

Church visits to mark 50 years of EU-Vatican diplomatic links

All EU member states are scheduled to visit a church in Rome that is historically linked to their country



The European Union (EU) has devised a unique way to celebrate 50 years of diplomatic ties with the Holy See -- each country will visit a church in Rome to which its people are historically associated. The program is named *Iter Europaeum* or the European Path. EU organizers said it aims "to enhance the deep links" between the union's 27 member states and the Holy See."

The walkway of European Churches in Rome" will begin on May 9, which is also Europe Day, an annual commemoration that celebrates "peace and unity" on the Old Continent. Latvia, Czechia and Hungary will visit their chosen churches in Rome on that day, an EU press release said. The program will continue for the next seven Sundays until June 27. On each Sunday, three or four nations are scheduled to visit their national churches in the Eternal City. Liturgical celebrations, concerts and guided tours will mark the Sunday programs.

The European Path is organized by EU Delegation to the Holy See, in collaboration with the EU member states' embassies accredited to the Holy See. Alexandra Valkenburg-Roelofs, the EU ambassador to the Holy See, described the program as "a European walkway of churches in Rome". "We were looking for a way to celebrate 50 years of diplomatic relations," she told Vatican News May 3. "And, we have found one," she added.

The first apostolic nuncio to the EU was accredited in 1970. With the exception of Denmark and

Estonia, Rome houses a church with strong ties to almost every EU-member state, the ambassador said. A plaque will be displayed in each church to explain why it was chosen and what the particular EU country's relationship is to the Holy See. Ambassador Valkenburg-Roelofs added that anyone can join the journey virtually at the website.

Cardinal Angelo de Donatis, vicar general of Rome, will celebrate Mass on the opening day in the Cathedral-Basilica Saint John Lateran. It will be followed by a visit to the nearby Basilica Santi Quattro Coronati, selected by Latvia. The journey includes a visit to the Basilica San Clemente, selected by Czechia as it contains the remains of the ninth century missionary in Great Moravia St. Cyril.

The day's program will conclude with a visit to Hungary's national church, the Basilica of St. Stephen. The unique church in the round-in-the-round is dedicated to both the first martyr as well as and St. Stephen I, the first king of Hungary. The organizers have prepared a schedule assigning dates and churches to some 25 EU member nations.

The program comes at a time when Vatican continues to express concern over policies of many EU member states on issues including homosexuality, increasing EU funding for abortion, stem cell research and same sex union. While Vatican stands opposed blessing same sex unions, the European Parliament has made it mandatory for all member states to recognize such unions.

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