



ROME PILGRIMAGE 2024

DAY THREE

Today is a special day for me as we begin with Mass in San Clemente, my favourite Rome church. We have been coming here for twenty years and got to know the Sister in admin, Alessandra the manager of the shop and Sacristy and, lately, the Abbot.

St Clement is just across the road from that monument to human depravity, the Colosseum. Cared for by the Irish Dominicans since the 12th Century, it was discovered, by a keen 19th century archaeologist priest, to have several layers of previous church beneath. These conclude in a Mithraic Temple – a cult much beloved of Roman soldiery whose initiation rites involved the slaughter of a bull followed by great dining and copious grog. A religion for men!

Normally I would celebrate in the Rosary chapel which looks out to the whole church but a few years ago the Abbot came along to see this curious convert priest and hear us sing the Mass and preach. He now turns up to assist me in the Sacristy and leads me to the High Altar with my pilgrims in the great marble choir, inches from where the body of St Clement lies. Words cannot describe the sense of humbling privilege to be able to offer Mass over the tomb of my beloved patron Clement. The Mass is for the Holy Name of Mary, the readings of the hillside retreat of Our Lady and the Baptist leaping in his mother's womb at the arrival of the child Jesus in utero. By this stage there was a whole bank of young American tourists sitting listening as I preached on the sanctity of life.

We exchanged presents with Alessandra and she gave me a big hug and asked after my health. She always assures me that I will be back next year – please God.

This is a great place to pray and, when we have done the archaeology, that is just what we do. The church also contains relics of St Cyril & St Methodius who evangelised the Slavs and who brought the remains of the fourth Pope, S. Clement, back from where they lay, the place of his martyrdom on the Black Sea coast. So it is a great opportunity to pray for the healing of Christendom, East and West, whose fracture has given so many victories to the enemy. The current war being a case in point.

Quatro Coronati is sadly closed for their community retreat so it is straight up the hill to the glorious immensity of the Pope's Church, St John Lateran. Here, amongst all the magnificence, the place where the Emperor Constantine built the first Church in Rome after his victorious entry after the triumph at the Milvian Bridge and his vision of the Cross, is a door leading to the beautiful cloister and a chance to pray the Rosary together.

Back down the hill and a sharp left back up another incline to a family run café, five home cooked dishes on the hot table, and a great lunch. Mama is reduced to tears by the fact that we have brought her some Cornish chocolate with a picture of our hometown on the wrapping.

Suitably fortified we began the long walk back to our 'digs' along the length of the ruins of Ancient Rome, then ascending to view the whole magnificence from the vantage point of the Capitoline. The Forum, the Senate, the Arch of Titus, right down to the Colosseum and up to St Sebastian's, open once a week for us to hear the nuns sing Vespers.

We descended from Ara Coeli and wended homeward, pausing to enjoy the glories of the Gesu, Ignatius' church with its fabulous trompe l'oeil ceiling – the righteous ascending heavenward toward the Holy Name while the rebels fall backward into the abyss.

Rested, washed and revived, we headed out to Massimo's for a long evening of reminiscence and to meet new friends.

I have noticed that, for all the prayer work that has gone in, the list is being constantly augmented by fresh requests via email. This is, at once, challenging and encouraging. A new day will dawn with new opportunities for bringing the needs of the world to the throne of grace and mercy and we are privileged to be those bearers of hope.

Fr Robbie Low