

## Embracing Peter and Paul: The Arciconfraternita della ss. Trinità dei Pellegrini e Convalescenti and the Cappella della Separazione in Rome

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Both in fact and in glorious prophetic vision, the epithets fashioned for ancient Rome proclaimed its centrality and destiny: *caput mundi* (head of the world), *urbs aeterna* (eternal city), *imperium sine fine* (empire without end). With its seat in Rome, the Church reinterpreted the imperial prophecies as its own providential destiny. The Eternal City refashioned itself as the New Jerusalem, supplanting the Jewish capital and the Synagogue. It could, in fact, lay claim to such a distinguished title due to the extraordinary number of holy sites and relics, more than any other city in Europe. So important was the cult of saints and relics that pilgrimage to Rome had become fundamental to Catholic devotion, inciting Protestants, in the sixteenth century, to vehemently deny its efficacy. The sacred spaces of *this* Renaissance city, diffused beyond the ancient walls, resonated in a unique fashion, no matter how many other cities proclaimed themselves a ‘New Rome.’

Of utmost significance, St. Peter and St. Paul, Princes of the Apostles and dual founders of the Roman Church, had suffered martyrdom there, jointly commemorated on 29 June. That day, in pagan times, had exalted the founders of Rome, the deified twins Romulus and Remus. In 441, in his famous sermon “On the Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul,” Pope Leo the Great (r. 440–61) alluded to the coincidence of dates that further glorified the resplendent spiritual foundation of Christian Rome. The hallowed remains of the apostles were shared between two of the city’s most venerable basilicas, San Pietro on the Vatican Hill and San Paolo fuori le Mura on Via Ostiense. Pope Gregory the Great (r. 590–604) added 30 June as an additional feast day to commemorate

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Paul's martyrdom, since the papal Mass of 29 June was conducted with full magnificence at San Pietro.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Protestant reformers not only decried the primacy of Peter, but questioned whether or not he had even visited Rome, let alone been martyred there, subjects on which the Bible and canonical Acts were silent.<sup>2</sup> A corpus of apocryphal literature, initiated in the second century, had attempted to fill these gaps. The *Acts of Peter* and *Acts of Paul*—as well as evolving narratives of their respective martyrdoms, which were widely circulated in Greek, Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopic, and Latin—were elaborated well into the sixth century.<sup>3</sup> Among these later apocryphal writings (now assigned to the sixth century) was an anguished, eyewitness account: a *Letter to Timothy on the Death of the Apostles Peter and Paul*. It was written in Greek to Paul's dear friend and confidant, and ascribed to St. Dionysius the Areopagite, the Athenian judge whom Paul had converted in Acts 17:34. In the *Letter to Timothy*, Dionysius recounted that he had followed Paul to Rome and witnessed the excruciating final hours of the Princes of the Apostles. He described how Peter and Paul were led outside the ancient walls along Via Ostiense and recorded the last words they spoke to each other before Roman soldiers separated the two and led them to their respective executions. As a firsthand witness to the Roman martyrdoms of Peter and Paul, St. Dionysius the Areopagite as well as his influential corpus of theological writings came under new critical scrutiny by humanists. These scholarly inquiries, which exposed a wide range of doubts about the supposed first-century texts and their author, were exploited by

1 That 29 June marks the actual date of martyrdom is dismissed by most scholars; see Marguerita Guarducci, "Il 29 giugno: festa degli apostoli Pietro e Paulo," *Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia* 18 (1985/1986): 115–25. Harry W. Tajra, *The Martyrdom of St. Paul: Historical and Judicial Context, Traditions, and Legends* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr–Paul Siebeck, 1994).

2 Remigius Bäumer, "Die Auseinandersetzungen über die römische Petrustradition in den ersten Jahrzehnten der Reformationszeit," *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte* 57 (1962): 20–57.

3 Richard A. Lipsius and Maximilian Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Herrmann Mendelssohn, 1891–1903); for the Latin and Greek *Passio sanctorum apostolorum Petri et Pauli*, see 1:118–222. Richard A. Lipsius, *Die apokryphen Apostelgeschichten und Apostellegenden: Ein Beitrag zur altchristlichen Literaturgeschichte*, 2 vols. (Braunschweig: C.A. Schwetschke und Sohn, 1883–87); Lipsius, *Die apokryphen Apostelgeschichten und Apostellegenden: Supplement* (Braunschweig: C.A. Schwetschke und Sohn, 1890). For a succinct discussion in English, see Tajra, *The Martyrdom of St. Paul*.