

Missio Ad Gentes - All Roads lead *from* Rome!

May 2026, by Fr Michael Pui



There is an idiom that says "*all roads lead to Rome*". It is taken to mean that no matter what methods, paths, or approaches are used, the same result is achieved or a specific goal is reached. The idiom has its origin in the Roman Empire. At the height of the Empire, the Romans constructed a massive, highly advanced network of over 400,000 km of roads. These 'highways' fanned out across Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa to connect the farthest provinces directly to Rome, the capital of the Empire. At its symbolic heart is the **Milliarium Aureum** (Golden Milestone), a monument erected in the Roman Forum by Emperor Augustus in 20 BC, and all distances in the empire were measured from this single point, making it literally true that every major road started or ended in Rome.

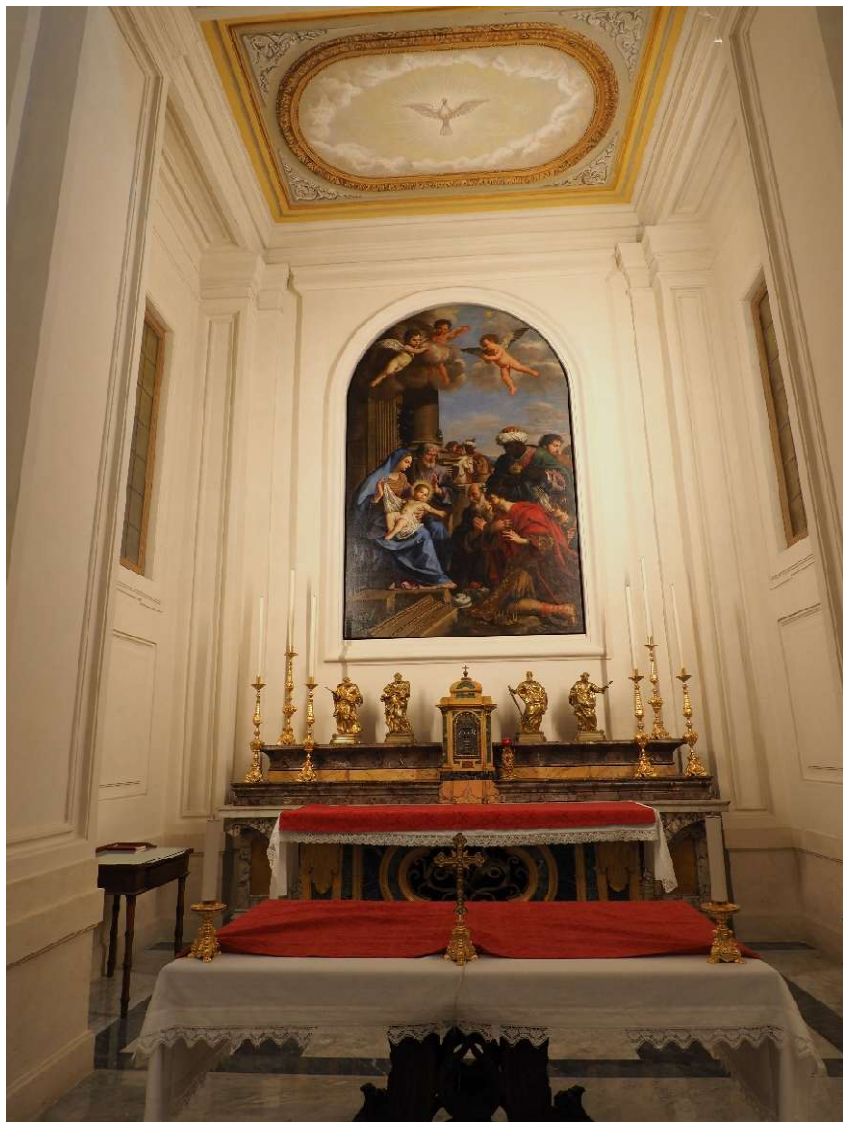


My recent visit to the headquarters of the Pontifical Mission Societies, the Palazzo di Propaganda Fide (now the Dicastery of the Evangelization of Peoples), led me to discover that there was a time when all roads, not so much led *to* Rome, but *from* Rome! When Pope Gregory XV established the Congregation of Propaganda Fide in 1622, on the feast of the Epiphany, he made a seismic shift in the way missionary endeavours were initiated and managed. Before that, missionary work was largely

controlled by the royal courts of Spain and Portugal. The establishment of the Congregation shifted the missionary efforts of the Church from a colonial patronage system to a more centralised and global effort. It shielded missionaries from secular political agendas. It also meant that missionaries would first come to Rome, to the Palazzo, before they went to faraway lands to sow the love of Christ. Evidence of this *ex urbe et orbi*, "from the city (of Rome) and to the world", can still be tangibly seen in the Palazzo, both within the walls and in the walls!

The Palazzo is an architectural marvel. Located near the Piazza di Spagna, and the famous tourist landmark, the “Spanish Steps”, it is one of the very few structures in Rome shaped by the city's two greatest 17th-century Baroque rivals, Gian Lorenzo Bernini and Francesco Borromini. The former designed the austere but elegant main façade overlooking the Piazza. The latter designed the side facade along via Propaganda, and also the chapel, the Cappella dei Re Magi (Chapel of the Magi), considered a jewel of Baroque interior design. Incidentally, Bernini was the designer of the Baldacchino in St Peter’s Basilica and the ‘embracing arms’ of the colonnades of St. Peter’s Square.

Imagine for a moment entering a chapel that, over 400 years ago, missionaries prayed and celebrated Mass before embarking on their mission. This outward ‘radiation of faith’ from Rome is captured in the painting of the ‘Adoration of the Magi’ (by



Giacinto Gimignani), located in the centre of the chapel. The Magi’s adoration is symbolic of the calling of the whole world to adore Christ because they were historically regarded as the first pagans to embrace Christianity. This aligns perfectly with the Congregation’s global missionary work to invite all into faith and the movement of missionaries *ex urbe et orbi*.

The chapel is also where the future Saint John Henry Newman was ordained a Catholic priest in 1847.



There are many other tangible treasures connected to the Church's *Missio Ad Gentes* within the walls of the Palazzo. To the left of the chapel sits an inconspicuous glass case. Contained within it is the religious habit of one of the great saints, St Thérèse of Lisieux, or St Therese of the Child Jesus. The 'Little Flower' never left her Carmelite monastery in France yet prayed daily for the missions, offering sacrifices and quiet suffering and daily activities to support missionaries and priests. Such profound spiritual dedication and commitment to evangelization defined her legacy. She believed that even the smallest, most hidden acts of love and sacrifice, when offered to God, held massive spiritual power to save souls worldwide. With such an ardent missionary heart, it is not surprising that, alongside with St Francis Xavier, she was declared her co-Patroness saint of the Missions by Pope Pius XI.

In 1909, Propaganda Fide set up its own printing press for the production of religious books in the languages of mission territories. Some of the products of the Polyglotta (*Tipografia Poliglotta*, or the Polyglot Printing Press) are on display in the Palazzo. The publications too bear witness to the movement of *ex urbe et orbi*, from the city (of Rome) to the world. These and many other treasures, including a fascinating collection documenting the global history of the Church's *Missio Ad Gentes* can be found in the Palazzo's *Museo Missionario*.

While the Palazzo is not fully accessible to tourists, there are guided tours by specialist agencies that will give you access if you book in advance. Therefore, whenever you get a chance to visit the Eternal City, do not just follow the footsteps of Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck in the movie, *Roman Holiday*, where they rode a Vespa across Rome's streets, ate gelato, and sought *la dolce vita*. Seek also the treasure hidden within the walls of some of its buildings, including the Palazzo di Propaganda Fide. Be inspired by how missionaries gave of their lives to take the love of Christ from the Eternal City to the world. Perhaps through them, you may discern how, from your visit to Rome, you too could be part of taking the faith to the world.