The Atrium of the Vatican Basilica

When dealing with any aspects of the events surrounding the construction of Saint Peter's Basilica, it is certainly necessary to evaluate its architectural dimensions which are by far larger than those of any other *fabbrica* of its kind. In the specific case of the atrium, it is possible to note that its net surface corresponds to a tenth of the total surface of the basilica floor which is 16,039 square meters on a covered surface of 20,139 square meters. The historical events surrounding the creation of the basilica atrium, tied in turn to the broader topic of its enlargement, is a well-known subject, considering the numerous publications which have been printed on the subject.

An important opportunity to re-examine this topic has been provided by recent restorations of the stuccoes on the portico that, as Antonio Nibby wrote, «in its vastness and magnificence can certainly rival any of the most splendid modern structures». The preservation restorations dealt with the entire architecture of the present atrium as a whole, dating back to the works of the first half of the 17th century, including the central hall and the two side halls, generally referred to as "Constantine's wing" and “Charlemagne's wing," the latter however created later during the papacy of Clement XI (Albani, 1700-1721).

After the death of Pope Clement VIII (Aldobrandini, 1592-1605), the most suitable candidate to succeed him was Cardinal Cesare Baronio. However, although he obtained the greatest number of votes in the conclave that followed the Pope's death on March 3, 1605, he was not elected due to opposition by the pro-Spanish party. Alessandro de Medici was elected in his place on April 1, 1605 and assumed the name of Leo XI, but he held the position for only twenty-six days. In the new conclave, after the sudden death of the new pope, Cardinal Baronio was once again proposed to the papal seat by the adversaries of the Spanish monarchy, but, once again, the necessary *quorum* of two thirds was not met, short by only eight votes. The Oratorian Cardinal Baronio, esteemed and well-known for his twelve-volume work of *Annales Ecclesìastici,* had in fact criticized the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, provoking the resentment of the Spanish who prevented him from obtaining the necessary support.

Cardinal Camillo Borghese, the future Paul V, was preferred over Baronio. His election was probably the outcome of an agreement between pro-Spanish and pro-French factions. As soon

as he was elected Pope, Paul V (Borghese, 1605-1621) confirmed the College of Cardinals of the Congregation of the Reverenda Fabbrica di San Pietro appointed by his predecessor Leo XI. In addition to the eight cardinals he also confirmed two architects, Giovanni Fontana (1540-1614) and his nephew, Carlo Maderno (1556-1629). The accession of Paul V to the papacy coincided with a period of strong artistic revival and renewed construction, especially in Roman circles, that would last through the 1600s. In the vast panorama of Roman construction during the first quarter of the 1600s, architecturally significant work was directed mainly toward the completion of Saint Peter's Basilica in the Vatican that required a very extensive construction site for supplying as well as storing the materials that needed to be worked at the foot of a structure before being mounted.

Carlo Maderno was appointed as architect by the Reverenda Fabbrica di San Pietro on January 1, 1603, and died on the 3Oth of the same month, in 1629. In the twenty-six years that he held this position, he spent sixteen in the service of Paul V, two with Gregory XV (Ludovisi, 1621-1623) and six with Urban VIII (Barberini, 1623-1644).

In 1605, during a religious function at the altar of the SS. Vergine, in the area of the ancient basilica, east of the dividing wall, a piece of window from the wall above fell to the floor of the church, frightening the many faithful who were present. This episode, related by the Cardinal

Archpriest of Saint Peter's Basilica to the Consistory of September 26, 1605, was an opportunity to convince the pontiff, by also soliciting the Cardinal Congregation, to authorize the work necessary to complete the new basilica, by knocking down the rest of the Constantinian structure which was still standing at that time. For two years the commission of cardinals discussed the subject of which architectural solution to adopt, studying in great detail the practical problems which needed to be resolved.

Pontiff Paul V then entrusted Carlo Maderno, at 51 years of age, with the task of completing the architecture of the basilica according to a Latin cross plan, as a result of his victory in a competition held in 1607. In this competition Maderno found himself contending with other important architects, such as: Domenico Fontana, Girolamo Rainaldi, Flaminio Ponzio, Nicolò Branconio, Orazio Torriani, Giovanni Antonio Dosio and Ludovico Cigoli.

The extension of the basilica commenced on March 7, 1607, with a blessing by the Cardinal Archpriest on the first stone placed in the underground passage towards the Gregorian chapel. (PAVLI. V. PONT. MAX. IVSSV EVANGELISTA. PALLOTTVS. TT. S. LAVRENTII. IN. LVCINA. CARD. CONSENTINVS. HVIVS. BASILICAE ARCHIPRESBYTER. HAEC. FVNDAMENTA IECIT. DIE. VII. MAII. MDCVII. PONTIFICAT. EIVSDEM. S. D. N. ANNO. SECVNDO).

Excavation for the foundations of the new facade and the portico behind it began on November 5

of the same year, while on February 10 of the following year, the first stone was placed *in situ,* by the director Antonio Ghetto.

Documentation and maps from that period show that the point of greatest depression of the Tiber plain was found in the area of the *Vallis vaticana* where the swampy *ager*, the *'infamibus Vaticanis locis"* infested with malaria spread to the south-east. In the orography of Vatican hill soil, the lowest point was in the south corner of the present facade; for its foundation, the architect Carlo Maderno was forced to lower it by approximately 33 meters (135 palms) from the level where the stairway of the new basilica begins.

The Sovereign Pontiff Paul V took a personal interest in the new fabbrica, visiting it often and urging on the work that was progressing at a rapid pace, though it is true that, with all the workers that were needed on site, there were as many as seven hundred people working day and night. The covering of the vault of the main nave is dated at 1614. The partition wall with the remains of the Constantinian basilica was destroyed on April 12,1615, while in 1618 the contract for the stucco work in the central area of the basilica atrium was drawn up, with the work beginning on May 29, the anniversary of the crowning of Pope Paul V. The work was set to be completed within one year of its beginning. The team of artists employed as stucco workers was composed of Martino Ferrabosco, Simone D'Aria, Giovanni Greppi da Caslano, Stefano Trentino, Giovan Battista Solaro, Andrea Carona, Giovan Battista Ricci da Novara.

The project was completed in 1613. In the *Diari sistini* of that year it was recorded that on Holy Thursday the Pope appeared from the loggia of the new facade.

The 17th-century building site was enormous in size, involving part of the surrounding city. From drawings left by artists of that period and from documents regarding payments to the various workers, it can be noted that the entire area in front of the basilica, the present square and the Borgo area up to the Tiber, where the Tràspontina Port at Castel Sant'Angelo was located, was a scene of feverish activity.

Obtaining materials, marble, in particular, was a serious problem at the time: so much so that, with a papal brief dated July 22, 1540, the Pontiff Paul III (Farnese, 1534-1549) granted the authority to dig everywhere, be it Rome or beyond, in public places *«lapis pro fabbrica S. Petri».* Furthermore, in order to safeguard Rome's antiquities from frequent raids by the people, Raphael (1438-1520) was appointed by papal brief in 1515 as commissioner of the antiquities. Yet, despite the extraordinary commitment, this measure was not successful in preventing the progressive loss of a large part of the ancient monuments which had been preserved until that time. As part of the baroque site there existed the position of the "deputato" corresponding to our present site manager whose specific task was that of controlling the quality of the material which was taken directly from the caves. In the notebooks from the 1600s we find the expressions used in the measurement of materials, such as: «*in giro* (in the round) or in *circonferenza* (circumference) for the rectified linear measurements, *in pelle* (in surface) or *largo in pelle* (wide

in surface) or *steso in* pelle (stretched in surface) for surface measurements. During that same period, in Roman circles only, the calculation according to *palmo quadrato in pelle* (palm squared in surface) entered into current usage when referring to the working of travertine stone, previously used only for marble. In cases in which the predominant size of the material was in the length, the expression used for measurements was *in pelle piana* (in full surface), while the *scornigiato* (frame) was measured with *palmo quadrato in pelle* (palm squared in surface). This phraseology is the basis of the majority of the contracts drawn up in the 17th century and can be found, regarding Vatican building sites, for contracts drawn up for work on the facade, as well as in the case of work contracts pertaining to the stuccoes of the atrium.

Other aspects of evaluation regarded the dimensions of the architecture in progress, and also the assumption of full responsibility on the part of the artists, who responded personally when the work did not fully satisfy the one who had commissioned it. This was also the case for the stucco work on the portico of Saint Peter's where, having established the general proportion of the sections, the various details were executed directly by individual workers.

In particular the quantity of materials used to construct the body of the fabbrica of the atrium, namely: lumber, rope, and pulleys, were half of what was used to shore the large extension vault of the basilica, even if the number of the wood centers was only ten less that those mounted for the nave. The types of lumber most commonly used were chestnut, fir, elm and pine. The timber came from the Forest of Marittima, Campagna and Sabina. The kinds of bricks produced in the 1600s were chiefly: ordinary brick, large brick, paving tile, canal, roofing tile, square.

The first payments for the portico framework date to February 1611. The stucco to be used in the portico of the facade of Saint Peter's Basilica had to be made of white lime, pozzuolana and powdered marble. The term stucco, during the 17th century, was used to indicate a decoration in bas or high relief, finished on the surface with different materials; such as the mixture of lime and powdered marble or travertine stone, or lime coloring on a mixture of lime and pozzuolana, as in the case being examined here.

The technique used by the artists for the stuccoes was rough-hewing, an operation that required several steps, which included preparing the overhangs and clamping the framework, indispensable measures to ensure the adherence to the support and to enable the spreading of the modeling mixture. The most important feature in the stucco technique continues even today to be the speed and precision used to shape the mixture while still fresh. This technique was used mainly when the workers answered directly for the quality of the work.

When Maderno finished the work on the portico for the central part of the atrium and the northern vestibule, they were revealed in all their splendor. The stuccoes were modeled on a grand skiff vault made up of sixteen groins, seven for each longer side and two, one in front of the other, on the shorter sides; the statues of the first martyr popes were positioned in pairs alongside each lunette; inside the octagons and arches, thirty-six stories of life of Saint Peter found in the *Acts of*

the Apostles were depicted, while the central fascia of the vault was scanned by the two stucco figures of Saint Peter and Saint Paul and by three coats of arms of the Pontiff Paul V. The entire central hall of the atrium was divided into three sections, with the Petrine scenes in marble, while the large ovule cornices were gold plated, as were the spindles and matchboards. The walls and the gates of the facade offer an elegant chromatic contrast that balances the pictorial richness of the stucco reliefs, exalted by the clear essentiality of the interior architectonic structure.

This was the appearance of the portico when it ushered in the Jubilee of 1625 under Pope Urban VIII (Barberini, 1623-1644), as Maderno had envisioned it, with a brick floor, like the one on the extension of the nave, and not yet adorned with polychrome marble, as it would later be with Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680) leading the way. Also, some of the main changes to the central hall of the portico which would later take place were the replacement of the brick floor with the new marble floor and the siting of the "Navicella" mosaic in the "lunettone" above the central gate and of the sculpture group *Pasce oves meas*, attributed to Bernini's students, on the opposite side.

The promulgation bull of the 1625 Jubilee was issued on August 6,1624. The crowd of Catholics gathered at the event was less than that of the two previous Holy Years, as the documents of the time attest. The Basilica of Saint Paul was replaced by the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, due to the fear provoked by an epidemic which was widespread in the Kingdom of Naples. On the occasion of this Jubilee, it was possible for the first time to acquire indulgences as many times as visits were repeated. The closing of the Holy Year occurred in an orderly fashion and with great solemnity.

Another document on the state of the portico of the basilica is taken from the expert report, commissioned by Pope Clement XII (Corsini, 1730-1740) to the architect Alessandro Galilei (1691-1737) on the project of the new sacristy of the Vatican Basilica. In that report the architect expounds his opinion on the different models proposed by the various architects taking part in the competition, to then be able to propose an alternate design solution himself.

The new plan for the sacristy consists of extracting, along both sides of the basilica, two enormous "rooms" that, starting from the outer corners of the Coro and SS. Sacramento chapels, respectively, reach the subarches of the facade towards the east. The rooms, each measuring 460 sq. m in surface area (36.80 x 12.50 m), would have reached the height of the large outdoor windows of the basilica. In this document it is interesting to note the state of the portico in 1732 (the date is written at the foot of the report): «There are many objections which can be made towards this fabric.... Likewise it could be opposed, that by closing the light of the Portico Arch towards the West part, a lot of light is taken away from the same Portico, the Portico would not

need light on this side, being that it already receives an overabundance of light from the part in front, which can be seen from Constantine's part, where a good portion of light from that Arch is walled up, and yet the Portico is still very bright; so that nothing will spoil said Portico in its closing, that Arch, since the bottom of the same, will be decorated, consistent with the lateral parts, and will correspond with the remainder of the aforementioned Portico ...".

During the festivities of the *Corpus Domini* the atrium was decorated with eight tapestries copied from original paintings by well-known artists. Of the famous works there were those said to be by Raphael, representing the life of Jesus Christ, woven in silk and gold. The cartoons of these tapestries were commissioned by Pope Leo X (Medici, 1513-1521), and magnificently executed in Flanders, under the control of Raphael's disciples.

Another example of how the atrium of Saint Peter's Basilica was adorned for grand occasions is taken from a drawing by Giuseppe Valadier (1762-1839) done in a sketchbook (reproduced in print, in 100 copies, in 1954), and pertains to the moving of the large bell that was to be mounted on the southern side of the facade. The design of the bell is the work of the architect's father, Luigi Valadier (1726-1785). In order to transport the bell, movable scaffolding was mounted from the foundry to Saint Peter's Basilica, in such a way as to be able to sound the bell at every stop so that it could be admired by the people. Before being mounted in the belfry fit beneath the "all'italiana" clock, the bell was placed in front of the Holy Door in the portico of Saint Peter's Basilica to receive the solemn blessing of Pius VI (Braschi, 1775-1799) on June 11, 1786, Trinity Sunday. "....Concluded the mass in the Sistine Chapel, the Holy Father with cope and mitre, preceded by the college of Their Eminencies Lord Cardinals, and by all the others present in the aforesaid Chapel, by the stairs named after Constantine proceeded to the Portico of the Vatican Basilica where the Altar had been erected at Holy Door in order to perform the solemn Blessing on the new large Bell of the Basilica... For the described function it was already all vaguely arrayed with tapestries, and damasks, and velvet that whole portion of the Portico, that leads from the largest door to Constantine's stairs, where by order of the Monsig. Majordomo of the Holy Apostolic Palaces, boxes were built with jalousies, one for the comfort of the princesses, and the Ladies, so many foreign as national who attended in great number...."

These tapestries were of considerable value; therefore, as soon as the new Pontiff, Pius VII (Chiaramonti, 1800-1823), elected in Venice on March 4, 1799, took over the Papal State for the part occupied by the Neapolitans, on June 23 of the same year, he had them guarded in the chambers of Pius V (Ghisleri, 1566-1572) in the Vatican. Subsequently the tapestries were transferred to the Vatican palaces, in the gallery following the room with the geographic maps. In the early 1800s, the very difficult task of restoring the recovered Raphael tapestries of the "Old School," by reconstructing the original manufacturing, was entrusted to the artisan Nicola Pericoli. From this period on, the tapestries were no longer exhibited in the atrium of the Basilica during the *Corpus Domini* procession that started at the Scala Regia and continued into

Charlemagne's wing.

On occasion of the *Berninian year* (1980-1981), the Fabbrica di San Pietro, in collaboration with the commission created by the Holy See, after an in-depth study, placed a two-door main entrance in shatterproof glass, measuring 6.10 x 3.12 m, at the north end of Constantine's vestibule, in completion of the ancient wooden door. In this way, Bernini's equestrian statue, erected in honor of Emperor Constantine (306-337) is more evident and in a more effective and honored position to be admired. The adopted solution allows visitors to see the precious work in which Bernini expresses his admiration for *"Victor Constantinus Maximus Augustus",* showing his love to the *Crux invicta.* On November 7, 1987, on the occasion of the historic visit of the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I to the Sovereign Pontiff John Paul II, a marble plaque with very large letters in Greek and Latin was placed to the right of the Holy Door. These are the only two interventions which were carried out in the atrium in the 1980s. The stucco decorations in the central hall of the atrium and in Constantine's vestibule, towards the Scala Regia, were completed in the 15th year of the pontificate of Paul V (1619), while the ones to the south, in Charlemagne's vestibule, were completed in 1721, during the pontificate of Clement XI (Albani, 1700-1721). Over time restorations were carried out during the following years: 1624, 1720, 1752, 1812, 1824, 1858, l9O8 and 1950.

In the 1700s we know that restorations of the atrium stuccoes were worked on first by Antonio Valeri (1648-1736), Director of the Reverenda Fabbrica di San Pietro from September 6, 1703, and Prince of the distinguished Accademia di San Luca; then the architect Filippo Barigioni (1690-1753) also the Director from November 22, 1736. The latter saw to the reconstruction of the stuccoes in the portico of the facade and of the decorative motifs, such as festoons of fruit, flowers, arabesques, relief rosettes and cherub heads, using a support framework of wire rods, nails and large iron pins, and pointing out finally that the «*stuccoes should be gilded with gold».*

Carlo Fontana (1634-1714) was the "Architetto" of the Fabbrica, from March 1, 1697 until his death on February 6, 1714. This position was then abolished and in its place were born the "supervising architects" (architetti soprastanti) starting with Matthia De Rossi (from 1675 to 1695), continuing with Domenico De Rossi (from 1695 to 1703), Antonio Valeri (from 1703 to 1736) and Filippo Barigioni (from 1736 to 1753). The last to hold this position was Luigi Vanvitelli (1700-1773). Today the Fabbrica di San Pietro provides continuous supervision and both regular and special maintenance of the Basilica and its surroundings, availing itself of the body of so-called "sampietrini," highly specialized workers. The Fabbrica work only within the basilica and, as mentioned, its surroundings, which are strictly defined by precise regulations: the holy grottoes, the "cortilone" or large courtyard to the north, terraces, attics, domes, storage areas, and the "Mosaic Workshop", which is the only organization connected with the Fabbrica di San Pietro. The building site for the atrium restorations belongs to a broader program of interventions examined by the Fabbrica di San Pietro in preparation for the great Jubilee of 2000. To prepare

for such an undertaking means also to prepare the first temple of Christianity for the event, with a series of works aimed in such a way as to present the Basilica in the most worthy way to best receive Christian faithfuls coming from around the world. Until a few years ago the study of the atrium of Saint Peter's Basilica, its decorative elements and the historical-artistic events connected to it gained little attention from scholars. However, recently Laura Teza published an essay entitled *"La decorazione figurativa a stucco del portico di San Pietro al tempo di Papa Paolo V"* (The Figurative decoration in stucco of the portico of Saint Peter in the time of Pope Paul V) in the book *San Pietro/Arte* e *Storia* nella *Basilica Vaticana* (Saint Peter/Art and History in the Vatican Basilica), Bergamo, 1996, pp. 237-287. This work creates a complete picture of the atrium of the Basilica.

In four centuries of existence, a general program of intervention aimed at the preservation of the central hall of the atrium and the side vestibules was never carried out. Thanks to the contribution offered by the Foundation of the Knights of Columbus, it has been possible to undertake a restoration of considerable technical, historical, and artistic importance. The usual difficulties of the work were complicated by the fact that the atrium occupies the entire space behind the facade, making it a particularly strategic place for the flow of faithfuls visiting the Basilica. Furthermore, the set up of a restoration work site had to take into account that it could in no way block access to the Basilica and hinder enjoyment of the atrium.

In order to have an exact idea of the imposing nature of the work site, it is sufficient to examine the size of the architecture as well as the materials used. The total distance between the two equestrian statues of Constantine and Charlemagne is 139 meters, while the central hall of the atrium is 12.80 meters wide and 71 meters long. The main cornice is 12.60 meters from the floor and the central vault approximately 18.70 meters. The stuccoes as a whole spread over a surface of approximately 3,500 square meters. Regarding the materials used in the first seven months of work (July 30), the scaffolding in the central hall alone required 12,538 orthogonal joints, 3,120 work platforms equal to 2,808 square meters, 150 service ladders, 820 fir tables for ml. 4.00 x 0.25 x 0.05 equal to a length of 3,280 km, 1600 measuring tables ml. 4.00 x 0.15 x 0.05 equal to 6,400 km. The materials and tools used: 780 kg of lime, 4,885 kg of paper pulp, 130 kg of *primal AC33,* 23 kg of *paraloid B72,* 2,125 liters of *contrad 2000,* 375 kg of ammonium carbonate, 1,005 kg of ammonium bicarbonate, 126 spatulas and trowels, 211 syringes, 295 sponges and 221 scalpels for various retouches.