



Christian faith and visual culture in Rome

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Abstract

Home to popes, final resting place of martyrs, and a crossroads of cultural exchange, Rome is a city whose unique history is closely intertwined with the development of Christian thought and practice. This team-taught, multi-disciplinary course uses the perspectives of art history, history, and theology to investigate how Christianity helped to shape developments in architecture and visual culture. As an intensive course taught onsite in Rome, students understand cultural heritage through a direct experience of the city. The course draws comparisons over time and across different faith traditions, so that students understand the changing urban fabric of Rome and its impact on individuals from the Early Christian period to the present. Students develop a greater respect for others through an understanding of cultural heritage and cultivate a deeper understanding of the Jesuit mission and identity of their university through a reflection on the roots of the Ignatian tradition in Rome.

Keywords

Accessibility; immersive; innovative; multidisciplinary; Rome

Christian Faith and Visual Culture in Rome is a team-taught, multi-disciplinary intensive study abroad course that has been offered through Loyola Marymount University (LMU) eight times since 2014. Cross-listed in Art History, Theology, and Catholic Studies, the course fulfills the university's Faith and Reason core requirement and has been recognized by LMU for its engaged learning and experiential learning for mission designations. The class, taught by an art history professor and a theology professor, was designed to make the study abroad experience accessible to all students. The course, profiled in Table

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(1), explores the development of Christian thought and practice in Rome through a direct study of art, architecture, and sacred space, while also examining Jewish traditions, the foundation of the Jesuit order, and contemporary Christian traditions. This comprehensive approach provides students with an understanding of diverse religious belief systems, contemporary worship, and the Jesuit principles that support their lifelong learning as global citizens.

TABLE (1)

COURSE PROFILE

Course or Program Title and Numbers	Summer Session I 2025: ARHS/CATH/THST 3998 Christian Faith and Visual Culture in Rome
Course or Program Title	2025 Summer in Rome: Christianity & Art
Target Student Population(s)	EX: first generation students, non-majors, adult learners, student athletes, veterans, students with disabilities, etc.
Content Focus, Field, or Discipline	Art History; Theology
Credit-Bearing	Yes
Program Level	Undergraduate
Program Duration	Short-term; winter/spring term assignments and Saturday classes; 15-day immersion in Rome
Onsite Locations	Rome, Italy

Academic rigor is a key component of the course, ensuring that students critically analyze historical, theological, and artistic material. Assignments, readings, and class meetings during the winter break and spring semester provide students with essential background knowledge before their in-country studies in the summer. In-country coursework consists of immersive, on-site lectures at Rome's churches, museums, and monuments, complemented by analytical writing assignments. Seven site visit essays require students to reflect critically on the artistic, theological, and historical contexts encountered, while a final interdisciplinary paper integrates their experiences in Rome with additional research to reinforce the course's learning outcomes. Students who produce exceptional work are encouraged to present at LMU's annual Undergraduate Research Symposium and other academic conferences, further reflecting the course's intellectual rigor.

Intentional engagement is central to the course structure, ensuring that students interact meaningfully with both the class material and their

surroundings. Pre-departure instruction builds student rapport before departure, creating a collaborative learning environment. Once in Rome, site visits, discussions, and reflections encourage active participation in the exploration of Christian art, architecture, theology, and history. Students engage with religious traditions firsthand, attending Mass in historically significant locations across three different contexts, such as a large multilingual Sunday Mass celebrated at St. Peter's Basilica and a small, daily Mass in Italian at the Basilica of San Clemente with local parishioners. The Jesuit priest co-teaching the course presides over a third Mass in English at the Basilica of St. Mary Major in the same chapel where St. Ignatius celebrated his first Mass in 1538, further enhancing the students' engagement with sacred spaces and providing insight into the religious traditions that underpin LMU. The goal is for students to comprehend the history and significance of the Mass within the Catholic Church and respectfully engage with traditions that may differ from their own. Attending Mass also illustrates the continuity of Christian worship, the significance of artistic traditions, and the importance of ritual, bridging historical and contemporary practice. This immersive experience prompts students to reflect on their own values and beliefs, leading to personal growth and fostering deeper connections with their faith traditions, whether Catholic or otherwise.

Discussions on Jewish-Christian relations take place during visits to the Jewish Ghetto, the Jewish Museum, and some of Rome's historic synagogues, where students engage with local Jewish community members to explore the historical significance of Jewish life in Rome and gain more nuanced insight into contemporary Jewish traditions and practices. The program additionally takes advantage of special religious celebrations that may be taking place in Rome, such as the canonization of saints or papal audiences, which allow students to understand the ongoing importance of these traditions in contemporary Italian culture and as part of the life of the global Catholic Church.

Evaluation and continuous quality improvement are integral to the course's success. Annual assessment of learning outcomes and participant feedback ensures that the program remains dynamic and relevant. Site visits and assignments evolve based on pedagogical effectiveness and emerging opportunities in Rome. In past iterations of the class, visits to sites such as Ostia Antica and the excavated Roman villa beneath Palazzo Valentini have been introduced to enrich students' understanding of ancient Rome. In 2019, the Scala Sancta, the holy stairs believed to be the steps Christ ascended on his way to the trial before his crucifixion, were briefly revealed for the first time in almost 300 years due to a restoration project. This resulted in adapting the program's planned site visit to the Sancta Sanctorum, a medieval papal chapel, to include an optional climbing of the exposed marble stairs that lead to the chapel on our

knees, similar to what medieval pilgrims did centuries before – a tradition that has continued to the contemporary period. In 2025, the program again adapted to incorporate a discussion of the special Jubilee Year with the inclusion of a pilgrimage to the “Seven Churches”; these visits, through the holy doors of Rome’s seven most important basilicas that are only opened every twenty-five years, will follow a tradition dating from the sixteenth century that remains a part of contemporary Jubilee celebrations.

In tandem with this commitment to improvement, the course encourages critical reflection to connect academic content with students’ lived experience. Students analyze primary texts, such as the second-century *Letter of the Smyrneans*, to contextualize religious diversity, persecution, and tolerance in the early Christian period. During the visit to the Jewish Ghetto, that discussion is extended to encompass the social, economic, architectural, and psychological impact of the Ghetto on the Jewish community in Rome from its foundation in the sixteenth century to its abolition in the nineteenth century. Our class discussions and our site visits not only introduce students to the often-fraught relationship between the Christians and Jews of Rome, but also offer a direct opportunity to discuss Jewish religious practices, learn about ritual objects, and understand the unique design and layout of synagogue architecture. Our day culminates with a group dinner at a kosher restaurant in the neighborhood that exposes students to the traditional Jewish recipes and culinary practices passed down through generations in Rome, thus enriching their understanding of the city’s diverse cultural landscape. The final instruction in Rome, focused on St. Ignatius of Loyola and the development of the Jesuit Order, introduces students to Ignatian spirituality and the Jesuit educational framework that has helped to shape LMU. A seventh site visit essay expands on this content to challenge students to consider how their experiences abroad inform their perspectives on faith, culture, and their undergraduate education at LMU.

Inclusive design makes the course accessible to students of all backgrounds, regardless of financial need, major, or level of study. The program is widely publicized across campus and to targeted groups such as LMU’s First-to-Go and Honors programs. A competitive application process, including faculty recommendations, student essays, and interviews, promotes both diversity and academic excellence. By offering a condensed summer travel period, the program remains affordable while allowing students to pursue internships or other coursework during the rest of the summer. Activities during the winter break and spring semester provide a pre-departure framework that fosters more meaningful engagement with the course material during the time on-site in Italy.

Innovation and creativity shape the course’s development, allowing for novel approaches to experiential learning. Rome’s rich historical and cultural

landscape provides opportunities for creative adaptations to the curriculum. Changing assignments have provided the students with diverse ways to understand the contemporary context of Rome and its historic routes. For example, students have created 360-degree videos of site visits that have been integrated into other courses at LMU, extending their experiential learning to other classes. An assignment related to early modern pilgrim graffiti, revealed during the restoration of the Scala Santa, provided an opportunity to learn about *ex votos* and Italian paleography. In conjunction with a discussion of papal elections, student groups have mapped the historic papal *possesso*, the route that allowed the newly elected pope to take possession of the Lateran basilica. The integration of new technology, mapping techniques, and restoration discoveries offer diverse and engaging ways to learn about Rome in the past and in the present.

Christian Faith and Visual Culture in Rome embodies LMU's Study Abroad mission by providing a culturally immersive and academically rigorous experience that transforms students both personally and intellectually. Moreover, it has broken new ground at LMU by offering an engaged learning experience abroad for a core course in Faith and Reason and in how it facilitates student learning through a multi-disciplinary team-taught lens. Through direct engagement with Rome's sacred spaces, religious communities, and complex history, students develop greater global and intercultural competencies, multi-disciplinary learnings, and critical reflection. Upon returning to campus, they share their insights through presentations, site visit videos, and campus events – bringing their global experiences into dialogue with the broader LMU community. In doing so, they not only enrich their own education but also contribute to LMU's commitment to global citizenship.

List of Supplemental Materials

- Suppl. 1: [Course Syllabus](#)
- Suppl. 2: [Signature Assignment](#)
- Suppl. 3: [Itinerary](#)
- Suppl. 4: [Additional Sample Assignments](#)
- Suppl. 5: [Sample Student Work](#)
- Suppl. 6: [Student Blog Post](#)

Author Biography

Kirstin Noreen received her Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University in 1999. With a specialization in medieval art, she has recent publications on the Roman church of Sant'Urbano alla Caffarella, the ritual use of icons, and the revival of Early Christian and medieval art in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Marc Reeves, S.J., a Roman Catholic priest and a member of the Society of Jesus, earned his D.Min. from the Chicago Theological Union in 2015 and an S.T.L. from the Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, MA, in 2007. His scholarship focuses on liturgy and sacraments with applications in Practical Theology. His research and teaching draw on diverse interdisciplinary resources in liturgical and historical theology, as well as ritual studies and cultural anthropology.