

FOREWORD

Rome. Say the word “Rome,” and a myriad of colorful and musical images fire the imagination: the hushed roar of Fontana di Trevi by moonlight where Marcello Mastroianni and Anita Ekberg cavorted in Fellini’s “La Dolce Vita;” the Spanish Steps of Trinitá dei Monti awash with the magentas, emeralds, and lilacs of spring-time flowers; that incomparable view from the Pincio of the dome of San Pietro, silhouetted against the flaming orange sky at sunset; the pale rose circle of Castel Sant’Angelo, where Puccini’s Tosca hurled herself from the parapets, reflected Monet-like in the quiet babble of the Tiber, shortly after a hazy, summer sunrise.

Rome is also the cacophony of the fruit vendors’ “fragole fresci” and “limoni qui” in that most splendid of all out-door markets, the Campo de’ Fiori. It’s a cool, Frascati sip at twilight in Piazza Navona while the *chitarriste* strum and sing “Quanto Sei Bella Roma,” and other local *canzone del popolo*, with Bernini’s Fountain of the Four Rivers providing the dramatic setting. And of course, it’s the faded imperial splendor of the Roman Forum and the Colosseum, looking somehow anachronistic as hoards of ubiquitous Japanese tourists innocently smile for photos against a backdrop that had once provided the stage for spectacles of unparalleled savagery and brutality. Yes, Rome is all of these things and so much more. It is the city, as one observer put it, of “surprise around the corner,” for despite what Baedeker, Cooke, and Frommer point out, one can still turn a corner and discover that quiet, little piazza with a fountain that the guidebooks overlooked. And at moments such as these—and there are many—Rome truly becomes yours, and yours alone. You sense the thrill of the discoverer, who’s accidentally stumbled upon some hidden treasure. There is no need to toss a coin over your shoulder into the Fountain of Trevi, for if your stay was long

enough to uncover her charms, Rome has claimed you; you are hers for life. You've no choice *but* to return.

I have returned, many times, since a month of study there in July of 1996, and each time there's something new to discover. It's particularly delightful to re-discover the city afresh through the eyes of others: my late wife Eugenia, with her love of art history, was naturally attracted to the architectural and artistic aspects; my friend Chris, who teaches European history, was more inclined to delve into Rome's imperial past.

As a student and teacher of Church history, I have always been impressed, ever since my first visit, by the innumerable number of cupolas that dot the city skyline—their lanterns crowned by gilded crosses—ultimately dominated by the grandest cupola of all, the dome of San Pietro. For whether one is fascinated by past imperial grandeur, or the magnificent art and architecture of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, those cupolas with their gilded crosses point to the one, underlying reality that has remained constant throughout the drama and spectacle of the past two millennia in this Eternal City's proud history—the one fixed point in an ever-changing universe: Rome is ultimately the Holy See, the capital of the world's nearly one billion Roman Catholics. And at the center of it all resides the man who, as successor to St. Peter, occupies the oldest executive office in the Western world—*Il Papa*, His Holiness, the Pope.

Try turning any corner, or walking down any street without encountering a church or major basilica; it's virtually impossible. Enter any major piazza such as Piazza Navona, or Piazza Barberini, or Piazza della Rotonda, where the Pantheon stands, and you'll doubtless observe a fountain in its center, inscribed with the name of some pope, followed by the abbreviation: "PONT. MAX."—"Pontifex Maximus," the "Supreme Bridge-builder." Even the mighty Egyptian obelisks, that Roman legions had plundered for triumphal ornamentation, and now stand at the core of these public squares—including the Piazza San Pietro itself—have all been baptized by the papacy into the Roman Church, topped with crosses at their apexes. But, you may be wondering, just what exactly *is* a "Pontifex Maximus," and how did this architect's title come to apply to the pope?

In ancient times, when the first wooden bridges were built across the Tiber, the title "Pontifex Maximus" (the Supreme Bridge-builder) was accorded the high priest of pagan Rome who performed rituals to appease the angry river gods. Later on, Julius Caesar was granted the title by the senate as an honorific. During the Imperial

period, from Augustus onward, all Emperors retained the title as the “Supreme High Priest” of the Roman cult.

As the power of the principate in the West was gradually transmogrified by the rise of the papacy towards the middle of the fifth century, it seems the title was assumed by the pope— that “Supreme Bridge-builder” between the Divine and the human— perhaps as early as Leo I, who quelled the wrath of Attila at the gates of a grateful Rome. And though the Renaissance and Baroque sculptors were quite liberal with the use of this title on works commissioned by their papal patrons, starting with the papacy of Gregory the Great (590—604) popes have abandoned it in favor of the more pastoral “*Servus servorum Dei*”—“Servant of the Servants of God” (imperial aspirations notwithstanding).

Today, ever since the Risorgimento of 1870 stripped the Church of the Papal States in the Italian drive for unity, the papacy has in fact become more pastoral and less pontifical, in the imperial sense. Just as the principate yielded to the papacy some fifteen hundred years ago, the papacy has had to yield to the pressures of Nationalism, Fascism, and Republicanism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which saw an end to its temporal powers, and a reawakening of its spiritual vision. Rome may very well be the capital of the Catholic Church, but it is also presently the capital of the Italian republic. One does not find “PONT. MAX.” chiseled on the entablature of the Monument to King Victor Emmanuel II. Still, regardless of these political upheavals, can any visitor with an unprejudiced eye deny that the Rome that bestrides the Tiber today— for there have indeed been *many* Romes throughout its vast history— is in reality the creation of those papal city planners that called it home from the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries?

It is essentially this Rome, then— Renaissance Rome, Baroque Rome, the Rome of “PONT. MAX.”— that will provide the focus for our discussion of this truly “Eternal City” in the pages that follow. For any discussion of Rome— of its art, its architecture, its history, its faith— is ultimately, unavoidably, a discussion of those pontiffs, both sinners and saints, who had the political clout and financial resources to command the genius of a Michelangelo, a Raphael, a Bramante, and a Bernini, to achieve the miracles in stone and in paint that defined an age. It is primarily *this* Rome that the visitor takes away in memory, and whose streets, piazzas, shrines, and palazzos we will revisit here.

As one stands inside the marble cool of the Pantheon— that most perfectly preserved of all structures from Rome’s imperial past— one might forget that this an-

cient temple to all the gods with its archetypal dome, oculus searching the heavens, is not only the resting place of Raphael and Italian kings of the Risorgimento, but, in fact, a parish church where Mass is heard every Sunday; imperial splendor, Renaissance genius, and the age of Italian unification, all united under the seal of the papal tiara and crossed keys of St. Peter. If you don't find the seal inside the Pantheon, look for it outside in the Piazza della Rotonda at the base of a cross-topped Egyptian obelisk, in the middle of a fountain. Below the seal you'll find the inscription:

Clemens XI

PONT. MAX.

Welcome to papal Rome!

Anthony T. Piantieri

New York City

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The Pantheon, Piazza della Rotonda.
Photo: courtesy of Maron and Pam Daher.