

At the Crossroads: In the Footsteps of St. Paul: ROME

“And so we came to Rome!” (Acts 28,14c). We sailed from Athens, reached the Italian port of Brindisi and proceeded to San Giovanni Rotundo, home of the modern apostle of the holy Rosary, instrument of Reconciliation and sign of God’s compassionate love, St. Padre Pio. From there, we took a bus ride to Pompeii and then finally, to Rome!

Entering Rome in the night, we saw the great dome of St. Peter’s Basilica slowly taking shape before us. Circling around the monument of modern Italy’s founder, we marveled at the Roman Forum, the Colosseum and the Arch of Titus that led to ancient Rome.

But the Rome of Paul’s time, under Claudius and later Nero, witnessed the expulsion of the Jews from the empire’s capital and the persecution of those who believed in the Way being preached by a certain Chrestus. Nero himself built his own Golden House that occupied three hills and had his huge column, the colossus, built at the entrance of what is now called the Colosseum.

Claudius and Nero wanted to continue the tradition of the emperor-gods, the worship of the goddess Roma and of Victory, and the institution of imperial peace and justice, after the spoils of war.

The *hoi polloi*, the ordinary folks of Roman society, had their own household gods, with their altars around their houses. Suppressed before on behalf of the emperor-worship, these were later rehabilitated and aligned with the worship of the emperor and his decrees together with the Jewish religion and the Christian sect. Except that the latter two could not be reconciled with the imperial religion and its politics of domination.

When Paul came to Rome, the Acts 28 took note that he preached unhindered, at the time of Claudius’s rule. But Paul himself suffered imprisonment and martyrdom in Rome, this time under Nero. Nero needed to unify the empire against political dissent. The story of the burning of Rome while Nero fiddled, whether historical or legendary, gave reason for him to find a scapegoat.

In this light, the Christians in the heart of the empire had to make a choice. How does one live out the faith in the heart of the empire that offered a different god, a different measure of success and a different way of living? Can one be Christian while enjoying the largesse of the empire at the same time? Must one secretly worship Jesus, and find accommodations in the emperor-worship? Can one obey the laws of Nature, the laws of the State, the laws of one’s body and the Laws of the Christ, the Way at the same time? To these questions, Paul wrestled with justice and justification, sin and redemption and the incompatible alternative of the Kingdom of God, the system of Christ. – Fr. Ben