

Wales Commandery Pilgrimage to Rome

12-15 September 2011

By noon on 12th September 14 pilgrims from the Wales Commandery, under the leadership of their Commander, Professor Norman Doe O.L.J., were aboard the plane at Bristol Airport for the 2 hour flight to Rome. Two minibuses were awaiting the flight and soon the party was installed in the Residenza Farnese Hotel, opposite the French Embassy and adjacent to the Piazza Farnese near the Campo de' Fiori.

The evening was spent getting to know the area as far as the Piazza Navona which, although it was only Monday night, was as wild as a Saturday night in Cardiff. Needless to say, there was a considerable police presence. The evening came to an end with Night Prayers for all back at the hotel, led by the pilgrims' chaplain Father John Owen.

The first full day began with Mass at Santa Brigida, a small but beautifully decorated church around the corner from the hotel. After breakfast all gathered on the hotel's roof garden for the morning reading and short discussion. The readings for the 3 days were from the Acts of the Apostles Ch. 28 vv 11-31 and each part was accompanied with a commentary by Matthew Henry, which provoked much thought and discussion, about being on a pilgrimage.

The first visit of the day was to The Venerable English and Welsh College, just a short walk from the hotel. We were given a warm welcome and guided tour by the resident priest, Father Tony Milner. The College was founded in 1362 as a hostel for English pilgrims to Rome but since 1579 it has been a seminary for training priests to work in England and Wales. There were numerous items of historical interest including a royal shield from the time of Henry V and many superb paintings. After a period of private prayer in the chapel, and following refreshments at the College, the pilgrims made their way to the Piazza Navona and visited the Basilica of Sant' Agnese (St Agnes) in Agone, a magnificent building with beautiful walls and ceilings together with a lovely statue of St Agnes who was martyred on the site in 304 AD for refusing to renounce her faith.

From there a short walk took us to the Pantheon – a remarkable structure dating from 125 AD. It was originally the Roman Temple of “all the gods” but in 609 it was consecrated as the church of Santa Maria ad Martyres. It contains Rafael's tomb and those of a number of Italian royalty. Just around the corner from the Pantheon is the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva, the only example of gothic architecture in Rome, dating from the 13th century. This also had magnificent decorations and a number of beautifully decorated tombs, including that of St Catherine of Siena who died in Rome in 1380. There is also a truly remarkable sculpture of the Risen Christ by Michelangelo.

The afternoon was spent looking at the sights and working our way to the Trevi Fountain. From there those with any energy left went on to the Spanish Steps.

The next day was the hoped-for General Audience in St Peter's square so it was an early start. On arriving at the Square armed with water and sun protection it appeared the powers that be had decided that, owing to the extreme heat, they would hold the event indoors.

There were about 15,000 people, all clutching tickets queuing to get through the security system. Our tickets, kindly provided by the general secretary of the Franciscan Order, Father Aidan McGrath, enabled us to have seats together near the front of the huge auditorium. The Pope appeared at 10.30 and proceedings began with his general statement, followed by the introduction of groups from all over the world – each given the Pope's blessing. An interesting experience that ended at noon. A visit to the great Basilica of St Peter was preceded by queuing at another security system. However, we lunched together afterwards and were honoured to host Aidan who was in excellent form.

Although it was still very hot the day was not yet over and we made our way to the Anglican Centre, in the Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, to be warmly welcomed by the Director, the Very Revd Canon David Richardson, Dean Emeritus of Melbourne. He is the Archbishop of Canterbury's Representative to the Holy See and also represents the various churches that make up the worldwide Anglican Communion. He officiated at the pilgrims' Service of Evening Prayer and gave an excellent homily on pilgrimages throughout the ages. This was followed by a reception during which we heard the history of the Centre and the Palazzo Doria Pamphilj.

The last day was spent working our way down the Corso Vittorio Emanuele first stopping at the delightful Basilica of St Andrea della Valle (the church which provides the setting for the 1st Act of Puccini's *Tosca*) where many of the interesting features of the building were pointed out by Father John Owen who knew the area from his days as a seminarian in Rome. We were regaled with stories of the Red Brigade when they blew up a bank and Father John pointed out to us buildings involved in past political activities. Finally we arrived at the "Gesù" the first Jesuit church to be built in Rome to a design that has been much imitated throughout the Catholic world. Inside there were chapels dedicated to St Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Order, and St Francis Xavier, the great missionary whose hand is framed above the altar and which, it is claimed, baptised more than a million people.

The final visit was to the church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli which could only be reached by ascending the Aracoeli Staircase with its 124 steps. Dating from the 6th century, it stands on the site of the Temple to Juno. The ceiling commemorates the Battle of Lepanto, in the sixteenth century – the last battle, it is often said, to have involved the Order of St Lazarus. However, the church is most famous for its icon, the Bambino, a carving of the Christ Child which is said to have extraordinary powers. Unfortunately, the original was stolen in 1994.

From here it was back to the hotel for minibuses to the airport and home at the end of a most memorable few days.

Appreciation

One cannot end this review of the pilgrimage without recognising the effort and work that had been put in to make it all happen. The thanks of all those on the pilgrimage must be directed to Norman Doe and his wife Heather Payne. The meticulous planning that went into the programme and the use of their contacts to make it run so well was outstanding. All agreed that we went places and saw things that we would never have seen if we had been on our own.

The thought that went into the production of the papers for formal occasions made the pilgrimage feel something really special:

The Night Prayer
The Morning Readings and Commentary
The Pilgrims Service of Evening Prayer.

They made the pilgrimage complete!

David Wheeler KLJ
Receiver-General