



# 2024 History Essay Contest

## Homeschool 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Winner

### Pompeii and Vatican City: The Classical and Renaissance Majesty of Italy

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As Giuseppe Verdi once said, “You may have the universe if I may have Italy.” If I could travel to any corner of the earth, I would go straight to Italy! Holding ancient temples and early churches, Italy has always been my dream destination. Italy is also packed with awe-inspiring landmarks, many of which were made by or visited by famous Roman figures, saints, classical composers, and artists. Contemplating all the grandeur of Italy, Pompeii, the city entombed by ash by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D, and the Vatican, where the Pope sits on the chair of St. Peter amid the splendor of the Sistine Chapel and St. Peter’s Basilica, exemplify the two pinnacles of Italian civilization: the Classical period and the Renaissance.

Why would I want to visit a city destroyed by a volcanic eruption? What’s so amazing about a city covered in ash? As the ash rained down upon the unsuspecting inhabitants of Pompeii while they went about their daily business, the superheated gas carbonized all organic material in its path and smoldering rocks encased the city and preserved everything from loaves of bread to frightened mothers cradling their children. I will be able to walk through the streets of Pompeii and see the city as a Roman would have. The eruption preserved the Temple of Apollo and the Amphitheater, but also the *tabernae*,

with their pots of fish stew and fresh-baked bread waiting for passersby to stop in for a bite to eat, making a real-world tableau for archeologists (as well as myself) to gape at and study. I can picture myself, 2000 years ago, working at my family's *Thermopolium*, an ancient Roman street food stand recently discovered during excavations of Pompeii, or as a painter on the beautiful frescos displayed in the houses of wealthy residents. On my break, I could have glanced up at the sky and watched the mountain erupt in gargantuan bursts of turbulent lava and the column of smoke billowing out like "a fearful black cloud ... rent by forked and quivering bursts of flame, ... [which] parted to reveal great tongues of fire, like flashes of lightning magnified in size" (Pliny the Younger). Walking through the streets of Pompeii today, I, as a student of Roman history, would see the figures I study as no longer simply words on a page, but rather living people with families, homes, and lives like mine.

While classical history and languages fascinate me, I also deeply love religion and Renaissance art and music, which are embodied in Vatican City. St. Peter's Basilica, wherein rest the relics of St. Peter, the first Pope, the rock upon which Jesus built his church, elevates my heart to contemplate the mysteries of Christ and his Church. Walking in the catacombs underneath the Basilica, I will be able to touch the words written on the rock: "Pétros eni" (Peter is here) and pray with the apostle who loved Jesus so much that he was crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to die in the same way as his Lord.

After venerating the tomb of St. Peter, I would walk directly to the Sistine Chapel, located in the Apostolic Palace, the Pope's residence in the Vatican. The chapel's amazing renaissance art, mostly painted by Michelangelo, would be the most magnificent sight I could ever see. I would gaze upon God the Father reaching out toward Adam in *The Creation of Adam*. Opposite this intimate gesture of love, I would see God's gesture of remedial love, casting Adam and Eve out of the garden. Turning to find the awesome fresco of the Last Judgment, I would meditate on the saints and martyrs displayed with the instruments of their torture and death, like St. Bartholomew, holding his flayed skin.

All of Italy is an amazing place to visit, but the first two destinations on my bucket list would be Pompeii and Vatican City. Roman history, my favorite subject, is so fascinating that I cannot wait to go to

these two historical sites! Italy not only has beautiful landscapes, but also has a layered story of civilization. First, there are ancient ruins from the Roman Empire, which the church transformed into beautiful cathedrals. Finally, in the Renaissance, skilled artists decorated and constructed buildings in the classical design. My two destinations are in different layers: Pompeii from the ancient layer of Rome, and the Vatican from the Renaissance (built over earlier with church buildings and catacombs). I could go to these two places in a very short time, since Italy is not large and my two destinations are near each other, but I would rather take longer to look at them more in depth. For me, no country can rival Italy in fascinating man-made structures, gorgeous landscapes, or depth of history.

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