

# Basilicas

Historical and Canonical Development

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# INTRODUCTION

The term “basilica” has a Greek origin; etymologically οἶκος βασιλείος means a royal house or edifice. The basilica in this architectural sense is usually a public building of rectangular shape with a large central hall, which can have different characteristics according to the regions.<sup>1</sup> From the end of the third century, when places of Christian worship became more common especially after the Edict of Milan in 313, the term “basilica” began to indicate also a building for sacred use, regardless of its architectural style or size. The class of “patriarchal basilicas” came into being in Rome later in the fourth century when some basilicas there were attributed to different patriarchs of the Church.

The ecclesiastical term “church” (*ecclesia*) was gradually preferred to the civil name of “basilica,” but the two words are used interchangeably in some instances. For example, as early as the thirteenth century some texts refer to the Church of St. Francis in Assisi as a *basilica*.<sup>2</sup>

The term “basilica” did not become canonical until the eighteenth century when “major basilicas” and “minor basilicas” gradually came into use and took on special significance and privileges. Henceforth, the designation of “basilica” has become a most prestigious and coveted privilege for churches. Basilicas are churches *par excellence*, the exemplars that express the Catholic faith in an outward, tangible and lasting manner.

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<sup>1</sup> See Celso Constantini, “The Development of the Basilica Style,” *The Ecclesiastical Review* 46 (1912), 129–137; and P. R. McCaffrey, “The Development of Christian Architecture,” *The Ecclesiastical Review* 72 (1925), 154–164.

<sup>2</sup> Sergio Bianchi, *Le Basiliche Minori* (Rome: Marianum 1976), 2.

# 1. PATRIARCHAL BASILICAS

## 1.1 HISTORY

### 1.1.1 At Rome

In the fourth century four churches in Rome were known as patriarchal basilicas (*basilicae patriarchales*). They were considered the seats of the four patriarchs in Rome. The Basilica of St. John Lateran was ascribed to the pope, the Patriarch of the West; St. Peter's Basilica to the Patriarch of Constantinople; the Basilica of St. Paul Outside-the-Walls to the Patriarch of Alexandria; and the Basilica of St. Mary Major to the Patriarch of Antioch. At the Council of Chalcedon in 451, Jerusalem was raised to a patriarchate, and Pope St. Leo the Great assigned the Basilica of St. Lawrence Outside-the-Walls to the Patriarch of Jerusalem. In those early years, these buildings all had accommodations attached to them for the respective patriarchs who might be in Rome for a council or some other business.<sup>3</sup>

These assignments, however, are now purely historical. The Church of Constantinople broke communion with Rome at the Great Schism, and the Latin Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem were impeded after the Muslims defeated the crusaders in the Holy Land. Before 1964, patriarchs of the Latin rite were appointed for each of the titular patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria and Antioch, but they were for the most part honorary. The Latin patriarchate of Jerusalem was re-erected in 1847, but the Patriarch of Jerusalem no longer had rights to St. Lawrence Outside-the-Walls. In the nineteenth century the Catholic Patriarchates of Alexandria and Antioch were restored for different Churches of the Eastern rites, but in some cases more than one patriarch holds the title for the same patriarchate.<sup>4</sup> It is not possible, then, to attribute a patriarchal basilica to a single patriarch.

Other Catholic patriarchates have been erected in the last few centuries, some from the Churches of the East reunited to Rome and some within the Latin Rite during the great missionary centuries. Among the new Eastern-rite Catholic patriarchates are Babylon for the Chaldeans (in communion with Rome since 1553) and Cilicia for the Armenians (in communion with Rome since 1742). In the Latin rite, the Patriarchates of Venice (1457), the West Indies (1524), Lisbon (1716) and the East Indies (1886) were also erected,<sup>5</sup> but

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<sup>3</sup> *Dictionnaire de droit canonique*, vol. 2, s.v. "basilique," p. 242 (1937).

<sup>4</sup> For instance, the title of the Patriarch of Antioch is held by the Catholic patriarchs of the Melkite, Maronite and Syrian rites.

<sup>5</sup> *Annuario Pontificio* 2002, 4-8.



the title of patriarch in the Latin Church presently does not entail any power of governance apart from a prerogative of honour.<sup>6</sup> No churches in Rome, however, have ever been assigned to the patriarchs of any of these new patriarchal sees.

### *Archbasilica of St. John Lateran, Rome*

The Basilica of St. John (*Basilica di San Giovanni in Laterano*), situated on the Lateran Hill, has the highest dignity of any church in the whole world. It is the cathedral of the pope as the Bishop of Rome and the Patriarch of the West, and therefore the seat of primacy over the Universal Church. Because of its special status, St. John Lateran is the only church that is also known as an “archbasilica.”

Constantine had donated a large tract of land on the Lateran Hill to Pope Miltiades in the fourth century.<sup>7</sup> Pope Gregory I consecrated the basilica built there under the patronage of St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist; the former symbolizes the time before Christ and the latter records the end of time in the Book Revelation, together representing the universality of the cathedral. In the Middle Ages, the basilica was simply called St. John by assimilation of the two names. Officially it holds the title of the Holy Saviour, because of an icon preserved in a nearby chapel and a legend of the apparition of the face of Christ on the day of the consecration.<sup>8</sup> The basilica has undergone various periods of rebuilding, restoration and refurbishing over the centuries.

On 23 January 1372, after the relics of the heads of St. Peter and St. Paul were brought there, Pope Gregory XI declared officially by the constitution *Super Universa* that St. John Lateran is to hold the first rank over all other churches, including St. Peter’s Basilica.<sup>9</sup> This was reconfirmed by Pope St. Pius V in 1569.<sup>10</sup> Pope Clement XII (1730–40) made the primacy of the Basilica visible by placing an inscription within the gable of the façade: “SACROS[ANCTA] LATERAN[ENSIS] ECCLES[IA] OMNIUM URBIS ET ORBIS ECCLESIA RUM MATER ET CAPUT”<sup>11</sup> (The Most Holy Church of the Lateran, Mother and Head of All Churches in Rome and in the World).

<sup>6</sup> *CIC*, can. 438.

<sup>7</sup> Louise Ropes Loomis, trans., *Liber Pontificalis* (New York: Octagon Books, 1965), 47.

<sup>8</sup> *Holy Rome: A Millennium Guide to the Christian Sights* (New York: Fodor’s Travel Publications, 1999), 105–6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>10</sup> *Dictionnaire de droit canonique*, vol. 2, s.v. “basilique,” p. 242 (1937). The apostolic constitution *Infrima avi* by Pius V reconfirming the primacy of the Lateran Archbasilica is dated 21 December 1569.

<sup>11</sup> J. A. Nainfa, “Minor Basilicas,” *The Ecclesiastical Review* 78 (1928), 6.

## 2. MAJOR BASILICAS

The four major basilicas (*basilicae majores*) are all in Rome, and they are the first four patriarchal basilicas: St. John Lateran, St. Peter in the Vatican, St. Paul Outside-the-Walls, and St. Mary Major. While the Lateran Basilica is the cathedral of the bishop of Rome, the other three major basilicas are churches considered as pertaining to the pope in a most special way. Only the major basilicas have the right to prefix their titles with the adjective *sacrosancta* (most holy).<sup>36</sup>

### 2.1 HISTORY

The distinction between major basilicas and minor basilicas did not come into being until the early eighteenth century. The earliest document that records the use of the term “major basilica” is dated in the year 1727.<sup>37</sup> Some historical authors mention “major” and “minor” churches in Rome, but not in the same sense that the denomination acquired in the eighteenth century.<sup>38</sup>

#### 2.1.1 Jubilee Years and Holy Years

The four major basilicas have been singled out as the pre-eminent churches in the Latin Church due to the tradition of the Jubilee Years, started by Pope Boniface VIII who proclaimed the first Jubilee Year on 22 February 1300.<sup>39</sup> He decreed that until 24 December of the same year (he later extended it until Easter 1301), citizens of Rome who visited the Basilicas of St. Peter and St. Paul for thirty consecutive days (or fifteen days for foreign pilgrims) could gain a plenary indulgence.<sup>40</sup> The requirement to visit also St. John Lateran was added in the second Jubilee Year in 1350,<sup>41</sup> and the Basilica of St. Mary Major in the third Jubilee Year in 1390.<sup>42</sup> From 1390 on, visits to these four churches were essential in the participation of the Jubilee Years in Rome. In the Jubilee of 1475, the denomination “Holy Year” was adopted and has been in use until the present time.

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<sup>36</sup> Joachim Nabuco, *Ius Pontificalium: Introductio in Cæremoniale Episcoporum* (Paris: Desclée & Socii, 1956), 232.

<sup>37</sup> Bianchi, *Le Basiliche Minori*, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Memmo Caporilli, *From the First Jubilee in 1300 to the Holy Year 2000* (Rome: G. De Cristofaro, 1998), 19–23.

<sup>40</sup> Papal bull *Antiquorum Habet Digna Fide Relatio*, in *ibid.*, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Caporilli, *From the First Jubilee in 1300 to the Holy Year 2000*, 25.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 29–30.

## 3. MINOR BASILICAS: THE TITLE

Subsequent to the denomination of major basilica, all other churches known as basilicas—including the Basilica of St. Lawrence Outside-the-Walls and the two Franciscan patriarchal basilicas at Assisi—have been canonically regarded as minor basilicas (*basilicae minores*). A few churches obtained the title of minor basilica as such from historical designation, but most others were granted the title subsequently by the Apostolic See.

### 3.1 HISTORY

#### 3.1.1 Distinguished Collegiate Churches in Rome

From the sixteenth century, some collegiate churches were considered “distinguished” (*insignis*), although in canon law there were no rules to discern one from the other. Collegiate churches are those with a chapter of canons, erected by the pope, whose role is to celebrate the more solemn liturgical functions in the church.<sup>78</sup> A collegiate church was “distinguished” if “it be the mother church of the locality, have right of precedence in solemn functions, be of ancient foundation, and conspicuous by its structure and the number of its dignitaries and members, and likewise be situated in a famous or well-populated city.”<sup>79</sup>

The distinguished collegiate churches in Rome were the “proto-basilicas,” the model of which would become that of minor basilicas.

#### 3.1.2 Immemorial Basilicas

Some churches are considered minor basilicas today not because of a special concession of formal erection by the Holy See, but because of the consistent use of the title since antiquity or the medieval age. In the second half of the eighteenth century the title of minor basilica was applied to churches in Rome other than the four major basilicas that had popularly been known as “basilicas.”<sup>80</sup> These include the distinguished collegiate churches in Rome.

It was not until 1917 that the Code of Canon Law officially recognized *de jure* churches that had the immemorial custom of using the title of basilica

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<sup>78</sup> *CIC*, can. 503.

<sup>79</sup> *Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, s.v. “Collegiate.”

<sup>80</sup> Bianchi, *Le Basiliche Minori*, 2.

as having such a right to the title.<sup>81</sup> We refer to such churches as immemorial basilicas.

Most immemorial basilicas can be found in Italy (see A.4). According to the catalogue redacted by Sergio Bianchi,<sup>82</sup> excluding St. Lawrence Outside-the-Walls, Rome has 37 immemorial basilicas. These include all the distinguished collegiate churches in Rome, which were the first ones to be known as minor basilicas in the second half of the eighteenth century. Not counting the two patriarchal basilicas in Assisi and the four pontifical basilicas (see 5.1), 64 churches in other parts of Italy are immemorial basilicas. In other parts of Europe, seven churches in Spain, three in Portugal and one in Poland have been able to keep the title of basilica before the title had to be granted by the Apostolic See. Outside Europe are four greatly esteemed shrines of Christ in the Holy Land that have been immemorially known as basilicas: the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth, the Basilica of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, the Basilica of the Agony as well as the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.<sup>83</sup>

### 3.1.3 Canonically Created Minor Basilicas

The first minor basilica that was canonically created goes back to 1783. The Augustinian friars of the Shrine of St. Nicholas of Tolentino (*San Nicola di Tolentino*), in Tolentino, Macerata, Italy, had requested the use of the title of basilica, and Pope Pius VI granted the favour by means of the pontifical brief *Supremus Ille*, dated 27 June 1783. This is the oldest known document containing a formal concession of the title of minor basilica from the Apostolic See.<sup>84</sup> In 1804 two more minor basilicas were created in Italy: St. Clement's Cathedral in Velletri, and St. Flaviano's Cathedral (now Co-Cathedral) in Recanati.

The practice was then extended to more distant places. The first church outside Italy to receive the title of minor basilica from the Holy See is Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris. Pope Pius VII was present in the cathedral at the coronation of Napoleon Bonaparte as Emperor of France; three months later, on 27 February 1805, he published a bull elevating the cathedral to the rank of minor basilica. The move was both spiritual and political; the pope hoped to renew the spiritual fervour among the French faithful, and at the same time wanted to grant Napoleon some favours so as to secure diplomatic ties with

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<sup>81</sup> *CIC 1917*, can. 1180.

<sup>82</sup> Msgr. Sergio Bianchi was an official for the Congregation of Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments until 1994. His catalogue of basilicas can be found in his *Le Basiliche Minori*.

<sup>83</sup> Bianchi, *Le Basiliche Minori*, 82–87.

<sup>84</sup> Sergio Bianchi, "Aggiornamento delle Norme circa la Concessione del Titolo di Basilica Minore," *Notitiae* 24 (1990), 18; Bianchi, *Le Basiliche Minori*, 3.

## 4. MINOR BASILICAS: PRIVILEGES

### 4.1 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRIVILEGES

The existence of minor basilicas in the eighteenth century did not imply the existence of privileges associated with the class of minor basilicas. The privileges connected to the title of minor basilica were not fixed until 1836. From then on, the privileges would evolve slowly.

#### 4.1.1 Distinguished Collegiate Churches in Rome

In the distinguished collegiate churches in Rome and outside Rome, the canons had precedence over the canons of other collegiate churches in public processions.<sup>203</sup> Distinguished collegiate churches in Rome alone, and their canons, had special insignia. These churches “were decorated the same as the patriarchal [basilicas]”<sup>204</sup> in such a way that they could use a papal canopy and a special bell (the same as the basilica bell) as distinctive ornaments. Their canons could wear “as choir dress while chanting the offices of the breviary, a rochet over their soutane and over the rochet in winter a violet *cappa magna* fitted with an ermine cape,”<sup>205</sup> instead of only a surplice over their soutane as in the case of the clergy of other churches. From the sixteenth century to the early eighteenth century, in Rome, the title of distinguished collegiate church was preferred in usage to that of basilica, because of the special privileges connected to the former.<sup>206</sup>

When these Roman distinguished collegiate churches became also known as minor basilicas in the second half of the eighteenth century, they retained their privileges and insignia by custom. These privileges and insignia would later be used by all minor basilicas erected after 1836. Other immemorial basilicas in Rome, however, did not enjoy the same privileges automatically.

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Bianchi, *Le Basiliche Minori*, 3: “*decoratae ad instar patriarchalium.*”

<sup>205</sup> Duane L.C.M. Galles, “The Basilica after Vatican II,” *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 90 (October 1989), 55

<sup>206</sup> Bianchi, *Le Basiliche Minori*, 2.

### 4.1.5 1989 Decree: *Domus Ecclesiae*

The concessions of privileges laid out in the 1989 decree *Domus Ecclesiae* were only slightly revised from *Domus Dei*. The number of days in which the faithful can obtain a plenary indulgence by visiting a minor basilica was expanded. The use of a rochet by the rector of a minor basilica was no longer allowed because of the vestment reform in 1969–70.

## 4.2 INSIGNIA OF MINOR BASILICAS: CANOPY AND BELL

### 4.2.1 History

The first documented use of a canopy and a bell is from the canonization of St. Brigid on 7 October 1391: “At the entrance of the church, all the canons of St. Peter’s came in front of [the pope] with the cross, the cover, the canopy and the bell.”<sup>211</sup> The right of the insignia of the canopy and the bell was given to the distinguished collegiate churches in Rome, from which minor basilicas would later inherit these insignia.

The papal document in reply to the Basilica of *San Giacomo Apostolo* in Caltagirone in 1817 explicated the use of the insignia in minor basilicas. The 1836 decree to the Cathedral Basilica of Lucera made it a law that minor basilicas should use the two insignia. However, neither the 1968 nor the 1989 decree mentions the right of minor basilicas to use the canopy and the bell. Because a comprehensive reading of the two decrees does not disclose that the use of the canopy or the bell has been abolished, one may conclude that minor basilicas can still licitly make use of them both.

### 4.2.2 Basilica Canopy

Also known in English as pavilion or parasol, or in Latin as *canopaeum*, *papilio*, *magnum umbraculum*, or *tabernaculum*, or in Italian as *ombrellino* or *ombrellone*, the canopy is the most visually attractive insignia of a minor basilica. The 1836 decree specifies that the canopy has the shape of an umbrella or parasol, half open. The canopy is made up of plain or damasked silk in twelve stripes of alternate colours, six red and six yellow. From each stripe is hung a pendant of the opposite colour, all braided and fringed in yellow. The canopy is topped by a globe with a cross, both made of gilt metal. The handle can simply be an ordinary banner pole.

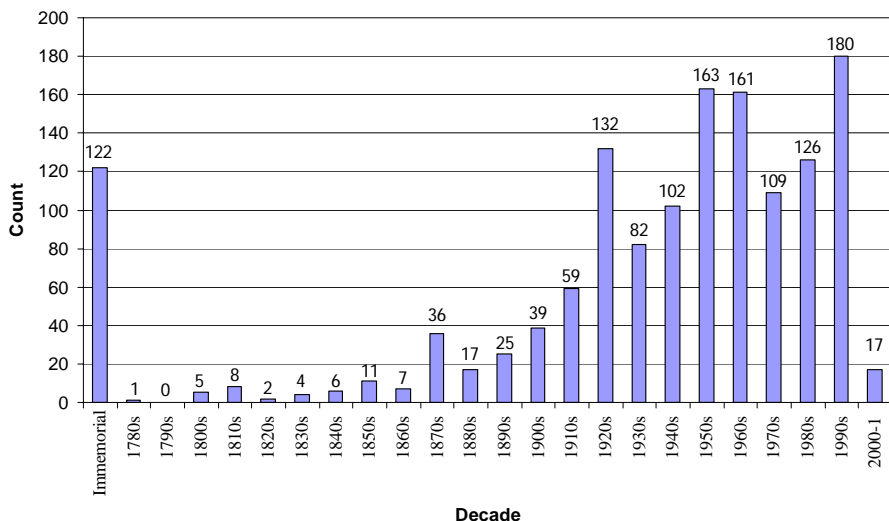
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<sup>211</sup> Translated from *Dictionnaire de droit canonique*, vol. 2, s.v. “basilique,” pp. 245–6 (1937). See also Henrius Dante, “Notae Practicae de Basilica Minore,” *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 68 (1954), 263; Henricus Dante, “De Locis Sacris: De Basilica Minore,” *Monitor Ecclesiasticus* 74 (1949), 176–7.

# APPENDIX: STATISTICS OF BASILICAS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

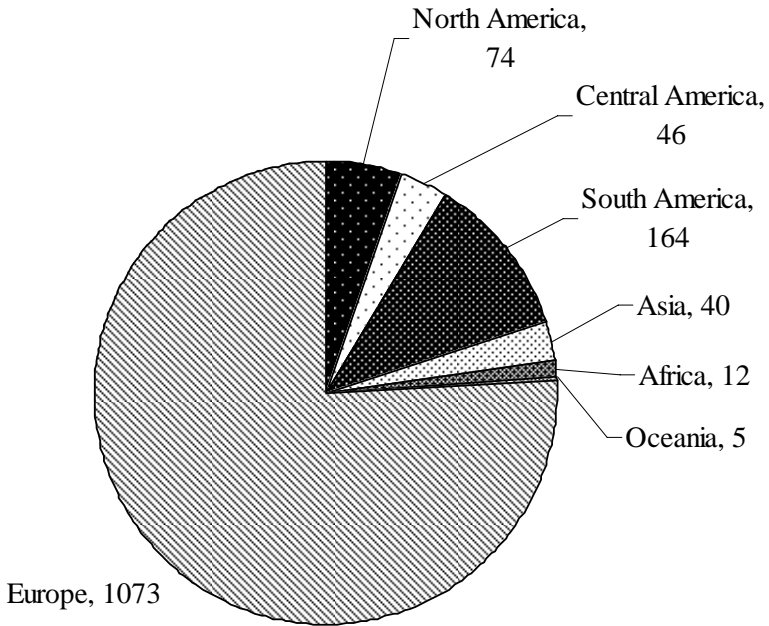
- \* The statistics in the following tables and charts include all the 1,414 minor basilicas, immemorial and canonically erected up to the year 2001. Unless otherwise stated, the immemorial minor basilicas incorporated in the statistics include the Patriarchal Basilica of St. Lawrence Outside-the-Walls in Rome, the two patriarchal basilicas in Assisi, the Pontifical Basilica of St. Anthony in Padua, the Pontifical Basilica of St. Mary in Loreto, and the Pontifical Basilica of St. Nicholas in Bari.
- \* It is not known how many of the 1,414 minor basilicas may have temporarily or permanently ceased to exist (see 3.9). These are not subtracted from the statistics.
- \* The sources are Sergio Bianchi's catalogue of minor basilicas erected up to the year 1974 (with numerous corrections and removal of two duplicate entries); *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* and *Notitiae* which report the subsequent erections of minor basilicas.

## A.1 Minor Basilicas Erected During Each Decade



- \* The years in which the greatest numbers of minor basilicas were created are: 1998 (32 basilicas), 1999 (30), 1991 (29), 1962 (27), and 1964 (26).

### A.3 Minor Basilicas on Different Continents



- \* North America includes only Canada and the mainland United States of America.
- \* Central America includes all countries between Mexico and Panama and all countries and dependencies in the Caribbean Sea (including the Netherlands Antilles and Puerto Rico).
- \* South America comprises Columbia and all countries south of Columbia.
- \* The five minor basilicas in Oceania are the four in Australia and the one in Guam (a territory of the United States of America).