

PARISHES OF  
**ST PIUS X, ALDERLEY EDGE, ST BENEDICT'S, HANDFORTH**  
**AND**  
**SACRED HEART & ST TERESA'S WILMSLOW**  
**WEEKLY REFLECTION**

**Sunday 26th April 4th Sunday of Easter**  
**Ravenna & The Holy House of Loreto: Two Sacred Places in Italy**  
**(1) Ravenna**

The articles for this week and next will give a glimpse into two unique Italian towns which are relatively little visited given their religious, cultural and historic interest.

Ravenna contains some of the finest early Christian art and architecture in the West and has a unique historical significance. In 402 A.D. the Emperor Honorius deserted Rome and made Ravenna capital of the Roman Empire. In 476 A.D. the city was conquered by Visigoths but was recaptured from the East by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian in 540 A.D. The city was Christian throughout this period, but the Visigoth kings followed the Arian heresy which held that Jesus, though the Son of God, was made by God before the beginning of time and so was not "consubstantial" with Him.

Ravenna has 8 Christian buildings dating from about 430 A.D. to 549 A.D. inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. There are 3 Basilicas, 1 chapel, 2 Baptisteries and 2 mausoleums. The Michelin Guide describes the mosaics in these buildings as "*the finest in Europe surpassing even those of Constantinople, Palermo and Venice*". In his Divine Comedy Dante (who is buried in Ravenna) called them "*a symphony of colour*". There is not space to describe the wonders of all these buildings, but a brief description of two of them may set the scene and explain their religious significance.

The Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo was built by the Visigoth king, Theodoric, in 504 A.D. It contains numerous series of mosaics representing Jesus' miracles and parables, His Passion and Resurrection, saints, prophets and evangelists. These date from the founding of the church, though some mosaics, considered by the Emperor Justinian to be too obviously Arian, were destroyed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. There are also many later mosaics from the early 7<sup>th</sup> century. UNESCO experts have described the church in this way: "*both the exterior and interior of the basilica graphically illustrate the fusion between the western and eastern styles characteristic of the late 5th to early 6th century. This is one of the most important buildings from the period of crucial cultural significance in European religious art*"

The Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe is a short bus ride from Ravenna centre. It was finished in 549 A.D., nine years after the city's return to orthodox Christianity. Its triumphal arch and the chancel are adorned with breathtaking 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century mosaics. These include, at the top of the arch, Christ encircled by 12 lambs, representing the Apostles, and by evangelical symbols. On the vaulting of the apse is the Transfiguration, depicted by a great Latin cross, the Salvation of the World, which is surrounded by stars between Moses and Elias and 3 lambs which represent SS Peter, James and John, the human witnesses to the miracle. Above the cross is the hand of God the Father and below it, the Bishop, St Apollinaris, among more lambs, in a landscape of flowers and rocks, with additional features such as trees and birds. The Basilica contains many other mosaics. UNESCO said the Church is *"an outstanding example of the early Christian basilica in its purity and simplicity of its design and use of space and in the sumptuous nature of its decoration"*.

Ravenna's religious buildings house mosaics on a vast scale. They are not only awe-inspiring in themselves, but also convey the deep spirituality which engendered them and which can still be appreciated today, some 1500 years later.

Stephen S.