



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on June 30, 2021

Underground Area of Rome's Colosseum Open to Public for First Time Ever

The subterranean levels of Rome's Colosseum are now open to the public, for the first time in the structure's almost 2,000-year history. Previously, visitors could explore the interior and exterior of the walls, but the underground was off-limits. Now, visitors can explore the areas where animals, gladiators, slaves, and condemned prisoners were kept before the "games" in which many of them died for the amusement of spectators.

The subterranean levels opened to the public on June 25.



Photo: Janbie/iStock/Getty Images Plus

In the past 2,000 years, the subterranean area — known as the "Hypogea" — has been seen by only a few individuals. It was originally lit by candles, since the floor of the Colosseum blocked out light in all except the areas where trap doors allowed the release of animals for the "games." The stage door has long since been destroyed by time and the elements, allowing full sunlight into the lower levels.

The Colosseum — which had been in various stages of disrepair and ongoing ruin for many hundreds of years — underwent a major restoration beginning in 2011. That restoration was due to the financial support of Diego Della Valle, chairman and CEO of the Tod's Group — an Italian company that produces luxury shoes and other high-end leather goods. As the *Robb Report* [reported](#):

Diego Della Valle, chairman and CEO of the Tod's Group, first took the Colosseum under his wing in 2011, when he pledged €25 million to restore the ancient landmark. The patriotic fashion exec kicked off a trend for Italian brands funding the beautification of the nation's architectural treasures: Fendi took on the Trevi Fountain, Bulgari got the Spanish Steps and Maison Margiela and Diesel parent OTB Group committed to Venice's Rialto Bridge.

And:

The first phase of Tod's work, completed in 2016 in partnership with Rome's Archaeological Heritage Department, tackled the structure's facade. But the second phase, the fruits of which debuted on June 25, revealed a vast area of the building that has never been seen by the public—even in the arena's heyday.

The newly restored hypogea was essentially the Colosseum's locker room, a level below the amphitheater's main stage where gladiators would gather and get prepped to appear before crowds of as many as 75,000 people. Those spectators never got to see these private quarters, which makes their restoration all the more exciting.

The Colosseum has long been tied to the persecution of Christians, many of whom are believed to have



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died there for refusing to give up their faith.

And while many, including the [original Catholic Encyclopedia](#) — published between 1907 and 1912 — have come to consider the martyrdom of Christians at the Colosseum to be a myth based in a combination of misplaced piety and misunderstanding of historical facts, others hold to the traditional reading of history. In a 2013 interview with EWTN, Fabrizio Bisconti of the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Archaeology said that there is ample evidence that Christians were killed there during the early Roman persecutions of Christians. Bisconti is described as one of the most important contemporary scholars on the subject. At the time of the interview he was secretary and professor of the Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archaeology as well as professor at the University Roma Tre.

Bisconti said:

The phenomenon of martyrdoms is certain. We are told about it by pagan sources, such as the historians of the time Tacitus and Suetonius, who wrote about the martyrdom under Nero, and the Christian sources, beginning with Clement of Rome, as well as by the Fathers of the Church: Tertullian and Minucius Felice, and later on in the mature age of the Church, by Augustine and Ambrose.

The great persecutions, after those of Nero, took place in the time of Domitian in the 3rd century and in the middle years with Decius in 250 and Valerian around 258. And then there was the great persecution of Diocletian, at the beginning of the 4th century, which affected the whole ancient Christian world.

As to the question of “literary information or any other sort of information” about actual martyrdoms in the Colosseum itself, Bisconti was asked, “If martyrdoms took place in amphitheaters, one can suppose that they also took place in the Colosseum?” His answer was, “Yes, but we don’t have literary information or any other sort of information to give us certainty.” He added, “The persecutions took place in the 3rd century, when the Colosseum was no longer being used. This is the historical or chronological problem.” That brings up the idea that the Colosseum is a “symbol” of Christian persecutions. To that, Bisconti said:

The amphitheaters were the places designed for the performance of games, and among them we know that tortures could be included. We can theorize about something sporadic in Rome’s Colosseum. However, persecutions, such as Nero’s, were delimited, and could hardly have taken place in an amphitheater as large as the Colosseum. In the 3rd century, when the persecutions were at their height, this amphitheater had fallen into decadence.

As a result of that symbolism — and the likelihood that actual persecutions did take place in the Colosseum — [in February 2018, the Colosseum was lit with red lights “to remember persecuted Christians.”](#)

June 30 is the day the Catholic Church sets aside as the feast day of the First Holy Martyrs. As part of that remembrance, [morningoffering.com](#) — a site providing daily spiritual devotions to Catholics — wrote:

A great number of Christians perished at the hands of the Roman Emperor Nero during the terrible persecution that lasted from 64-68 A.D. This was the first of many major



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persecutions of the newly founded Church at Rome. The holy men and women who first died for the Gospel of Jesus Christ are also called the “Protomartyrs of Rome.” Some were burned as living torches in the Emperor’s gardens; some were crucified; others were fed to wild animals. Many died even before Sts. Peter and Paul, and therefore it is said of them that they are the “Disciples of the Apostles ... whom the Holy Roman Church sent to their Lord before the Apostles’ death.” God used the sacrifice of these holy men and women, who suffered like their savior Jesus Christ, to lay the indestructible foundation of His Church. Their bold witness for the Christian faith as they endured a brutal death won many converts and caused the Church to grow and spread throughout the world. The feast day of the First Martyrs of the Holy Roman Church is June 30th.

The opening of the Hypogea for the first time ever will provide many visitors a unique look into the history of the Colosseum. For Christians — both Catholic and Protestant — it will provide much more: It will be an opportunity to connect with those who shed their blood, bravely refusing to recant their faith in Christ while bowing their knee to the powers of the world.

And — given the times in which we find ourselves — that seems *apropos*.



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