

# SACRED SPACE

By Michael Wright, Rome, Italy



**B**aptism and confirmation in Community of Christ were profound moments for me. They were a renewal of my discipleship and another step forward in healing my relationship with God.

The act of joining the church was a moment of faith, handing myself over to the whisperings of the Spirit. This was a joyous time to enter an inclusive and loving community that values the Worth of All Persons. I had been taught that Enduring Principle my whole life, but had been seeking a movement where it could be applied to me.

My home is in Rome, Italy, a city with deep Christian roots but no Community of Christ congregations. In a city with more than 1,000 historic churches, I choose to worship with my brothers and sisters throughout Europe in the Community Circle online family. It has been a tremendous spiritual lifeline and a testament of how technology can bless those far from congregations or even those who incapable of attending for health reasons.

In the days leading to my baptism, I received a text message from Apostle Richard James in Wales. He was planning to fly to Rome to perform the sacraments for me. The text asked where I would be baptized.

I had put a lot of consideration into the commitment and act of baptism, but the thought that I needed to find a place never had crossed my mind. I initially thought of the Tyrrhenian Sea, about a 10-minute drive from my home. It seemed an appropriate and sacred setting. After all, this is the sea that St. Paul traveled on to make his way toward Rome.

Then I feared the sea might be too cold. Plus I wanted to welcome my Community Circle friends and my family from around the world to join me online. This would not have been possible by the seaside.

I thought of searching online for a short-term apartment rental that had a heated pool or a large Jacuzzi tub where I could be immersed. I finally found the perfect apartment. It had a beautiful bathroom that looked like a spa with a giant Jacuzzi tub! The apartment had Internet, a full kitchen, and a living room, which meant I could host friends for the service and even continue in sacred conversation around the table during lunch.

The apartment was on Via Amerigo Vespucci in Rome, a street honoring the explorer for whom the American continents are named. I liked the symbolism of an American who has made his life in Italy continuing his faith journey in a building with



this street name. My only doubt was whether I was missing the idea of sacred space by not having the sacraments at the sea.

I eventually put the worry aside, thinking the location did not matter; my decision to follow Christ is what mattered. So I rented the apartment.

Finally, the day arrived for my baptism and confirmation. It was a beautiful spring morning, and I had butterflies in my stomach. I hoped the service would be perfect.

As Apostle James and I reached the apartment building, my eyes caught the sun's reflection off five brass cobblestones, called stumbling stones or Stolperstein, on the threshold of the apartment building. These cobblestones are memorials, placed in front of buildings where Roman Jews were taken from their homes and eventually murdered during the Holocaust. These particular stumbling stones commemorated the Di Consiglio family.

The large Di Consiglio family had made Rome its home for centuries. The Di Consiglios were historically textile merchants and butchers. Cesare; his wife, Celeste; and their three children, Ada (6), Marco (4) and Mirella (1) lived in the busy Testaccio neighborhood.

Life in Nazi-occupied Rome was precarious. Jewish families, although nervous and ever-watchful, rested in the assurance that Allied forces were just a couple of hundred kilometers away. After all, Allied forces already occupied Naples and the south. Also, some Jews thought the massive deportations that had taken place in other European cities were unthinkable in the place where the pope lived.

These assurances were destroyed in the early

morning of October 16, 1943, when Nazis entered into the Jewish ghetto of Rome and started to arrest families. At first, families thought the Nazis had come to get men for a work detail. When they understood this wasn't the case, pandemonium ensued. Families fled and hid in stores. Mothers being dragged to waiting trucks tossed their babies to strangers. Others found refuge in convents and the homes of Roman Gentiles, who risked their lives to save their human brothers and sisters.

Nazi forces arrested nearly 2,000 Jews that day. Among them were the Di Consiglios, who lived in the building where I was to be baptized. Only sixteen of all of those arrested that day survived the Nazi death camps.

I can imagine Cesare leaving the house early in the morning to go to work, and then the German SS barging into the building and dragging Celeste and her three children from their apartment, loading them on a truck, and deporting them.

Did they go quietly? Did the children cry? Did neighbors peek to see what was happening? Was anyone brave enough to stand up for justice as their neighbors were being removed? Or, were screams and cries ignored by neighbors who gritted their teeth with tears in their eyes, thinking, "I can't do anything"?

Celeste and her three children endured the hard voyage in rail cars, packed like cattle, and arrived in at the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. Immediately, they were ushered to the gas chambers. Exactly one week after being arrested, they were dead.

Cesare was arrested March 21, 1944, and likely was imprisoned at the SS Headquarters in Via Tasso.

I've seen the cramped cells where Italian partisans and Jews were kept in complete darkness. Fearing their fate would be death, they scratched into the walls their good-byes, still visible today: "Addio bimba mia" ("Goodbye my little girl.") and "La morte è brutta per chi la teme" ("Death is ugly for those who fear it.")

Two days later, March 23, a bomb exploded during a partisan attack in Via Rasella, killing 33 SS officers. In retaliation, Cesare was among the 330 Italian partisans and Jews transferred to the Ardeatine Caves on the edge of Rome. There, the Nazis massacred them.

I was baptized and confirmed March 25, 2019, in that same building where the Di Consiglio family once lived, almost 75 years after Cesare was murdered. His family was persecuted and decimated because of its religion.

I, in a very different time, expressed my religious liberty and my desire to draw closer to God in that same building. As I took on new covenants that day, I thought of Doctrine and Covenants 162:6a–b:

From the earliest days you have been given a sacred principle that declares the inestimable worth of all persons. Do not forget.

The One who created all humankind grieves at the shameful division within the human family. A prophetic people must work tirelessly to tear down walls of separation and to build bridges of understanding.

We know very well that sacred spaces, like the Temple, are physical symbols that represent the attributes of God and humankind's desire to commune with the Creator. They are places where we connect with the Divine.

That connection helps each of us create the peaceable kingdom on Earth. These are places where the most vulnerable are loved and can find justice. Places where reconciliation is not only possible, but expected.

So, the apartment that I rented for convenience and amenities ended up becoming, for me, a sacred space. It was a place where I communed with God's Spirit in sacrament, where peace was felt.

I also received a spark of uneasiness from the Spirit as I left the building that day, stepping over those stumbling stones of the Di Consiglio family and into my new life as a disciple.

I cannot stop thinking of that family and the equivalent of the Di Consiglios in our societies today. I determined to continue work and ministry as a bridge-builder between people, breaking down divisions, and defending the marginalized. The building at Via Amerigo Vespucci, No. 41 in Rome will always be sacred space to me. 卍

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