

# Places in Rome

## The Colosseum

In 1972 St Josemaría said in a homily, "I venerate with all my strength the Rome of Peter and Paul, bathed in the blood of martyrs, the centre from which so many have set out to propagate throughout the world the saving word of Christ. To be Roman does not entail any manifestation of provincialism, but authentic ecumenism. It presupposes the desire to enlarge the heart, to open it to all men with the redemptive zeal of Christ, who seeks all men and takes in all men, for he has loved all men first."<sup>1</sup>

The ruins of the Colosseum are an eloquent witness to the greatness of ancient Roman civilization, and the same time to its immorality and impermanence. Pope John Paul II characterised it in telling words when he called it "this tragic yet glorious monument of imperial Rome, a silent witness to power and dominion, a testimonial to moments of life and of death, where cries of blood (cf. *Jn* 4:10) seem still to ring out, together with words of peace and forgiveness."<sup>2</sup>

### Greatness and cruelty

The Flavian Amphitheatre, to give the Colosseum its original name, is a reflection of the genius of Rome, with its capacity

1. St Josemaría Escrivá, In Love with the Church, Chapter 1 "Loyalty to the Church", 11 (June 4, 1972)

2. John Paul II, Way of the Cross at the Colosseum, Good Friday 2003, Opening Prayer

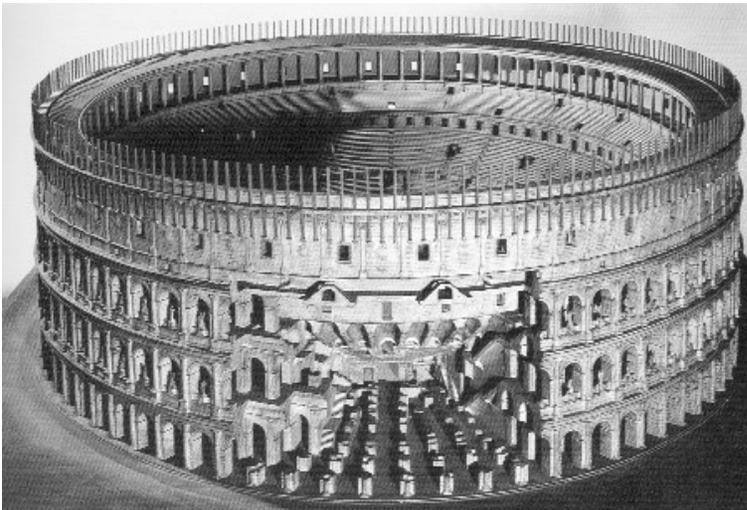


for carrying out stupendous undertakings while attending to practicalities down to the last detail. Everything about this vast construction is designed to ensure that its imposing dimensions detract nothing from its beauty or its utility. Architectural balance is achieved through the three tiers of arches in which the spaces are carefully distributed to give a sense of lightness. Practical common sense is evidenced by thousands of details. More than eighty different entrances enabled the amphitheatre to be filled with people or evacuated in just a few minutes; the distribution of seats was calculated to give a full view of the arena from each of the fifty thousand places available; awnings could be extended by a team of a hundred soldiers, to protect the audience from

sun or rain as needed; and there was a complex network of underground passages, with pulley-operated lifts to haul the gladiators or wild beasts up to the arena.

This huge construction took eight years to build, and as many as twelve thousand slaves may have been used as labour. Many of these would have been Jews, taken prisoner by Titus after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D. The new Amphitheatre was inaugurated in 80 A.D., with a hundred days of spectacles and festivities, during which hundreds of gladiators and around five thousand animals were killed in the arena. Also around that time the first *naumachiae* were held: these naval battles, enacted by flooding the whole of the arena with water, must have caused a huge impact on the Roman population by their novelty.

*Reconstruction of the Colosseum,  
Museo della Civiltà Romana, Rome*



Successive emperors competed to offer more grandiose spectacles every year. Seneca had already lamented the spiral of violence and inhumanity that this type of entertainment gave rise to.<sup>3</sup> The populace demanded ever more sensational events, interested only in blood and killings, the more cruel and sophisticated the better.

In this context the execution of criminals was not seen as particularly exciting fare for the public, since the defenceless prisoners seldom offered much resistance to the executioners or wild beasts. For this reason they generally took place at the end of the morning, as an interval between the morning and afternoon gladiator contests. Many of the prisoners who were put to death under the gaze of brutalized and often bored spectators, were Christians.

### **A noble martyrdom "in Amphitheatrum"**

A moving example of how the early Christians faced martyrdom is given to us by St Ignatius of Antioch, who died in the times of the Emperor Trajan. A convert from paganism, Ignatius was St Peter's second successor to the episcopal see of Antioch. In 107 A.D. he was arrested, condemned *ad bestias* - to be killed by wild beasts - and sent to Rome under military guard for execution.

Of his long journey from Syria to Rome we know a great deal through the historian Eusebius of Caesarea and, especially, the seven letters written by St Ignatius himself to the churches of seven different cities, to strengthen them in their faith and forewarn them against the Gnostic heresies which were being propagated at that time.

All his letters begin with the greeting "From Ignatius, also called Theophorus ('God-bearer')". Opus Dei's founder, St Josemaría, used to love this name, and he wrote: "One ought

3. Cf. Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* I, 7, 3-5

to be able to apply to every Christian the name that was used in the early ages: Bearer of God. Your actions should be such that you really deserve to be called by that wonderful name."<sup>4</sup>

St Ignatius was full of God, and this is reflected in the tone of his letters. "Abundant happiness through Jesus Christ, and His undefiled grace" is his greeting to the Ephesians, and he sends the Philadelphians a greeting "in the blood of Jesus Christ, who is our eternal and enduring joy". The reasons for his happiness were totally supernatural, since the future martyr knew what awaited him, and the soldiers who guarded him were far from gentle. "From Syria even unto Rome," he wrote, "I fight with wild beasts, by land and sea, by night and by day, being bound amidst ten leopards, I mean a company of soldiers, who only grow worse when they are kindly treated. But I am the more instructed by their injuries [to act as a disciple of Christ]."<sup>5</sup>

St Ignatius rejoiced to share in Christ's Cross, and ardently desired that his identification with our Lord should be completed in martyrdom. Accordingly he begged the Christians not to intercede for him with the Roman authorities, and expressed his desire that the wild beasts would devour him speedily, "and not deal with me as with some, whom, out of fear, they have not touched."<sup>6</sup> There were some famous cases in which the voracious animals had refused to attack Christians, or, to the spectators' astonishment, had even lain down meekly at their feet. Long-standing traditions attest this of St Martina, St Alexander and St Marinus, among others.

The Bishop of Antioch was thrown to the lions in the Colosseum<sup>7</sup>. Thus was fulfilled his expressed desire: "I am God's wheat, and I must be ground by the teeth of wild

4. St Josemaría Escrivá, *The Forge*, 94.

5. St Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Romans*, 5, 1.

6. *Ibid.*, V, 2.

7. *Martyrium Antiochenum* VI, 3.



beasts to become the immaculate bread of Christ."<sup>8</sup>

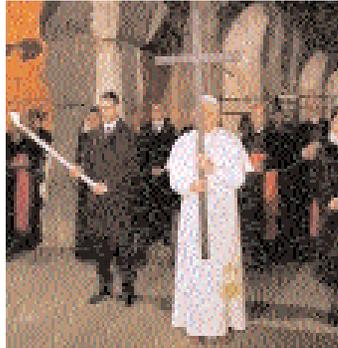
After the horrible spectacle was over the Christians managed to rescue some of the martyr's bones. These they preserved with great reverence and later sent back to Antioch. As St John Chrysostom said to the faithful of Antioch, "You benefited from his bishopric, and those of Rome admired his martyrdom. The Lord took this priceless treasure from you for a short time to show him to the Romans, and has now returned it to you increased in glory."<sup>9</sup> In the seventh century,

8. St Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Romans*, 4, 1.

9. St John Chrysostom, *In Sanctum Ignatium Martyrem homiliae*, no. 5, PG 50, col. 594



*Martyrdom of St Ignatius of Antioch, Johann Kreuzfelder (1570-1636)*



In 1964 Pope Paul VI restored the tradition of holding the Stations of the Cross in the Colosseum, started by St Leonard of Port Maurice in 1750



for fear of Saracen invasion, the relics were once more taken to Rome, and today repose in the church of St Clement. Pilgrims may go there, as St John Chrysostom recommended, "to draw spiritual fruit from these holy remains, since they are like a treasure from which part may be taken away without diminishing the whole."<sup>10</sup>

### The path of ordinary life

Although the Circus Maximus, Nero's Circus, and other Roman sites were also the scenes of many martyrdoms, in 1794 Pope Benedict XIV consecrated the Colosseum as a holy place, sacred to the memory of the Passion of Christ and the sufferings of the martyrs. That same year he had the fourteen Stations of the Cross placed around the arena.

People entering the Colosseum today are immediately confronted with a large black wooden cross, inviting them to pray. On this spot, before the instrument of our Lord's Passion, which also recalls those who gave their lives for Christ, desires for greater self-giving arise very naturally, desires of overcoming one's own selfishness once for all, desires of an increased love of mortification in all Christians. With the help of God's grace, these holy aspirations can come to fruit in ordinary, daily life. "Many who would willingly let themselves be nailed to a Cross before the astonished gaze of a thousand onlookers cannot bear with a Christian spirit the pinpricks of each day! Think, then, which is the more heroic."<sup>11</sup>

The founder of Opus Dei had a great devotion to the martyrs of the early centuries of the Church. At the same time, he always reminded people that holiness is for everyone, and warned against the mistake of imagining that supernatural

10. *Ibid.*, col. 595.

11. St Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, 204



Stone plaque commemorating the consecration of the Colosseum as a holy place



heroism is confined to special situations such as persecutions, martyrdom, overwhelming difficulties, or undertaking great enterprises for the glory of God. Instead of waiting for deeds of such magnitude, which might occasionally arise in real life, but only very seldom, he encouraged all Christians to follow the path of heroism in our own normal situations. Hence the advice he gave in *The Way*: "You want to be a martyr. I will place a martyrdom within your reach: to be an apostle and not to call yourself an apostle, to be a missionary - with a mission - and not to call yourself a missionary, to be a man of God and to seem a man of the world: to pass unnoticed!"<sup>12</sup>

Like the martyrs, we Christians have to have a burning desire to fulfil God's Will and show him our love even through sacrifice, undertaken with joy, because "Mortification is not pessimism or bitterness. Mortification is useless without charity. That is why we must seek mortifications which, while helping us develop a proper dominion over the things of this earth, do not mortify those who live with us. A Christian has no warrant to act as torturer, nor should he allow himself to be treated as a feeble wretch. A Christian is a man who knows how to love with deeds and to prove his love on the touchstone of suffering. But, I must remind you, mortification does not usually consist of great renunciations, for situations requiring great self-denial seldom occur. Mortification is made up of small conquests, such as smiling at those who annoy us, denying the body some superfluous fancy, getting accustomed to listening to others, making full use of the time God allots us... and so many other details. We find it in the apparently trifling problems, difficulties and worries which arise without our looking for them in the course of each day."<sup>13</sup>

12. St Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, 848

13. St Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ is Passing By*, 37