

The smallest state in the world

Where is the smallest state in the world? It is in Rome, in Italy. Rome is the political, artistic and historical centre of Italy, but to millions of people all over the world there is something else very special about Rome. It contains Vatican City—the Vatican—the smallest state in the world.

Vatican City is the capital of the Roman Catholic Church. Vatican City sits on a hill, Vatican Hill, almost in the centre of Rome. It is on the bank of the Tiber River, which runs through Rome. Its main building is St Peter's Cathedral, with its magnificent square—St Peter's Square. Nowadays, millions of people visit the square hoping to see the Pope on one of his rare appearances, or just to feel uplifted by the majesty and significance of the holy place.

The site of St Peter's was not always a religious centre. The Roman Emperor Caligula, one of the first emperors to develop the site, had a circus built there. This was really an open stadium area where sports were played and chariot races were held.

The Emperor Nero made the area into an immense park where early followers of the Christian faith were put to death, many on crosses. Among the martyrs in the year 67 (nearly 2000 years ago) was a man called Peter, who was declared a saint—Saint Peter—after his death.

Three centuries later, when Christianity had become the major religion of the Roman Empire, a church was built on the site of St Peter's tomb. It was not a massive church like the cathedral that sits there today, but in a short while the church was surrounded by numerous small buildings and offices.

In the ninth century, Pope Leo IV had the whole area enclosed by a stone wall. This protected the holy area. It helped to separate the small state from the bloody political battles that often raged for the control of Rome.

Over the centuries, walls were added by other popes. The most recent was built in the first half of the seventeenth century. Parts of these walls survive in the stone wall that can be seen around St Peter's Square today.

Vatican City may be little in area but that does not mean it is of little importance.

