



Below: A close-up of Mary and Jesus after his crucifixion is from “Deposition,” by German sculptor Theodore William Achtermann. It is one of the highlights of visiting Rome’s Trinità dei Monti church, above the Spanish Steps.



PHOTOS BY SUZANNE MORPHET/Special to Stars and Stripes

The basilica of Rome’s massive church of San Giovanni in Laterano (St. John in Lateran) is spectacular, with frescoes from the 12th century. San Giovanni is considered “the mother of all churches of Rome and the world,” and the throne in the apse is still reserved for the pope.

# Divine inspiration

## Rome’s lesser-known churches pack a wallop of art and architecture

By SUZANNE MORPHET  
Special to Stars and Stripes

“Too bad it’s such a dead religion,” observed an American woman at the end of our three-hour tour of the Vatican Museums, the Sistine Chapel and St. Peter’s Basilica.

Squeezed, pushed and prodded past some of the best art and architecture in the world, we emerged at the other side of the Vatican feeling overwhelmed but also slightly ripped off. Maybe my colleague

was hoping to have a spiritual experience. I know I was. But the crowds at the Vatican pretty much eliminated any possibility of that.

Our guided tour that started an hour before the Vatican opened its doors to the general public was fascinating, but once those doors opened we were caught up in the tidal wave of humanity that surges through the Vatican every day, crescendoing until it reaches one room — the Sistine Chapel.

Each day 20,000 people

squeeze into that room, craning their necks to look at Michelangelo’s famously frescoed ceiling, while hoping not to get elbowed or pick-pocketed in the process.

The Roman Catholic religion might be in trouble elsewhere, but here in Rome you’d never know it.

And with the popularity of Pope Francis, you can bet that attendance will be even higher than usual this summer.

I had planned to go back to the Vatican on my final

day — a Sunday — to see the pope address visitors from his window overlooking St. Peter’s Square. But another experience changed my mind.

Late one afternoon, after a glass of wine with a couple of writing colleagues who live in Rome, we wandered into a church I’d never heard of and I was stunned by its beauty.

The ceiling of Sant’Ignazio di Loyola is a clever *trompe l’oeil*, appearing to be curved when it’s actually flat. White marble, gold trim and precious stones

adorn its massive interior. I’m no art expert, but this ceiling struck me as far lovelier than the Sistine Chapel’s. And there were only a couple of dozen other people inside, if that.

Clearly, Rome has lots more art than what’s enclosed by the Vatican’s walls. I decided to spend my final day visiting lesser-known churches with more elbow room. And there are plenty; according to one source, Rome has more than 900 churches.

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Huge statues of Christ and his apostles look down from atop San Giovanni in Laterano.

