

# Pilgrimage to Italy: Christ Dwelt Among Us

By: John Brock

A pilgrimage is a journey or search of moral or spiritual significance. Typically, it is a journey to a shrine or other location of importance to a person's belief and faith.

And so it was that 43 pilgrims, about half from St. Mary of the Lake, assembled at the Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport to begin their pilgrimage to Venice, Florence, Sorrento and Rome, Italy. The stories of the four cities we visited, what we saw, the meals, the accommodations are for another article—a travel article, perhaps. This is a story of a spiritual pilgrimage. It is the story of a journey, not a destination.

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Early on our first full day in Venice (a city full of twisting, narrow alleyways with ancient, cobblestone surfaces), we realized one of our friends was missing. My cell phone rang. I answered to hear an Australian accented voice say he and his wife were with our missing friend. I handed the phone to our tour director and rescue ensued. This was the first of many beautiful kindnesses we experienced throughout the trip.

Later that same day, the multiple bridges of Venice took their toll on one of our fellow travelers, rendering her new knee painful and stiff. For the remainder of the trip, every time there were 600-year old stairs, uneven pavements, drops from the bus or tricky ancient buildings, there were hands from our fellow pilgrims to hold her hands and arms. As beautiful as the churches and artworks were, we were finding Jesus in those helping hands.

Venice is also the home of St. Mark's Cathedral, an 1100-year-old Byzantine church hosting the grave of St. Mark. Our first Mass of the trip was celebrated in the crypt chapel of St. Mark's. Fr. Talbot stood under the sarcophagus of St. Mark on the Feast Day of St. Jerome: the Gospel writer and the man who translated the Gospel into the Vulgate Latin. The solemnity and awe of that Mass set the tone for many of the spiritual experiences of the journey.

In Assisi, we celebrated Mass in a small chapel in the Franciscan seminary. This is a place of great peace; we saw the roses without thorns and the turtle doves still present in the garden of St. Francis. To walk the grounds, to worship in Assisi was a Holy time.

One of our Masses was in the Chapel of St. Catherine of Siena, which was graced with an ancient Byzantine Crucifix. We were able to visit a replica of Catherine's home and get a sense of the strange power of this Doctor of the church. It was a mystical place.

No Mass was scheduled in Positano. In the center of the town stands the beautiful church of Santa Maria Assunta. We assembled inside and Fr. Talbot led us in a spontaneous prayer service. For me, it was the spiritual high of the entire trip, perhaps because it was spontaneous and surrounded by such a secular setting.

Upon arriving at St. Peter's Square hoping to see the Pope, we sat down with some Canadians (Packer fans, but nice nonetheless). When the Popemobile approached, the Canadians ensured that all of us had

clear views as Pope Francis drove slowly by. The Pope's charisma flowed over all of us. Because of the cooperation of all in this small group, we felt Christ in both the viewing of the Pope and in the actions of the group.

In Rome, we celebrated Mass in a side altar of the Church of the Gesu', which is the mother church of the Jesuit Order. St. Ignatius is buried in this church, which was consecrated in 1584. Although we did not have time to tour this church, its link between the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and our 21<sup>st</sup> Century Jesuit Pope was joyful.

The next day Mass was celebrated in the Basilica of St. John Lateran, which is the church of the Bishop of Rome and often just called, "The Pope's Church." The main altar has, in prominent display, a beautiful, yet simple chair. It is the Pope's chair and if a chair on an altar can look holy, this one did. Our Mass in a side chapel gave Fr. Talbot the opportunity to say Mass in a pre-Vatican II chapel. The closeness of our little band of pilgrims was palatable in this intimate and ancient place of worship.

We also toured St. Peter's Basilica, which is unbearably beautiful. It is so big that not even the crowds that had limited our time and freedom in other Rome venues could keep us from being awed by the spiritual forces radiated by the architecture and artworks that surrounded us. One could spend a day just in St. Peter's, and we had but half an hour. Nonetheless it was an experience of a lifetime.

I am not sure what I expected from this pilgrimage. The opportunities for reflection, personal worship, even lighting candles were rare. But Christ dwelt among us, the 43 pilgrims. The helping hands, the concerned voices, the looking out for the slow, the lame, and the lost—this was Christ alive.

We pilgrims prayed together, laughed together, worshipped together, and forgave each other together. And so our search for moral significance was within. Not a bad lesson to learn and not a bad pilgrimage to make.