hands, so that even facecloths or handkerchiefs that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, and the diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them." This was used as an early example of the use of relics.22 By the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 C.E. it was mandatory for every church to have a saint's relics before it could be consecrated.23 The power of this declaration made the pilgrimage to Rome immediately appealing. According to Newbigin, "relics were replicated all over Europe and held in great

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19 Kessler and Zacharias, *Rome 1300*, 164-165.

20 Webb, *Churches and Catacombs*, xxi.

21 Kessler and Zacharias, *Rome 1300*, 167.

22 Webb, *Churches and Catacombs*, 212; Eleanor Vernon, "Romanesque Churches of the Pilgrimage Roads," *Gesta* 1 (1963): 12.

23 "We decree therefore that relics shall be placed with the accustomed service in as many of the sacred temples as have been consecrated without the relics of the Martyrs. And if any bishop from this time forward is found consecrating a temple without holy relics, he shall be deposed, as a transgressor of the ecclesiastical tradition." Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., "The Seven Ecumenical Councils," in *Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 14 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 560. See also Wilfrid Bosner, "The Cult of Relics in the Middle Ages," *Folklore* 73 (Winter, 1962): 236.

esteem...Roman relics were the 'parent' relics, and all other relics derived from them."24 Thus, once again great throngs of pilgrims began to make the journey to Rome, and one of the most popular destinations was San Paolo fuori le mura because it preserved the relics of St. Paul.

In order to promote a particular pilgrimage destination, itineraries produced at this time were used to publicize what a particular city had to offer, as well as functioning as guidebooks for those set to travel.25 These itineraries were used as an important publicity tool in order to combat competition between other pilgrimage sites. These booklets listed what special indulgences were given to pilgrims who visited certain sites in Rome.26 One such text, the Stacions of Rome, specifically records the benefits of going to San Paolo fuori le mura.27 Its author asserts that visiting San Paolo daily for a year was equal, in terms of indulgence, to traveling to St. James' in Spain (125-128; F. J. Furnivall, 146). During the later part of the Middle Ages pilgrimage badges also began to gain popularity. The purpose of these badges was two-fold. According to Birch, these badges were "a good means by which pilgrimage centers advertised themselves," in addition to also being a communicative means for pilgrims to express their personal dedication.28 By filling Rome with relics and by promoting and highlighting the history of the city in its itineraries the papacy drew in continual economic growth in the city of Rome.

Specific churches were inherently more appealing than others if they possessed a notable saint's relics. In order to control and accentuate the pilgrim's experience, St. Paul's crypt, located in the transept of the church, experienced several stages of remodeling throughout the Middle Ages.29 Much of the information about such renovations comes from the Liber Pontificalis, which was begun in the sixth century to record the events of each pope's pontificate. While Sixtus III (432-440 C.E.) was pope, the Emperor Valentinian is recorded to have added an elaborate confessio at the pope's request.30 Less than a century later, Symmachus I (498-514 C.E.) is said to have commissioned artwork to be placed behind the confessio.31 One of the most significant changes made to the crypt in the history of the basilica occurred during the

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24 Nerida Newbigin, "'Del grasso di Lorenzo un'ampolletta': Relics and Representations in the Quest for Forgiveness in Renaissance Rome," *The Journal of Religious History* 28 (February, 2004): 59; Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome*, 26.

25 Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome*, 38; Hager, *Pilgrimage*, 188; Newbigin, "Relics and Representations," 52-53.

26 Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome*, 194-196.

27 Hubert believes this English poem "was one of a class of documents which evidently formed part of an organized propaganda to attract pilgrims to Rome." J.R. Hulbert, "Some Medieval Advertisements of Rome," *Modern Philology* 20 (May, 1923): 404; Hager, *Pilgrimage*, 179-180.

28 Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome*, 77-79.

29 For a general overview concerning the changes that pilgrimage churches went through see Vernon, "Romanesque Churches of the Pilgrimage Roads," 12.

30 *Liber Pontificalis*, 37.

31 *Liber Pontificalis*, 47; Anna Maria Cerioni, *The Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls*, (Rome: Pontificia Amministrazione, 1991), 41.

pontificate of Gregory the Great. He is responsible for altering the crypt in such a way as to allow mass to be given over St. Paul's body. According to the Liber Pontificalis, Pope Gregory is said to have done the same at St. Peter's basilica.32 Also, Leo III (795-816 C.E.) added a flight of stairs that made the crypt more accessible.33 Pilgrims devoutly made the trip to San Paolo fuori le mura because they were allowed an unusual closeness to the martyr's body. They could lower strips of cloth into holes made on the lid of the saint's tomb, thereby, making contact with St. Paul.34 The significance of this act is directly connected to the passage related above from the Acts of the Apostles.

In 1300 C.E. Pope Boniface VIII issued a papal bull that instituted the first Christian Holy Year, the first Jubilee. This was by far the most decisive method used by the church during the Middle Ages to encourage pilgrims to come to Rome. Indulgences were awarded to the pilgrims who made the long and difficult journey to Rome.35 In Boniface's decree he specified that each pilgrim would be required to visit San Paolo fuori le mura in addition to St. Peter's.36 Dickson notes that a pilgrim's complete repentance of sins "was a prerequisite for the receipt of the indulgence."37 Other requirements included visiting the sites each day for a predetermined length of time. For those who lived in Rome it was thirty consecutive days, while it was fifteen days for those who had made their way to Rome.38 According to Lisa Jardine, indulgences were "marketed with increasing energy by a clergy for whom raising money for the Church had become a legitimate activity...the individual 'bought' salvation, an intangible asset, whose efficacy depended on their trust in the Pope and his Church in Rome."39

After Boniface convened the first Christian Jubilee changes were quickly made by succeeding popes. For instance, Boniface had originally declared the Jubilee to be celebrated every hundred years doubling its Old Testament ancestor.40 However, the span between each celebrated Holy Year was quickly shortened, each pope using a different set of circumstances in order to validate their pronouncement.41 Eventually the Christian Jubilee was to be celebrated

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32 *Liber Pontificalis*, 63; Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome*, 36.

33 Kessler and Zacharias, *Rome 1300*, 177.

34 Kessler and Zacharias, *Rome 1300*, 179; Newbigin, "Relics and Representations," 54, n. 22, 56.

35 Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome*, 194-196; Dickson, "The Crowd at the Feet of Pope Boniface VIII," 289; Kessler and Zacharias, *Rome 1300*, 1.

36 Kessler and Zacharias, *Rome 1300*, 158; Webb, *Churches and Catacombs*, 207-213.

37 Dickson, "The Crowd at the Feet of Pope Boniface VIII," 286, 294.

38 Newbigin, "Relics and Representations," 54, n. 21; Braghin, *The Jubilee Guide to Rome*, 7.

39 Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 335-336; Newbigin, "Relics and Representations," 52.

40 Leviticus 25: 1-55. Dickson argues against the Christian Jubilee's associations with the Old Testament. Dickson, "The Crowd at the Feet of Pope Boniface VIII," 285; Hager, *Pilgrimage*, 186; Kessler and Zacharias, *Rome 1300*, 2; Braghin, *The Jubilee Guide to Rome*, 5.

41 Boniface IX (1389 C.E.) changed the celebration of the Jubilee from one hundred years to every thirty-three years "in deference to the length of Christ's life on Earth." Nicholas V (1447-1455 C.E.) then decreased the intervals again, this time to twenty-five years. Hager, *Pilgrimage*,

every twenty-five years. Also, additional churches were added to the list of sites pilgrims had to visit in order to qualify for indulgences. In 1350 C.E. Pope Clement VI (1342-1352 C.E.) added the Lateran and in 1390 C.E. Pope Urban VI (1378-1389 C.E.) added Sta. Maria Maggiore.42 Considering the Christian Jubilee and the quick changes made to the frequency with which it would be celebrated, and the number of churches a pilgrim had to visit, it seems likely that the primary motivation for such changes is closely linked to economic benefits.43 The revenue created by the mass amounts of pilgrims visiting Rome in order to gain their indulgence generated a great deal of wealth.

Thus it is clear that there is an important link between the politics and piety of the city of Rome throughout the Middle Ages. Although I have only given a brief description of their relationship and more research needs to be done, it is already clear that the theme is pertinent to understanding the usefulness of pilgrimage to the economic and political history of the city. For instance, although the Donation of Constantine has been discovered to be a forgery this does not lessen its importance in history, as it clearly demonstrates the papacy's attempts to control their image, and reveals its political and economic motives.44 In addition, the papacy's ulterior motives do not detract from St. Paul's appeal to the devout throughout the Middle Ages. The fame of St. Paul has been constant since shortly after his death. His story inspired the faithful, and his letters served as guides cherished by the pious believers of Christianity. However, we see that St. Paul's influence and dominance as an early Christian martyr was used for two very distinct purposes: to understand the message of Jesus, and to sell the message of Jesus.

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188. Braghin also adds that Clement VI (1342-1352 C.E.), in 1343 ordered the Jubilee to be celebrated every fifty years. Braghin, in contrast to Hager, notes that it was Urban VI (1378-1389 C.E.) who was responsible for changing the Jubilee to thirty-three years, and Paul II (1464-1471 C.E.), who, in 1470, set it at twenty-five. Braghin, *The Jubilee Guide to Rome*, 10-11.

42 The churches a pilgrim is required to visit and frequency with which the Jubilee is celebrated has remained the same since the end of the Middle Ages.

43 Birch, *Pilgrimage to Rome*, 201.

44 Lorenzo Valla, *The Falsely-Believed and Forged Donation of Constantine*, trans. Olga Zorzi Pugliese (Toronto: Centre For Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 1985).