

PILGRIMAGE TO ROME - September 2026

Fr Robbie Low's Diary

A pilgrimage is inevitably a journey to another place. That place has a special resonance, an otherness, a holiness – places of pilgrimage are places where the veil between earth and heaven is unusually thin. Or, it may be that there are many more familiar places where that thinness prevails but we are too busy to notice or give the time to enquire.

Pilgrimage requires a leaving behind of the familiar and a degree of abandonment to providence.

We hope, by arrival at that place, we will somehow encounter a glimpse of that forgotten country to which we truly belong and, if we are ever in listening mode, which calls us home.

But it is all of that and more for the journey itself is not incidental but rather part of both the way and also the destination. It achieves this, in its apparent passivity, by the challenges it throws up physically as well as spiritually, by the at once beautiful and unfamiliar terrain which it obliges us to pass through and by the strangers and fellow pilgrims we encounter, both those with whom we set out and those whose path we share for a few hours or a day. Not least in the sharing of our stories as the Ghost of God, whom we have surely invited to help us discern, teases out our testimony, delves deep into those overcrowded, long abandoned banks of memory and reveals to us the long and often winding path by which we have come and the outline of the path of years that yet remains of this mortal journey.

Arriving is significant but the being both alone with God and together with others on the way is critical.

Amongst the others we will have invited, if we have had the spiritual commonsense, will be our guardian angel. He will faithfully be there, true, but common courtesy and an awareness of the fact that we ought to include his ministry especially at such a time of both potential triumph and otherwise unguarded vulnerability, should inform our guest list.

We might also rally our saintly patrons to our aid as well as the prayers of those who love us on earth for the journey is both one of aloneness and of joyful company.

But we also travel, if we are serious players, with the prayers and intentions of those we leave, temporarily, behind and all those who have asked for our prayers. For our intention, as followers of Christ, is not simply an advancement of our own interests in Heaven, - but the welfare and salvation of souls. We never come to the altar, be it the church or mountaintop, without our precious cargo of these prayers.

Amongst our essentials to pack must be a notebook and a pen, that nothing may be lost of what is revealed en route, and a ready means of access to the Word of God.

We pray the prayers of 'setting out' and for protection. We pray for an openness to God and the gift of reflection and discernment. And then we hit the road.

ROME 2026

There is little walking involved on this annual pilgrimage but simply round the city's closely packed and myriad holy sites. Nor are there sudden and great vistas of beautiful landscapes. No weariness or putting up of the temporary shelter of tents. We drive and fly and work out of an apartment within the very centre of the Eternal City. We take with us the Word, the Prayers of many and the simple companionship of the Way.

This year the journey thence was amazingly smooth. We overnighted at some dear friends, fellow converts and strong 'pray-ers' who live near the airport, from whom we received both bodily sustenance and spiritual bounty and prayers of blessing on our enterprise. They are about to embark on the Camino !

The airport, while thousands were locked in air traffic control chaos the previous day, saw us safely boarded, smoothly flown and landed on time. The taxi touched 110kph on the road to Rome weaving in and out of the slower vehicles while the driver told us stories, often necessarily illustrated by both hands leaving the wheel. Exhilarating.

A brief walk across the Campo di Fiore – the field of flowers – once the great fruit and veg market but now reduced to a remnant three Italian

stalls, the rest now given over to Asian management of souvenir shirts, pasta, limoncello, junk.

The apartment unchanged, the air con swiftly on against a heat and closeness that had sucked the oxygen out of the air, unpacked, showered and with that tiredness that brings with it a warm sense of a day well done.

Prayers of thanksgiving given. Family notified. We set out round the corner to our old friend's wine bar for a late supper and welcome 'home'. It turns out that Massimo is off today but his young manager gives us greetings worthy of his patron and our favourite table in the corner. Signor Antonelli's Umbrian Sagrantino is excavated from the cellar and, instead of the fatted calf, I order 'Gricia' pasta and Sara a Tuna speciality of their tiny kitchen.

You may not think this a very spiritual start but it is all part of the graciousness of God in laying the secure foundations for our common enterprise. We are 'plumbed in' and, when deeply slept, ready for the morning round.

6am A lie-in. We plan the prayer round and after office and daily write up, we set sail for coffee and buns at Angelo's – the little old-fashioned bar where we have been going for over 20 years. It is shut and the old man at the leather shop opposite explains that Angelo, who is now 88, has rather 'lost it'. We may be lucky to see him again. Breakfast will not be the same now that our friend has gone. Later in the week we will see his daughters running the bar and catch up with news that Angelo is well and well retired.

We use another 'caffeine station' nearby that day and then it's off, by different routes, different churches, with lists of all those who have entrusted us their intentions. I have a substantial parish list. Sara has her own huge list.

The weather forecast is not good. Rain from 2pm. Suddenly all bets are off. The mighty rumble of thunder, the anger of the pagan gods, the angels moving their furniture or whatever mythology you prefer, Roman rain, when the heat breaks, is Biblical. Within a minute the deluge is upon us. The streets are not Rome but Venice. We are marooned on islands of street café umbrella stands as the torrent roars along the

Teatro and into Paradise Alley. The speed and ferocity of even this brief and passing deluge are an eloquent reminder that it is no good leaving the building of salvation's ark to the last minute. You'd be lucky to catch a piece of passing driftwood.

After some twenty minutes it reduces its force to an English 'heavy downpour' and, poncho- defended to the knees (which will soon be busy kneeling), we shoot across the Piazza to our favourite prayer haunts – Sara to the Spanish Church, beautifully kept and with a depth of inviting silence – me to St Augustine's – currently wreathed in scaffolding and clanging to restorers tools but still containing the Caravaggio 'Our Lady of the Pilgrims', my ever starting point, the ikon snatched from the fall of Constantinople to the Muslim hordes in 1453 and a reminder of this ancient war's recrudescence. And the tomb of St Monica – the place where we always pray for the lapsed.

The Lapsed are always a special burden on my heart because they are, for the most part friends and family who have drifted or jumped ship under cultural pressure, 'grown out of Sunday School simplicity' and failed to encounter the Faith in an adult catechism or rejected God's love consciously or been unable to square that love with some trauma of their own lives or a million other reasons. Whatever.....they have abandoned the Pilgrim Way and both we and they are the poorer for their leaving.

All I can now do is pray, engage where I can and love them in a way that, in spite of my sins and failings, may yet speak to them of He who is the Way, the Truth and the Life and pray again that someone may yet rekindle on the altar of their hearts the fire of love for God.

In human terms it is probably my most important prayer of the week and emotionally the most costly. Grace is never cheap and love will always bear the burden of that pain.

Having stopped at the Caravaggio and prayed for the look of adoration on the kneeling couple's faces, to be translated into my heart, I moved to St Monica, access through the site granted by a kindly builder. The small green sarcophagus, the mortal remains of she whose heart would not let her lapsed family go, is my focus as I ask for her prayers who knows above all the suffering of our hearts at the loss of the lapsed and our glorious celebration at each one who returns.

Holy Monica pray for them.

There is also in St Augustine's, a statue of Our Lady where people come to pray for the gift of children, for those who are pregnant, for those who have had trouble or loss. I have a short list of those asking for prayers and a longer list of those, over the year, who have received Our Lady's help and, against all odds, come to know the joy of motherhood.

We are, at this particular moment, all invoking Our Lady's prayers to defeat the 'Murder Bill' (assisted dying is a slippery euphemism) hoping to stop a further descent into the materialist culture of death which has consumed already over ten million unborn and now seeks to cull the elderly, the frail and the disturbed.

Lists...

We all have prayer lists, I guess. The point of a list is as an aide memoire. I make a list for my confession, for example, so that I don't conveniently forget the more embarrassing and humiliating bits. But lists, of themselves are more of a pointer to the greater reality of the person for whom one is praying. They cannot, of themselves, contain the full picture. Lists are two dimensional. Prayer is at least three dimensional and effectively four dimensional.

This is also why prayer is work and one can reasonably expect it to be as tiring as digging a trench and emotionally more so, the more one is engaged. I always recall being warned by Fr Thaddeus, when first ordained, that if I was celebrating Mass properly I would start Sunday on my knees in prayer and end it on my knees in exhaustion. He was not wrong.

So, although we are not hiking miles across difficult terrain here, we are hard at work and it is never boring.

The background is, of course, personal. We Pilgrimage to discern God's will for the next steps on the journey but the foreground is awash with other needy souls and their companionship and the sacred trust which they place in you to offer their most important and often private intentions.

The long morning in St Augustine's is augmented by prayers for discernment of vocations for two young friends from my HCPT days and

guidance for two old friends seeking to prepare for the 'home strait' and knowing what the Lord would have them do in the years that remain. Also for an evangelist colleague whose future is ever uncertain but whose company and faith in the Lord is always exhilarating and inspirational.

I moved on to the exquisite- baroque- totally over the top - St Louis of the French, the Caravaggio triptych of St Matthew - call - gospel writing – brutal martyrdom. St. Louis, it may be recalled, died on the eighth crusade trying to curb the ever expanding empire of Islam, defeated by dysentery and death.

Herein is also the ghost of Joan of Arc and her heroic cry, 'I am not afraid. I was born for this.'

It always sends a shiver down my spine when I recall how timid most of us are in proclaiming Christ. Joan's words are a clarion call to courage – to 'man-up' or, in her case, 'woman up' and start getting serious about the battle for the hearts, minds and eternal prospects of our children and our society. There is no political solution to the state or our State, only a divine one. Prayers for the political life, leadership and representation here.

From thence just across the piazza that houses my unfavourite church, the Pantheon – an amazing building that seems yet to house the deep rumblings of pagan regression. There is S. Maria sopra Minerva and the relics of St Catherine of Siena – another great female saint who instructed the Pope to 'man up' leave the French orchestrated and dominated exile in Avignon and get back to HQ – Rome – and do his job. A good place to give thanks for the strong and faithful and loving women in our lives.

I returned to the apartment only to be joined by Sara minutes later with the news that her handbag had been stolen from her rucksack – money, bank cards, phone, flat keys, codes, the lot. The restaurant manager in the market told her her bag was open and thus she discovered her loss. St Anthony was invoked . While Sara rang the banks to block everything I rang her phone again and again determined to have a word with the thief. An hour later, all precautions taken we sat down. I would ring again.....and someone answered !!!! Not the thief but a tour cart guide. The thief had thrown the bag into one of their carts. We rushed

across to the office near the Pantheon. Bag, phone, keys, bank cards, hairbrush all there. All that was missing was a 20 euro note – Sara rarely carries much cash. Apparently most thefts are addicts. Cash is the key. The rest takes too much organisation. We were amazed, grateful, happy as you can imagine. The restaurant manager was astounded. St Antony had triumphed again. We prayed for the thief.

The afternoon was given over to reading and a two hour siesta which enables the rest of the day to go on until 10ish.

That evening we were scheduled to meet with a friend of some forty years standing, much younger than us, who has been asked to do an important ministry in the Church. Both he and his beloved mother had played a significant part in my final conversion to Rome. We had an evening of quiet celebration, prayer and joyful reminiscence, looking back over the ways in which the Lord, in His mercy, had led us onward and seeking His wisdom for the road ahead.

The weather obliged with another torrential blessing but mercifully our chosen café was but a short hop for both of us.

The Friday started early and ‘booted and prayed in’ we set sail for my favourite church, S. Clemente, and my annual treat, courtesy of the Prior and our twenty odd year friendship with the archaeology and shop manager, Allesandra, of celebrating at the High Altar.

S. Clemente is currently wreathed in scaffold and drapes as a massive cleaning process continues until mid 2027. It is, when revealed, a place of startling beauty and fabulous mosaic. The church itself sits on the site of three previous churches, revealed in the 19th century by a keen priest-archaeologist, which in turn sits above the original Temple of Mithras – a cult beloved of Roman soldiery. All this is now available to visit. But the key is that under the High Altar rests the relics of the fourth Pope, Clement, of whom there is mention in St. Paul and one of whose letters still remains for us to read. Clement was enslaved and eventually martyred in the Black Sea, drowned with an anchor round his neck.

His sacred remains were brought back to Rome centuries later by the brothers Saints Cyril and Methodius (c9th), the Apostles to the Slavs, later made Patrons of Europe by Pope St John Paul II. St Cyril is buried

in S. Clemente and is sign of the needful union of Eastern and Western Christendom. It is a good place to pray for the unity of the church.

From thence, via a quick shot of Caffeine and a belated breakfast bun, we ascended to the church of St Gregory the Great. Here, in the neighbouring chapel, cared for by the Missionaries of Charity (Mother Teresa) is the famous marble table from which Gregory regularly fed the poor.

The church itself houses the tiny chapel where he used to pray and the carved stone seat that was his little 'cathedra'. Here we recall his decisive role in sending the mission to our land via Augustine of Canterbury and our longing for its reconversion.

I always like to spend a goodly time there because, even one and a half millennia on, the place is resonant with his presence and the call to evangelise.

In all these places, I find, the Lord lifts from the simple piece of paper, with my 'list', the people He wants me to pray for there and more besides. It seems to become so evident and flow so naturally than it ever does at home.

For a year now I have been trying to discern a word given me here on my last visit. Is it something that the Lord wants me to do or is it my imagination or, worse, my vanity deceiving me. I am directed to a Sister whose ministry is clearly one of welcome. I am to ask her to pray for me and then, being told nothing of the matter in question, ask which it is – YES or NO?

She takes this strange request in her stride and prays for me by the Table of St Gregory. At the end of her prayers, I ask her to tell me if she has discerned the answer. She smiles and makes a couple of encouraging remarks about the nature of my priesthood in Christ and Christ's priesthood in me that the answer, to whatever my secret question was, is 'YES'.

I am aware that this will take a great deal of work, convincing the sceptical and dealing with some internal opposition. But at least it is now

clear and I thank God for it and ask His aid in making it happen and His strength in helping me overcome and win round any serious opposition.

From the great church on the hill we descend back towards S. Clemente but stop short, as usual, at the little family café on the way down. We have been coming here for years after the Mass as they always have a selection of hot home-made lunches ready. Having got to know them, it is one of the places, like Angelo's, where we disburse the bounty of our gifts – Cornish chocolates, Cornish Tea Towels or Cornish calendar.

The MAMMA here always prefers the chocolate and this year is no exception. Lunch, for us this time, is a Lasagne and an Artichoke pasta which we share. Leg weary and full, we catch the 87 bus back to the apartment. It is utterly rammed and we are glad to see the Colosseum stop where 90% of the human ballast disembarks and we get a seat.

Sara noticed something odd as we passed the tree lined edge of the park just before that great centre of human slaughter. A large African man bent down one of the lower branches of a large tree and placed a large bag in it before allowing it to take its place again with its now hidden cargo. Whatever it contained this was clearly a drop-box for criminal activity.

The other thing I noticed on my fellow passengers, depressingly, was the unabated enthusiasm for tattoos. They are almost all uniformly ugly, of poor design and obliterating large areas of flesh with vast blocks of that permanent dark blue blight, symbol of self-loathing and mark of the revival of materialistic paganism. In my youth the only people who regularly sported these grim memorials to drunken nights were 'ladies of the night' and sailors. Now the self-abuse of the body permeates every stratum of society and is eloquent of the growing crisis of identity and the rejection of the person God actually made.

In the evening we set off for Trastevere – the old working class area of Rome and these days the centre of night time youth activity. The streets are a mass of the under 30s, the cafes full, the squares jam-packed with street artists, musicians etc all trying to eke out a living this way.

Across the Ponte Sisto we enter Trilussa square. Our friend Sergio, the rock guitarist and singer, has been banned by the police for 'after hours noise' and now has had to cede his amphitheatre, where he regularly

played to 500 -700 people, to a ghastly drum and bass 'Rap' style cacophony. Sergio is confined to the bridge where he still draws so big a crowd that the bridge is only passable with difficulty and no little determination. We arrived for dinner just as he was disconsolately packing up and promised to catch up with him the following evening.

At 'Vecchia' on the Via del Moro, our favourite Trastevere trough, we are put in a window seat on the dark side where it is too hot and I ask for a move. We are moved to our usual window seat on light side, airy far less crowded and delicious meal. The latest craze is buying huge glass drums of Aperol; Spritz with straws for all to sup on your table and it comes with firework fizzing in it. Very spectacular. We stick to a decent Vino Rosso. We are the oldest people in the café by far and it is hard to find anyone over forty in Trastevere at night.

An early night....a good day.... Much quiet prayer but the preponderant memories are of friends met up again, new meetings, decisions made and the long day's wait for news of a very close friend's daughter who is in labour with her first and now struggling into the third day – a situation all too familiar to us when our Alice had the same rough time. It turns out that the baby is born while I am praying with St Gregory. It's a boy. Congratulations. I suggest the name 'Gregory'. We wait and see.

Saturday dawns and Sara heads off for St Laurence – a bus journey to the quiet prayerful cloister where she loves to pray. I set out for St Peter's to pray too but first to do some shopping in Borgo Pio – cinctures for Bodmin, collars for an Anglican friend, a gift for someone in Bodmin congregation to give to a priest friend with a new church. Also to book the restaurant for Sunday night (Vittoria) up by the Office of the Inquisition.

I arrived in the Piazza at 10am and very few people around to my surprise so I went shopping first. A mistake. Twenty minutes later the square was packed, the queue right round the block. I consulted my conscience, headed for the back gate, flashed my Celebret (priest passport), got put in much shorter queue. Went up 'disabled' alley - told the man about my Parkinson's – straight through. The Basilica was heaving. I always kneel on the porphyry stone on which secular monarchs were crowned and offer the sovereignty of my life and my land back to Jesus.

Next stop is the altar of Pope Pius X, the great Giuseppe Sarto, the peasant boy who foresaw the crisis of modernism and its threat to the Church and was a great pastor. He is one of my heroes and his body, fully vested, lies, incorrupt, under the altar. I always ask for his prayers.

Then to the tomb of one of my other heroes, John Paul II. Here I pray for Polish friends and for the Papacy and all Apostolic leaders like our bishops.

From there to the confessional boxes to make my confession. It is a real privilege to be able to lay down those burdens in such a special place and, in the wait, twenty minutes or so, to begin the day's prayers for those on the list. Liberated by the absolution of the priest and joyfully singing my penance, I can get down to the long day's work of prayer. There is huge noise and movement but it is possible to shut it all out especially in the Blessed Sacrament chapel. Eventually I move down to the crypt to pray at tomb of Benedict XVI and then to St Peter's tomb where so much of my direct direction in the last twenty years has been received.

Although there was scarcely room to move did what I always do and knelt . This has the secondary effect of reducing the noise as other people remember why they are there and give them permission to do the same. I try to spend about 15 minutes there and wait on God and offer the most pressing needs of my intercessions and those who have specially asked for the prayers of the Prince of Apostles.

Back in time for brief siesta and writing up of diary and typing of two hymns which I have written since arriving in Rome.

Dinner at Cappellari -street of the hatmakers- very old style Italian – beautiful food and atmosphere. Then down to Ponte Sisto to catch Sergio. He is playing 'Country Roads' as we arrive and on great form. Sara and I start the dancing on the bridge. Hordes of young fans but we manage to squeeze our way to the front and give it our best shot.

Happy days.

By this stage the drugs have worn off and my legs are gone as we crawl back to a late bed with the glorious prospect of a 'lie -in'.

Sunday Mass is not til 11am. Hallelujah.

Sunday

A very slow start. Didn't wake up until after 6am. Just about sorted to go out at 10.20 for a stroll prior to going to the Extraordinary Rite Mass at Holy Trinity of the Pilgrims, fifty yards round the corner from us.

Two hundred plus congregation. Lots of men and young families. Ninety per cent of congregation were under forty. The children are well behaved but there is no sense of 'repressive parenting' just a quiet familiarity with the Mass and quiet attention. The womenfolk almost all sport a mantilla and simple tasteful understated dresses – in keeping with Biblical teaching on head covering. The men are smart/casual but no ostentation. The queue to the confessional is constant. The music is beautiful.

The sermon is animated and long and seemed to hold the congregation without them drifting. When Communion arrives it is such a joy to have had the priest's orientation helpfully restored for the entire celebration but also the luxury of altar rails allowing time and reflection and focus and an unhurried return to the pew.

It is a good time and place to lift more prayer intentions to the Lord. The church is one I often visit to unload the joyful burden of my own and other's prayer intention.

Sunday treat – just thirty yards down the street is the beautiful Sicilian patisserie. We always thought it would be too expensive in our early years but, braving it some years ago, found the delicious coffee was the same price as junk cafes and cheaper than many PLUS the cakes are 'to die for' and again not overpriced.

On returning I dodge up a small plate of Pasta Arrabiata – it's the nearest I can get to a curry. Then a brief post- prandial snooze before a short constitutional.

Later on I do some writing and then, by early evening , we set out to the Vatican, across the Castle bridge, past a woman violinist busking and rendering a haunting version of my unfavourite 'Beatle' song 'Imagine'. If it wasn't for the words it would be beautiful!

This sets me off and I proceed to inflict a medley of Lennon/ McCartney numbers on my unfortunate companion – something I often do in the car on long journeys. Another option is the whole of Dylan's first album. This gives me a chance to check my lung capacity especially on 'Man of Constant Sorrow', 'Song for Woody' and supremely on 'Freight Train Blues' where the 'hold' not only lasts a lung bursting lifetime but, unrefreshed, leads straight into an octave jump to falsetto train whistle. I get strange looks from passers by and a clear signal from 'the management' that enough is enough.

Being early by about 20 minutes, we pause for an Aperol Spritz at a small local bar before crossing the highway to 'Vittoria' – a restaurant introduced to us by our son-in-law's Mamma and treated there by her.

Beautiful meal in a packed and popular place. We pre-booked and got the window seat. Home by Taxi and, as in no mood to sleep, a quiet read and a late prayer time.

I have difficulty reading to order these days. I can go whole weeks without a book because there is no capacity or energy for that specific kind of concentration yet I can still read for study. Then, suddenly, the green light will come on and I can read a tranche of books. As with 'everything Parkinson's', you just have to do it when the motor is running and accept when you can't.

Monday - again we go our separate ways but end up at the same place at different times. Feast of Holy Cross – Sara is in St Peter's for 8.30 Mass.

I arrived, after office and scribbling and correspondence catch up, for long morning prayer session in the Basilica, confession and midday Mass in Lady Chapel.

The Blessed Sacrament Chapel, the one remaining place where you can avoid the ceaseless thrum of camera-wielding tourists, has a permanent guard on the door quietly explaining that it is for prayer only – no cameras, no talking etc. The greedy tourist boldly lies and will do anything to gain entrance. Once through the curtain they are faced with terrifying unfamiliarity. Rows of silent, kneeling Catholics before the exposed Blessed Sacrament. The men tourists look uncomfortable and try to find an escape route. The women tourists tend to affect attention

for a few seconds before reverting. To my great joy there is also an internal 'guard' monitoring behaviour.

The newly arrived couple next to me are preparing to use their camera. The guard swoops and *sotto voce* but with authority – 'NO CAMERAS, MADAM'

She pockets her phone and starts talking to her husband. The guard swoops again. **'This is a silent place'**

He has scarcely stepped a couple of paces away before the offender has whipped out her fan and is ostentatiously cooling herself from the previous embarrassments. He steps in again. 'NO FANNING YOURSELF' either as this is distracting others.

With a flounce and a final word to her husband, 'There is nothing to see here', she is gone. Hallelujah.

Of course there is plenty to see – Our Lord for a start. The rapt attention of the faithful. A depth of prayer intensity with which the tourist mind is wholly unfamiliar. The wandering herds of rubbernecks, cameras ever recording things that their holders do not pause to experience and which will, in all probability, be briefly inflicted on family on return – all none the wiser and the encounter with Christ unfulfilled.

After a good while in that wonderful oasis, it's back down to St Peter for a final kneel and wait on the Lord.

Into the piazza and off down the Borgo Pio to do a little shopping for a friend in the congregation. Then back to base camp where Sara is preparing her next venture. This will be a trip to the suburbs to see a young woman and a baby.

Some many years ago now we met Isotta, a reliable and beautiful young tourist guide, at the 'Borghese'. Her knowledge and presentation were so good that Sara booked her the next time we came to Rome. Over the years we have kept in touch, prayed for one another and had an annual meal together.

Last year she invited us to her new flat where she had settled a couple of years ago with the man of her dreams and their now new baby. It is a strangely obvious lesson which, when younger, one does not

always fully appreciate, that the steady constancy of faithful friendship, keeping in touch, ensuring that somewhere, on even the fullest prayer round, the trials and triumphs of those we care for are not forgotten.

The late evening, on return, was spent with a large glass of Grillo and a Cassata round at Massimo's which, over a quarter of a century, has become our physical and social base camp where we are always welcomed and cheered and sustained.

Tuesday morning early we prepared for the great treat of this tour. Marco, our Spanish Rome University don friend, whom we met at a Spanish/Cornish Baptism in Bodmin three years ago, had got permission for me to celebrate Mass at the altar where St Philip Neri had lived, prayed, had a vision of Our Lady and levitated amongst many other things. St Philip was known as the Apostle of Rome and noted for his spiritual brilliance and great sense of humour. I had always warmed to him. We were met by the most cheerful sister and helped to set up. We were also joined by a young English journalist friend, whom we had also first met three years ago.

The sense of awe and unworthiness and privilege and excitement that, for me, always accompanies the ascent to the altar, is hugely magnified in these holy places and, by the time I leave the altar, prayed out, I am both exhausted, invigorated and my shirt absolutely drenched with sweat.

From the Mass where so many prayers were offered by us all, aloud and *in corde*, we moved across the Via Giulia, past the heavily armed Anti-Mafia HQ, to the underground car park to collect Marco's car and begin our 40 minute ride to Lake Bracciano – where, the state of the Church and the world having been intensely analysed. The three of them went for a swim while I patrolled the shoreline.

Not only does the Parkinson's mean that I can no longer swim but also that even paddling can make me giddy as the stillness of the earth collides with the movement of the waters. That did not stop us all having a very joyful afternoon.

We left the beach to go into the café just across the road. Marco ordered - enough for a regiment as it turned out – great bowls of seafood, fresh and tempuraed, exotic rural pastas and grilled vegetables and roasted

pork, finished with palette cleansing sorbets and washed down with a local red.

Then back a short distance to the little hilltop village itself – huge, lung bursting ascent to the summit church – and to gaze over the deep blue of the lake beneath the Cambridge Blue of the cloudless sky. Then down to the tiny central piazza where the young barman had to be shown where his bottle of Strega was hidden, unopened, at the back of the top shelf. The warm glow purred through my body and was worth at least three doses of my medicines!

Returning, exhilarated and wiped, we had a quiet evening in. Sara caught up on her work. I caught up on my reading.

Wednesday – we set off for S. Cecilia, at the far end of Trastevere, where Sr Margaret, from Liskeard, teaches Gregorian chant and kindly arranges for my annual Mass at the altar tomb of the patron of musicians. It is another high point of offering. We then spend an hour with Sr. catching up. Cornish chocolate and calendars of Cornwall are dispensed as with our other much appreciated ‘regulars’.

Drifting back down the narrow street we encounter a queue of some 50 people. They are in line for Enzo’s – world famous and no reservations taken. It is 11.50 and I persuade Sara to wait. As the local church clock chimes twelve, the staff line up to welcome us all and it reminds us to pray the Angelus. We are seated next to a young Australian nutritionist who seems to have ordered everything to try. She is ‘whippet-thin’ and one of those lucky people who can eat without getting fat.

We have a lovely hour in her company. I have ordered a pasta with oxtail and sweet black grapes. It is absolutely brilliant and no dearer than the tourist menu stuff in the big piazzas. Brilliant.

The only problem is that neither of us will be able to squeeze in our planned evening repast at Ditti Romba’s. A truly first world problem.

Reflecting on the make up of our Roman pilgrimages over the last twenty five years, they seem always to fall into the same pattern.

PRAYER – PEOPLE and PASTA.

(You could add the Pope if you like alliteration or even Prosecco for frivolity – though I prefer Sagrantino, Strega and Sergio on the Ponte Sisto.)

But that is the heart of it. We get the extraordinary joy and responsibility of taking the prayers of many to the holy places, of connecting with new people and reconnecting with old friends all joined in a network that transcends the physical realities of our everyday lives and to enjoy the good things of the earth in their simplicity and in convivial society. All this surrounded by the living monuments and inspiring memorials at the historic headquarters of our Christian civilisation. It doesn't get much better than that.

After the compulsory siesta, a gentle early evening stroll to Il Teatro, the best ice cream in town, up by S Salvatore in Lauro. Then down the riverbank to a full bodied Spritz at Massimo's. A brief turn over the Sisto where Sergio is on the late shift and, having got our schedule for our last night, we promise a last dance tomorrow. Tired and happy we wander slowly back to the apartment only to have the phone ring.

It is Fr. Ciaran ! for whom we had been praying just earlier that day. His birthday went well and he is in good form. A lovely surprise.

'Time for bed', said Zebedee.
It certainly is.

Thursday

Sara to Mass at Spanish Church. Me to St Peter's in Blessed Sacrament Chapel. Then last visit to the tomb. Walking down the street my orientation went haywire , not, this time, the fault of Vatican II. I managed to get lost on a straight road that I have visited hundreds of times!

I hadn't noticed the time and my drugs had ceased to work. This meant half an hour before I could do anything while the new load kicked in. I used the time to grab a late breakfast/early lunch and some urgent hydration. Even then I started back to the flat at approx. the speed of a sedated slug – twenty minutes for the first five hundred yards! Then the battery started to work and I did the next 2000 paces at a fair old lick.

Quick 20 minute siesta then packed all but overnight essentials ready for the morning and zipped out to do a bit of shopping. Sorted stuff out at Asian shop.

He said '67 Euros'.

I said, 'If it's more than 30 euros the lot it's no sale.'

We settled amicably at 30 euros.

Back to basecamp and pondering the texts, not for the first time this week, facing me on Sunday. Sermon required. Gospel....the latecomers to the vineyard getting the same pay as those who have worked all day. Clearly a moment to advertise my union affiliation (Communion) and the solidarity with many of my more ambitious contemporaries who seemed to see the election of a socialist government as co-terminus with the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven.

'One out, All out, comrades.'

Last night and it's time to dress up and party.

Massimo & Sergio, here we come. Hope the legs hold out!