Archeologists to explore contents of St Paul's tomb

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Last week Pope Benedict XVI approved plans to examine the interior of an ancient stone coffin, which Vatican archeologists positively identified as that of St. Paul less than two years ago, reported *Kath.net*.

The coffin is beneath the main altar of the Basilica of St. Paul outside the Walls. The position of the stone coffin has not been altered since the year 390 AD.

Archeologists are expected to remove a plug, with which the coffin had been sealed in antiquity, and use an endoscopic probe to gather images of the contents.

The researchers are unsure about what they will find in the tomb since documentary evidence indicates that St. Paul's remains were removed from the original burial site in AD 258 to another part of Rome. They were then moved back to the site of the basilica when it was built over the original church in the late fourth century.

The tomb was discovered during excavations in 2002 and 2003, which were launched after thousands of pilgrims visiting the basilica during the Jubilee Year of 2000 asked about the location of the apostle's tomb, reported *WorldNetDaily.com*.

The sarcophagus was found during the second excavation under the basilica's main altar, behind a 4th-century marble plaque that bears the inscription, "Apostle Paul, martyr."

The tomb measures about eight feet long, four feet wide and three feet high. Since the discovery, archaeologists have cleared away centuries of debris and plaster that surrounded the tomb. A thick glass panel was put into the floor so visitors can look down to the tomb.

Archeologists tried to X-ray the sarcophagus when it was first found but the stone was too thick.

The decision to further explore the contents of the tomb was made with the upcoming Year of St. Paul in mind.