

The Significance of St. Peter's Basilica in Catholicism

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Abstract: St. Peter's basilica is the largest church in the world. It is the center of the Catholic Church. The Pope reigns from this location. Its significance in the Catholic Church is enormous. There are a lot of things that give significance to this basilica. In this paper, I will endeavor to discuss the main aspects of St. Peter's that make it significant, such as St. Peter's burial site, Pope's spiritual authority, connections to Counter-Reformation, and the works of art of various saints.

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http://www2.gwu.edu/~art/Temporary_SL/129:255/Readings/New%20St.%20Peter's%20Basilica%20or%20Temple.pdf

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Built and perfected over a time period of about four hundred years by famous artists like Bramante, Raphael, and Michelangelo, the Late Renaissance church, St. Peter's Basilica, is a magnificent piece of architecture. It is the largest church building in the world located in the smallest country in the world, the Vatican City State. It is Vatican City's crown jewel. St Peter's Basilica, also referred to as the Vatican Basilica, is seen by many as the principle church in Christendom, and more so in the Catholic Church. The basilica is an attraction to millions of visitors each year. In the early fourth century, Emperor Constantine built a basilica on the Vatican Hill at the site that supposedly was the location of St. Peter's tomb.¹ The church was ordered for reconstruction and restoration by Pope Nikolas V in the late fifteenth century and has since then played a more significant role in the Catholic Church. In this short essay, I will discuss the main points that give St. Peter's Basilica significance in Christianity and the Catholic Church specifically.

It is best to first look at St. Peter and the namesake of this glorious piece of architecture. Peter is considered by Catholics as the first Pope. Peter was the first disciple of Jesus Christ and undoubtedly the leader of the first church. Matthew, in his gospel, records an encounter Jesus had with Peter in which Jesus changes his name from Simon to Peter. Jesus says, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church."² Peter, in Aramaic, means stone or rock. The major use of Vatican Hill and the St. Peter's Square in the first century was for sporting events.³ In 64 A.D., the mad emperor Nero set fire to a section of slums in order to clear space for his new palace. The fire burned out of control nearly destroying Rome. Nero

¹ Miller, Keith. 2007. St. Peter's [electronic resource] / Keith Miller. n.p.: Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 2007. p. xi

² Matthew 16:18 NASB

³ Charles B., McClendon. "The History of the Site of St. Peter's Basilica, Rome." *Perspecta* 1989: 33. JSTOR Journals. p. 69

needed a scapegoat and found the emerging movement called Christianity, led by Peter, to be the ideal target. He had Christians executed on Vatican Hill as part of a sporting event. The Roman historian Tacitus explains the execution methods of Nero:

They [the Christians] were dressed in the skins of wild animals and torn to pieces by dogs, or they were crucified or set fire as human torches after dark. Nero offered his Gardens for the spectacle and provided entertainment in the Circus, during which time he mingled with the crowd or stood in a chariot, dressed as a charioteer.⁴

It was during this event that Peter was supposedly killed. It is rumored that he was buried on Vatican Hill, but there is no clear evidence of it. By the fourth century, Christianity was a major religion with many followers and one of them was the newly converted Roman emperor, Constantine. Constantine followed the local legends and built the first basilica, now known as the Old St. Peter's, on Vatican Hill. Dr. Christopher Bellitto, the Associate Professor of History at Kean University calls Constantine's move a smart one because he memorialized in a physical way to an illiterate population the site where Peter was.⁵ For centuries after the construction of the Old St. Peter's, the basilica remained neglected and in a bad condition. However, the sanctity of the site never faded away. This was because many Christians believed that the church built on Peter's tomb was the church that Jesus wanted to build.

The successor to Christ's follower Peter, Vicar of Christ, head of the Catholic Church, the Pope is the leading force in the Catholic Church. There have been two hundred and sixty five popes since St. Peter in a continual succession that has spanned more than two thousand years.⁶ All of their jobs have been reflective of the job entrusted to Peter by Jesus. What gives them the spiritual authority is the place from which they rule. The Professor of Architectural History at the

⁴ Charles B., McClendon. "The History of the Site of St. Peter's Basilica, Rome." *Perspecta* 1989: 33. JSTOR Journals. p. 69

⁵ "History of Saint Peter's Basilica," The History Channel website, [http://www.history.com](http://www.history.com/http://www.history.com/videos/history-of-saint-peters-basilica)
<http://www.history.com/videos/history-of-saint-peters-basilica>. 1:40-1:55

⁶ Kelly, J. N. D., and Michael J. Walsh. *A Dictionary of Popes*. : Oxford University Press, 2010

University of Edinburgh, Ian Campbell asserts that “the wider spiritual authority claimed by the Bishop of Rome is derived from St Peter, leader of the Apostles, and thus the church built on the presumed site of his tomb has come to represent the Catholic or Universal Church.”⁷ The Pope claiming his spiritual authority is derived from the location of St. Peter’s basilica, his church. Hence, St. Peter’s represents the Universal or the Original Church. This is another aspect that gives the basilica its significance and importance in Catholicism.

The Council of Trent in the late-sixteenth century was tasked with the job of finding a way to respond to Protestantism. The Counter-Reformation, as we now know it, according to Kevin Mulcahy “provides an important example of how the arts – especially architecture, painting, and sculpture – were mobilized to serve the religious mission of the embattled Catholic Church.”⁸ Mulcahy, a Professor at Louisiana State University, in his article entitled, “The cultural policy of the Counter-Reformation: the case of St. Peter’s,” goes into great detail in explaining how the Catholic Church and Trent used aesthetics, specifically in St. Peter’s, to gain back followers. The progress that was made during this era on the basilica was driven by religious motives to defend dogmas attacked by Protestants, namely the cult of Virgin Mary among others.

⁷ Campbell, Ian. 1981. "The New St Peter's: Basilica or Temple?." *Oxford Art Journal*, 1981. 3. JSTOR Journals. p. 3

⁸ Mulcahy, Kevin V. 2011. "The cultural policy of the Counter-Reformation: the case of St. Peter's." *International Journal Of Cultural Policy* 17, no. 2: 131-152. p. 1.



Pieta by Michelangelo. Photograph: Bill Perry/Fotolia

Virgin Mary is a key figure in Catholicism. Protestants also view her as an important figure and believe that she was divinely appointed to give birth to Jesus. However, unlike Catholics, they do not pray to or worship Mary. Mary has a more central role in Catholicism than in any other Christian group. During the fifteenth century, the Catholic Church faced many attacks from the Protestants for being a cult that worshipped Mary. As a rather indirect response, Michelangelo was commissioned to build the statue. Pieta, the statue of Mary holding Jesus, is one of the most important sculptures of Mary in Catholicism. Catholics all around the world view this sculpture in reverence and adoration for Virgin Mary. It is located in St. Peter's basilica and this sculpture is also another thing that gives the basilica its significance.

The spectacular façade and the artistic treasures of St. Peter's draw millions of visitors across all races, beliefs, denominations, and countries to this location. It is a holy site for Catholics all around the world. St. Peter's tomb site, the Pope's spiritual authority, connections to the Counter-Reformation, and the works of art depicting various saints are all things that give St. Peter's basilica its significance. The history of this basilica spans over two millennia during

which the site has gained significance in the Catholic Church. From the simple basilica built by Constantine to the magnificent Late Renaissance church we see today, St. Peter's has come to mean so much more than a cathedral to Catholics around the world.

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