

## My Experience on Our Pilgrimage to Italy

William Wahlers

Before the pilgrimage actually happened, I wasn't sure I would even be able to go. But, by the Grace of God, I did. As the pilgrimage got closer to being a reality, I knew in my heart, I was meant to go. This was an experience I was not going to let pass me by. My pilgrimage started out with Father Owen and we pilgrims gathered outside of our parish of St Rose of Lima. We were all excited and eager to go on a journey of faith and fun. I personally was excited for not just the wonderful places I would see, but also for the opportunity to enhance my closeness to Jesus and the Catholic Church.

We arrived in Italy after, a short stopover in Germany, with little or no sleep on our long flight. We began our pilgrimage in Padua Italy, all being filled with passion to get our journey started. The journey began on the blessed grounds of the Basilica of St. Anthony. Father Owen gave his first Mass of the pilgrimage. His words made me feel as if I were there when St. Anthony himself was. I sat there listening and feeling so blessed. I had a picture of me taken with Father Owen after the Mass at the Altar because I felt I needed to capture the feeling in my heart to always look back on, to see where my journey in my Catholic faith had taken me. After the Mass we were all filled with the Holy Spirit and eager to see the sights. We later went to our first hotel of five and had a great dinner filled with thanks and laughter. Before turning in that night, I was standing

in front of the hotel just letting this day soak in and gave thanks to God for being there with Him, Father Owen and all the pilgrims.

The next day we headed for the wonders of Venice. That day we had Mass in the Basilica of St. Mark. This was another Blessed feeling listening to Father Owen and seeing the magnificent sights of Venice. That included the Palace, gondolas, the Basilica and so much more. I personally enjoyed walking alone at times to just let the city, people and the blessings of the Mass soak in. As I walked and gazed at all the wonders that city had to offer, I said a personal thanks to God for having this as part of my journey.

Thursday we entered the historic city of Milan. We had Mass at the Duomo dedicated to the Assumption of our Blessed Mother. Later we all went and were in awe at the painting of the Last Supper by Leonardo Da Vinci. That masterpiece made you gasp and stare at it, as if it were speaking to you. The excellent guide we had told such amazing details of the messages the painting was sending and most of us had never realized this before.

Friday we drove to Lake Como and had Mass at the Basilica of St. James. The day was a rainy one, but did not dampen our spirits at all. This place was like a postcard with the beautiful villas on the slopes along the lake, and only four kilometers from Switzerland.

The following day, on Saturday we were still in Milan. Alex came up from Rome to be with us for the day. We had Mass that day at the Basilica of St. Ambrose. When entering the Basilica, we felt the history of the Basilica enter us instead of us entering the Basilica. Under the altar were the bodies of the Bishop Ambrose and two martyrs' on either side of him in their clerical outfits. Then on our drive to Florence we drove along the coast and had a wonderful time in Santa Margherita on the Italian Riviera. Along with taking in the breathtaking sights, I had a chance to touch the Mediterranean Sea, which was quite nice. We entered the beautiful city of Florence around 6 pm. We had another great dinner at a nice restaurant. I was honored to sit with Alex and Father Owen and had a great conversation along with others at the table. Alex had to leave early to get back to Rome. Some of us walked the streets of Florence after dinner. We had a blast talking and getting to know each other even more. The night was more than just sights. It was us enjoying the night and each other's company. I again gave thanks for another Blessed and fun night. After our tour through Florence the next day, we headed for Assisi.

We entered the wonderful city of Assisi of St. Francis. Father Owen gave Mass at the Basilica of the Angels. Another Blessed Basilica where just a month earlier, the Holy Father himself was there. Before entering the Basilica, Father Owen received a call from the Vatican to have Mass with the Holy Father and I was right by him to witness that "Holy call". I was about to have my own Blessed event. I was blessed and honored to do the second

reading at the Mass which was from 2 Timothy. That was my first time reading the Word of the Lord at the pulpit. I have to admit I was a bit nervous, but standing there with Father Owen and being in such a blessed place, the reading went well and I knew the Holy Spirit was with me. That Mass was a blessing and honor I still give thanks for today. After the Mass, we saw the garden of thornless rose garden of St. Francis. One amazing thing to mention was at a statue of St. Francis there, the birds still come and rest by him. One bird, a dove I think, was sitting on the small fence in front of the statue as if guarding and honoring him. The bird never flew away with all of us being there. The following day we had Mass at the Basilica of St. Francis. We then toured the area and soaked in the beauty, history and blessings of it all.

Monday afternoon we drove to the city of Rome. Tuesday morning Father Owen was blessed to celebrate Mass with the Holy Father, Pope Francis and ten other priests at the chapel of Santa Marta. That same morning we had Mass with Father Owen at St. Peter's Basilica at the tomb of Pope Pius X. How blessed were we pilgrims to have mass by Father Owen in St Peter's Basilica who just had mass with the Holy Father himself? We then toured the SCAVI and saw where St. Peter was buried directly under the Basilica.

On our last day of our wonderful pilgrimage, we gathered at St. Peter's Square. We were all filled with excitement and the Holy Spirit to see and listen to Pope Francis. An added treat and honor was to hear them announce, "The Parish of St. Rose of

Lima” for all there to hear. We then toured parts of Rome to see more amazing places, such as the Pantheon. We then had our last Mass in Rome at the church of St. Augustine at the altar where St. Monica is buried. There I had my second Blessing and honor of doing another reading of the Word of the Lord at Mass, with Father Owen and all the pilgrims. I didn’t think that could be topped, but I was wrong. We then went to visit the Pontifical North American College where Alex and Deacon Andrew reside. We were all blessed to take part in the evening prayer with all the seminarians in their chapel. That was hard to put into words. Being blessed to say the prayer with them will forever be in my soul. That night we all had our last dinner together. Alex, Deacon Andrew and two other great Seminarians from the college joined us for dinner. We all gave thanks and enjoyed a wonderful meal. The night wasn’t over yet. Some of us, including Father Owen, Alex, Deacon Andrew and the two other Seminarians topped off that marvelous day with a drink and laughs on the beautiful rooftop of our hotel. We then had to say our good byes and well wishes. It was sad to say good bye to our friends and that great last night. Early the next morning we left Rome and took our flight back home.

My journey in the Catholic faith was so strengthened on this pilgrimage to Italy. I have come so much closer to Jesus and the Church. I knew, Jesus was with us the whole time. I could write forever on how blessed I was for going on this pilgrimage, but in closing I will just mention some of my most treasured moments. The ones meaning the most were the honor and

blessing of doing the readings of the Word of the Lord, and the evening prayer at the college. The others were the walks and talks getting to know all the great pilgrims. The people, places and events were all on the path to a place we are all seeking. To be with God when our earthly journey ends. I will be forever be thankful to God, Father Owen, Stephanie and all the pilgrims for making the pilgrimage a wonderful and blessed part of my journey. I will be forever blessed from the laughs, talks, sites, and Masses of a pilgrimage that took me even closer to Jesus and the Catholic Church.

God Bless to All!!!