

## **Rome - An overview of a visit**

(Personal notes updated 29 Sept 09, Denis Fitzgerald)

### **Contents**

Introduction.....	1
The program – overview .....	2
Meeting people.....	2
Sites and Museums .....	2
Churches .....	2
praying together .....	2
Papal audience .....	3
The spiritual dimension of material wonders.....	3
Praying together .....	4
Meetings.....	4
Cor Unum.....	5
Justicia et Pax.....	5
Caritas Internationalis .....	5
Sant'Egidio Community .....	6
Implications.....	7

### ***Introduction***

Our group of 22 people from the Catholic Social Services Australia development program spent the first week in Rome. We arrived individually - I was there from Tues 15 - and we departed for Brussels on Sunday 20 September.

It was a great visit, in many different ways, with some meetings and formal visits, and quite a bit of visiting sites, walking around, eating, shopping etc. It was a pilgrimage – a journey of searching in faith, and discovery. We prayed together as a group.

We stayed at the Irish College, which is fairly central – close to the Colosseum and St John Lateran, and a long but achievable walk from the Vatican. Thanks are due to the College, and to Maureen Ghiradello and her colleagues at Catholic Social Services Australia for arranging the program and other details. Fr Joe Caddy's Roman experience was invaluable in guiding us to particular sites, and commentating on the several Churches he led us to.

There is so much to Rome, represented in daily life, in the people and institutions working there; in the life of the Church today. It's also represented in the historical sites, churches, museums etc that set out the stories of Republican and Imperial Rome, the history of the Church and of its saints, and of the Papacy; the flowering of the renaissance, the baroque etc; and the story of the Italian state and the Italian people.

Everyone must be selective! Engaging with the story of the Gospel and with Catholic thought and practice were important points of focus for our group.

Much of this was informal and unstructured. Meals and walks were occasions for discussion as well as for sampling culinary and streetscape delights. People that we met added much to the story – a casual chat at the Irish College, for example, involved a reflection on Irish history with Msgr Tom Toner, who had been the prison chaplain to Bobby Sands, who died on a hunger strike in Ireland in 1981, and Fr Sean Rogan, who had been his parish priest – Sands' talks with his chaplain were a key feature of the recent film 'Hunger'. Votive shrines on buildings, and the grandeur of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Italian state monuments, each told part of the Roman story.

I'd spent a few days in Rome in 1977, most of it around the Vatican area, and just east of there. Fading memories from those days, plus books, articles and advice from the McMahons, Clarks, Bennets and others helped orientate me beyond the group activities.

But much of the visit involved specific visits and activities, along the following lines:

### ***The program – overview***

#### **Meeting people**

- Sant'Egidio Community
- Papal Audience
- Caritas Internationalis
- Vatican agencies Cor Unum and Justicia et Pax
- Ambassador Tim Fisher

#### **Sites and Museums**

- Scavi – the excavations around the tomb of St Peter
- Vatican Museums, including a presentation on St Paul [DF, rather than group]
- Walking around Forum, Colosseum, Column of Marcus Aurelius, etc, etc

#### **Churches**

[visits less organised as we go down the list]

- St Peter's Basilica
- San Clemente
- Santo Stefano Rotondo
- Santa Maria sopra Minerva
- Pantheon
- Santa Maria di Trastevere
- Santa Maria Maggiore
- Santa Sabina
- Gesu
- St Ignatius

#### **praying together**

- a couple of group Masses at the Irish College
- evening prayers with the Sant'Egidio community
- group Mass at the Polish chapel at St Peter's
- joining in Sunday community Mass at the Irish College

- a shared prayer at Vatican agencies Cor Unum, and Justitia et Pax.
- Mass at the Gesu [DF]

### ***Papal audience***

Our participation in a general audience with the Pope was a highlight – we were among thousands, but were nevertheless part of a substantial interaction between Pope and people from around the world. We were among the groups whose presence was acknowledged, and we prayed with the Pope and all others present.

After preliminaries in five languages, the Pope preached for a while in Italian on Simeon, a 10<sup>th</sup> Century Christian from Asia Minor, who exemplified the development of the interior life, and adherence to conscience. Each of around eight language groups then had a turn: introduction of groups such as our own, a summary by the Pope of his earlier catechesis, and some comments of greeting.

There was a receiving line at the end, for bishops, dignitaries, representatives of bridal couples who were in the audience, some people with disabilities.

We were next to a group of some 50 Americans, who were in Europe on a staff reward program from US Food Service. There was a Buddhist group, prominent in their saffron colours, lots of nuns, school and parish groups, etc. Some of the groups were ready for their mention: some had prepared a hymn, others a musical item, some had a banner to wave, some changed enthusiastically. Our group waved sedately! There were people from all over, but with a concentration on Europe – proximity, wealth?

### ***The spiritual dimension of material wonders***

Tim Fisher, Australia's Ambassador to the Holy See, spoke to the group, with his usual enthusiasm. Among other things, he spoke about reasons not to sell off the collections of the Vatican etc, and use the proceeds to address pressing human needs. His main points were that any one off large scale expenditure would have only a modest positive impact on the people of the world; and that the art etc is part of the patrimony of the world, that should not be disbursed.

This is a big issue for many Australians, and others, which is no doubt why it is front of mind for Fisher in his meetings with visitors. There is the grandeur of buildings – Churches, mainly – and of the works displayed there. There is also the question of museum collections.

A key purpose of religious art is to raise our hearts and minds to God, and to lead us to deeper reflection on matters of faith and love. All churches seek to do this to some extent, but the churches in Rome are in a league of their own – the work of the greatest artists over many centuries represented in paintings, mosaics, statuary, the grand domes, colonnades, etc, in marble, gold etc. Much of it wouldn't be built today, but that doesn't reduce its beauty, or its potential for inspiration.

The Vatican museum, one among many, is overwhelming – the Sistine Chapel, Raphael's School of Athens, and many other work; Da Vinci's St Jerome; a range of work from Blessed Angelico and Giotto; classical sculptures the Apollo of the

Belvedere and the Laocoon, and so on . Again, the purpose of the religious art is to lead us to God, and to follow his will, through impact on heart and mind. The secular work displays the greatness of the human artistic achievement. What achievement!

Perhaps a program of selling off some works to public museums around the world, to generate a fund for relief and development? Perhaps the bottom line, too, is that all of us need to be conscious of alternative uses of all the funds and assets that pass our way.

-----

The linkages between faith and the physical environment were strong in many ways.

The impact of great works of art is manifold: stimulating the mind and the heart. This was a feature of every church we visited, from the grand baroque of St Ignatius', to the much more subtle work from the era of Constantine.

The physical environment was palpable during Mass with our group in one of the chapels underneath St Peters; at the tombs of the Popes, and of the saints of the church – St Catherine of Siena, St Ignatius, etc, etc.

The same applied strongly to a tour of the archaeological excavations, the 'scavi', that have corroborated the burial of St Peter under where the main altar of St Peter's now stands. Michelangelo and others knew that the altar of Constantine's 4<sup>th</sup> Century church, which they were replacing, was build on top of a large stone box, which they believed held the bones of St Peter. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Church on the site of a cemetery, on the side of a hill – not a regular site for a church. They revealed too a set of bones very near to the large box, and graffiti etc that was all consistent with the bones being those of St Peter. The main altar of St Peter's today thus stands above several layers of altar and of commemoration of the burial of St Peter, and sits below the great baldacchino and dome. The link to apostolic Christianity is very strong indeed.

### ***Praying together***

For believers in Jesus Christ, praying with others can be a powerful experience. A number of our encounters were conducive to prayer: we prayed with the two Cardinals we met, with the Pope, at our own Eucharistic gatherings, and with the community at Sant'Egidio. It was an honour at Sant'Egidio to be part of a gathering with some dozens of Bishops, and a Russian Orthodox delegation, whose leader spoke so warmly about the need for unity, and about his deep love and respect for the community and its work.

We prayed too at each of the Churches we visited – at the tombs of St Peter, St Ignatius, St Catherine, the various other Saints, at the countless memorials, and in the presence of God everywhere.

### ***Meetings***

The 'central agencies' of the Church are remote to most of us – they work in a complex system, and on a very wide range of issues. Visiting sites – even just offices

– can make a difference to one’s understanding of them, and engagement with them. Meeting key players is even better.

Our visits to the Pontifical Council Cor Unum (which is concerned with the service mission of the Church) and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace presented human faces to both these bodies. At both places we were warmly welcomed, and the idea of our visiting was applauded.

### **Cor Unum**

At Cor Unum we met with the President, Cardinal Cordes, and the under-Secretary, Msgr Giampietro Del Tol [?]. They spoke about the issues they are engaged with – spiritual development of those working on behalf of the Church, in order that people can give themselves in their service. We spoke about the key themes of the 2005 encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, for which Cardinal Cordes provided some of the initial drafting; and of the fact that Charity is central to the mission of the Church – it is through the works of the Church that people meet God.

### **Justicia et Pax**

We met with the President, Cardinal Renato Martino, and an American Msgr xxx. Links with Australia, climate change, refugees, Timor Leste were all firmly on the agenda. The Cardinal was very proud of the 2004 *Compendium of the Social Teaching of the Church*, and recommended it to us. The Cardinal noted too that the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* had been welcomed everywhere, as a critique of economics, based on love. We briefly discussed human rights – they need to be based on human dignity; it’s the needs of people that need to be foremost; Human rights/life issues will continue to be to the fore for some time to come. We told them that Pope John Paul II’s 1985 statement on aboriginal rights etc remained a powerful instrument today.

At both agencies they were interested in and pleased that we had visited. We prayed with each of the Cardinals. Among other things, some of us will now approach the recent encyclicals of particular interest to these two organisations – *God is Love* and *Charity and Truth*, respectively – in a different light, having discussed (albeit very briefly) some elements of them with people close to their development.<sup>1</sup>

-----

Briefings at Caritas Internationalis and the Sant’Egidio Community also extended our engagement with the broader Church. There were issues where we shared a common passion – spirituality, service, injustice and international solidarity. And there were pathways forward: cooperation across nations, groups and religions; advocacy growing out of service and analysis; deepening of our own commitment and spirituality.

### **Caritas Internationalis**

Jacques Winter, Delores Halpin-Backman and Fr Pierre Chibambo briefed us on this international confederation of 162 active members. Noted that CCUSA is a member

---

<sup>1</sup> These issues have emerged several time subsequently in Leuven and Paris, from a range of points of view.

in its own right, separate to the overseas-oriented Catholic Relief Services. A similar situation applies in England. Germany, Italy and some others have a combined international and domestic-focused organisation.

The international HQ is a point of information exchange, fosters collaboration, and helps coordinate eg disaster response. *Populorum Progressio* (1967) and the two recent encyclicals, *Deus Caritas Est* and *Caritas in Veritate* were cited as key documents.

A 2009 working document ‘Caritas – a sign of love for God’s humanity’ with an opening reflection by Caritas President Cardinal Rodriguez, and longer piece by the Caritas Internationalis Theology Commission, outlined and invited comment on the theology and spirituality underpinning their work. ‘Justice and human promotion are an indispensable part of the mission of the Church, which is the advocate of the poor’, wrote the Cardinal. And among the concluding remarks by the Commission: ‘Christian identity is both given by our response to the gospels, and discovered as we encounter Christ in strangers’.

Other key priorities at Caritas are

- Sustainable peace building
- HIV/AIDS and health care
- Migration issues
- Climate change impacts
- Governance issues, including capacity building of members

Relations with the Vatican is a complex topic – it is a complex institution. CI works hard to avoid conflict – they are part of the church, and Vatican endorsement of papers etc increases their weight. But CI is based in the grass roots, and responds to evidence from members. It is thus responsive to members and to the Vatican. Informal relations and actions are important – not just formally agreed papers – it is necessarily a political environment.

### **Sant’Egidio Community**

Claudio, Analita and Roberto generously briefed us at length, and invited us to join their evening prayers.

Their movement started in 1968 with high school students setting out to live the gospel in prayer and in serving those at the margins. They do this because it is mandated in the gospel – the Good Samaritan follows Martha and Mary in the gospels. There are 70,000 people in 60 countries. These people pray and serve together, they don’t live in community, they have their own jobs.

They try to respond to all calls for assistance: children are a priority; registration of all children, responses to HIV/AIDS, foster care, education – in Italy etc as well as the third world. Aged care, etc etc. Personal friendships with those they serve is a key – prisoners, old people, street people. Professional boundaries was an area of discussion with our group.

SE welcomes the people it works with into their ministry, if that's what they want. Eg, some people with disabilities can communicate better through painting than with words – the sale of some paintings has financed part of the HIV/AIDS program. 'there is no one so poor that they can't do something for others'. "The gospel is the same for us as for them."

Love of peace, and work for peace, is another feature of SE.

Advocacy is a key feature, which grows out of loving service.

Ecumenism is a key feature of their work, because of the need to work together to build a better world – relations with the Russian Orthodox church are very strong. SE is happy for non-Christians to join their work, but they stress that their calling is to prayer and to service.

'Gratuitousness' is important – service for the gospel cannot be done for money; there must be voices that talk for gratuitousness.

### ***Implications***

Thinking through the implications of all of this for Catholic social services in Australia is a priority for the group.

Deepening our own spirituality is a theme that has emerged – deepening our ability to find God in the face of the person we serve. Caritas documentation builds on material previously available to us.

Deepening our encounter is another theme: charity is not a one-way thing. It's an encounter, a relationship, that has the good of the other at its centre. Participation and connectedness emerge, as do input from the person who is in need. Advocacy emerges from such encounters, as we are called to a total response by the gospel – we don't act just because it feels good, or because it is good, but because we are called to serve others. This is countercultural.

Seeking out areas of greatest need emerges as an issue – to respond to needs that are discerned.

Maintaining linkages – political, ecumenical, with others of good will. There is too much to be done, and the task is too great, for us to try to do it alone, a theme outlined by Sant'Egidio and Caritas.

Keeping abreast of developments. Reading an encyclical is one thing, but it's part of a heritage, part of a dialogue. So too is the *Compendium*. There is much groundwork to be done here, as well as ongoing study. A sophisticated engagement is called for.

There were issues where we shared a common passion – spirituality, service, injustice and international solidarity. And there were pathways forward that members of our group identified with: cooperation across nations, groups and religions; advocacy growing out of service and analysis; deepening of our own commitment and

spirituality. An issue for the future is the extent of future contact with these groups on these matters.

Catholic identity already emerges as a complex concept. As Catholics, the group readily identified with much of Christian Rome; we respected and appreciated the time from the Cardinals; and we were inspired by the gospel-driven work of Sant'Egidio and Caritas. We felt part of the universal church. But there was an 'otherness' as well. For example, SE emerges in a particular cultural setting; the Roman Dicasteries are a long way from Australia, and are dealing with some issues at a rarified level. Local Bishops and structures are important, as are the other elements of the Church in Australia. This is to be built on in the coming weeks, and, indeed, the years ahead.