

Basilica

The word “basilica” is Latin, and has three distinct meanings.

In the times of Ancient Rome, a basilica was essentially a city hall.

When the Roman Empire adopted Christianity, it became common for major church buildings to be constructed with the same architectural plan* as the basilicas of the past.

Lastly, “basilica” is also used as an honorary title that is bestowed upon a Roman Catholic church. It is an important Catholic church that has been given special ceremonial rights by the Pope. Once the title is bestowed upon a basilica, it may never be taken away.

**Today, “basilica” is still used in an architectural sense to describe rectangular buildings with a central nave and aisles, typically with a high transept from which an apse projects.*

Major Basilica

There are four major basilicas, all located in Rome and known as the four great papal churches of Rome. They are St. Peter’s, St. Mary Major, St. John Lateran and St. Paul Outside the Walls.

Minor Basilica

Just over 1,800 of the more than 221,000 Catholic churches are minor basilicas. There are several privileges that go with the status of minor basilica. They include a certain precedence before other churches, the right of the conopaeum, the tintinnabulum (a small bell) and the right to display the papal symbol (the crossed keys of St. Peter.)

The conopaeum is an historic piece of the papal regalia and insignia, once used on a daily basis to provide shade for the pope. Today it is a symbol of the Catholic Church and the authority of the pope over it. It is found in the contemporary Church at all the basilicas throughout the world, placed prominently at the right of their main altars.

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