



ROME PILGRIMAGE 2024

DAY ONE/TWO

We flew in from Bristol with two of our little company and into a speedy taxi to the centre. Our welcome at the Venerabile by Fr Stephen led us to a capacious suite behind ornate doors, a warm shower, time to unpack and be down for Mass at 6.30.

Then off to Massimo's wine bar (L'Angolo Divino) for a glass of his finest followed by a simple meal at the Ai Balestrari.

It is always a joy to catch up with Fr Stephen. I have known him and his family since he was a boy at school and I was his chaplain nearly forty years ago. Always the brightest, he is a quiet and unassuming master of communication and education while having a remarkable gift for pastoral insight and spiritual direction. It is partly his (and his wonderful late mother Elizabeth's) fault that I am a Catholic. So I owe him much.

The evening was a long catch up, a review of the state of the Church and some positive discussion about the possible ways forward.

We retired by 11 and, true to form, I was taking anti migraine meds at 4am. They worked and I was ready to go by 6am.

Our day, after office and exercise began by meeting in the Piazza Navona, by the Fountain of the four rivers. It was swathed in scaffolding – a pattern that was to dog the day as it appeared that this was true of many of the holy sites we had planned to visit. The preparations for the Jubilee 2025, it transpires, have left most of Rome swathed in scaffolds and high grade decorated mesh.

From the Piazza, the site of a Roman Imperial racetrack, up along to the secluded site of St Augustine's. We always start here because, tucked away in the corner is the Caravaggio of 'Madonna of the Pilgrims'. There, in a dark and none too clean doorway in the poor quarter of town is a beautiful dark haired, comely REAL woman, holding a naked toddler Christ in her arms, resting across her ample hip. The Child is blessing two kneeling pilgrims, an old lady and a young man of about thirty. Mother and Son? Their

clothes are shabby and their bare feet are filthy from the journey. In the distance a dimly lit fountain plays. But why we start here is because of , not only the powerful reality of Our Lady and the Christ, a stark contrast to the anaemic washed out blonde of earlier iconography and trad ugly baby, but because of the look on the faces of the kneeling pilgrims.

The light reveals a joy and wonder and unalloyed love and adoration. It is this that is the key to our pilgrim journey. If we can get the beauty of those faces into our hearts then we have begun to pilgrimage. That is our aim and our end, to kneel in adoration and receive the blessing of the Child in the arms of Mary.

There are many things here but we must concentrate on just a few. Returning to the main door there is a shrine to Our Lady, littered with petitions. It is famous for answering the prayers of those wanting to have children. Just before I left Bodmin, a holiday visitor to the Mass told me that we had prayed for her infertile daughter and son in law there this time last year and that they now had a child. It was an encouraging start. We have sought Our Lady's help there many times and seldom been disappointed.

From there we paused to look at the columnar Raphael of Isaiah the Prophet reflecting on how he was then just one of many jobbing painters before fame lifted him into the artistic stratosphere.

Above the glorious High Altar is a tiny ikon of Madonna and Child. It is a precious relic of the great Christian Empire of Byzantium/Constantinople which, lacking the support of the divided West, fell to the persistent brutal assaults of militant Islam in 1453. It is a reminder of a high water mark of the long remorseless push of Islam into Europe which had been thwarted at Poitiers, reversed in Spain, beaten back at the gates of Vienna and now was achieving by immigration into an apostate West, what centuries of warfare had failed to achieve.

To the left of this tiny gem is the chapel of St Monica. St Monica famously reminded her son, Augustine , that she was not concerned with where she would be buried but only that her soul be prayed for regularly at the altar of the sacrifice of the Mass.

Here, we always stop and ask for her prayers for those of our family and friends who have lapsed – recalling her great prayer work on her husband and son.

Onward and round the corner into St Louis of the French. This baroque and totally OTT masterpiece is also swathed in scaffold and mesh – the Caravaggios of St Mathew now only visible on posters. The famous triptych begins with the Lord pointing to Matthew whose hands are, at once, one on the money on the table and one pointing to himself with the questioning look – ‘You can't mean me.’

The choice – Materialism or Messiah – is stark.

The inner turmoil gives way to the tranquillity of the second image. Matthew receives the angel – borne, spirit inspired, word that will become his Gospel.....

And then the stark horror of his martyrdom as he lies defenceless before the demonically gurning executioner, red hot with the fury of the enemy in the face of the witness to Christ. It is both a reminder of the depths to which fallen man can tumble along with the cost of faithfulness to Christ.

The memorial to Joan of Arc is shrouded- 'I am not afraid. I was born for this.' Also the theatrical monument to St Louis himself who died of swamp fever in the desert disaster of one of the many failed crusades. Among Louis' great achievements was the novelty that a man was innocent until proved guilty instead of the other way round.

The altar dedicated to the elderly priest victim of a recent Muslim fanatic is also a victim of the ubiquitous mesh. But we remember the servants of the Law here and the victims of terror.

Here again we are reminded of the desperate loss of Eastern Christendom, the cost of martyrdom and the burgeoning power of the anti-Christian forces. It is a good place to pray for the persecuted church of our time.

From here we mosey down behind the Pantheon, a wonderful building but, for me, utterly lacking in any sense of the numinous. Heaving with tourists it seems to still be a place of the original PAN THEON – the mustering of the old pagan gods of Rome.

To St Eustachio's –

Here we are treated to an account of the extraordinary life of the saint. The church has its patronal this month and, in previous years the piazza was filled with a town band, playing everything from, ' Guide me o thou great redeemer' to ' Dancing Queen.' While the drum majorettes twirl their batons and march up and down in leggy costumed splendour. After an hour the procession of the relic emerges and we set off, singing hymns, around the parish boundary. At every junction the old priest stops the parade and gives a two minute homily to the passing crowds. This climaxes with a full evangelical preachment on the steps of the Pantheon before returning to St Eustachio's for the Feast Day Mass. This is vibrant popular piety at its public best and a sign of what is possible even for the ordinary parish church.

On a normal day the porch of the church is filled with poor people getting a free lunch. The inevitable mixture of simple faith and good works is set before our eyes here.

Each church becomes a place where we stop to pray for those who have asked for our prayers – and this year there is a record number. I have travelled with four closely typed pages and still they continue to come in via emails.

We turn in, past Bernini's elephant, with its absurd howdah full of obelisk, to Santa Maria Sopra Minerva. The church, like so many, built on a previous pagan site,

reclaiming the earth for the Lord and transforming the most primitive godward tendencies of Man into a place that recognises the full revelation of God in Christ and the potential for the Apotheosis of Man into the divine.

Scaffolding obtains here too but we can get to the high altar resting place of St Catherine of Siena and pray with her and leave our prayer requests on her tomb. The great Lippi Christmas card mural is also visible (the angelic band with their instruments , dancing in the skies above Bethlehem and the new born king.)

The Rosary Chapel is open. We pray decades there for the dead (Mystery of the Resurrection) and for the renewal and the re-energising of the mission of the Church (Pentecost). We conclude with a Salve Regina. At the end of which an angry jobsworth caretaker chap appears and berates us for praying in the chapel. I smile and thank him for the privilege. It's always more annoying to be nice.

The pilgrims are then led to the great Palace of the Doria Pamphili, just past the site of St Paul's house arrest home in the Via Lata, for an immersion in the most wonderful collection of culture outside the Vatican Museums.

We will reconvene at 4pm at the beautiful absurdity of the Turtle fountain on the borders of the Jewish Ghetto.

The Ghetto was imposed by Pius V and herded the Jews into what was a dank and marshy riverside dump. It now boasts the Great Synagogue of Rome which was visited by Pope St John Paul II where he, who had witnessed first hand the curse of anti-Semitism, spoke of Jews as 'our elder brothers in the Faith.' Here I always pause to pray for Jewry and the many friends in my old parish, not least the Rabbi.

Over the bridge across Tiber Island, the Church and Hospital of St Bartholomew, whose remains are there. Praying for the Anglican parish church in Lostwithiel (St Barts) and her people. Then into Trastevere (= across the Tiber) district. Once working class it is now highly fashionable and the 'go to' place for the young. Our goal is S Cecilia's. Here the martyr lived and died. Her house is under the church. Prayers here for our musicians. Also for Sr Rosario who always prepared the altar for me and who, I learn, has just died. We pray in the beautiful crypt chapel beneath the tomb.

Back through the winding streets to the large piazza and great Basilica of St Maria in Trastevere. This is one of the most beautiful churches in Christendom. The mosaics are breathtaking. As planned we are in time for the 5.30 Mass sensitively celebrated by a young African priest.

I have marked out, on the list of prayer requests, who will be prayed for where and St Maria is such a gift of a place to pray.

At the end of Mass we all go our separate ways and we end up at Vecchia for a Cacio e Pepe, the simplest dish but one of the most delicious and testing to get right.

I have had a sneaky glance in the English bookshop window and will return another day. As we cross the Ponte Sisto homewards we meet Sergio, the brilliant guitar player who has the Piazza Trilussa alive with hundreds of dancing tourists each night after 10pm. We promise to hobble down another night but not tonight! Sleep calls and another early morning and long day.

Fr Robbie Low