

CHAPEL IN HONOR OF SAINTS BENEDICT, CYRIL AND METHODIUS, PATRONS OF EUROPE, IN THE HOLY GROTTOS

On December 31, 1980, the Holy Father John Paul II declared Sts. Cyril and Methodius Patrons of Europe, together with St. Benedict. One year later, on November 2, 1981, the Sovereign Pontiff gave the blessing on the new holy place created in their honor.



The chapel's site within the Holy Grottoes, along the Clementine peribulum, allows pilgrims to view the chapel without even entering it. It sits in a space (*Polyandrium*) that in 1607 Pope Paul V (Borghese, 1605-1621) had designated to hold the relics of saints and martyrs exhumed from the tombs of the ancient basilica under demolition. In the 20th century, while excavations were being carried

out in the necropolis below, the Grottoes were emptied of the bones kept therein and for a certain period housed a few valuable 15th century marble reliefs, removed from the grand funerary monument of Paul II (Barbo, 1464-1471). Finally the Fabbrica di San Pietro transformed this location into a chapel dedicated to the patron saints of Europe, leaving the original architectural structures of the space itself unchanged.

The main wall of the chapel, in front of the entrance, houses a large bronze altar piece 3x2 m depicting the three Patron saints of Europe: Benedict, Cyril and Methodius. On the sides, the four Evangelists are carved with their symbols and with each one bearing a scroll with the first words of their Gospel in Latin. On the left wall, behind the altar, there is a bronze crucifix (2.90x1.60 m) of Carolingian inspiration that recalls the crucifix that hung until 1550 «*in capite columnarum*) in the Constantinian basilica. Christ is represented with a halo, without his crown of thorns, with his hands and feet not pierced by nails and slightly detached from the plank, almost as if to foretell the Ascension. At either end of the cross are the Virgin Our Lady of Sorrows to the right and St. John Evangelist to the left; at the bottom are the Apostles, Peter and Paul; above is Christ the King, with a scepter in his right hand and a globe in his left. The altar "*coram populo*" is composed of 13th century Cosmatesque elements, while the palliotto displays a large cross inscribed in a circle.

The architectural layout of the chapel was overseen by Giuseppe Zander, director of the Technical Office of the Fabbrica di San Pietro, while the sculptural works are crafted by Tommaso Gismondi. Two inscriptions recall the proclamation of the three patron saints of Europe and the generosity of the Knights of Columbus which made possible the realization of the chapel itself. At the base of the bronze altar piece it reads:



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HONORI SS. CYRILLI E METHODII QUOS S. BENEDICTO
ADIUNCTOS IOANNES PAULUS II PONT MAX DIE XXXI
DEC. A. MDCCCCLXXX COMPATRONOS EUROPÆ
DECLARAVIT
RITE DICATUM

A second epigraph states:

AEDICULAM HANC
QUAM IOANNES PAULUS II PONT MAX
IN HONOREM
BENEDICTI ITEMQUE SS. CYRILI ET METHODII
PATRONUM EUROPÆ

STRUI JUSSIT
EQUITIBUS A COLUMBO SUMPTUM SUPPEDITANTIBUS IDEM
POSTRIDIE KALENDAS NOVEMBRES

ANNO MCMLXXXI
RITE LUSTRAVIT