

# Apostle's grave may be beneath Rome church

January 4, 2007

Posted: 1/05/07

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**By Stacy Meichtry**

*Religion News Service*

VATICAN CITY (RNS)— Vatican officials have identified a marble sarcophagus embedded in the foundations of a Rome basilica as the coffin believed to contain the remains of the Apostle Paul.

The announcement marked the latest chapter of an excavation campaign under way since 2002, when Vatican archaeologists set out to locate the sarcophagus.

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A  
statue  
of the  
Apostle  
Paul by  
Adamo  
Tadolini  
stands  
in St.  
Peter's  
Square  
at the  
Vatican.  
(RNS  
photo  
by Rene  
Shaw)

The actual contents of the coffin, however, remain unknown, because it has not been fully unearthed. Instead, it remains buried beneath the main altar of the [Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls](#). Cardinal Andrea Cordero Lanza di Montezemolo, the archpriest of the basilica, said he had no reason to doubt the sarcophagus contained the apostle's remains, because the coffin appeared to have gone untouched since the 4th century, when an early Christian temple was erected over it.

The sarcophagus was discovered directly beneath a marble slab with the engraving "St. Paul apostle" in Latin.

Archaeologists burrowed through more than three feet of plaster, mortar and brick to reach the fourth century foundations of the basilica. That hole is covered with glass now, providing visitors with a tunnel view of the

sarcophagus' marble surface.

The project's goal, Vatican archaeologist Giorgio Filippi said, was to bring the sarcophagus to light for Christian pilgrims rather than probe the contents for proof of the apostle. But he said his research team was "studying the possibility" of exploring the coffin's interior.

According to the early Christian writer Eusebius of Caesarea, Paul was taken to Rome during the reign of Emperor Nero and beheaded.

Tradition holds Paul was buried with the Apostle Peter in the Christian catacombs along Rome's Via Appia. His remains later were moved to a site outside the city's ancient walls, where Roman Emperor Theodosius erected a church in the 4th century to honor the martyr.

That church burned down in 1823, and the current basilica was built above its foundations, with a new altar directly over the site of the tomb.

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