

ROME, ITALY

10th Annual International Teacher's Seminar and the Inaugural Biblical Study Tour
Report by Steve Staten

Rome is called both the eternal city and the city of seven hills. Historically it was the hub of the greatest earthly empire from about 30 BC to 476 AD, the place where Christian orthodoxy championed over heresy, and where famous Christians were martyred. It eventually became the stronghold for the faith of nearly one billion Roman Catholics, symbolized by the imposing Vatican which holds some of the most illustrious art forms in the world.

About one hundred and sixty Christians, seventy from the International Teachers Seminar and ninety from the Biblical Studies Tour, spent five days together in tours, classes, fellowship and brainstorming. The ITS group involves those who have met some prerequisites, including the writing of papers and an established role in teaching in their congregations. Douglas Jacoby is the primary force behind both the ITS and the open BST. The former is a developing into a shared consortium for teachers in the fellowship of the International Churches of Christ; Rome marked the 10th annual meeting of the ITS. The BST was promoted through Doug Jacoby's website (www.DouglasJacoby.com). Except for some discussion groups, we were all one big group. Together, we were amazed by the Coliseum (think *Gladiator*), the Roman Forum, the Vatican, which is home of the Sistine Chapel (think Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*), the Catacombs and much more.

Friday, November 5th: Pompeii

For early arrivals only

The conference officially started in the evening but there was an optional one day excursion several hours from Rome near Naples for those who arrived a day early. We were treated to the famous archaeological dig of Pompeii, buried but not completely destroyed, in 79 AD by the volcanic ash spewed from Mt Vesuvius, nine miles away. The city itself was 130 acres and remained hidden for most of the centuries since the first because it could not be found underneath ash and cinders. In fact, this sea town could not be found because excavators expected to find it near the sea but volcanic debris moved the shoreline out by about two miles. First signs of Pompeii were found by accident in about 1600 and its excavations began in 1748. They continue to this day. It is amazing how well the volcanic ash preserved rather than razed the city. The gases of Vesuvius killed all life; through a plaster injection technique, their shapes have been



preserved. Many victims were found in the huddled position, holding their nostrils; evidently they died trying to keep from inhaling the fumes.

While no specific evidence of Christianity in Pompeii has survived, the town itself reveals much of the typical lifestyle of first Roman century world. It takes little imagination to envision the city's pre-destruction pleasures, theatres, places of worship, religions, market places, social customs, municipalities, and even their pets. Some of the artwork that survived is in good condition. It is possible Pompeii is the most important archaeological site for first century Roman culture since it was literally frozen in time (perhaps the wrong metaphor!) in the best overall condition of any site so far discovered. For one quality website on the vast information available on Pompeii, go to www.thecolefamily.com/italy/pompeii.

Evening Introduction

As things opened up at customary introductory dinner and fellowship, Douglas prepared us to appreciate Rome, especially for those without a frame of reference. He handed out and spoke on orienting information. We also heard international missions reports, the first of a number of reports which were scattered throughout our days together.

Christians representing every segment of our fellowship of churches from France, Mexico, Italy, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Russia, the Ukraine, Albania, Singapore, China, Kuwait, Germany, Switzerland, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States were in attendance. There was greater breadth of representation in this event than any other event in the last two years – from healthy churches to hurting churches. The upheaval beginning two years before caused many to move to different cities—and even countries—and this was the first opportunity for many of us to exchange contact information. It was a great chance to catch up and gain from each other's perspectives.

It took much time to get the fellowship to quiet down for Douglas to deliver his introductory talk, **Rome in Context**. The fellowship feast was filled with great anticipation. Twenty minutes later he closed, "We're here in Rome. And we are looking at history." The sheer adrenaline of the moment helped most of us deal with any jet lag.

Saturday, November 6th: Ancient Rome

We had official Italian tour guides, ably assisted by teachers James Greig, John Oakes, and Joey Harris. The movies concerning ancient Rome have helped wet our appetites. Those who took time to read Roman historians Suetonius, Tacitus, and other authors were especially primed for this day.

The tour buses circled part of old Rome and dropped us off outside the famous Coliseum (also spelled Colosseum), finished after just eight years in 80 AD, during the reign of Titus. The Coliseum could hold an audience of 40,000 comfortably but was sometimes crammed to hold 70,000. Approximately 5,000 beasts died in games during its one-hundred day opening ceremonies alone. It was sometimes filled with water as the place

of small naval battles, other times used for traditional gladiatorial spectacles. Often audience participation could affect the fate of the gladiators. It is easy to imagine the deaths of Christians in this amphitheater in the second and third centuries. One eminent Christian who dies here was Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (~ 107 to 112 AD).

We passed by the Arch of Constantine and headed up the Via Fori Imperiali through the Roman Forum. The Arch of Titus, which we stopped to study, has an important connection to events in the Holy Land in the first century – the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Then we passed to the main area of the forum. This area of the city was the activity center for commerce, religious, political and legal matters. Many famous scenes in history happened here – Mark Anthony’s famous speech in honor of Caesar, for instance. The forum area spanned three of the Seven Hills of Rome. Much of this district was secretly burned by Nero in 64 AD (to clear ground for this ambitious building projects); after the fire went out of control, he blamed the Christians, opening a door for intense persecution. The apostles Paul and Peter came to Rome and were martyred in the aftermath. Many famous buildings, arches, and temples were noted on this tour.

Next we walked to the Pantheon, which is astonishing for its size, design and construction. Its dome was the largest built until later centuries, measuring about 142 feet (43 m) in diameter and rising to a height of 71 feet (22 m) above its base. The method of construction remains a mystery. It was built as a pagan temple before the time of Christ, but adapted to become a church building several centuries later. From there we were off to lunch.

In the afternoon we heard various reports and then **Romans: Performance or Obedience?** by Gordon Ferguson. Of course, it is always a treat to hear Gordon speak on his favorite book in the Bible and give his perspective on what he calls “the high water mark of the New Testament”. Teaching Romans is always pertinent because, as Gordon convincingly said, “legalism is trusting the wrong thing” and many Christians have fallen (and will again likely fall) into the trap of trusting performance. Afterwards the men and women of the ITS group had separate sessions, while I delivered **Lessons From the History of the Roman Church** to the open track participants. I had a very strong Roman Catholic upbringing, and shared ten valuable lessons from centuries of hierarchical developments.

Sunday, November 7th: **The Catacombs, Basilica of St. Paul**

We began our day of worship in very ornate and worshipful structure with a welcome, more reports and prayer. Thierry Fender of Geneva, Switzerland prepared our hearts for communion. Then Kelly Petre taught a fantastic class on **Caesar & Christ: The Stage is Set**. Incredibly thoughtful and faith-building, this message reminded us of the eternal power of the divinity versus the fleeting powers of humanity. Jesus Christ was clearly lifted up in our worship. Then, Canadian Andy Fleming preached from the heart a sermon

in such called **The Passion of Paul**. Andy's ability to connect the New Testament gospel and our missions today is a standard for all evangelists.

Afterwards we had lunch and were off to the Catacombs. There are miles of catacombs and were we only able to tour one section. We were told that people have been lost for days in the catacombs (when they didn't follow the guides). Most catacombs of interest date to post-apostolic periods of Christianity. Nonetheless, by the later half of the second century the Catacomb of Domitilla had traces of Christianity. The third century is when artwork and graffiti were more heavily developed in various catacombs when the church was both large and unpopular.

We then went to the Basilica of St. Paul, a most beautiful building over the so-called tomb of the apostle Paul and then we were done for the day. All evenings during the conference were for eating and fellowship.

Monday, November 8th: **The Vatican and site seeing**

We headed to the Vatican at 7:30am to beat the arrival of thousands of Catholics on pilgrimage to their Mecca. The doors opened around 9:00am and most of us had no idea what to expect. Once inside we heard the story (of the feud) between Renaissance rivals Michelangelo and Raphael. Then we went through some large cathedral-like rooms and one extremely long corridor which held the most amazing tapestry work—worth the journey. The word “ornate” came to my mind countless times. Eventually we reached the famous Sistine Chapel, the inner magnet of the Vatican Museums, which draws so many visitors from around the world. When we reached the *The Last Judgment* the group I stood among was stunned.

The book *Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling* by Ross King details the behind-the-scenes story of the Last Judgment with the Reformation as an important backdrop. The amazing ceiling and wall that holds *The Last Judgment* was done with a quite complicated process. This is truly one picture that could receive a whole semester's worth of discussion as a college course. Some aspects of the huge painting were scandalous in their day – for its nudes and some of the characters portrayed. Its restoration was completed in 1999.

Much of the artwork in other parts of the Vatican seemed to be more about the well dressed Popes and less about God and the Christ. Once inside St. Peter's Basilica we were aware that this is the largest church building in the world. If in doubt, the church has some comparison drawings marked on the floor, showing that the next closest church building in size is not even close. The Vatican wants their visitors to know that they cranked out the biggest church structure—and no doubt they did. It is also, in the view of many, a gaudy tribute to popes and hierarchicalism. It is no wonder Luther was so upset after visiting Rome, as Germany was a compulsive backer for St. Peter's Basilica, providing bundles of money to keep their loved ones out of hell. Historians say the Pope's authorization of the sale of indulgences for this building was the catalyst for Luther's reaction.

We had a few open hours where a good number of us headed back to see the inside of the Coliseum. This put us back in touch with a more authentic Christianity where we knew that some saints had given up their lives for Christ without any pomp or pageantry. Eventually we made it back for classes.

The women enjoyed a class on **Female Martyrs of the Roman Empire** by Vicki Jacoby. The men had other options and just before dinner the ITS group had some interesting choices including a crucial conversation entitled, *How the Rest of the World Really Perceives America*. Dinner at *Alle due Fontanelle* was exceptional after such a heavy day.

Tuesday, November 9th: **Closing Session**

All good things must come to an end. Doug Jacoby ended the BST with his message **Rome & Revelation**, where he shared some of his compelling views on the meaning of the last book of the Bible. The ITS group stayed for another hour discussing next year's location and format (Athens, Greece was the front runner). I am sure that nearly all who attended as ITS or BST participants are already thinking about saving their money for 2005's study tour. These four and a half days will forever change the way that some 160 people will read their Bible.