

Pilgrimage to Italy, November 11-21, 2013

Our trip started off chilly and early at 6:45 a.m. on a cool Monday morning. But with a 2 hr. snow delay at Chicago airport we landed with a rush in Frankfurt, Germany to reach Venice, Italy on the day after (time wise) that we left the states! Once we met up with our tour manager, Franca, in Venice ... our pilgrimage was on.

Venice is known as the “city of canals” and it truly is. While there we celebrated mass at St. Mark’s of St. Marcos Plaza, walked over the “Bridge of Sighs” while touring the Palace of Doges, enjoyed the scenic overview from St. Mark’s bell tower, some of us experienced a gondola ride to the supermarket and we all visited the one, and only, Murano Glass Company.

Leaving Venice we traveled south to Padua, home of St. Anthony and enjoyed a private Mass at St. Anthony’s Basilica in St. Maximilian Kolbe’s chapel. Driving further into the Tuscany countryside we entered Florence on the same day. We viewed the breath taking overlook of the Arno River Valley of Florence and saw the original Statue of David by Michelangelo at the same overview. While in Florence we not only saw the “Duomo” of Santa Maria Cathedral we celebrated a private Mass there as well. The 2 young men of our tour took the incentive to physically walk a spiral staircase to the top of the “Duomo” dome to overlook the area. According to Franca, this was a first for any of her tours, as not many want to attempt this feat! We also viewed the beautiful “Gates of paradise” doors, the walkway of the Arno River and the best dang leather store in the world, where many of us put our credit cards to use!

Heading south again, through the Umbria region we arrived in the quaint historical town of Assisi. Assisi itself is surrounded by the original walls of medieval times and protected by the original fortress over head on the hill where Assisi resides. We celebrated a private Mass in a very unique “forest/ nature setting” chapel in the Basilica of St. Francis and toured the church of St. Clare, which today houses the original house where St. Francis lived and died and his miraculous thorn-less rosebush garden. (It was here in Assisi, that we met up with a very special “Americanized” young man for a meal and a ceramic shop tour! Ask a pilgrim about him if you wish!)

Again, heading south, we finally reached the Eternal City of Rome, located in the Lazio region of Italy. We first viewed the City of Rome via bus and saw the Coliseum, Argentine Plaza (where Caesar was killed), the Tiber River, the ancient field where the chariot races occurred, Mussolini’s balcony and the ancient walls of Rome. We visited the Pantheon in all its scientific glory with an open ceiling, where Raphael is buried and the world famous Trevi Fountain. We arrived at the Vatican to view its many works of art, of which we saw much of Raphael and of course Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel painting. In the Basilica of St. Peter, we celebrated Mass in Pope John Paul’s chapel with Pope John Paul II burial tomb, as well as viewed the tomb of St. Peter himself. Outside of the Vatican we visited an ancient underground burial site, the Basilica of St. Mary Major and the Pope’s “Bishop of Rome” church, St. Paul’s Basilica.

Having a free day to “roam around Rome” some of us took a trip south again, via bus to go see Pompeii, a 2000 year old city which was buried in volcanic ash at one point from Mount Vesuvius. The many original bathhouses, stores, houses, gladiator arenas and theaters that we saw really brought home the idea of just how it was that people lived in the times of early Christianity. We traveled south, (again!) to see the beautiful panoramic Mediterranean view of the city of Naples and Mount Vesuvius.

The next morning was the day we’d all been waiting for... the papal audience at St. Peter’s Square. It was the 29 of us and 80,000 other pilgrims all lined up for HOURS to get in for seating. As you all know, we made it in and had the blessed experience of seeing Pope Francis and heard those longed for words that “St. Elizabeth’s Parish from Robinson, IL, US of A” was in attendance at the final papal audience for “the year of Faith”! Witnessing from both near and far, the atmosphere was filled with electrical excitement, mixed with very humbling feelings. Having a papal blessing over all of us present and those of you back home puts the “awe” in “awesome”! Upon leaving the Vatican for the last time, we had a private mass at St. John’s of Lateran Basilica.

Upon returning to the hotel and saying our goodbyes to Franca, we prepared for our early morning wakeup call to return home. Our trip may have ended... but our pilgrimage is only getting started.

There was just too much going on at all times to tell about every movement we made or what all we saw, but I have tried to hit the high points as each of us has a different memory of what all we saw and did. We started each day off, on the bus praying Morning Prayers to begin our day. We were served all types of pasta dishes at most meals, also had some delicious zoupas (soups). Then there was the dessert...gelato! Dairy Queen will never compare to this fantastic ice-cream as pilgrims from this trip will tell you!

Sincerely ... Patti Buercklin



This group picture was taken at St. John's of Lateran Basilica

Front Row: J.B. Chapman, Matt Buercklin, Betty Boyd, Mary Brown, Franca Koxvold (tour manager), Father Aloy, MaryJo Henk, Rhonda Stone, Patti Buercklin, Autumn Knoblett.

Back Row: Pat Sheehan, Terri Smith, Judy Dorn, Daniel Meinhart, Delores Nieman, Mary Meinhart, Susan Schmidt, Lucy Alvey, Sarah Laski, Gail Jurick, MaryJo Kile, Ed Pool, Karen Reinoehl, Ann Pool, Janey Branson, George Bohman, Sharon Pritchard, Jane Bohman, Lynn Knoblett. (Not pictured Chuck Reinoehl)



Pope Francis the First, St. Peter's Basilica