

# PILGRIMAGE TO *ROME & ASSISI*

In June 2015, a group of 31 pilgrims gathered in Rome for a 10-day pilgrimage to some of the most sacred Christian sites in Lazio, Umbria and in the Marche. Many of the pilgrims had visited the Eternal City before but few had been to Assisi, and none to the smaller centres of Lanciano, Loreto or Manoppello. Organised and led by Fr Nigel Gibson, the aim of the pilgrimage was to provide spiritual growth through daily prayer, visit some world-renowned chapels and basilicas, and engage in theological and spiritual reflection. Prior to setting off, pilgrimage chaplain, Fr Robert Martin, had prepared a special *Pilgrimage Prayer Book* to be used whilst on the road or when visiting some shrines and chapels. This was an invaluable resource that did much to enhance daily prayers and worship on the journey. *In Touch* invited Fr Robert to share his thoughts on this first-ever St John's Pilgrimage to Italy in an article he calls *Travelling with the Saints*. We also sought reflections from some of the pilgrims themselves.



## *Travelling with the Saints*

*"Pilgrims are not tourists. They have come, quietly and humbly, to seek the holy and enter more deeply into God's presence."*  
Sister Wendy Beckett – Author and Art Historian

So with these thoughts in mind we gathered in Rome to start our pilgrimage, most of us coming from Hong Kong but some from the United Kingdom and the United States, as well. It had been nine months in the preparation but finally we met up in the Eternal City.

Rome has its own charm and fast moving energy. Lots of people, cars, scooters and police sirens are heard all the time. So it was indeed a great blessing that we stayed in a hotel just outside the city centre giving us a sense of peace and calmness. We went to bed on the first night well blessed by Fr Nigel and with a list of instructions for the next day. So started our pilgrimage.

On this first day of our pilgrimage the Sistine Chapel and Vatican museum were the first visits on our list. There is so

much to see in this huge complex and our wonderful guide, Alberto, briefed us thoroughly on the chapel and its paintings. The Sistine Chapel was different to what I had imagined, i.e. "the creation of Adam" didn't occupy a whole dome, but instead it was part of a long ceiling with many other paintings. Michelangelo painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel while lying on his back for four years! It is impressive beyond words, totally fascinating – one becoming a bit dizzy staring upwards, or claustrophobic with the masses of people in the same room.

We then moved into the Basilica of St Peter, the burial place of St Peter, with its famous square and the colonnade outside. As we wandered around the church it was perhaps not the exquisite works of art that were most impressive but the crowds of pilgrims from every part of the world who are drawn to this Mother Church of Latin Christianity.

We finished our church visits that day with a celebration of the Holy Eucharist by Fr Hugh Phillipson in All Saints' Anglican



The Pilgrims outside the Holy Door of St John Lateran Basilica, Rome



Holy Face of Manoppello



St Peter the Apostle

Church in the city centre, a welcome bit of Victorian gothic after the baroque of the Vatican. (The church, not Fr Hugh!)

Perhaps though, even after the glories of St Peter's, we weren't prepared for our afternoon visit to the Anglican Centre and the first of numerous surprises our leader Fr Nigel had arranged for us. The Anglican Centre is the home and office of the Archbishop of Canterbury's official representative to the Holy See. It's set in a wonderful Roman palazzo and is a centre of prayer, study and ecumenical exchange. Archbishop Sir David Moxon, the Director of the Centre, welcomed us and gave us much needed refreshments and a fascinating talk on the work of the Centre, current relations with the Roman Catholic Church and the joint project Anglican and Roman Catholics have started to help ease the plight of refugees trying to get into Europe.

After the talk we were taken by Archbishop David to visit the excavations under the villa which have unearthed what is thought to be the actual house of St Paul's captivity in Rome. This is a very recent excavation and it was a unique experience to be in a first century Roman house, let alone one which was the final home of the Apostle Paul.

The next day, along with Alberto our guide and Stefano our trusty driver, we were off early to see the Basilica of St Paul

outside the Walls and the Catacombs of St Sebastian. I think this is one of my favourite churches in Rome, a wonderful example of a Roman Basilica set in a beautiful courtyard. This is the traditional place of the martyrdom of St Paul and again we joined with pilgrims from across the world to honour the Apostle. Then off to the Catacombs of St Sebastian, the underground burial site of many early Christians, including the initial resting place of St Peter and St Paul. Here, there was a real sense of communion with our early brothers and sisters in the faith.

Another of Fr Nigel's surprises followed with lunch in a local restaurant which provided us with a roasted pig, Roman style, much to the delight of our Hong Kong pilgrims. Next came the Basilica of St John Lateran and the papal church of St Mary Major, with an unscheduled gelato bought by some of the more mischievous pilgrims!

The following day we moved on from the hustle and bustle of Rome to a small town in Abruzzo called Lanciano. The drive from Rome to Abruzzo was spectacular and we got to see for the first time just how beautiful the Italian countryside is. Lanciano is famous for an 8th century miracle. A monk who had doubts about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist found that when he said the words of consecration at the

Mass the bread and wine turned into flesh and blood. The host is still preserved in the church. This is a difficult place for some to visit and for some doesn't fit easily within Anglican spirituality.

We were granted permission for Fr Nigel to celebrate a Eucharist in the Shrine and, whatever our thoughts about the relic might be, were united in our sense of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. 'Thou art here we ask not how!'

Back to our hotel for a well-earned rest and swimming for the more sporty pilgrims in the hotel pool. (I myself offered a blessing to the swimmers and settled down with John Li for a cold beer!)

The next day was a Sunday, and as good Anglicans we went to church, but this time to the Parish Church of Manoppello, a small farming community. The church is also the Shrine of the Holy Face and it is believed to contain the veil used by Veronica to wipe the face of Jesus on the Way of the Cross. Tradition tells us that the imprint of his face was left on the veil. The image is quite beautiful and bears a striking resemblance to the image found on the Holy Shroud of Turin but to be honest the most moving part of the visit was to join in the Sunday Mass of the local community,

celebrated with such simplicity and reverence. (Perhaps we will cover with another veil Fr Nigel's fiery meeting with a rather fierce German nun?)

After his experience with the nun, Fr Nigel moved us on quickly to another surprise visit. This visit was to a local farm that produced olive oil and served lunch in a converted barn. We feasted on local produce, olive oil and wine and the ladies traded recipes with the farmer's wife who cooked our lunch. It was a real chance to chat to the local folk.

Next stop on our itinerary was Loreto a wonderful fortified town with massive outer walls. Loreto's most treasured possession is the Shrine of Our Lady, known as the Holy House of Nazareth, and believed to be a representation of the home of the boy Jesus in Nazareth. It is strange to see a small house/chapel, containing an image of the Blessed Virgin, within a large basilica. To understand this place and the Marian devotion offered there, one needs to see it as a shrine not just of Mary, but of the Incarnation. In Loreto we were close not only to Mother Mary but to her beloved Son, Jesus.

Our first sight of Assisi was from the lower town of Santa Maria degli Angeli, and I suspected from the start that Assisi would be the highlight of our pilgrimage. Assisi lay about 5km away





The magnificent hillside Basilica of St Francis of Assisi



A rare privilege: Fr Robert celebrates the Eucharist and Fr Nigel preaches in front of the tomb of St Francis in the crypt of the Basilica

on top of a large hill. It houses many churches and places of spiritual significance. Of course, our first visit in Assisi was to the Basilica of San Francesco, which consists of an upper and lower church, where the tomb of St Francis is housed. It was here that we were to celebrate our third Eucharist of the pilgrimage and Fr Nigel had arranged for us to be allowed to use the altar in front of the Tomb of St Francis. It was one of the high points of my priesthood to celebrate the Eucharist so close to the remains of a saint who has always been close to my heart. There was a wonderful meditative quietness in the chapel and Fr Nigel preached a homily which really summed up for all of us what the pilgrimage was all about – he told us that we were not travelling alone but watched over by St Peter and St Paul, Blessed Mary and now St Francis and St Clare. We were travelling with the Saints!

At the other end of Assisi we found the beautiful pink and white-stoned Basilica di Santa Chiara, (Church of St Clare), which houses her tomb. It is here that the famous crucifix which spoke to St Francis is kept and as we entered a group of Italian pilgrims were singing songs and praying. St Francis and St Clare shared a great spiritual bond and he held her in high regard.

We also undertook visits to other places associated with St Francis, such as Eremo delle Carceri, on the high slopes of Mount Subasio, about 4km from Assisi. We took a minibus but met other pilgrims who had walked from Assisi. This was St Francis' hermitage, a place where he would escape to pray. In the hermitage garden, many of us were deeply moved by a

simple bronze cast of the saint lying on the ground at the point of death. He had asked to be placed on the bare earth before he died. His simplicity and gospel devotion were inspiring.

Our last visit in Assisi was to where we started Santa Maria degli Angeli to visit the Basilica which houses the original small chapel of St Francis, the Porziuncola. It stands directly under the later-built Basilica's large dome. Dating from the 9th century, the long-abandoned little chapel was given to him by the Benedictines and became the early headquarters of the new Franciscan order, founded here in 1209. We arrived in a thunderstorm, and it rained and rained, so much that after visiting the church we had to stand in the portico for ages before we could get back to the coach. (Plenty of opportunity for me to chat to some lovely Franciscan sisters from Italy, Ghana and London.) The rain finally stopped and we made our way back to the coach and turning to look back at the Basilica we saw a double rainbow. It felt as if someone was giving us a final blessing on our pilgrimage!

We journeyed back to Rome for our last night full of thoughts and prayers, and thankful for blessings received. Back in Rome, Fr Nigel celebrated our last Eucharist in the hotel. Despite the service being in a conference room there was a real sense of gathering with angels and saints to give thanks for their fellowship and all the blessings we had received. After sharing our thoughts on the pilgrimage we sang together a funny song, specially written by the pilgrims to celebrate our time together. There was a real sense of fellowship, of journeying together and with the Saints who are our brothers and sisters.



St Francis' hermitage. No mystery why he often came to this peaceful place to pray and meditate



Watched over by St Francis and St Clare, Fr Nigel celebrates the Eucharist in the Basilica of Our Lady of the Bridge, Lanciano



In Bevagna, near Perugia, the Trapolini family, owners of the celebrated olive oil mill, Antico Frantoio Nunzi, served an unforgettable lunch. Olive oil will never be the same again!

I think I can speak for all the pilgrims if I say we felt it a great privilege to have been able to have walked in the footsteps of these great saints of the Church. There was a real sense of being blessed by their presence and learning more about them, their sacrifices, their strengths, their pain and hardships, and their resolute striving to be united with God. Their spirituality and their devotion knows of no divisions and labels; anyone irrespective of their denomination can feel greatly inspired and motivated by these great souls who are gifts from God to his Church.

So was it a tour or a pilgrimage? Well, the tourist sees sights, discovers new places, learns interesting facts, takes photographs and accumulates souvenirs. The tourist returns home the same person as the one who left, save perhaps for a broadened mind.

The pilgrim, on the other hand, gains insights and discerns new truths about oneself. The pilgrim travels with the expectation that the one who returns will not be the same person as the one who set out. We were certainly changed!

Robert Martin



# Pilgrims Have Their Say...

The pilgrimage was beyond my expectations in every way, and that is no mean praise coming from a 'hard core' pilgrim! There was so much to see and learn and all of it was spiritually uplifting. Fr Nigel did a superb job managing everything and Fr Robert was a real asset to the team. And the fellowship among the pilgrims was just incredible. Well done, Father Nigel!

**Mary Szeto**

The Italy pilgrimage contained many memorable moments for me - daily prayer on the coach, a very special Holy Eucharist in front of the tomb of St Francis, Fr Nigel's 'surprises' on the journey, and even a double rainbow over the splendid church of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi.

But perhaps what made the deepest impression was meeting the humble, staff-holding, unshaved walking pilgrim in Assisi whom we met three times at various points. When we said goodbye it had started to rain and he politely refused our offer to share our bus back to the city. His natural warmth and engaging smile remained as he unceremoniously continued his spiritual journey on Assisi's hallowed ground. He was a powerful witness who emanated genuine love and compassion.

**Wallace Lai**

The less touristic churches of Lazio, Umbria and the Marche were a joy with their instinctive blend of proportion, artistry and exquisite stonework against a startling blue sky.

The Anglican Centre in Rome left me inspired with its quiet, ongoing dialogue with the Vatican. Beneath the beautiful palace that houses the Centre we were treated to the almost conclusive news that we were standing in the location where St Paul was held in house arrest.

Most pilgrims do not have the chance to celebrate their own Mass at the tomb of St Francis of Assisi, nor to visit in silence his outdoor deathbed high in the hills above the city of Assisi.

**Ruth Phillipson**

It was Jesus who said: 'When two or three of you are gathered together in my name I am there in the midst of you.' Well, both Nelly & I believe that throughout this pilgrimage, with Fr Nigel at the helm guiding us with his extensive local knowledge, alongside Fr Robert's beautiful prayers, Jesus really was present among us. We both feel richly blessed to have been part of this journey to some of the most inspiring places in Christendom. This pilgrimage far exceeded our expectations.

**Kenneth and Nelly Fung**

All the roads I have taken to grow my faith have been bumpy, filled with sharp bends and many reversals. Fr Nigel's leadership on this pilgrimage, together with Fr Robert's liturgies, added a significant wealth of perspective on Christianity. It all helped my attempts to peel away imagery (often stunning) and marketing down the ages from the underlying core of belief. I have a long way to go but the amazing fellowship amongst the pilgrims moved me further forward than I could have expected. I had fun too, plus a surplus of 'unauthorised' food!

**John Hamilton**

On our first full day we followed in the footsteps of St Paul and visited the ongoing excavation of a house many believe belonged to St Luke, and almost certainly where St Paul was imprisoned and wrote 2 Timothy 2:9: 'I am...being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained.' The whole journey was a deeply moving experience that enriched our understanding of some of the most important people in the New Testament, notably St Peter and St Paul.

Overall, the beauty of the sacred sites, the spectacular landscape of the Abruzzi, morning prayers on the coach, four special Eucharists, and the delightful meals, filled us with gratitude. Blessings flowed daily, evident in the safety, unity, laughter and many surprises that kept us joyful throughout.

**Miriam and Varkey Mathew**

Before we entered the famous Sistine Chapel, our guide, Alberto, described to our group with genuine enthusiasm, the fascinating facts of the famous ceiling and altar and wall fresco The Last Judgment. Later in St Peter's Basilica, I was deeply moved by a piece of marble sculpture, Pietà, presenting Mary sorrowfully contemplating the dead body of her Son which she holds on her lap. These are just a few of Michelangelo's many great works. The devotion by this faithful artist of his whole life working tirelessly to manifest the glory of God is indeed humbling.

**Margaret Sang**

This pilgrimage was an unforgettable experience. Everyone I've met since we returned is full of praise and admiration for the organisation, the fellowship, the lovely 'surprise' lunches, and beautiful countryside and, of course, the sense of wonder and awe for the fascinating places of worship and historical towns we visited. Everything about this pilgrimage gave me a sense of true peace and holiness.

**Alice Inglis**