

Basilicas

Basilica is an honorific title bestowed on a church of historical and spiritual importance by the Holy Father. Churches honored with the title basilica belong to two classes, major and minor. There are seven major basilicas worldwide, four of which are patriarchal and 63 minor basilicas in the United States. The title basilica carries with it both privileges and obligations since it is now considered one of the pope's churches. Among the primary privilege is the right to display, both inside and outside, the coat of arms of the pope.

Two additional symbols rooted in the papal court are given to the church for display. One is the tintinnabulum, a bell which has the practical function of alerting the people to the approach of the Holy Father during a papal procession through the streets of Rome. The other is the ombrellino, an elaborate umbrella which protects the Holy Father from inclement weather. It is always displayed half-way open to signify the church is ready to welcome the Holy Father.

The term basilica, used in the architectural sense, was first used to signify a secular, public building in ancient Rome; but in the canonical sense it is a term used by liturgists as a title bestowed on a church of historical and spiritual importance by the Holy Father. As previously noted, there are two classes of basilica, major and minor. Of the seven major basilicas worldwide, four are papal and are all found in Rome. These four basilicas include Saint John Lateran, Saint Peter's Basilica, Saint Paul Outside the Walls and Saint Maria Maggiore. These basilicas are distinguished by having a papal altar and holy door which is opened only in a Jubilee Year. At least until recently, these churches were also open twenty-four hours a day and their staffs included priests who were continually available to hear confessions. Saint John Lateran is the cathedral of the Bishop of Rome and is the only church called an archbasilica. It is interesting to note that Saint Peter's of the Vatican has the largest interior of any Christian church in the world. Saint Paul's Outside the Walls is also known as the Ostian Basilica because it is situated on the road that led to Ostia, the harbor city of ancient Rome (ostia means "mouth" in Latin and the city was situated at the mouth of the Tiber). Saint Maria Maggiore was called the Liberian Basilica because the first building was attributed to Pope Liberius. It is the largest church in Rome dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary.