Rebuilding St. Peter’s Basilica

When Pope Martin V (1417-1431) returned the papacy to Rome after it had resided for seventy years in Avignon, he found the city in disrepair. Dedicated to restoring the temporal and spiritual supremacy of the Roman Church, he and his successors worked to bring the urban administration under the control of the papacy and engaged in urban planning and major public works projects. A key component of this goal was a new Vatican complex of offices and the papal residence. Most importantly, he wanted to restore the premiere pilgrimage site in the west and the seat of papal spiritual authority: St. Peter’s Basilica. Built by the emperor Constantine and consecrated in 326, St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome was in desperate need of repair. Pope Nicholas V (1447-1455) was the first to lay solid plans for the renovation of St. Peter’s. The church needed more space for pilgrims and for priests to officiate around the high altar. An avid collector of ancient texts, which later became the core of the Vatican library, Nicholas V’s plan for the structure was in accordance with classical architecture, much like the precepts that the humanist Leon Battista Alberti explained in his 1452 treatise On the Art of Building. The classical style of the renovated basilica would connect Rome to its ancient glory while asserting spiritual renewal and the temporal and spiritual authority of the Roman Church. In essence, the renovated basilica would restore Rome as caput mundi, or capital of the world, under the direction of the papacy and the Roman Church. The design was most likely modeled after two influential ancient buildings: the Pantheon (118-125 C.E.) and the Basilica of Maxentius and Constantine (310-320 C.E.). The renovated church was to be proportional and consistent with the ratios and forms of antiquity with a dome over the high altar and tomb of St. Peter. When Nicholas V died in 1455, his successors focused on other projects in the effort to renovate and rebuild the city of Rome. Work on St. Peter’s would come to the forefront once again, however, during the papacy of Julius II.

Ultimately, it would be the plans of Pope Julius II (1503-1513) that would form the new St. Peter’s. Instead of renovating the old church, Julius II declared the entire building structurally unsound. Working with the design by the architect Donato Bramante (1444-1514), the cornerstone for a new basilica was laid in 1506. The plan was based on the shape of the Greek cross, which had arms of equal length. Four smaller domes would top towers at each end with a larger dome over the high altar, as in Nicholas V’s plan. The main dome was to be 131 feet in diameter, a few feet shy of the dome of the Pantheon, which was 137 feet in diameter. Inside, the walls were molded and sculpted. This part of the design was accomplished through the rediscovery of poured concrete, a technique the ancient Romans knew but had not been prevalent through the Middle Ages. The walls were formed and cast on site and then treated with stucco or masonry, requiring a specialized workforce.

Construction of the new basilica progressed slowly. After Julius II died in 1513, followed by Bramante a year later in 1514, direction of the project fell into various hands. When
the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500-1558) sacked Rome in 1527 in retribution for papal participation in a plot against him, construction ceased until 1538. In 1546, Michelangelo (1475-1564) took over direction of the construction and design. Michelangelo’s plan maintained Bramante’s Greek cross enclosed by a square ambulatory with four smaller domes on the barrel vaults surrounding it. He also followed Bramante’s plan for the main dome, which included a classical colonnade and a drum for the dome, but he used paired columns instead of the single, evenly spaced columns of Bramante’s design. For the outward appearance of the dome, Michelangelo decided to show paired ribs leading to the lantern to symbolize the ascent of the spirit toward heaven. The main dome was completed in 1590. In all, construction of the new basilica took over 150 years from start to finish.