

34 - 35

roma the 7 churches

20 km

Every pilgrimage begins with a single step and the intention of reaching where our heart guides us.

Step 34

Pilgrimage to the 7 basilicas

Comments

Step 34

The pilgrimage to the Seven Churches is known to most thanks to St. Philip Neri. However, it is a processional tradition that predates St. Philip, dated by some to the 7th-8th century and by others to the 14th century, at the time of the first Jubilees.

Already around 1140, Benedict, a canon of St. Peter's Basilica, wrote in his guide *Mirabilia urbis Romae* a description of the seven Basilicas with their relics. And another guide, the *Pilgrims' Consolation*, written in 1450 by the Augustinian Giovanni Capgrave, besides presenting the Seven Churches and the spiritual treasures they contain, also deals with the indulgences that it is possible to obtain in relation to the liturgical seasons (for example, a thousand years for those who visit the Basilica of St. Peter on the day of the Annunciation, Monday, Thursday or the day of the saint's feast).

St. Ignatius of Loyola, who arrived in Rome on Palm Sunday 1523 to ask the Pope for permission to travel to Jerusalem, also spent Holy Week on pilgrimage to the Seven Churches. Years later, on April 22, 1541, Ignatius and his six companions - the Jesuits of the first hour - went to the Seven Churches and took the vows of belonging to the Society of Jesus in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. That the pilgrimage was known and that the pilgrims could obtain indulgences is

confirmed by a letter of St. Francis Xavier dated September 20, 1542, sent from Goa to Ignatius of Loyola, in which Xavier asks His Holiness to grant the Governor of the Indies (delegate of the King of Portugal) and his family the privilege of receiving -each time they went to confession- «those indulgences that they would obtain if they visited the Seven Churches of Rome».

On the day of Pentecost 1544, during one of his pilgrimages, St. Philip Neri suffered a cardiac dilatation in the catacombs of San Sebastian. As Philip was ordained a priest on May 23, 1551, at the age of almost 36, it is evident that he went to the Seven Churches even before he became a priest: he went alone and sometimes at night, crossing dangerous areas, with a loaf of bread and some books to read by moonlight. But the official beginning of this pilgrimage practice was on February 25, 1552 (Fat Thursday): with a small group of friends, more and more numerous (up to 6 thousand people), he left from Via Monserrato (near Piazza Farnese), from the church of San Gerolamo della Carita, in whose convent Filippo lived (only in 1583 Pope Gregarious XIII convinced him to move to S. Maria in Vallicella, or Chiesa Nuova).

The pilgrimage begins at St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. From there we walk 6.2 km to the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, outside the Roman walls. Then we continue through the streets of Rome 3.6 km towards the hill of the catacombs and arrive at the Basilica of St. Sebastian. We left and went up to the catacombs of St. Callixtus, to cross the beautiful park and avoid the bustling Via Appia (attention that on Wednesdays the fence is closed, and there is no choice but to climb the Via Appia, with heavy traffic). We pass the church of «Quo Vadis» and continue in the direction of the ancient walls. From San Sebastiano we have 4.7 km to reach the Basilica of St. John Lateran. We still have 800 m to reach the Basilica of the Holy Cross and then 2.3 km to the Basilica of San Lorenzo. From there we have only 2.4 km to the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. In total, 20 km of pilgrimage.

The pilgrimage is also a symbolic journey through the Christian world. S. Giovanni in Laterano was the seat of the supreme pastor. Four basilicas represented the patriarchal sees of antiquity (S. Pietro, Constantinople; S. Paolo, Alexandria; S. Lorenzo, Jerusalem; S. Maria Maggiore, Antioch). Finally, S. Sebastiano and S. Croce, who were on the way, were added to complete the «mystical sense» of the number 7 according to Sixtus V. Seven are the Churches of the Apocalypse of St. John (Ephesus, Laodicea, Smyrna, Philadelphia, Sardis,

Thyatira, Pergamum), which God enriches with the Seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Seven hours of journey, marked by the Seven bloods of Jesus (circumcision, sweating in the garden, scourging, crowning with thorns, crucifixion of hands and feet, opening of the side) or by the Seven sorrows of Mary. Seven are also the steps of Jesus during the Passion and Seven are the words of Jesus on the cross.

The pilgrimage can be done by public transport, from one church to another, but we recommend walking the little more than 20 km that the map shows. At this stage it is good to have Google Maps or another application that reads the GPX that we offer here on the web. Just note that, following the GPX route of our website, just 400 m from the beginning of the road (at the obelisk of the square) we pass by the building of the Central Curia of the Jesuits in the Vatican, the world headquarters of the Society of Jesus. So, go ahead... and, ¡Buen Camino!

Pilgrimage to the 7 basilicas

Comments coming from various sources such as the commentary on the seven churches by Jean-Paul Hernandez sj, comments from a booklet photocopied for pilgrims by Centro San Lorenzo in 2015, and also from the booklet on Pellegrini Alle Sette Chiese, from the Ufficio Nazionale Per la Pastorale del Tempo Libero, Turismo e Sport.

We propose to work on each text as we arrive at the corresponding basilica.

1.- St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City

On the Vatican Hill, Nero (emperor from 54 to 68 A.D.) had built his private circus where gladiator fights and capital executions of rebels and traitors took place. For this reason, a nearby necropolis had been created to bury the victims. Among them, many Christians were thrown to the wild beasts or consumed as living torches. According to ancient sources, the first systematic persecution of Christians took place precisely under Nero, after the great fire of Rome in 64 A.D. It is probable that Simon Peter was crucified in the circus as one of the victims of the first Roman persecution (others defend the death of Peter in 68 A.D.). In any

case, it is in this necropolis that during the excavations of 1953 Margherita Guarducci discovered what most archaeologists recognize today as the Tomb of St. Peter. It is marked by a Greek inscription («Peter is here») and by many other indications that confirm the importance of the deceased for the first Christian generations.

The first basilica of St. Peter was built by Constantine between 320 and 333, on the necropolis. In 1450 the restructuring of the basilica began. In 1506 Pope Julius II reopened the reconstruction of the Basilica with a new project directed by the architect Bramante. To realize his project, Bramante began to demolish the Constantinian Basilica, provoking numerous criticisms, such as those of Erasmus in Rotterdam. During his visit to Rome in 1510, Luther also criticized the reconstruction works and later denounced the Church of Rome for selling indulgences that served to finance the Basilica. After some interruptions related to the sack of Rome in 1527, work resumed and in 1546, Michelangelo Buonarroti, in charge of the basilica, redesigned the central plan and concentrated on the dome, completed by Giacomo della Porta in 1590. The dome, designed by Michelangelo, is still today the highest in the world at 136 meters. Around the drum of the dome the 16th chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew is read in Latin: «You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church... and I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven». Finally, in 1607 Carlo Maderno undertook the reconstruction work with a plan that combines the central plan of oriental inspiration with that of the basilica, a typical architectural model in Rome and in the West.

The obelisk, located in the center of the oval square, takes the viewer directly to the origins of the entire building. In fact, it is an Egyptian red granite obelisk that Pliny the Elder had already placed on the central «column» of Nero's Circus. We can say that it is perhaps «the last thing Simon Peter saw before he died in Nero's Circus». The obelisk remained for centuries on the south side of the Basilica before being moved to the Maderno façade in 1586. Bernini's oval thus forms a new type of «circus» where the pilgrims who come to the square are the new «martyrs» (Greek for «witnesses»). They are called to bear witness to the faith no longer before the gaze of a hostile public, but before a «heavenly court» made up of 140 saints represented on the cornice.

Meditation:

Peter was a Jewish man from Galilee. He was not a man of high culture, but a simple fisherman who worked with his hands. Nevertheless, God called him and made him the first among the apostles. The very fact that St. Peter's Basilica is so grand, considering the simplicity of the apostle, is very eloquent. It shows us the paradox of the Most High God who calls us and comes down to meet the little ones. Today, as he called Peter, God comes to me and desires to make my life magnificent. Throughout this pilgrimage, God invites me to listen to the call of Jesus who wants to stay in my home. I am invited to listen to God who calls me by name. If I participate in this pilgrimage, it is because God wants me to be here, it is not by chance. Jesus has called me to this situation at this moment. As he called Peter, he now invites me to follow him. He wants me and wants to make me a sign for the world! We are witnesses!

2.- Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls

The first Basilica dedicated to St. Paul was built by Emperor Constantine in 324, the same years that St. Peter's Basilica was being built in the Vatican. As in the case of St. Peter's, this Basilica was built on the burial place of the Martyr. The dimensions of the present Basilica are slightly larger than those of the previous one. Approximately fifty years later, under the reign of Theodosius, it was completely rebuilt not only to better welcome pilgrims, but above all because at the end of the fourth century the intellectual world and the Christian faith began to dialogue more and more, and the Apostle Paul became a symbol of this dialogue. This is not only because Paul of Tarsus is known for having opened the Church to non-Jews, but also because his letters express an intellectual richness with which educated pagans could find more compatibility than with Simon Peter, a humble fisherman. The Basilica of St. Paul, built in much the same way as that of St. Peter, was intended to emphasize the dual apostolic nature of Rome: that of the fisherman Peter and that of the intellectual Paul. Over time structural changes were introduced, the most important being that of Gregory I, who raised the floor of the church. In 1823 a fire almost completely destroyed the Basilica. The subsequent reconstruction took into account the need to maintain both the architectural structure and the iconographic program.

The basilica consists of a Latin cross plan divided into five naves accessed through a four-sided portico. The garden inside the portico is a sort of transition between the exterior and the interior and reintroduces to those who enter it an image of an «ordered world», a return to the origins, a «paradeisos» (Greek for «garden»). At the center of the garden is a huge statue of the Apostle with his iconographic attribute: the sword. The triumphal arch recalls the instrument of his martyrdom (according to tradition, St. Paul was beheaded in the place where today stands the nearby «Abbey of the Three Fountains»). The sword also recalls the expression with which the Letter to the Hebrews (in ancient times attributed to St. Paul) compares the Word to a «two-edged sword» (Heb 4:12).

It is possible to access a lower level with respect to the floor of the Basilica: it is an ancient floor, before Gregory I. In front, we find the sarcophagus of Paul, in which, almost certainly, are his remains. They have been identified by a convergence of factors, including the presence of traces of gold threads, identical to those found in the remains of St. Peter in the Vatican necropolis. This coincidence is due to the time when the relics of the two Apostles were gathered and kept in a precious canvas in the «Memoria Apostolorum» of the Basilica of St. Sebastian on the Appian Way, before being separated and taken back to their original place of martyrdom as the «foundation stone» of their respective Basilicas.

IGNATIAN NOTE:

Once the Society of Jesus was approved by papal bull, an election was held for the first superior general of the order. All the companions wanted Ignatius to be the chosen one, but he had a hard time accepting the position. Once he accepted the burden that fell on his shoulders, they all agreed that on the following Friday, April 22, 1541, they would go through «the seven stations of the seven churches of Rome», and that, in one of them, that is, in St. Paul's, they would make their profession, taking the vows specified in the Bull. Why in St. Paul's outside the walls, and not in St. Peter's, to which Loyola had been so devoted since his youth? Undoubtedly, to avoid the noise of the people in that unfinished basilica.

Garcia Villoslada sj says in his «St. Ignatius of Loyola, new Biography» that «In that long journey that they made through almost all of Rome, visiting the seven churches, they were all so smiling and exultant with joy that they seemed filled with the Holy Spirit, each one in his own way. The novice Ribadeneira was most

impressed by the Provençal Codure. Let us copy his words: «I do not want to fail to mention the extraordinary and excessive devotion that Master Juan Coduri felt that day, with such vehement and divine consolation, that he could in no way repress it within himself, but rather it came out in gushes.... We heard him fill the sky with sighs and tears; he was crying out to God in such a way that it seemed to us that he was fainting and would burst from the great force of the affection he was suffering, as if he were showing signs that he would soon be freed from this prison of the mortal body. For in this same year of 1541, in Rome, he who was the first to make profession after our Bl. Ignatius was also the first of the ten who passed from this life, on the 29th of August».

Meditation:

We know that St. Paul proclaimed the Gospel wherever he went, with his words and his works. He gave a great witness to a world that did not know Christ. With the opportunity to ask for his intercession in this basilica, let us pray for the grace to always live the faith with courage wherever we are. Paul was a witness to God's love for the whole human race. With Paul, we feel that we are pilgrims of Love and wish to bear witness to our experience.

3.- Basilica of St. Sebastian in the Catacombs

To commemorate the relics of St. Peter and St. Paul, «pillars of the Church», the first of the Jews, the second of the Gentiles, pilgrims flocked to this church. Since, in the summer of 257, Emperor Valerian had forbidden Christians to gather in their places of worship, they transferred the relics to the catacombs of St. Sebastian. The first feast of the two saints together is dated June 29, 258.

In this Basilica is buried St. Sebastian, converted to the Christian faith in 288. He lived and died under the rule of Emperor Diocletian, whose first army cohort he commanded. The cult of Sebastian developed in many European countries, so that the crypt where his body was preserved was the destination of numerous pilgrimages. Saint Sebastian suffered martyrdom under the pagan authorities who riddled him with arrows, tied to a tree.

The present Basilica, built in 1608, is the restructuring of a Basilica from the Constantinian period (4th century). Highlights:

- The altar with the urn of the body of Saint Sebastian.
- The Chapel of the Relics, with one of the arrows that hit the Saint and the column to which he was tied.
- The bust of Christ the Savior, Gian Lorenzo Bernini's last work (shortly before 1680).
- The original stone with the footprints believed to be those of Christ, related to the «Quo vadis» episode.

The nearby church of Quo Vadis, on the road leading to San Giovanni in Laterano, is worth a visit. The Church of the «Domine Quo Vadis» is one of the first churches located on the Appian Way Antica, about 800 meters from the Basilica of San Sebastiano. The church has medieval origins, but was rebuilt in 1600. It takes its name from the oral tradition according to which the apostle Peter, fleeing from the city to avoid martyrdom, meets Jesus, to whom he addresses the following words: «Domine quo vadis» (Lord, where are you going?). And the Lord answers him: «I am coming to Rome to be crucified again». Peter, aware of the rebuke, turns around to face his destiny and Jesus disappears, but, as he disappears, he leaves his footprints on a stone on the paved road. As a testimony of the encounter, inside the Church there is a stone with the footprints «of his holy feet», left by Jesus precisely in the place where the Church stands today.

Meditation:

A Christian martyr like Sebastian is a witness not to death but to life. The martyrs were able to sacrifice their lives because they were convinced of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They knew that Jesus was, and is also today, the way, the truth and the life, and so they imitated Jesus' love for us and gave their lives in witness as He did. We are called to do the same, to give our lives, to open our hearts to Jesus and to the life that Jesus brings us, bearing witness to the end.

4.- Basilica of St. John Lateran

The Cathedral of the Bishop of Rome is not St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, but St. John Lateran. From the 4th to the 14th century, all the Popes resided here. This basilica, rebuilt in the 18th century, takes its name from St. John the Baptist, St. John the Evangelist and from the surname of the family that once owned the place. This church, the first one built in the whole world and considered the mother of all churches, is the image of the whole Church and in turn is the «Body of Christ». Already in the Gospel of John, Jesus compares his body to a Temple (Jn 2:21). The First Letter of Peter speaks of Christians as «living stones» of a spiritual building (1 Pet 2:5). Moreover, the form chosen for this «first cathedral» is rich in theological significance. The choice of the basilica is the choice of a civil and not a religious building. It is certainly a desire to distance itself from a pagan religiosity manifested in its pagan temples, but above all it is to affirm that the God of Jesus Christ is the God who is found in the daily life of the «square» (that is, in the covered part of the forum that is the basilica) because he is a God incarnate. Moreover, the Roman basilica was also an ancient place of justice. To pray in the basilica was, therefore, to understand prayer as a legal process. This corresponds exactly to a theology of the Gospels, and in particular to the Gospel of John, in which the reader is involved in the trial of Jesus and where the prosecutor (in Hebrew «Satan») and the defense attorney (in Greek «Parakleitos», name of the Holy Spirit) are spoken of. The reader of the Gospel, like someone who enters a basilica to pray, realizes that in his heart the historical process of Jesus continues, where he is accused of being an impostor. As St. Ignatius points out, the spiritual life will consist in recognizing the two voices and becoming a «witness» (in Greek «martyr») of Christ in this ongoing process.

Today the interior of the basilica is presented with its baroque decoration largely thanks to Borromini. The twelve statues of the Apostles in the niches of the pilasters were made by various artists in the early eighteenth century. They exalt the role of the Apostles as «columns» of the Church. If the Creed speaks of an «apostolic» Church, it is above all because none of us has ever seen the Risen One, but Christian faith in the Risen One, in fact, is faith in the faith of the other, who in turn has relied on another, going back to the Apostles, the only eyewitnesses of the Risen One.

The mosaic of the hemispherical vault of the apse is the result of several reinterpretations, but probably retains the central themes of the first version. It dates back to Constantine himself and wants to highlight the glorious Cross. The

vision of the Cross that the emperor had with the words «In hoc signo vinces» («With this sign you will conquer») before the battle of the Milvian Bridge (where Constantine defeated his rival Maxentius). This sign is now enlarged so that all the people can contemplate it, but no longer for the sake of a military victory, but rather an inner victory. The four rivers and the deer are part of the Paleochristian iconographic language.

Outside the basilica, but near the main entrance, is the Church of the Holy Stairs. Inside, there is the staircase by which, according to tradition, Jesus climbed before his trial before Pilate. The Holy Staircase would have been transported to Rome by the Empress St. Helena, mother of Constantine, in 326 AD. Pilgrims climb the stairway on their knees. In a Christian context, any ladder symbolizes the «ladder of Heaven», that is, the ladder of Jacob's dream (Genesis 28:12) reinterpreted in the Gospel of John as the Cross of Jesus and his Passion (John 1:51), an open passage for all mankind between earth and heaven.

Behind the Lateran Basilica, you can see the Baptistery, built by Sixtus III between 432 and 440 AD over an ancient Baptistery from the time of Constantine. Although the interior has been modified many times, the external structure remains from the 5th century. The architectural model is based on that of a pagan mausoleum. Whoever enters the baptistery can experience what the women experienced on the morning of the Resurrection after their Crucifixion, as if they were entering the empty tomb. Whoever enters the baptistery thinks it is a place of death but discovers that the baptismal tub is like an empty tomb, which helps to experience the Resurrection. Its octagonal shape underlines the symbol commented by the Church Fathers of the «Eighth Day» (the day after the Sabbath) which is the day of the Resurrection. The adjacent chapels preserve the mosaics of the early Christian era.

Meditation:

We are in the Church of St. John Lateran, the Mother Church of Rome. It is important because inside there is a chair: the chair of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope. The chair is the symbol of the teaching authority of a Bishop in his Diocese. It is good to spend some time meditating on the authority and power of the Church, which is founded on the power of love and service that Jesus himself

invites us to live in our lives. Here we pray in a special way for our Pope and for all the bishops of our own Dioceses. May God bless them with his Spirit, that they may be authentic shepherds ready to die for their sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus. Let us pray that God will give them the grace to lead us all in faith. Let us reflect on the importance of having good guides. With our experience as pilgrims, applying the role of guides to our daily lives, when we do things, when we are active preaching or giving catechism to others, or simply talking about our faith, do we impose ourselves with our truths and be authoritarian, or do we know how to withdraw and let Jesus shine through what we do or say?

5.- Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem

Built to commemorate the Passion and Death of Jesus, thanks to the relics preserved here: the most important are three fragments of the cross, a nail, a fragment of the title that hung on the Cross (INRI) and two thorns of the crown. It is not a sepulchral basilica, but a place to celebrate the mysteries of faith: if in the Basilica of St. John Lateran it is the Resurrection and Redemption, in the Basilica of the Holy Cross it is the Passion and Death.

Founded by Constantine and his mother, St. Helena, or their immediate descendants, on the site where once stood a Palatium, owned by the emperor, known as Sessoriano. Helen, in 325, had found on Golgotha the remains of the wood of the cross and other relics, placed in a chapel on the floor of which was spread a layer of earth from Calvary, «stained by the blood of the Lord». The Basilica, in its original structure, was intended to follow the basilica of Jerusalem. The highlights:

- The Cosmatesque pavement (by a very famous family of marble workers, the Cosmati, from Lazio) and the Renaissance ceiling.
- In the apse, the lower band with the Legend of the True Cross, narrated also by Piero della Francesca in Arezzo and by St. Ambrose in the 5th century. Having found the three crosses of Jesus and the thieves, the problem was to discern which was that of the Lord: St. Helen had the body of a young man laid on each cross and, in contact with that of Jesus, the dead man came back to life and gave glory to God.
- The Chapel of the Relics.

- The Chapel of the Pietà (or Gregorian), semi-subterranean like that of St. Helena, with a precious reliquary in the form of a triptych, which bears, in the center, an ancient Imago Pietatis.
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Meditation:

Today, we can often think of faith as something distant or abstract, but this Church proclaims the concrete reality of our faith. This Church, founded on soil brought from Jerusalem, is dedicated to the historical instrument of our Lord's passion, the Holy Cross. Christ's selfless and sacrificial love for us was manifested in a real way, and his desire to show mercy to us and enter into friendship with us is a reality that becomes a foundation for our whole life. How do we make Christ a present reality in our daily lives? We pray for the grace to understand how much God loved us through the cross of his Son.

We also meditate on the saving power of suffering our daily crosses. Ask for the grace to understand our lives from the perspective of suffering. God did not want suffering but endured it. We cannot explain it or understand it theoretically. When we look at the cross, we see that God has not abandoned suffering humanity. God is present in suffering because he first included it in himself, in his own life in Jesus. We too can bear our suffering with Him and offer it with Him. We can discover that, with him, even in suffering, our life is fruitful.

6.- Basilica of San Lorenzo Outside the Walls

Place that commemorates the martyrdom of St. Lawrence and the unity that St. Lawrence was able to create between faith and charity. Victim - on August 10, 258 - of the persecutions of Valerian, he was one of the 7 deacons, in charge of the care of 1,500 poor and widows helped by the Christian community of Rome, as well as the administration of the goods and cemeteries. Some Popes of the time were not elected among the presbyters but among the group of deacons. According to tradition, when Valerian asked St. Lawrence to give him all the goods of the Church, he presented the poor, the sick and the lame to the Emperor as treasures of the Church and was subsequently martyred by being burned on an iron grate.

Around 330, Constantine had a small oratory built over the tomb of Lawrence, with a double staircase to welcome pilgrims. Nearby he had a large basilica cemetery built over which, around 580-90, Pope Pelagius II erected a new basilica. And Honorius III (1216-1227) added another, which is the one through which one enters today.

In the Basilica there is also the memory of another deacon, the protomartyr St. Stephen (†34), of the philosopher St. Justin (†114), animated by intellectual charity, and of Alcide DeGasperi (politician, founder of the Christian Democratic Party and promoter of the European Union, died in †1954), to recall the charity that must always permeate political action. It deserves attention:

- The narthex of the Vassalletto, Roman marble workers active in Rome between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, for some people coinciding with the Cosmati. There are 13th century frescoes, which tell the stories of St. Lawrence and St. Stephen in parallel, and the tomb of DeGasperi, the work of Giacomo Manzù.
- The Cosmatesque pavement, work of the Cosmati marble workers (XII and XIII centuries).
- The mosaic of the triumphal arch (6th century), visible in the presbytery towards the interior: it represents the Majesty of Christ.
- The crypt with the tomb of Saints Lawrence, Stephen and Justin.

Meditation:

This is the basilica that embodies the spirit of charity and solidarity. «You did it to me»: these are the words Jesus says referring to the final judgment. St. Lawrence had these words engraved in his heart. Because, when he was asked to deliver the treasures of the Church to the emperor, he gathered the poor of Rome and presented them to the emperor. He saw Christ in the poor. Christ is the only treasure of the Church. Our prayer in this church is to be able to see Jesus in the distressing disguise of any kind of poor person. «You did it to me.» We ask for the grace to love more sincerely those around us, in their richness and in their poverty. We also ask for the grace, through the intercession of St. Lawrence, to love the Church as she is. If at times the Church seems poor to us, perhaps it is so, first of all, because we too are part of it.

7.- Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore

The Basilica of St. Mary Major is one of the first dedicated to Mary in Christianity. It was built shortly after the Council of Ephesus (431 AD) which declared Mary «Theotokos» (Mother of God) underlining that Jesus is God from his conception and therefore the human body of Jesus has been an expression of God. A story passed down tells that on August 5, the Virgin Mary appeared to Pope Liberius in a dream asking that a church be built in her honor and mentioning that a miraculous sign would indicate exactly where to build the church. It is said that on that August 5, 358, a miraculous snowfall occurred only here on the Equiline Hill.

Many of the mosaics preserved in the Basilica are dated 432 AD. On the right side of the central nave, we have the story of the Exodus and on the left side, the story of the Patriarchs. These two great visual narratives correspond to the catechesis of the Fathers of the Church and comment on the promises of Israel as a long journey leading to the Incarnation. And it is precisely the Incarnation that is depicted in the Arc de Triomphe, the entrance of God in the form of a human body, thus making every human body «capable of God.» The scenes are mostly taken from the apocryphal gospels, such as the Annunciation in which Mary is weaving with a red thread. The «Proto-Gospel of James» in fact relates that Mary, at the time of the Annunciation, was weaving the red veil of the Temple of Jerusalem, the same veil that was torn during the Crucifixion.

The mosaics of the apse were made by Jacopo Torriti (13th century). In the lower part, between the stained-glass windows, the mosaics represent various episodes of Mary's life. In the hemispherical vault of the apse, on a starry background, the mosaic represents the coronation of Mary as the culmination of a life where her whole body became God's instrument. With the «Marian apse», St. Mary Major interprets the Eucharist as the continuation of the Incarnation, and the body of every human being as the place where God manifests Himself.

In a side chapel, down some stairs leading to a decorated reliquary, are some pieces of wood from the cradle of the Child Jesus. St. Ignatius celebrated his first Mass as a priest here, on this altar. Because of his devotion to the Nativity, he wanted to celebrate it in Bethlehem, but it was impossible for him to make the

trip to the Holy Land at that time. Today the stone altarpiece that was on the altar is dismantled in pieces and exposed in a side chapel, near the main entrance, on the right side of the exit.

Meditation:

Mary kept in her heart the many mysteries of her life with Jesus. The many encounters, the many events that she shared with Jesus and that she did not yet fully understand, she kept in her heart. God himself dwelt in her and walked beside her. She lived the most ordinary and mundane events of her daily life with her little Son, Jesus, at her side. She saw him turn water into wine and she saw water and blood flow from the pierced heart of her beloved Son on the cross. Today, on our pilgrimage, we have encountered Jesus in a variety of ways. May Mary's example lead us to meditate in our hearts on these encounters and discoveries as we return to our normal daily lives at home. Let us not forget that our whole life is a pilgrimage to our heavenly homeland.

We ask Mary, at the end of this pilgrimage, to help us keep in our hearts what we have come to understand during this experience. Mary, take us by the hand and, from this moment on, stay with us forever.

Comments

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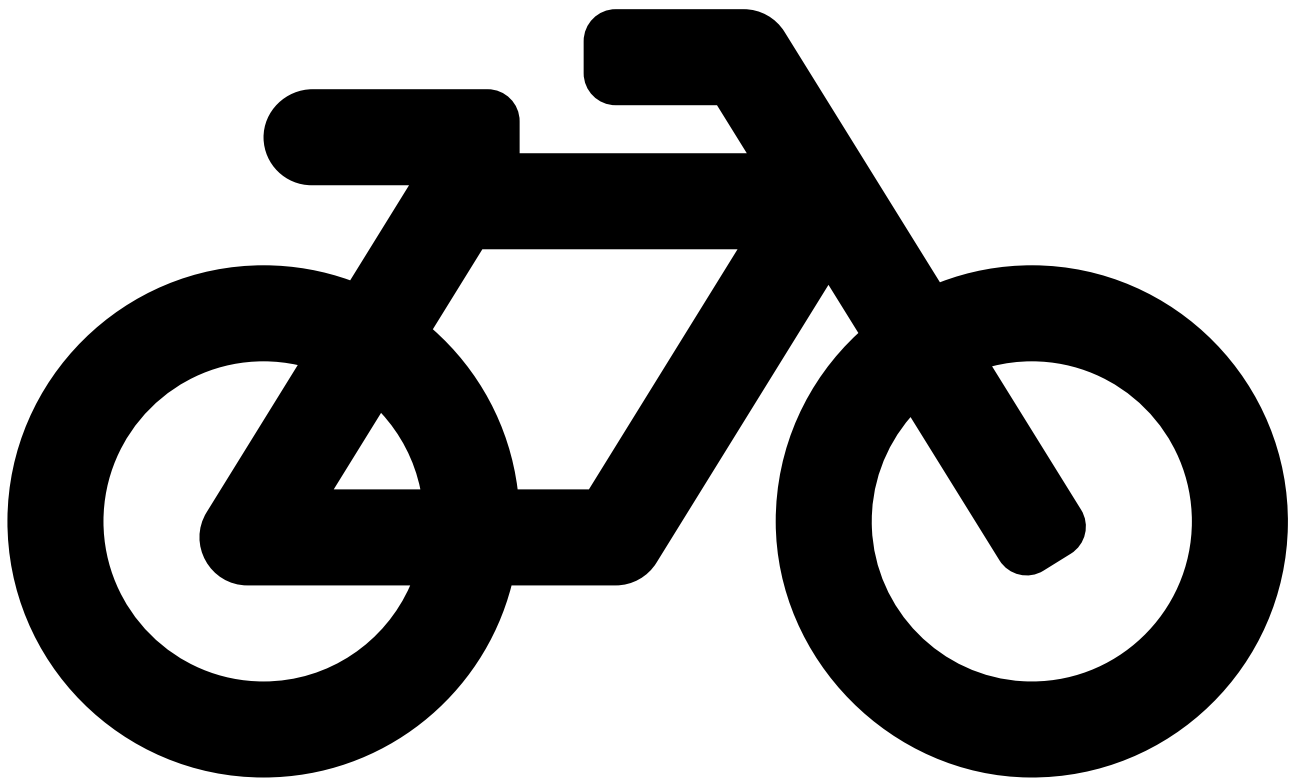
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The entire itinerary can be done by bicycle. Urban itinerary. At the entrance of each basilica you will have to leave your bicycle tied up.

San Pablo Extramuros: Km 6

San Sebastiano: Km 10

San Juan Laterano: Km 13,5

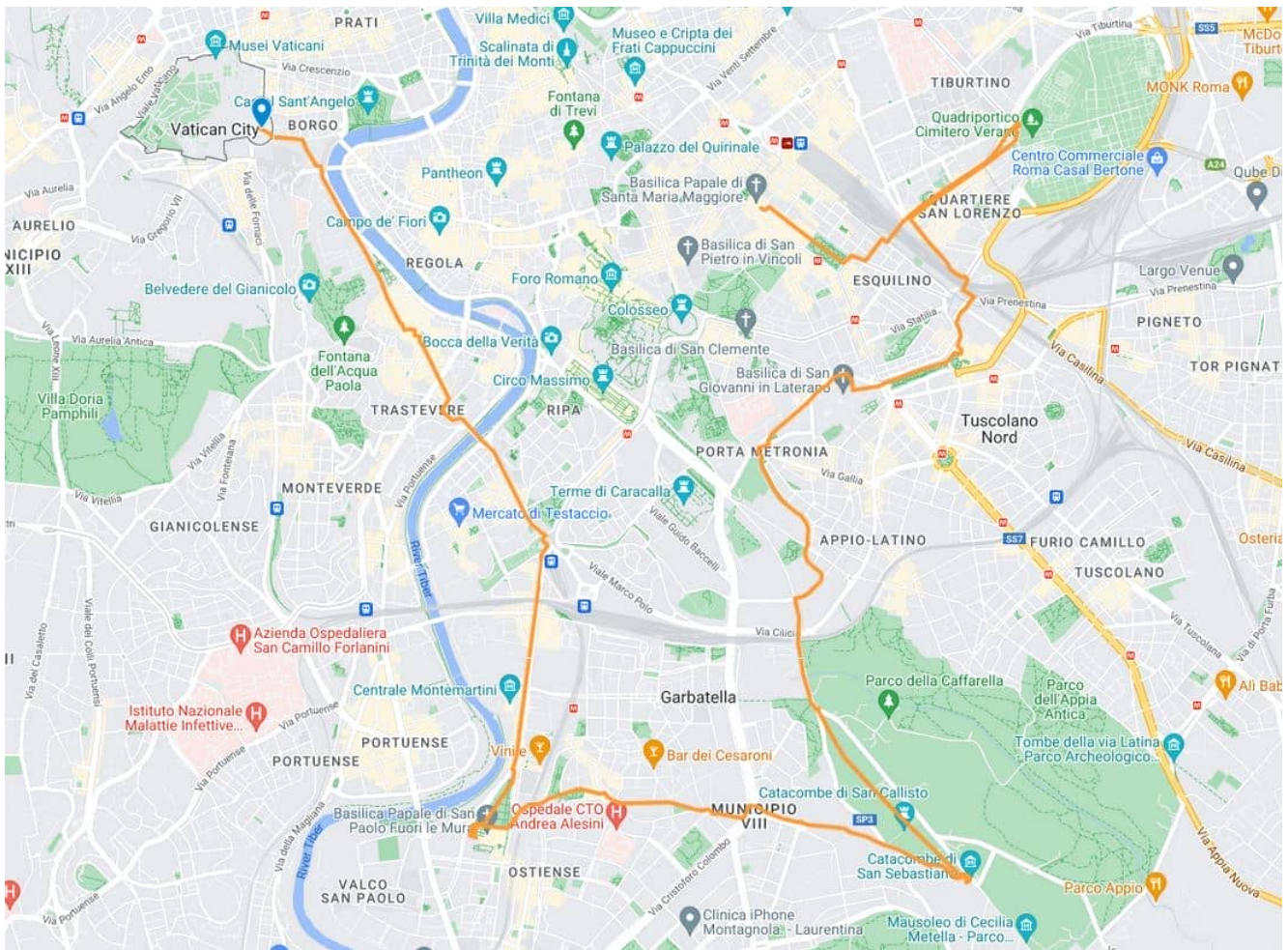
Santa Cruz: Km 15,5

San Lorenzo Extramuros: Km 17,6

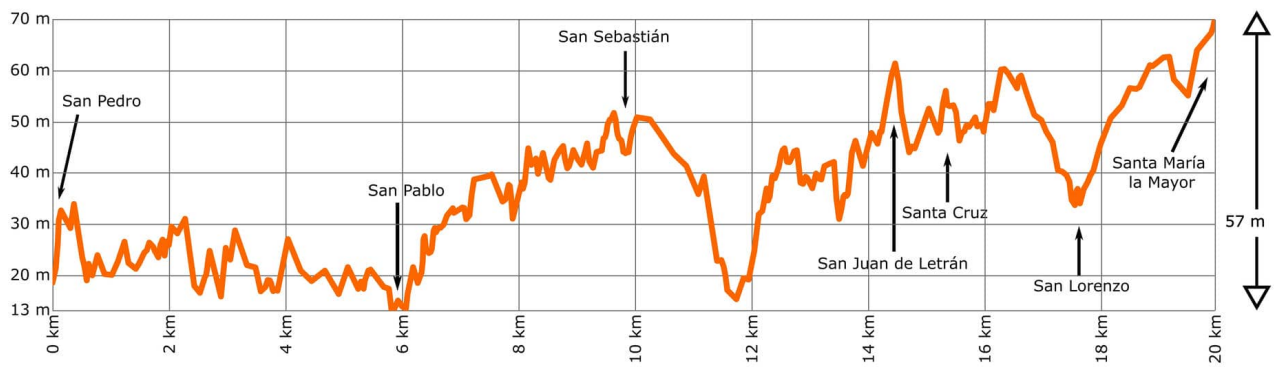
Santa María la Mayor: Km 19,9

Trail

Step's sketch



Altimetry



The weather in Roma

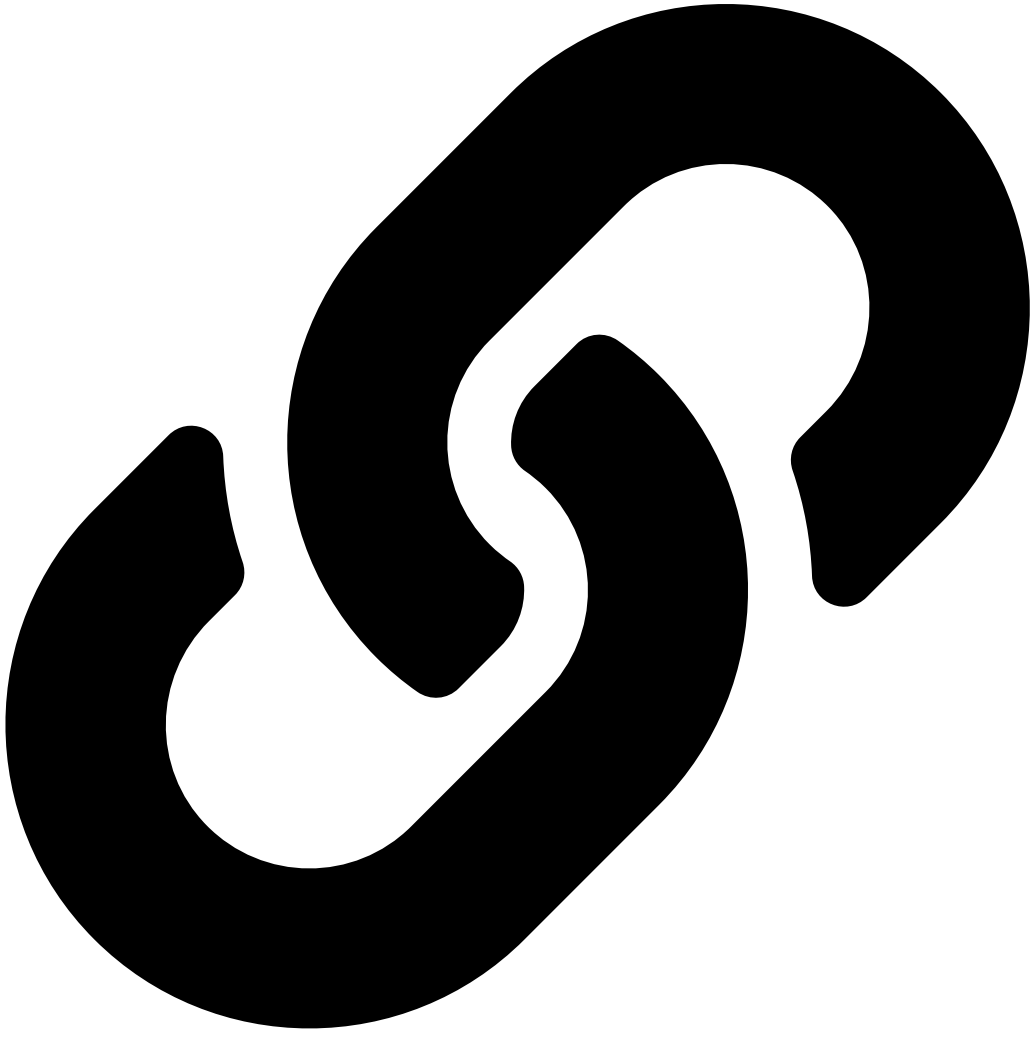
[view trail in wikiloc](#)

[download gps](#)

Galery

Step's photos









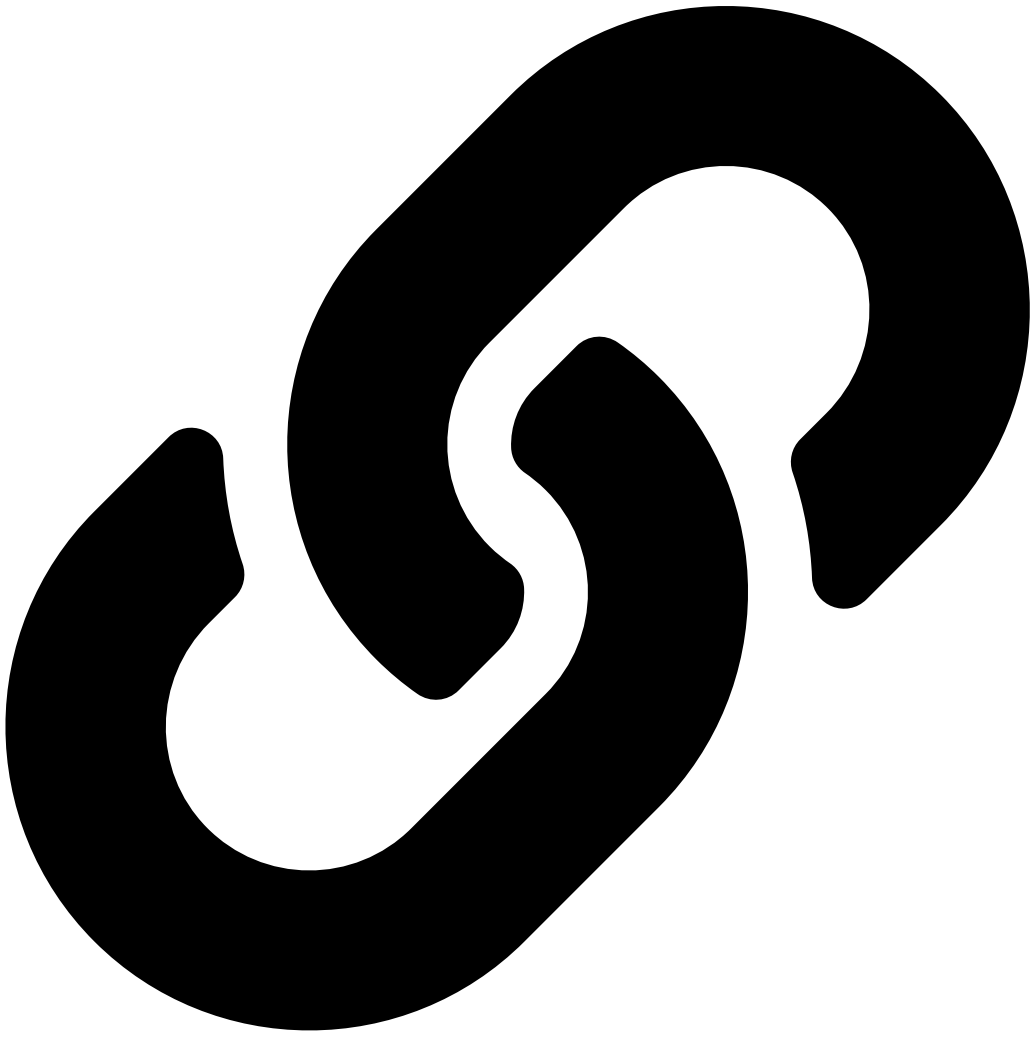
















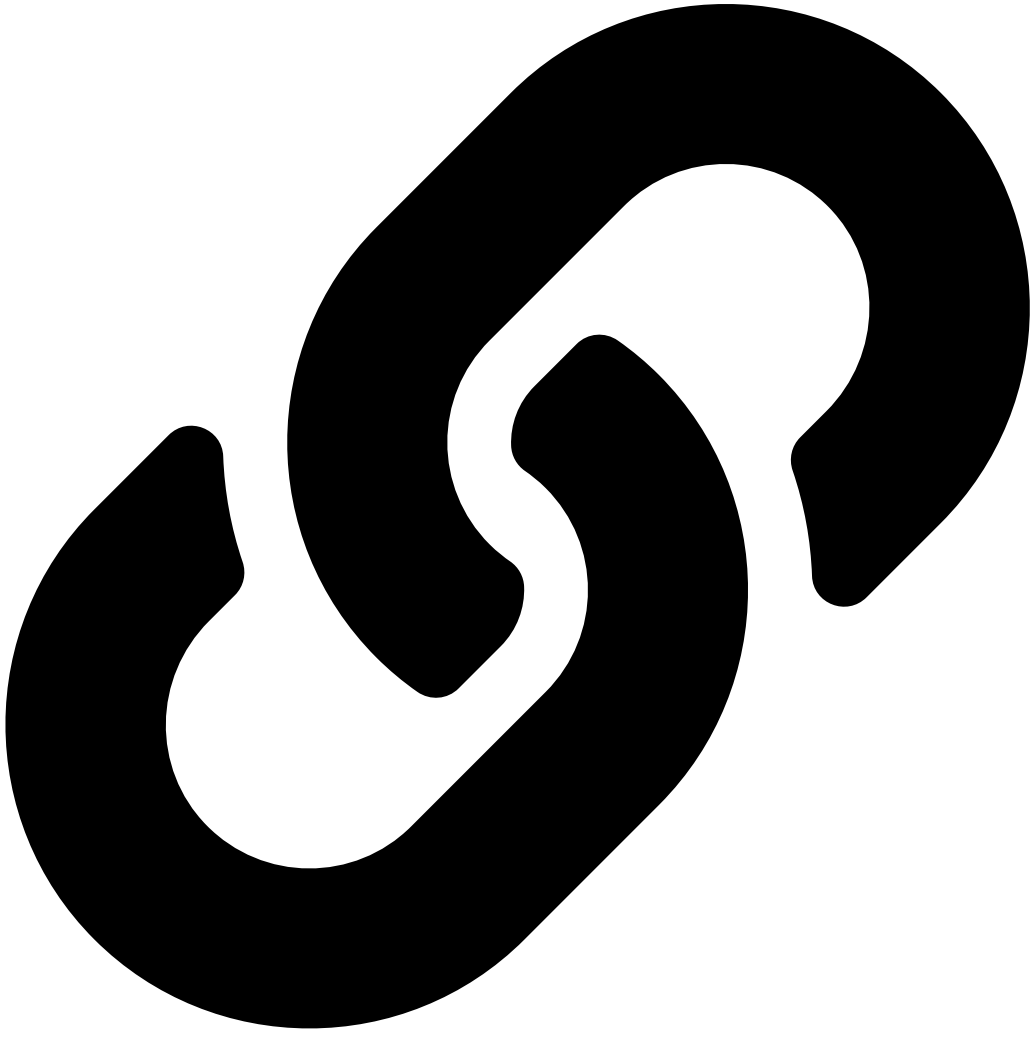
















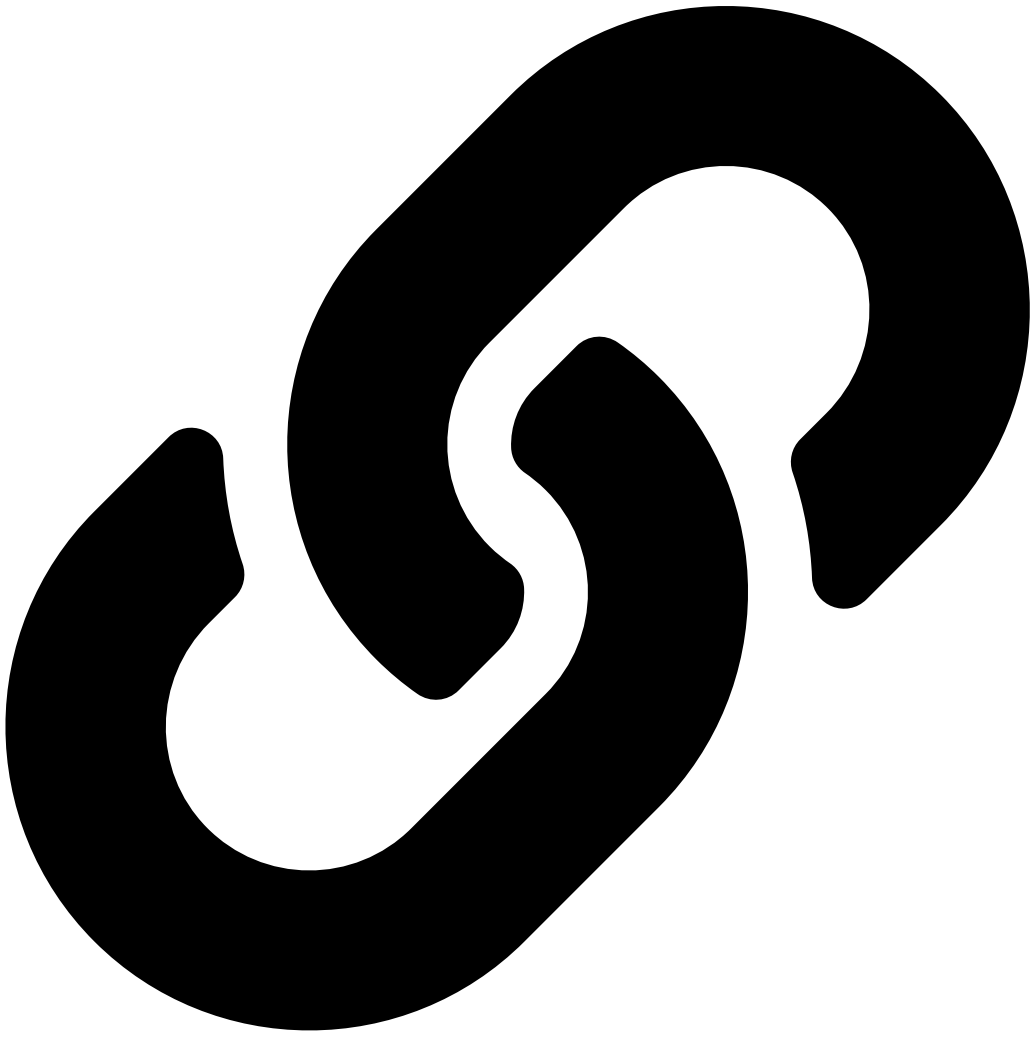














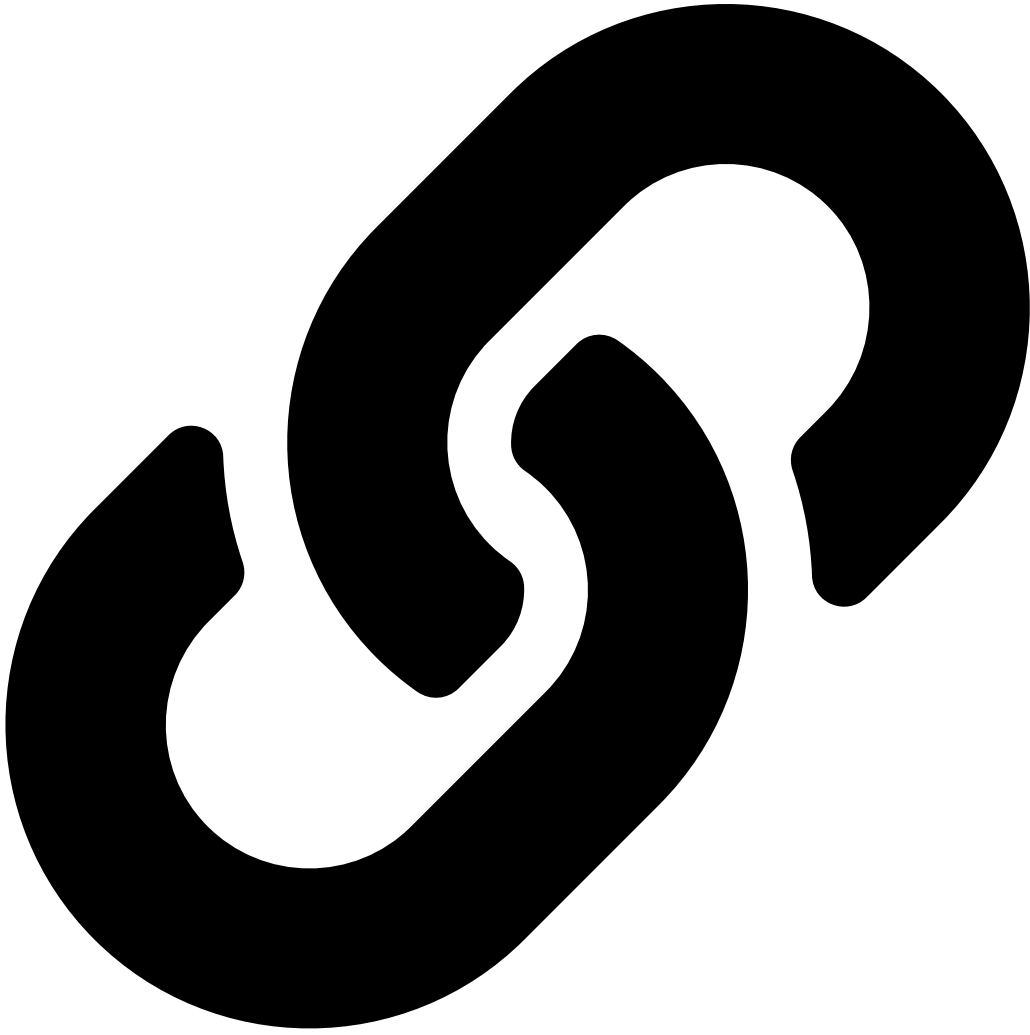












[previous step](#)

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