



THE PILGRIMAGE

206 Tours Proudly Presents...

 *Prague, Poland,
Medjugorje & Italy*

With Mass Daily and under the Spiritual Direction of...

Fr. Sabino Lattanzio
Group Leaders
Alicia & Victor Araneta



December 13-26, 2011

THE GROUP

SPIRITUAL ARMY OF GOD THE FATHER

LOS ANGELES, CA | LAS VEGAS, NV

AND DEAR FRIENDS FROM MANILA, PHILIPPINES

AND ZURICH, SWITZERLAND

THE PILGRIMS



THERE WERE A TOTAL OF 30 PILGRIMS. THE VERY FIRST PERSON WHO SIGNED UP WAS EVELYN PUA. HER HUSBAND, ROBERT, AFTER SIX MONTHS OR SO, DECIDED TO JOIN HER. HE SAID, HE ALWAYS HAD VISIONS OF EVELYN HAVING PROBLEMS CARRYING HER LUGGAGE FROM AIRPORT TO AIRPORT!



THE ARANETA FAMILY — ALICE, VICTOR & THEIR ONE AND ONLY CHILD, APRIL — WHO TURNED 21 THE DAY BEFORE THE PILGRIMAGE. SHE DIDN'T NEED MOM AND DAD'S PERMISSION TO ENJOY A WINE-TASTING SPREE IN EUROPE!



ARMANDO & NORY JOSE

ARMANDO CELEBRATED HIS 65TH BIRTHDAY IN OCTOBER 2011 AND HIS DOTING WIFE, NORY, THOUGHT THE BEST WAY TO CELEBRATE THAT MILESTONE IS TO BE ON A 14-DAY PILGRIMAGE TO PRAGUE, POLAND, MEDJUGORJE AND ROME!



LOIDA MANCE & JIM WAYDA

LOIDA & JIM LEFT A FEW DAYS AHEAD OF THE PILGRIMS TO EXPLORE JIM'S ROOTS IN HUNGARY. THEY MET UP WITH THE GROUP IN PRAGUE. LOIDA, JUST BEFORE SIGNING UP FOR THE PILGRIMAGE MADE IT KNOWN THAT ONE OF THE MAJOR REASONS FOR HER HUSBAND WANTING TO JOIN THE PILGRIMAGE IS TO CELEBRATE THE CHRISTMAS EVE MASS WITH POPE BENEDICT XVI — A ONCE-IN-A LIFETIME EXPERIENCE!



BEN & VINCIE ONG -- NEVER HAD SECOND-THOUGHTS ABOUT JOINING THIS PILGRIMAGE. FROM THE TIME THEY SAW THE ITINERARY, THE ACTIVITIES LINED UP AND THE PRICE — THEY GOT READY!



FRANK & BETH LIM — THEIR SCHEDULE HAS BEEN FULL SINCE THEY RECENTLY RETIRED. BETH HAD A SICK SISTER TO CARE FOR; FRANK GOT ILL; THEN THEY HAD TO BE AT A DESTINATION WEDDING — THEIR DAUGHTER'S! FRANK GOT A LITTLE CONCERNED WITH THEIR TIGHT SCHEDULE AND THE FINANCES AS WELL — AND THOUGHT OF CANCELING ON THE PILGRIMAGE — BUT THEIR LOVE AND TRUST IN THE INTERCESSION OF MOTHER MARY PREVAILED!



NOVENIA GUTIERREZ & LILIA TUAZON

NOVENIA AND LILIA ARE COUSINS — PRAYING, TRAVELING
AND SHOPPING TILL THEY DROP — TOGETHER!

THE BATINOS — FRANK, LORMA & MARILYN
AND FLORITA GAJITO, TOO.

THIS IS FRANK, LORMA & MARILYN'S SECOND TIME TO A PILGRIMAGE IN ROME.
THE FIRST TIME WAS IN 1978 WHEN MARILYN WAS ABOUT FIVE, SURVIVING HER
WILS TUMOR SURGERY AT AGE 2, THEN LEFT WITH ONLY $\frac{3}{4}$ OF HER RIGHT KIDNEY.
NOW, 30 YEARS OR SO LATER, THEY ARE BACK SEEKING CONTINUED HEALING IN
MEDJUGORJE AND RENEWING THEIR PLEDGE OF THANKSGIVING TO THE GREATEST
PHYSICIAN OF ALL!

AND . . .

AUNT FONG — WHO THEY ALWAYS TAG ALONG FOR PRAYERS AND WORSHIP!



TESS ALMERO

THIS IS TESSIE'S 3RD PILGRIMAGE WITH 206 TOURS, HER 1ST WITHOUT HER HUSBAND WHOM SHE LOST TO CANCER OVER THREE YEARS AGO. IN HER "REFLECTIONS" BELOW, READ ON TESSIE'S GREAT BLESSINGS AT THIS PILGRIMAGE.



SYLVIA MELENDEZ

SYLVIA INJURED HER FOOT DURING THE 1ST LEG OF THE PILGRIMAGE — BUT THAT DIDN'T SEEM TO BOTHER HER AT ALL. SHE USED A CANE AT ONE TIME OR THE OTHER — BUT SHE PERSEVERED THROUGH ALL THE WALKING, EVEN THROUGH THE MUDDY, ROCKY APPARITION HILL IN MEDJUGORJE -- BASKING ALL THE BLESSINGS OF THE PILGRIMAGE IN HER HEART, MIND AND SOUL!



ROM & AU DeGUZMAN — THE COUPLE WHO ALWAYS TOOK TIME OUT OF THEIR BUSY SCHEDULES TO WORSHIP AND SERVE GOD — CARING, COMFORTING AND SHARING THEIR FAITH WITH THE MEN AND WOMEN THAT GOD PUTS ON THEIR PATH!

DOROTHY IKERI - PUT IN HER VACATION REQUEST A YEAR BEFORE THE PILGRIMAGE — SHE DIDN'T WANT TO MISS ON THE NURSES' PRIORITY SCHEDULING!



GLENDAL PERALTA, MARIAPAZ CUA & NANETTE HAGI



GLENDAL THANKS GOD FOR HER BOSS' [MARIPAZ] GENEROSITY — TAKING HER TO ALL PLACES SHE TRAVELS. NANETTE STATES THAT SHE WOULDN'T BE IN THE PILGRIMAGE HAD HER FRIEND MARIPAZ NOT INVITED AND CONVINCED HER TO JOIN!

EILEEN & CHEN CUA —
EVERYONE'S SWEET NIECE AND NEPHEW.
THE PILGRIMS' PRAYER AND WISH FOR THEM —
THEIR LITTLE BUNDLE OF JOY --
SOON!



**AND LAST, BUT DEFINITELY NOT THE LEAST,
OUR SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR, FR. SABINO LATTANZIO**



**FR. SABINO MADE EACH MASS HE CELEBRATED SPECIAL —
FULFILLING OUR INDIVIDUAL QUEST AND THIRST FOR SPIRITUAL WISDOM AND GRACE!**

OUR DAY-TO-DAY ACTIVITIES

TUESDAY -- DECEMBER 13, 2011

THE EXCITEMENT IN EACH OF THE PILGRIMS' [ALL 21 OF US] FACES FROM LOS ANGELES WERE EVIDENT AS EACH ONE ARRIVED AT THE LUFTHANSA AIR WAITING AREA AT LAX. SOME HAD A QUICK BITE FOR LUNCH BUT EVERYONE WAS ON TIME. NEITHER PASSPORT, GREEN CARD NOR BOARDING PASS WAS MISSING.

OUR FLIGHT AND LAYOVER AT FRANKFURT WAS PLEASANT. WE HAD TIME TO EXCHANGE PLEASANTRIES WHILE WAITING FOR EVELYN AND ROBERT PUA, WHO DEPARTED FROM LAS VEGAS, AND FOR OUR FLIGHT TO PRAGUE. THE PUAS' FLIGHT WAS NOT AS SMOOTH AS THE FLIGHT FROM LA, BUT EVERYTHING WENT WELL IN THE END.



WEDNESDAY -- DECEMBER 14, 201

AT AROUND 3:00 O'CLOCK IN THE AFTERNOON, WE WERE MET AT PRAGUE'S RUZYNE'S AIRPORT BY OUR TOUR GUIDE, JANUSZ KULCZYNSKI ("JANUSZ"), OUR SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR, FR. SABINO LATTANZIO, AND THE CUAS [MARIPAZ, CHEN, EILEEN] AND GLENDA WHO CAME ALL THE WAY FROM THE PHILIPPINES, VIA ZURICH, SWITZERLAND. EXCEPT FOR VICTOR, IT WAS THE VERY FIRST TIME FOR ALL OF US TO MEET THEM.

FROM THE AIRPORT, OUR PILGRIMAGE TO ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL CITIES IN THE WORLD BEGAN. THE FIRST STOP WAS THE FAMOUS **CASTLE DISTRICT**. THE MAIN ATTRACTION OF THE CASTLE DISTRICT IS THE **PRAGUE CASTLE** ITSELF -- THE LARGEST CASTLE IN THE WORLD, THE SEAT OF THE CZECH GOVERNMENT, AND WHERE THE COUNTRY'S CROWN JEWELS ARE KEPT. THE CASTLE IS ACTUALLY A COMPLEX OF BUILDINGS. IT'S ALMOST A SMALL TOWN ON ITS OWN WITH A VARIETY OF WALLS, GARDENS AND BUILDINGS. IT WAS FOUNDED IN THE YEAR 880 AND TOOK NEARLY 700 YEARS TO COMPLETE.

JUST LIKE IN MOST TOURIST DESTINATIONS, THE GATES TO THE OTHER PARTS OF THE CASTLE DISTRICT CLOSES AT 5:00 PM -- HENCE, VISITS TO THE OLD ROYAL PALACE, THE ST. VITUS CATHEDRAL AND THE OTHER TOWERS WERE SCHEDULED FOR DAY 2 OF THE PILGRIMAGE.

FROM THE CASTLE DISTRICT, WE WALKED TO **OUR LADY OF LORETO CHURCH** FOR THE FIRST HOLY MASS OF OUR PILGRIMAGE. THE LORETO SANCTUARY IS NOT ONLY ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT PILGRIMAGE SITES IN PRAGUE BUT ALSO ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL BUILDINGS OF THE BOHEMIAN BAROQUE.

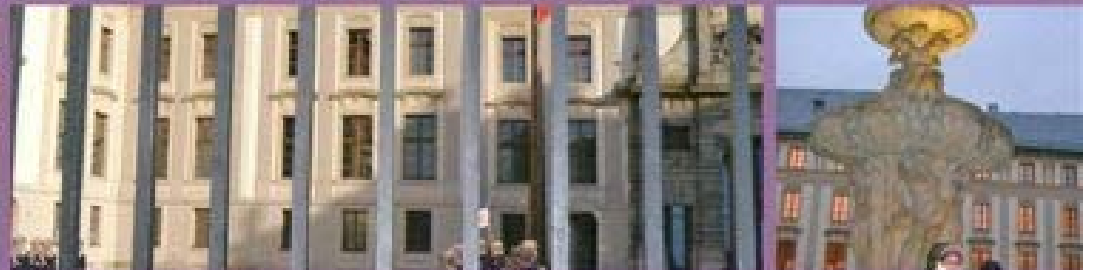
AFTER THE MASS, WE PROCEEDED TO THE COURTYARD WHERE A **DUPLICATE OF THE ORIGINAL HOME¹ OF THE VIRGIN MARY**, STOOD. IT IS A PLAIN STONE BUILDING, WITH A DOOR ON THE NORTH SIDE AND A WINDOW ON THE WEST AND A NICHE WHICH CONTAINS A SMALL BLACK IMAGE OF THE VIRGIN AND CHILD, ADORNED WITH JEWELS. AROUND THE HOUSE IS A TALL MARBLE SCREEN, THE FOUR SIDES OF WHICH REPRESENT THE ANNUNCIATION, THE NATIVITY, THE ARRIVAL OF THE **SANTA CASA** AT LORETO AND THE NATIVITY OF THE VIRGIN, RESPECTIVELY. ACCORDING TO LEGEND THE SANTA CASA WAS SAVED AND TAKEN BY ANGELS TO LORETO, ITALY AROUND 1290.

IT WAS ALSO IN THE COURTYARD THAT WE GOT A GLIMPSE OF THE **BELL TOWER** OF THE CHURCH -- AND WERE TOLD THAT HAD WE TIMED OUR VISIT RIGHT, WE WOULD HAVE HEARD ALL 30 BELLS RING TO THE TUNE OF THE MARIAN SONG, "WE GREET YOU A THOUSAND TIMES".

¹ THE HOUSE WHERE VIRGIN MARY WAS TOLD BY ARCHANGEL GABRIEL THAT SHE WILL GIVE BIRTH TO JESUS, THE SON OF GOD.

ON OUR WAY TO HOTEL CHOPIN, WE WERE TREATED TO A PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE CITY GETTING A GLIMPSE OF THE **CHARLES BRIDGE**, THE OLDEST BRIDGE OVER VLTAVA RIVER IN PRAGUE, THE **ASTRONOMICAL CLOCK²** IN THE **OLD TOWN SQUARE** ON THE **OLD TOWN HALL BUILDING**.

² THE ASTRONOMICAL CLOCK HAS THE EARTH IN THE MIDDLE OF THE UNIVERSE. THE CLOCK WAS CREATED TO SHOW THE THEN PRESUMED ROTATION OF THE SUN AND THE MOON AROUND THE EARTH. THE CLOCK ALSO SHOWS THE MOVEMENT OF THE SUN AND THE MOON IN RELATION TO THE SIGNS OF ZODIAC. THE CLOCK MAKER, HANUŠ, WHO PERFECTED THE CONSTRUCTION IN 1490 WAS - ACCORDING TO LEGEND - MADE BLIND BY THE CITY COUNCIL TO PREVENT HIM FROM MAKING A MORE BEAUTIFUL CLOCK ELSEWHERE.



Arriving in Prague
Castles One

More Castles



Our Lady of Loreto
the Santa Casa



THURSDAY -- DECEMBER 15, 2011

AFTER A SUMPTUOUS FISH ENTRÉE AT HOTEL CHOPIN'S RESTAURANT, JANUSZ ADVISED THAT OUR BUS RIDE TO POLAND THE FOLLOWING DAY WILL BE ABOUT EIGHT HOURS LONG AND THAT WE HAD A FULL SCHEDULE AHEAD OF US.

BREAKFAST, THE NEXT MORNING WAS READY AT 6:30 A.M. WE WERE BACK TO THE PRAGUE CASTLE DISTRICT BY AROUND EIGHT O'CLOCK TOURING THE FAMOUS **St. VITUS CATHEDRAL** -- THE PLACE OF ROYAL CORONATIONS AND ALSO THE LOCATION OF THE REMAINS OF SEVERAL FAMOUS CZECH KINGS. INSIDE THE CATHEDRAL IS ALSO THE FAMOUS **STAINED ROSE WINDOW**,³ THE **St. WENCESLAS CHAPEL** WHERE THE CZECH CORONATION JEWELS ARE KEPT BEHIND THE DOOR WITH THE SEVEN LOCKS (SEVEN IMPORTANT PEOPLE INCLUDING THE CZECH PRESIDENT AND THE CZECH PRIME MINISTER KEEP THE KEYS) ARE KEPT.

IN THE **OLD ROYAL PALACE** -- THE ORIGINAL SEAT OF CZECH RULERS, WE FIRST ENTERED THE **VLADISLAV HALL**, THE LARGEST HIGH-GOTHIC VAULTED⁴ SPACE IN CENTRAL EUROPE, THEN PROCEEDED ON TO THE PALACE CHAPEL AND THRONE ROOM. AT THE END OF THE TOUR IS "**THE STORY OF PRAGUE CASTLE**" EXHIBIT, WHICH FEATURES ARTIFACTS FROM THE CASTLE'S PAST.

WE WITNESSED THE **CHANGING OF THE GUARD** AT THE FRONT GATES OF THE CASTLE, WHICH TAKES PLACE EVERY HOUR. WHILE THESE MEN OBVIOUSLY TAKE THEIR JOB VERY SERIOUSLY, THEY'RE NOT COMPLETELY IMMOBILE. THEY SHIFT A LITTLE, THEIR EYES WANDER, PRESUMABLY ENJOYING THE TOURISTS PASSING BY.

ABOUT HALF OF THE PILGRIMS, WHO HAD NO FASCINATION OR HAVE HAD ENOUGH OF THE CASTLES THE AFTERNOON BEFORE DECIDED THAT THEY SHOULD GET A HEAD-START WALKING TO OUR NEXT STOP. THREE OF THESE PILGRIMS TOOK SOME TIME CHECKING OUT THE STORES ALONG THE WAY EVENTUALLY SEPARATING THEMSELVES FROM THE REST OF THE GROUP [THEY ADMITTED THEY PRAYED HARD THEY WOULD BE FOUND SOON] -- BUT LATER ON CAUGHT UP WITH THE SECOND BATCH OF PILGRIMS TREKKING THEIR WAY TO THE SHRINE OF THE INFANT JESUS OF PRAGUE. SO AT THE 10:00 O'CLOCK MASS, WE WERE ONCE MORE COMPLETE -- ALL 30 PILGRIMS!

³ A ROSE WINDOW (OR CATHERINE WINDOW) IS OFTEN USED AS A GENERIC TERM APPLIED TO A CIRCULAR WINDOW, BUT IS ESPECIALLY USED FOR THOSE FOUND IN CHURCHES OF THE GOTHIC ARCHITECTURAL STYLE.

⁴ A VAULT IS AN ARCHITECTURAL TERM FOR AN ARCHED FORM USED TO PROVIDE A SPACE WITH A CEILING OR ROOF.



and more . . .
of Prague Castle

OUR LADY OF VICTORY CHURCH IS OF EXCEPTIONAL SIGNIFICANCE, NOT ONLY BECAUSE OF ITS ARCHITECTURE AND ARTISTIC DECORATION, BUT IN PARTICULAR BECAUSE IN IT IS WHERE THE FAMOUS **STATUE OF THE INFANT JESUS OF PRAGUE** IS PRESERVED AND VENERATED.

THE **ALTAR OF THE INFANT JESUS** IS SITUATED AT THE RIGHT HAND SIDE, SECOND FROM THE CHURCH ENTRANCE. THE STATUE OF THE INFANT JESUS OF PRAGUE IS DISPLAYED IN A GLASS CASE IN THE CENTER OF THE ALTAR. THE STATUE IS DRESSED IN A ROYAL ROBE AND HAS A CROWN. THE ALTAR IS SURROUNDED BY STATUES OF OUR LADY AND ST. JOSEPH. GOD THE FATHER, REPRESENTED AS AN OLD MAN IN THE UPPER PART OF THE ALTAR, IS SENDING HIS SON TO EARTH. RIGHT AT THE TOP, THE HOLY SPIRIT HOVERS IN THE

FORM OF A DOVE. BESIDE THE ALTAR THERE ARE TABLES WITH THANKS FOR THE MIRACLES RECEIVED FROM THE INFANT JESUS.

THE **MAIN ALTAR** HAS THE FORM OF A VICTORY ARCH. THE STATUES REPRESENT ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS AND ST. TERESA OF AVILA, WHO WAS THE REFORMER OF THE CARMELITE ORDER AND THE LEGENDARY FIRST OWNER OF THE STATUE OF THE INFANT JESUS. ON THE TOP PART OF THE ALTAR, THERE IS A SMALL PICTURE FEATURING A NATIVITY SCENE. THE ORIGINAL OF THIS PICTURE WAS BELIEVED TO HAVE HELPED THE CATHOLIC ARMY AT THE BATTLE OF THE WHITE MOUNTAIN AND IN FACT GAVE THE DEDICATION TO THE CHURCH OF OUR LADY OF VICTORY.

THE **MUSEUM OF THE INFANT JESUS** IS BEHIND THE MAIN ALTAR AT THE RIGHT HAND SIDE. THE MUSEUM

DISPLAYS THE ROBES OF THE INFANT JESUS AND OTHER RELIGIOUS OBJECTS (CHALICES, CROSSES, SCULPTURES, ETC.). AFTER SHOPPING AT THE GIFT SHOP, WE WERE ON OUR WAY TO POLAND, STOPPING FOR A QUICK LUNCH AT SOME FAMILIAR PLACES -- McDONALD'S, KFC AND SUBWAY.

AS WE ENJOYED THE BEAUTIFUL COUNTRYSIDE EN ROUTE TO KRACOW, WE PRAYED THE ROSARY, THE DIVINE MERCY, SANG SOME SONGS AND WATCHED DVDs ON THE LIFE OF SAINT FAUSTINA AND BLESSED JOHN PAUL II.

DINNER, CHIT-CHATS, PHOTO-SHOOTS AND THUNDEROUS LAUGHTER AT GALAXY HOTEL'S RESTAURANT WAS GREAT!



Infant Jesus Shrine
Lady of Victory

FRIDAY -- DECEMBER 16, 2011

AFTER BREAKFAST, WE WERE OFF TO **WADOWICE**, A SMALL CITY 30 MILES SOUTHWEST OF KRAKOW, THE **BIRTHPLACE OF BLESSED POPE JOHN PAUL II**. OUR FIRST STOP WAS THE BAROQUE **CHURCH OF THE PRESENTATION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY**, WHERE FR. SABINO CELEBRATED A VERY SPECIAL MASS FOR THE GROUP. AFTER A HOMILY WHICH TOUCHED OUR HEARTS DEEPLY, HE ASKED ALL OF US TO COME UP TO THE ALTAR FORMING A CIRCLE HOLDING EACH OTHER'S HANDS, SLOWLY AND MEANINGFULLY RECITING OUR FATHER.

IT WAS IN THE CHURCH OF THE PRESENTATION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY THAT JOHN PAUL II WAS BAPTIZED AND CONFIRMED A CATHOLIC. HE SERVED AS AN ALTAR BOY AND PRAYED DAILY BEFORE THE MIRACULOUS PICTURE OF OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL HELP.

THE CHURCH'S GOTHIC ALTAR AND SEATS FOR THE CLERGY AND CHOIR DATES FROM THE 15TH CENTURY WHILE THE LATE-BAROQUE NAVE⁵ AND AISLES WERE BUILT IN THE 1790S. THE LEFT AISLE CONTAINS A **BAPTISMAL FONT** WHERE THE BABY KAROL WOJTYLA WAS BAPTIZED.

VERY NEAR THE CHURCH OF THE PRESENTATION IS THE **HOUSE WHERE THE VICAR OF CHRIST WAS BORN AND RAISED**. THE PLACE HAS BEEN TURNED INTO A MUSEUM. IT IS UNFORTUNATE THAT AT THE TIME OF OUR VISIT, THE MUSEUM WAS CLOSED FOR MODERNIZATION TILL THE END OF 2012. JANUSZ, HOWEVER, ARRANGED TICKETS FOR US TO THE **WADOWICE MUNICIPAL MUSEUM**, OPPOSITE JOHN PAUL II'S FAMILY HOUSE. THE MUSEUM EXHIBITS THE POPE'S VARIED MEMORABILIA.

AFTER CHECKING OUT THE POPE'S FAMILY PICTURES AS WELL AS HIS PERSONAL BELONGINGS — SKIS, A RUCKSACK, A CAP, A PRAYER BOOK, SCAPULARS, ETC. PLUS PHOTOS FROM HIS THREE VISITS TO WADOWICE AS THE POPE, JANUSZ TOOK US TO A NEARBY COFFEE SHOP FOR A TASTE OF POPE JOHN PAUL'S FAVORITE **"CRÈME CAKE."**

⁵ IN CHURCH ARCHITECTURE, THE CENTRAL APPROACH TO THE MAIN ALTAR.



Presentation Church
of Bl. Virgin Mary

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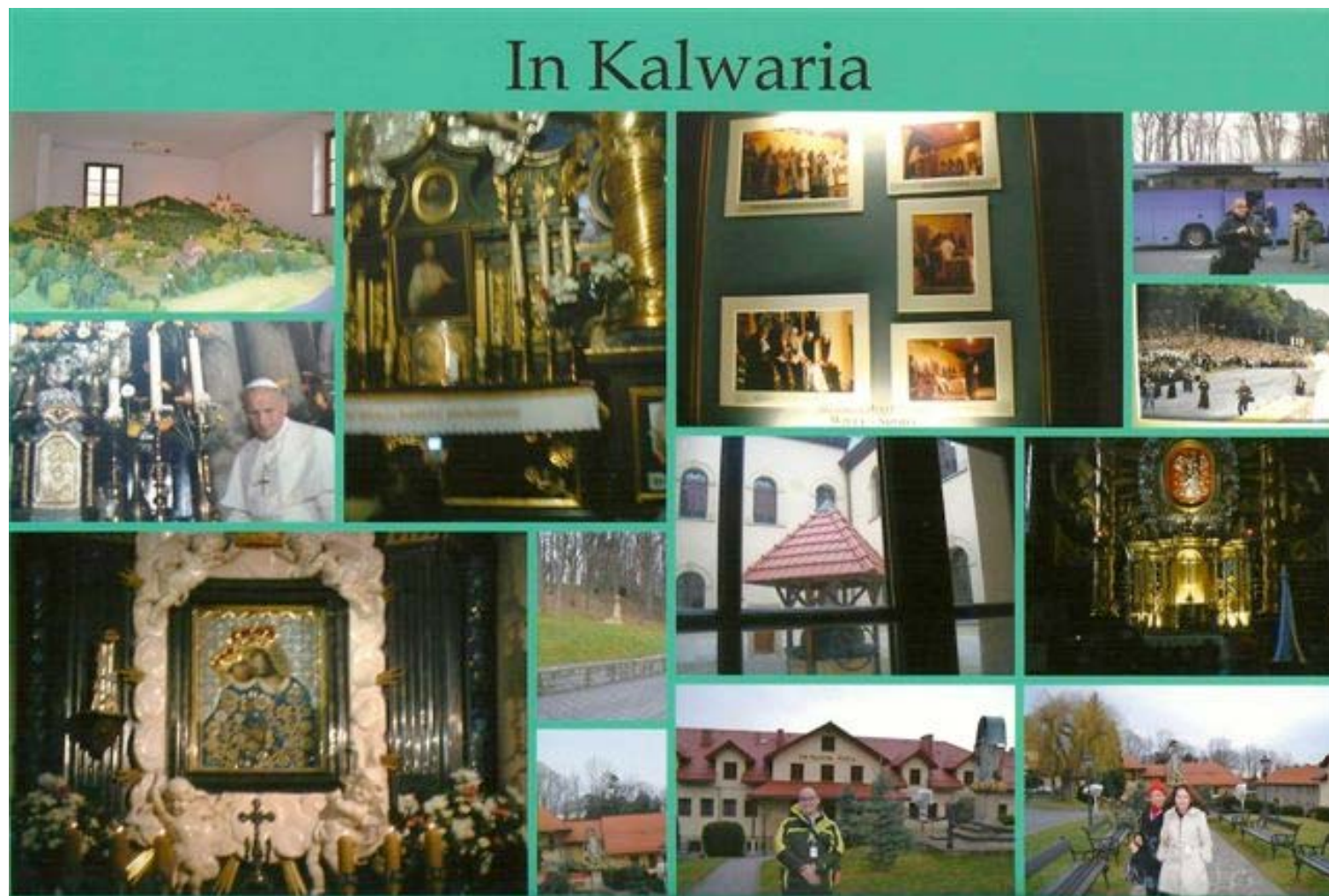
CALVARY SANCTUARY IN KALWARIA ZEBRZYDOWSKA

THE KALWARIA ZEBRZYDOWSKA, IS NOT IN OUR ITINERARY BUT JANUSZ, A TRUE-BLOODED POLE, THOUGHT A PILGRIMAGE IN POLAND WILL NOT BE COMPLETE WITHOUT

VISITING THE PLACE. THE KALWARIA IS POLAND'S FIRST CALVARY SANCTUARY ESTABLISHED IN 1600 IN THE CARPATHIAN FOOTHILLS 33 KM SOUTHWEST FROM KRAKOW, TO PROVIDE PILGRIMS WITH A SUBSTITUTE OF JERUSALEM. IN THE KALWARIA, WAS THE 17TH-CENTURY BAROQUE **CHURCH OF THE ANGELIC MOTHER OF GOD** ADJOINING THE **FRANCISCAN MONASTERY** OF THE SAME AGE. THE MOST WORSHIPED PLACE IS THE **CHAPEL WITH OUR LADY OF KALWARIA MIRACULOUS PICTURE**, FOLLOWED BY THE **CHAPEL OF ST. ANTHONY OF PADUA**.

THE CHURCH OF ANGELIC MOTHER OF GOD IS THE STARTING POINT OF SEVERAL OVERLAPPING PILGRIMAGE CIRCUITS -- **THE PASSION**

PATH LAID OUT IN HILLY WOODLAND FROM ONE BAROQUE CHAPEL TO ANOTHER. EACH OF THE 42 TINY CHURCHES IS DIFFERENT AND REPRESENTS A JERUSALEM SITE PROMINENT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND/OR THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION WHILE HILLS AND STREAMS BEAR SUCH NAMES AS ZION, GOLGOTHA, AND MOUNT OF OLIVES. ACCORDING TO JANUSZ, ON **GOOD FRIDAY**, THE FAMOUS TRADITIONAL **LIFELIKE PASSION PLAY** ARE ENACTED IN THE SCENERY OF THE SANCTUARY, DRAWING HUGE CROWDS EVERY YEAR.



FROM KALWARIA, WE CONTINUED TOWARDS LAGIEWINSKI TO THE **SANCTUARY OF THE LORD'S MERCY** — WHERE THE **LORD'S MERCY ICON** IS IN THE HEART OF THE SANCTUARY; THE 19TH-CENTURY BRICK **CONVENT OF THE SISTER OF GOD'S**

FAUSTINA AND OFFERED AND PRAYED ON THE WRITTEN PETITIONS OF FRIENDS AND FAMILY BACK HOME.



MOTHER OF MERCY. IT IS ALSO IN THIS CONVENT'S CHAPEL THAT THE **RELICS OF SAINT FAUSTINA** ARE FOUND.

AT 3:00 P.M., WE JOINED THE SISTERS AND THE LOCALS PRAY THE DIVINE MERCY CHAPLET, AFTER WHICH WE WERE GIVEN THE CHANCE TO KISS A RELIC OF SAINT

AFTER A QUICK LUNCH AT THE SANCTUARY'S CAFETERIA, WE TOURED THE SPACIOUS MAIN CHURCH, AN ARRAY OF CHAPELS, THE VIEWING TOWER, AND THE MODERN PASTORAL LODGE.

AT DUSK, WE PRAYED AT A PATIO GARDEN WITH THE DIVINE MERCY STATUE, BEFORE PROCEEDING TO, OF COURSE, THE GIFT SHOPS.

FOR ABOUT AN HOUR OR SO, THE PILGRIMS WERE IN A CHAPEL FOR A TALK ON SPIRITUALITY BY ONE OF THE SISTERS OF GOD'S MOTHER OF MERCY.

ON OUR WAY BACK TO KRACOW, JANUSZ MADE GOOD HIS PROMISE TO SHOW US **POPE JOHN PAUL'S TOMBSTONE** AT SOME HUGE SHRINE [WHICH WAS STILL IN ITS LAST PHASE OF CONSTRUCTION]. THE POPE'S TOMBSTONE WAS BROUGHT TO KRACOW FROM ROME AFTER HE WAS BEATIFIED.

ISN'T IT INTERESTING THAT TODAY WE STARTED WITH BLESSED JOHN PAUL'S BIRTH AND ENDED THE DAY AT HIS TOMBSTONE?

SATURDAY -- DECEMBER 17, 2011

AS HAD ALWAYS BEEN, OUR DAY STARTED EARLY FOR A FULL-DAY TOUR OF THE **JASNA GORA SHRINE IN CZESTOCHOWA**. WE WERE PLEASANTLY SURPRISED TO HEAR OUR TOUR GUIDE, FR. SIMON, SPEAK SOME GOOD TAGALOG, BEING ASSIGNED IN THE PHILIPPINES FOR SEVERAL YEARS! FR. SIMON STATED THAT THE SHRINE IS THE THIRD-LARGEST CATHOLIC PILGRIMAGE SITE IN THE WORLD AND HOME TO THE BELOVED **MIRACULOUS ICON OF OUR LADY OF CZESTOCHOWA**, MORE COMMONLY KNOWN AS THE **BLACK MADONNA**.

WE TOURED THE BAROQUE BASILICA, NAMED THE **CHURCH OF THE HOLY CROSS AND NATIVITY OF MARY** -- IT HAS THREE AISLES AND CEILINGS DECORATED WITH ACCOUNTS OF THE MIRACLES OF OUR LADY OF CZESTOCHOWA. THE BASILICA WAS UNDER RENOVATION AT THIS TIME AND THE MANY ALTARS WERE CORDONED OFF WITH SCAFFOLDINGS AND PLASTIC. AT THE **MONASTERY'S TREASURY**, WE SAW A RICH STOREHOUSE OF VOTIVE OFFERINGS GIVEN TO THE BLACK MADONNA OVER THE CENTURIES TO THE PRESENT DAY. GIFTS RANGE FROM SWORDS AND SCEPTERS TO ROSARIES MADE OF DRIED BREAD IN CONCENTRATION CAMPS. KINGS, QUEENS AND POPES HAVE DONATED A VAST ARRAY OF PRECIOUS OBJECTS. ALSO DONATED TO THE VIRGIN ARE TEAR-GAS CYLINDERS USED BY THE COMMUNISTS AGAINST SOLIDARITY PROTESTORS IN THE 1980S, AND THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE WON BY LECH WALESA IN 1983.

AT 2:00 P.M., WE WITNESSED THE ROYAL AND TOUCHING UNVEILING OF THE ICON OF OUR LADY OF CZESTOCHOWA!

OUR LADY'S ICON IS KEPT HIDDEN BEHIND A SILVER SCREEN. THE FAITHFUL AND THE TOURISTS JAM IN TO SEE HER AND HEAR THE SERVICE THAT ACCOMPANIES HER UNVEILING -- A SUDDEN, THUNDERCLAP OF A TIMPANI ROLL HIT THE AIR, FOLLOWED BY A HARMONIOUS TRUMPET FANFARE -- A FABULOUS RITUAL USHERING IN THE CELEBRATION OF HOLY MASS, WITH FR. SABINO CONCELEBRATING WITH A LOCAL PRIEST.

THE ALTAR WITH THE ICON IS SEPARATED FROM THE REST OF THE CHAPEL OF THE BLACK MADONNA WITH A FLOOR-TO-CEILING IRON SCREEN. THE ICON SHOWS A SERIOUS MARY HOLDING THE INFANT JESUS ON HER LEFT ARM AND GESTURING TOWARDS HIM WITH HER RIGHT HAND. THE VIRGIN'S GAZE IS INTENSE -- SHE SEEMS TO LOOK RIGHT AT US! THE IMAGE IS IN A GOLD FRAME DECORATED WITH HUNDREDS OF PRECIOUS JEWELS, AND STANDS ON AN ALTAR OF EBONY AND SILVER.

WE SANG MASS HYMNS WITH OUR CANTOR, MARILYN. BUT FOR COMMUNION, ONLY SHE SANG *HOW BEAUTIFUL IS THE BODY OF CHRIST*. THE GROUP HAS HEARD MARILYN'S BEAUTIFUL RENDITION OF THIS SONG A NUMBER OF TIMES DURING OUR MASSES IN LA -- BUT TODAY, IT WAS AS IF SHE WAS LIFTED ABOVE THE GROUND BY ANGELS AS SHE SANG HER HEART AND SOUL TO OUR LORD AND OUR LADY -- WE WERE TOLD THAT THE LOCALS BEHIND THE FLOOR-TO-CEILING IRON SCREEN HAD TEARS IN THEIR EYES!

AFTER JASNA GORA, WE WERE OFF TO **KRAKOW'S CHRISTMAS MARKET** -- THE HUGE MARKET SQUARE IN THE OLD TOWN'S CENTRE. IT IS LARGELY FILLED WITH WOODEN STALLS OFFERING A VARIETY OF GIFTS -- FROM MOUTH WATERING DELICACIES TO TRADITIONAL ITEMS SUCH AS WOOLEN CLOTHES, LOCALLY-CRAFTED JEWELRY, AND OF COURSE, CHRISTMAS ORNAMENTS! THE PILGRIMS WENT OFF TO THEIR DESTINATION OF CHOICE -- MOST WENT SHOPPING, THOSE WHO WERE SPIRITUALLY-FULL BUT TEMPORALLY HUNGRY HAD A TASTE OF POLAND'S FAMOUS SAUSAGES, NUTS, CANDIES AND PASTRIES; SOME WATCHED A LOCAL SHOW WHERE MOST PERFORMERS SANG ENGLISH CHRISTMAS CAROLS, AND SOME WENT BACK TO THE MEETING PLACE [BY THE FRONT ENTRANCE OF MARY'S BASILICA] QUITE EARLY BUT IN TIME FOR THE EVENING MASS!

OUR LAST NIGHT IN KRACOW -- AND THOUGH WE WERE STILL "HIGH" SAVORING THE MANY SPIRITUAL MANIFESTATIONS OF MOTHER MARY'S PRESENCE DURING THE DAY, WE WERE SADDENED BY THE THOUGHT THAT WE WILL SOON BE SAYING GOODBYE TO A NEW-FOUND FRIEND -- JANUSZ. WE WILL MISS HIS PLEASANT DISPOSITION, HIS FUNNY EUROPEAN CULTURE PUNS, HIS CARING WAYS -- STOPPING THE BUS FOR OUR COMFORT BREAKS [AND PAYING ALL OUR "FEES"] AS MANY TIMES AS POSSIBLE!

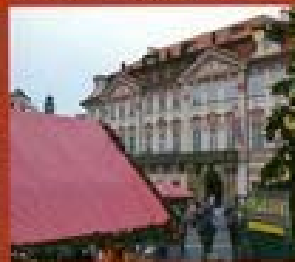


At Jasna Gora



Mass at Chapel of
Lady of Czestochowa

Kracow's Christmas Market Square



SUNDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2011

WE WERE ALL UP AT ABOUT 3:00 O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING TO PICK UP OUR BREAKFAST IN BROWN BAGS AND LOAD OUR LUGGAGE FOR OUR 6:00 A.M. FLIGHT TO MUNICH. JANUSZ WAITED UNTIL THE LAST OF THE PILGRIMS HAS CHECKED IN. IT WAS ABOUT AN HOUR AND A HALF FLIGHT, AN HOUR WAIT TO BOARD OUR FLIGHT TO CROATIA, AND OVER AN HOUR FLIGHT TO SPLIT AIRPORT.

SLAVENKA JELAVIC ("SLAVENKA"), OUR TOUR GUIDE AND OUR COACH DRIVER, WERE AT THE AIRPORT'S PICK-UP LOT WITH THE WELCOME SIGN "206 TOURS". ON THE WAY TO MEDJUGORJE, IT WAS RATHER A CHALLENGE TO KEEP OUR EYES AND EARS OPEN TO LISTEN TO SLAVENKA'S HISTORY, DESCRIPTION, TRADITIONS, ETC. OF THE SITES ALONG THE WAY. WHEN IT WAS TIME FOR OUR ROSARY AND EVEN BEFORE THE THIRD MYSTERY, ALMOST EVERYONE WAS DOZING OFF FROM ONLY A FEW HOURS SLEEP TO CATCH OUR EARLY FLIGHT FROM POLAND THAT MORNING!

AT THE **BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA** BORDER THOUGH, MOST IF NOT ALL, WERE AWAKE WONDERING WHY OUR ENTRY TO CROATIA WAS TAKING TOO LONG!

OUR ACCOMMODATION AT PENSION DUBROVNIK WAS VERY MODEST, BUT CLEAN AND QUITE COMFORTABLE. FROM OUR ROOM'S BALCONY, YOU GET A FULL VIEW OF **SAINT JAMES CHURCH**, THE FOCUS AND THE CENTRE OF BOTH SACRAMENTAL AND PRAYER LIFE, NOT ONLY FOR ITS PARISHIONERS, BUT FOR THE PILGRIMS AS WELL.

AFTER WE CARRIED OUR LUGGAGE TO OUR RESPECTIVE ROOMS AND FRESHENED UP A BIT, WE WALKED UP ACROSS THE STREET FROM OUR HOTEL TO THE **BRONZE STATUE OF THE RISEN SAVIOR**. SLAVENKA POINTED TO US OIL OOZING OUT OF THE RIGHT THIGH OF THE STATUE.

STROLLING ALONG THE WALKWAYS AROUND THE AREA AT DUSK, YOU FEEL A BREEZE OF CALMNESS AND PEACE. AS YOU GO TOWARDS THE CHURCH, YOU CAN'T MISS THE **25 CONFESSIONALS** AND THE LONG LINE OF THE FAITHFUL SEEKING GOD'S FORGIVENESS. I'VE NEVER SEEN SO MANY CONFESSIONALS UNTIL MEDJUGORJE AND AM JUST AWED AT THE LENGTH OF THE LINE FOR EACH OF THE CONFESSIONALS!

AS THE LINE TO THE CONFESSIONALS WAS VERY SLOWLY EASING UP, THE CROWD GOING TO THE CHURCH WAS STARTING TO INCREASE IN NUMBER SO WE DECIDED IT WAS BETTER TO BE RATHER EARLY FOR THE SIX O'CLOCK EVENING MASS TO GET SEATS CLOSE TO THE MAIN ALTAR. THE PRAYERS WERE IN CROATIAN AND WE SAW PEOPLE WITH HEADSETS AHEAD OF TIME — SO THERE MUST BE A FREQUENCY WHERE YOU CAN GET THE ENGLISH VERSION OF THE MASS. SINCE WE DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT THE HEADSETS, WE REFERRED TO OUR MAGNIFICATS ALL THROUGH THE DURATION OF THE MASS. IT WAS AT COMMUNION TIME, WHEN WE REALIZED HOW JAMPACKED THE CHURCH WAS! AND IT WAS INDEED A CHALLENGE GETTING OUT OF THE CHURCH AS EVERY INCH OF SPACE AVAILABLE WAS WITH A LIVE BODY!

AS WE GOT BACK TO THE PENSION HOUSE — A SUMPTUOUS DINNER WAS WAITING FOR US — AND EVERY MEAL THEREAFTER FOR THE NEXT TWO DAYS. FRESH EGGS AT BREAKFAST WAS FRIED WITH THE YOLK INTACT IN A PERFECT CIRCLE! THEY SERVED THE BEST PORK AND FISH DISHES!

Medjugorje!



MONDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2011

MOST PILGRIMS WERE AT THE 6:00 A.M. MASS TODAY.

AFTER BREAKFAST, WE WERE OFF TO AN ORPHANAGE A FEW MILES AWAY. SLAVENKA WAS HOPING **VICKA IVANKOVIC** ("VICKA"), ONE OF THE SIX VISIONARIES, WILL BE WELL ENOUGH TO GIVE US AN AUDIENCE. SHE HAD A RECENT BACK SURGERY AND HAS NOT BEEN MEETING PILGRIMS IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS OR SO.

VICKA ARRIVED JUST A FEW MINUTES AFTER WE CONCLUDED OUR ROSARY PRAYERS. SHE SHARED WITH US MOTHER MARY'S BEAUTIFUL MESSAGE OF RECONCILIATION, PEACE AND LOVE, WHILE SLAVENKA TRANSLATED IN ENGLISH. VICKA THEN INVITED US TO PRAY WITH HER AS SHE PRAYED TO OUR MOTHER FOR ALL OUR PETITIONS. VICKA STOOD STILL BY THE MAIN ALTAR PRAYING — IT WAS A GOOD 20 MINUTES — OF PEACE AND QUIET, AS WE INDIVIDUALLY, AND AS A GROUP, EXPERIENCED HEAVENLY PRESENCE!

FR. SABINO CELEBRATED MASS, AND IN PLACE OF THE HOMILY, HE ASKED THE PILGRIMS TO SHARE THEIR STORIES OF FAITH AND WHERE THEY ARE IN THEIR JOURNEY SEEKING GOD. IT WAS EMOTIONAL FOR MOST OF US AS WE LISTENED TO EACH OF OUR OWN STORIES.

OUTSIDE, WE WERE NOT AWARE THAT RAIN WAS POURING HARD — AS IT WAS THE NIGHT BEFORE. AS WE BOARDED OUR MOTOR COACH FOR THE **APPARITION HILL** SLAVENKA WARNED THAT BECAUSE OF THE WATER RUN-OFF ALONG THE APPARITION HILL, THE CLIMB MAY NOT BE SAFE. BUT DESPITE THIS WARNING, WITH WALKING STICKS, UMBRELLAS AND PONCHOS IN HAND, WE STARTED OUR TREK. THE NARROW ROAD WAS INDEED WET AND SLIPPERY. MOST OF US GOT ONLY UP TO THE FOOT OF THE HILL WHERE MOST DID SHOPPING FOR SOUVENIRS. BEN WENT FARTHER THAN THE FOOT OF THE HILL TO CHECK OUT THE CLIMB AND CAME BACK WITH THE VERDICT THAT SAFETY WAS A COMPROMISE. BUT TWO BRAVE, DETERMINED SOULS HAD TO DO WHAT THEY HAVE BEEN INSTRUCTED TO DO, VICTOR AND FRANK PROCEEDED, AS SLAVENKA LED THEM UP THE HILL. AS APRIL WATCHED HER FATHER CLIMB THE HILL WITH HIS FASHIONABLE SNEAKERS AND HIS ELECTRIC BLUE PONCHO, SHE FELT A PROMPTING TO FOLLOW SUIT. MARILYN, THEN NOTICING THAT APRIL HAS GONE, HURRIED UP THE HILL TO FOLLOW APRIL.

THESE TWO FATHER AND DAUGHTER TEAMS SAID IT WAS INDEED A HARD CLIMB AS THE ROAD WAS STEEP, ROCKY AND WET! BUT THEY PRAYED THE ROSARY FOR ALL THOSE WHO COULD NOT CLIMB AND THEY ASKED MOTHER MARY TO BE WITH THEM! THE HIKE DOWN WAS YET ANOTHER CHALLENGE BUT THEY KNEW A FORCE WAS WITH THEM AS THEY PICKED UP LITTLE KEEPSAKE ROCKS FOR THE REST OF THE PILGRIMS. FOR THESE SOULS, TO KNOW THAT THEIR FEET HAVE LEFT THEIR MARKS ON THIS HOLY MOUNTAIN IS TO FEEL THAT THE PRAYERS AND PETITIONS THEY ONCE BROUGHT TO MEDJUGORJE ARE STILL LIFTING UP FROM THE ROCKY STONES TO OUR LADY EACH EVENING THAT SHE VISITS THE VILLAGE!

IN THE EARLY EVENING, MOST OF US WERE BACK AT THE SHRINE FOR A MEDITATIVE STROLL ALONG THE WALKWAYS. WE WENT FOR SILENT ADORATION OF JESUS IN THE BLESSED SACRAMENT AT THE **ADORATION CHAPEL** THANKING HIM FOR OUR EXPERIENCE OF MEDJUGORJE.

testimonies for the
Glory of God!



Vicka!



Apparition Hill The Brave Four



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2011

WE WERE BACK AT SAINT JAMES FOR THE **STATIONS OF THE CROSS** BUILT AROUND THE BRONZE STATUE OF THE RISEN SAVIOR FOR OUR GROUP PRAYER. THESE STATIONS, WE WERE TOLD WERE SPECIFICALLY BUILT FOR PILGRIMS WHO CANNOT CLIMB CROSS MOUNTAIN.

AFTER THE HOLY MASS, WE ASSEMBLED FOR A TALK BY **FR. SVETOZAR KRALJEVIC ("FR. SVET")** – HE HAS BEEN ASSISTING IN THE VILLAGE, HEARING CONFESSIONS, GIVING TALKS IN ENGLISH, COUNSELING, AND SERVING IN ANY CAPACITY THAT WAS NEEDED.

FR. SVET, SHARED WITH THE PILGRIMS HIS REFLECTIONS OF THE MESSAGE OF MEDJUGORJE, PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE AS WE LIVE OUR LIVES EACH DAY, HOW DO WE CREATE A "HOLY ENVIRONMENT" IN OUR HEARTS AND HOMES, HOW DO WE PROTECT OURSELVES AND OUR CHILDREN FROM THE PERVASIVE WORLD VIEW, AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SURRENDER ONE'S LIFE TO GOD.

SLAVENKA MADE GOOD HER PROMISE YESTERDAY THAT SHOULD THE RAIN STOP AND THE SUN SET THE NEXT DAY, SHE WILL DO A SECOND CLIMB FOR THOSE WHO WISH TO EXPERIENCE THE APPARITION HILL. AND THEY DID. FOR SOME IT TOOK A LONG TIME. FOR OTHERS, IT TOOK AN EVEN LONGER TIME -- NEEDING ANOTHER HAND TO HOLD AND SUPPORT THEM. THERE WERE THOSE WHO NEVER EVEN THOUGHT THEY CAN MAKE IT CONSIDERING THE CONDITION OF THEIR KNEES, LEGS AND FEET. AND FOR THOSE, WHO WERE TOO AFRAID TO SLIP, FALL OR BREAK A BONE – IT BRINGS COMFORT AND HOPE THAT MEDJUGORJE IS LIKE HOME WHERE, SOON, THEY HOPE TO RETURN AND TAKE ANOTHER CHANCE TO CLIMB THE HILL OF OUR LADY OF PEACE!

AT OUR LATE LUNCH TODAY, THE PILGRIMS TALKED ENDLESSLY ABOUT THEIR CLIMB TO THE APPARITION HILL – THEY WERE LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN WHO HAD JUST RECEIVED A MOST PRECIOUS GIFT FROM THEIR MOTHER - THEIR HEAVENLY MOTHER!

AS I PREPARED TO LEAVE MEDJUGORJE, I FELT THE TOWN'S DEEP AND TOUCHING SPIRITUALITY. WE, LIKE ALL THE OTHER PILGRIMS AND SOUL-SEARCHERS, COME FROM FAR AND WIDE TO PARTAKE IN THE SANCTITY OF THE PLACE, MEET WITH VISIONARIES AND SIMPLY ENJOY ITS GRACE-FILLED AMBIANCE. VERY SOON, I HOPE TO BE BACK AND DURING WHICH TIME, I WILL STAY MORE THAN TWO DAYS, AS THE LONGER YOU STAY THE MORE YOU CAN MAKE TIME FOR PERSONAL PRAYER, REFLECTION AND RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES IN THE COMMUNITY.

IN THE AFTERNOON WE WERE OFF TO **DUBROVNIK** FOR OUR OVERNIGHT FERRY RIDE TO ITALY. NOT ONLY DID WE SING CHRISTMAS CAROLS, WE ALSO DID A HAPPY BIRTHDAY SONG TO OUR DEAR SLAVENKA – WHOSE DEEP SPIRITUALITY, WE WILL REMEMBER FOR A LONG TIME.

THE **JADROLINJA** – THE FERRY THAT TOOK OUR BLESSED JOHN PAUL II IN HIS PAPAL VISIT TO MEDJUGORJE! ITS CABINS WERE CLAUSTROPHOBICALLY TINY – WITH ONLY TWO COUPLES HAVING THE LUXURY OF A SMALL WINDOW. MOST DIDN'T TAKE A SHOWER THAT EVENING OR MORNING FOR FEAR OF THE CONDITION OF THE WATER. BUT NONE OF THE PILGRIMS TOOK SUCH INCONVENIENCE NEGATIVELY. MOST OF US ENJOYED THE COMEDIC SITUATION OF SLEEPING BESIDE OR ON TOP OF OUR LUGGAGE OR JUST STAYING PUT WHERE WE WERE AFTER WE TOOK THEM INSIDE THE CABIN.

I HEARD A WIFE SAY IT WAS FINE SUBSTITUTE FOR THE LONG HOURS OF TRAVEL BY MOTOR COACH HAVING TO STOP A FEW TIMES FOR A LONG LINE TO COMFORT BREAKS! WE HAD FUN AT DINNER TIME EVEN IF THE FOOD WAS MUCH TO BE DESIRED -- AS WE TRIED TO ADJUST TO THE FEELING OF SWINGING ON A HAMMOCK!

AFTER DINNER, WE SPENT A FEW MOMENTS OF PRAYER IN THE **FERRY'S CHAPEL**, AFTER WHICH MOST OF US CONGREGATED AT THE LOBBY AREAS LAUGHING OUT LOUD AT OUR "CRUISE-Y" TRANSFER TO ITALY.



the second chance
at Apparition Hill



Jadrolinija's
Marko Polo!

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2012

OUR TOUR GUIDE, VALENTINA IANNI (“VALENTINA”), AND OUR DRIVER, ANGELO, WERE AT THE PIERS OF ANCONA, ITALY BY THE TIME OUR FERRY DOCKED. VALENTINA IS A BEAUTIFUL, YOUNG, AND VIBRANT WOMAN. ANGELO LOOKED A LITTLE MATURE, IS VERY PLEASANT AND ALWAYS READY TO OFFER THE PILGRIMS A SHOT OF ESPRESSO TO KEEP US WARM AND AWAKE!

WE HAD A PIT STOP AT THIS INTERESTING MARKET WITH GIANT CHOCOLATE BARS AND LOLLIPOPS — WHICH OF COURSE, ATTRACTED MOST OF THE LADIES TO TAKE BACK HOME TO THE U.S.!

THE EUCHARISTIC MIRACLE

OUR NEXT STOP WAS **LANCIANO**, THE PLACE OF THE **“EUCHARISTIC MIRACLE,”** SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATIONS OF WHICH CONCLUDED THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE MIRACLE.

FR. SABINO’S CELEBRATION OF THE MASS WAS AT A SMALL CHAPEL ADJACENT TO THE MAIN ALTAR OF THE CHURCH OF SAN FRANCESCO. THE PRECIOUS ***MONSTRANCE WHICH PRESERVES THE HOLY RELICS*** WAS VISIBLE FROM THE PEWS WHERE WE WERE SEATED. AS WE WAITED FOR FR. SABINO TO PREPARE FOR THE MASS THERE WAS UTTER SILENCE — PILGRIMS CONCENTRATING, VENERATING, BASKING ON THE LIVE MEMORY OF GOD’S GIFT TO HIS CREATION.

LOOKING BACK AT OUR 2005 PILGRIMAGE, WHERE WE ACTUALLY HAD THE BLESSED OPPORTUNITY TO CLIMB UP HIGH FROM THE BACK OF THE ALTAR TO SEE AND SAVOR THE SCENT OF THE EUCHARISTIC MIRACLE IN SANTAREM, I PRAISED AND THANKED MY JESUS, AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN, THAT HE COMES ALIVE TO ALL OF US PERSONALLY IN THE CONSECRATED HOST THAT WE CONSUME AT HOLY MASS!

FOR LUNCH, VALENTINA LED US TO A RESTAURANT, UPON ENTRY THEREIN, WE TOOK DELIGHT IN THE AROMA OF PASTA IN TRUFFLE SAUCE! THE SERVERS AND THE OWNER [NOW OF THE THIRD GENERATION] WERE WARM AND KIND.

SAN GIOVANNI, ROTONDO

WE DROVE ON TO SAN GIOVANNI, ROTONDO WHERE WE HAD A MARVELOUS ACCOMMODATION AT HOTEL GRAN PARADISO. A SPECTACULAR VIEW OF THE SNOW-CAPPED SAN GIOVANNI VILLAGE WAS A REAL TREAT BOTH WHEN YOU WAKE UP IN THE MORNING AND RETIRE TO A RESTFUL SLEEP AT NIGHT. AFTER DINNER, MOST PILGRIMS WOULD SPEND BONDING TIME AT THE LOUNGE/BAR OVER A CUP OF COFFEE, CHOCOLATE OR TEA. CONVERSATIONS, OFTENTIMES, WOULD CENTER ON THE PILGRIMS’ REFLECTIONS ON THE EVENTS TAKING PLACE ON EACH AND EVERY LEG OF THE JOURNEY.

Lanciano



Lanciano's Eucharistic Miracle



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2012

AFTER AN EARLY BREAKFAST, WE TOOK A LOCAL BUS FOR A MASS AT THE **TOMB OF PADRE PIO [THE INITIAL CRYPT]**. WE MEDITATED A WHILE ON THE ORIGINAL TOMB OF PADRE PIO WHERE THERE WAS A LIFE-SIZED JESUS IN THE TOMB SITE.

IT WAS AT THIS MASS TODAY, THAT FR. SABINO INTRODUCED US TO PADRE PIO'S TOUCHING PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION — **STAY WITH ME LORD**.

AS WE EXITED THE CHAPEL, WE WENT THROUGH THE **SACRISTY WHERE PADRE PIO CHANGED AND KEPT HIS VESTMENTS**.

WE WERE ALL EAGER TO SET FOOT WHERE PADRE PIO'S BODY WAS MOVED -- INSIDE THE PADRE PIO PILGRIMAGE CHURCH, [NEWER **CHURCH OF OUR LADY OF GRACE [SANTA MARIA DELLE GRAZIE]**], WHERE WE ALSO EXPECTED TO SEE HIS CELL, HIS CONFESSIONAL, THE CRUCIFIX FROM WHICH HE RECEIVED THE STIGMATA, AND NEARLY EVERYTHING HE OWNED OR TOUCHED.

I DON'T EXACTLY KNOW HOW IT HAPPENED BUT OUR GROUP GOT SEPARATED INTO TWO GROUPS — ONE WITH FR. SABINO, WHO WAS GIVEN DIRECTIONS TO THE TOMB BY ONE OF THE CAPUCHIN FRIARS; AND VALENTINA'S GROUP. I WAS WITH FR. SABINO'S GROUP. WE TRAILED THE SNOW-COVERED LONG WALKWAYS SUPPORTING AND LOOKING OUT FOR EACH OTHER AS MOST OF US COULDN'T AFFORD TO SLIP AND FALL — EXCEPT OF COURSE, CHEN, — WHO LANDED

SECURELY ON HIS BEHIND AS HE SLIPPED WALKING THE SNOW [ONE OF HIS WISHES FOR THIS PILGRIMAGE]!

SEVERAL TIMES WE CAME TO A DEAD-END — LOOKING FOR AN OPEN DOOR TO LEAD US INSIDE TO THE CRYPT — BUT THESE DEAD-ENDS DIDN'T STOP US FROM ENJOYING THE SANCTUARY BURIED IN SNOW — SO WE POSED AND SMILED FOR LOTS AND LOTS OF PHOTOS! AND SOMEWHERE, SOMEHOW IN THE MIDST OF THE PHOTO SHOTS, VALENTINA AND HER GROUP FOUND US — AND TOGETHER, FOUND THE ENTRANCE TO THE LOWER LEVEL OF THE PADRE PIO PILGRIMAGE CHURCH, WHERE PADRE PIO'S REMAINS WERE TRANSFERRED IN APRIL 2010. A CURVING HALLWAY WHICH WALLS ARE COVERED WITH MOSAICS LEADS TO THE CRYPT. THE MOSAICS DEPICT EVENTS IN PADRE PIO'S LIFE, INCLUDING HIS CELEBRATION OF THE MASS, HIS INTERACTION WITH OTHER MONKS, AND PADRE PIO KNEELING IN PRAYER IN FRONT OF A CRUCIFIX WHILE RECEIVING THE STIGMATA. **PADRE PIO'S CRYPT** HAS A CEILING MADE OF GOLDEN CERAMIC TILES WITH INDIRECT LIGHTING THAT GIVE THE ROOM A GOLDEN GLOW. PILGRIMS STAND IN LINE TO PASS BY **PADRE PIO'S SILVER COFFIN** LINED WITH BEZEL SETTINGS ENCRUSTED WITH LARGE PRECIOUS STONES OF GEOMETRIC SHAPES. PILGRIMS OFFER THEIR PRAYERS AND TOUCH THE COFFIN AS THEY WALK BY.

LUNCH TODAY WAS AT ANOTHER FAMILY-OWNED RESTAURANT WHERE WE HAD A SUMPTUOUS FEAST — LAURIAT STYLE. WE STARTED WITH GREAT TASTING APPETIZERS EACH INVITINGLY PRESENTED; WINE, AND WATER WITH BUBBLE AND NO BUBBLES, OF COURSE. FOLLOWING THE APPETIZERS WERE THREE DIFFERENT PASTA DISHES, SERVED ONE AFTER THE OTHER — TO WHICH, MOST OF US ASKED WHEN IT WILL STOP AND WONDERING HOW MUCH THE LUNCH WOULD COST US!

San Giovanni Rotondo



in search of
Padre Pio's Tombs



MONTE S'ANT ANGELO

WE THEN TRAVELED THE BREATHTAKING VIEW OF THE **CARGANO PENINSULA** TOWARDS **MONTE S'ANT ANGELO** TO SEE THE **GROTTO OF SAINT MICHAEL**, A SHRINE CONSECRATED BY SAINT MICHAEL HIMSELF IN THE YEAR 490. THE STREETS TO THE SHRINE WAS FOR PEDESTRIANS ONLY AND IT WAS LONG, COLD, DOWNHILL WALK TO THE GROTTO. UNFORTUNATELY, THE TOUR GUIDE VALENTINA CONTRACTED STOOD HER UP AND WE WERE LEFT ON OUR OWN TO TOUR THE CAVE. THE SHRINE HAS A STAIRWAY THAT GOES DOWN TO THE CAVE WITH THE ALTAR. THE WALLS OF THE STAIRWAY HAVE A CRUCIFIX AND NICHES FOR RELIGIOUS STATUES.

THE CAVE WITH THE ALTAR IS PAVED WITH MARBLE SQUARES AND OUTFITTED WITH BENCHES THAT SEAT APPROXIMATELY 80 PERSONS. THE MAIN FEATURES OF THE ALTAR ARE A **CRUCIFIX AND A STATUE OF MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL** HOLDING A SWORD IN HIS RIGHT HAND WITH HIS ARM LIFTED AND READY TO SWING THE SWORD AND STRIKE. TOWARD THE RIGHT SIDE, AT THE ENTRANCE OF THE CAVE THERE IS PARTITION WITH A SMALL GLASS WINDOW THROUGH WHICH CAN BE SEEN A **FAINT SMALL CROSS WHICH ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI IS SAID TO HAVE CARVED IN THE STONE** WHEN HE VISITED THE CAVE DURING A PILGRIMAGE.

THE WALK BACK TO THE MOTOR COACH WAS SHORTER THIS TIME BUT A CHALLENGING UPHILL CLIMB, NONETHELESS. WE CAN'T WAIT TO GET INTO OUR BEDS FOR A QUICK NAP — ESPECIALLY AFTER THAT FEAST AT LUNCH!

SANTA MARIA DELLA GRAZIE

THOSE WHO WOKE UP IN TIME, WALKED TO THE **OLD CHURCH SANTA MARIA DELLA GRAZIE** WHERE PADRE PIO CELEBRATED MASS AND HEARD CONFESSIONS. FR. SABINO INTRODUCED US TO FR. ERMELINDO DI CAPUA, ONE OF THE CAPUCHIN FRIARS RESIDING AT THE CONVENT DURING PADRE PIO'S LIFETIME. FR. ERMELINDO ARRANGED TO HAVE US WATCH A FILM ON THE LIFE OF PADRE PIO. HE ALSO SHARED WITH US HIS PERSONAL RELICS OF PADRE PIO — A CRUCIFIX , A PAIR OF GLOVES AND A PRAYER BOOK.

WE PROCEEDED TO THE **MAIN ALTAR** WHICH HAD A MOSAIC DEPICTING OUR LADY OF GRACE, A FIGURE OF PADRE PIO AND AN ANGEL IN THE CLOUDS. ON THE SIDE PEWS OF THE MAIN ALTAR, IS WHERE OUR CONFESSIONS WERE HEARD BY FATHERS SABINO AND ERMELINDO. WE WALKED BACK TO OUR HOTEL AND SHARED WITH THE REST OF THE PILGRIMS OUR YET ANOTHER ENCOUNTER WITH OUR DEAR PADRE.

Monte S'ant Angelo



at Santa Maria
delle Grazie



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2011

MASS THIS MORNING WAS AT THE BEAUTIFUL CHAPEL OF OUR HOTEL GRAN PARADISO. AFTER LANCIANO, THE PILGRIMS' FAITH HAS BEEN SET EVEN MORE DEEPLY IN THE SACRAMENTAL PRESENCE OF OUR LORD. IT WAS A JOY TO SEE THE PEACE AND HAPPINESS IN EACH OF THE PILGRIMS' FACES AS THEY RECEIVED COMMUNION!

AFTER BREAKFAST, WE JOURNEYED TO ROME -- ABOUT SIX HOURS DRIVE. ON OUR WAY, WE PRAYED THE ROSARY AND DIVINE MERCY AND SANG CHRISTMAS CAROLS IN BETWEEN. NAPPING AND SNORING, OF COURSE, WAS ALLOWED. WE NEED BOTH SPIRITUAL AND PHYSICAL REVIVAL -- THE SPIRITUAL AND THE PHYSICAL IN-SYNC!

ANCIENT ROME

THE FIRST ON OUR ITINERARY IS ANCIENT ROME. WE MET OUR TOUR GUIDE NAMED MARGUERITE, WITH HER LITTLE, WRINKLY, RED, BANNER -- WHICH I WAS ITCHING TO IRON EACH TIME SHE TOOK IT OUT. WE WERE EACH GIVEN A HEADSET -- CONNECTED TO MARGUERITE. IT WORKED REALLY WELL AS YOU CAN HEAR MARGUERITE VERY WELL AS SHE WENT FROM ONE ALTAR OR SITE INSIDE THE BASILICA. MARGUERITE IS VERY WELL VERSED IN HER TRADE. SHE GAVE US A LOT OF INTERESTING AND HISTORICAL INFORMATION -- TOO MUCH THAT AT THE END OF THE TOUR, MOST OF WHICH WERE EITHER ERASED OR DEEPLY HIDDEN IN YOUR MEMORY BANK! SO THE PHOTOS FROM CHEN, MARILYN, APRIL AND VICTOR, HELPED ME RELIVE WHAT WE SAW.

THE **SCALA SANCTA (HOLY STAIRS)**, ACCORDING TO THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION, ARE THE STEPS THAT LED UP TO THE PRAETORIUM OF PONTIUS PILATE IN JERUSALEM, WHICH JESUS CHRIST STOOD ON DURING HIS PASSION ON HIS WAY TO TRIAL. THE STAIRS WERE, REPUTEDLY, BROUGHT TO ROME BY ST. HELENA IN THE 4TH CENTURY.

IT CONSISTS OF TWENTY-EIGHT WOODEN STEPS, NOW ENCASED BY WHITE MARBLE STEPS, LOCATED IN A BUILDING WHICH INCORPORATES PART OF THE OLD LATERAN PALACE, LOCATED OPPOSITE THE BASILICA OF SAINT JOHN LATERAN.

THE FIRST TWO PILGRIMS TO MOUNT THE STEPS ON THEIR KNEES, WERE VICTOR, WHO GRABBED BEN. THEN WE SAW FRANK AND LORMA. THE RATE OF THEIR PROGRESS IS VERY SLOW AND LOOKS PUNISHING. THE OTHERS, OR SHOULD I SAY THE LESS DEVOUT OR WITH WEAK KNEES [INCLUDING MYSELF] WALKED UP THE ALTERNATIVE STAIRCASE. AS WE WAITED AT THE TOP OF THE HOLY STAIRS, WE FOUND OUT THAT MORE OF US CLIMBED THE STAIRS ON THEIR KNEES -- ROM AND AU DEGUZMAN, APRIL, MARILYN AND GLENDA.

AT THE TOP OF THE HOLY STAIRS IS A SMALL AND LAVISH PRIVATE CHAPEL CALLED THE **SANCTA SANCTORUM OR HOLY OF HOLIES**, THE PERSONAL CHAPEL OF THE EARLY POPES IN THE LATERAN PALACE, KNOWN AS THE CHAPEL OF ST. LAWRENCE. THIS IS WHERE THE ICON OF JESUS PAINTED BY THE ANGELS IS FOUND.

SANTA MARIA MAGGIORRE -- IS THE FIRST, THE GREATEST, THE LARGEST, AND THE MOST IMPORTANT CHURCH DEDICATED TO THE MOTHER OF GOD. ANOTHER NAME FOR THE CHURCH IS OUR LADY OF THE SNOWS. ACCORDING TO LEGEND, A WEALTHY ROMAN SENATOR AND HIS WIFE, WHO COULD NOT HAVE CHILDREN, PLEDGED THEIR FORTUNE TO THE MOTHER OF GOD. IN AFFIRMATION, SHE PRODUCED A MIRACULOUS SUMMER SNOWFALL AND TOLD THEM TO BUILD A CHURCH ON THE SITE. THE LEGEND WAS LONG CELEBRATED BY RELEASING A SHOWER OF WHITE ROSE PETALS FROM THE BASILICA'S DOME EVERY AUGUST 5.

Scala Sancta Sancta Sanctorum



THE **BASILICA OF SAINT JOHN LATERAN**. THE FRONT FACADE OF SAN GIOVANNI IN LATERANO IS PROBABLY THE MOST RECOGNIZABLE PART OF THIS IMPORTANT BASILICA — IT IS TOPPED WITH LARGE WHITE STONE STATUES OF JESUS AND HIS APOSTLES. THE **MAIN DOOR**, OF A TOTAL OF FIVE, IS FROM THE CURIA JULIA, THE SENATE HOUSE, IN THE FORUM ROMANUM. THE BORDER IS A 17TH CENTURY ADDITION, AS THE DOORWAY WAS TOO LARGE FOR THE DOORS. THE DOOR TO THE FAR RIGHT IS **THE HOLY DOOR**, WHICH IS ONLY OPEN DURING HOLY YEARS.

THE HIGH ALTAR

THE GOTHIC **BALDACHINO**⁶ HAS A RELIC CHAMBER AT THE TOP, IN WHICH THE HEADS, OR PART OF THE HEADS, OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL ARE PRESERVED ACCORDING TO TRADITION. A MURAL RUNS AROUND THE BALDACHINO, WITH FOUR SCENES FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT -- THE ANNUNCIATION, THE NATIVITY, THE CRUCIFIXION AND THE CORONATION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN.

PART OF A TABLE INCORPORATED IN THE ALTAR IS SAID TO HAVE BEEN USED BY ST. PETER TO CELEBRATE THE EUCHARIST.

THE ALTAR IS A **PAPAL ALTAR**, RESERVED FOR THE HOLY FATHER.

THE CONFESSIO⁷ IS WHERE POPE MARTIN V'S REMAINS (1417-1431) IS BURIED. AT THE ALTAR IS A STATUE OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST.

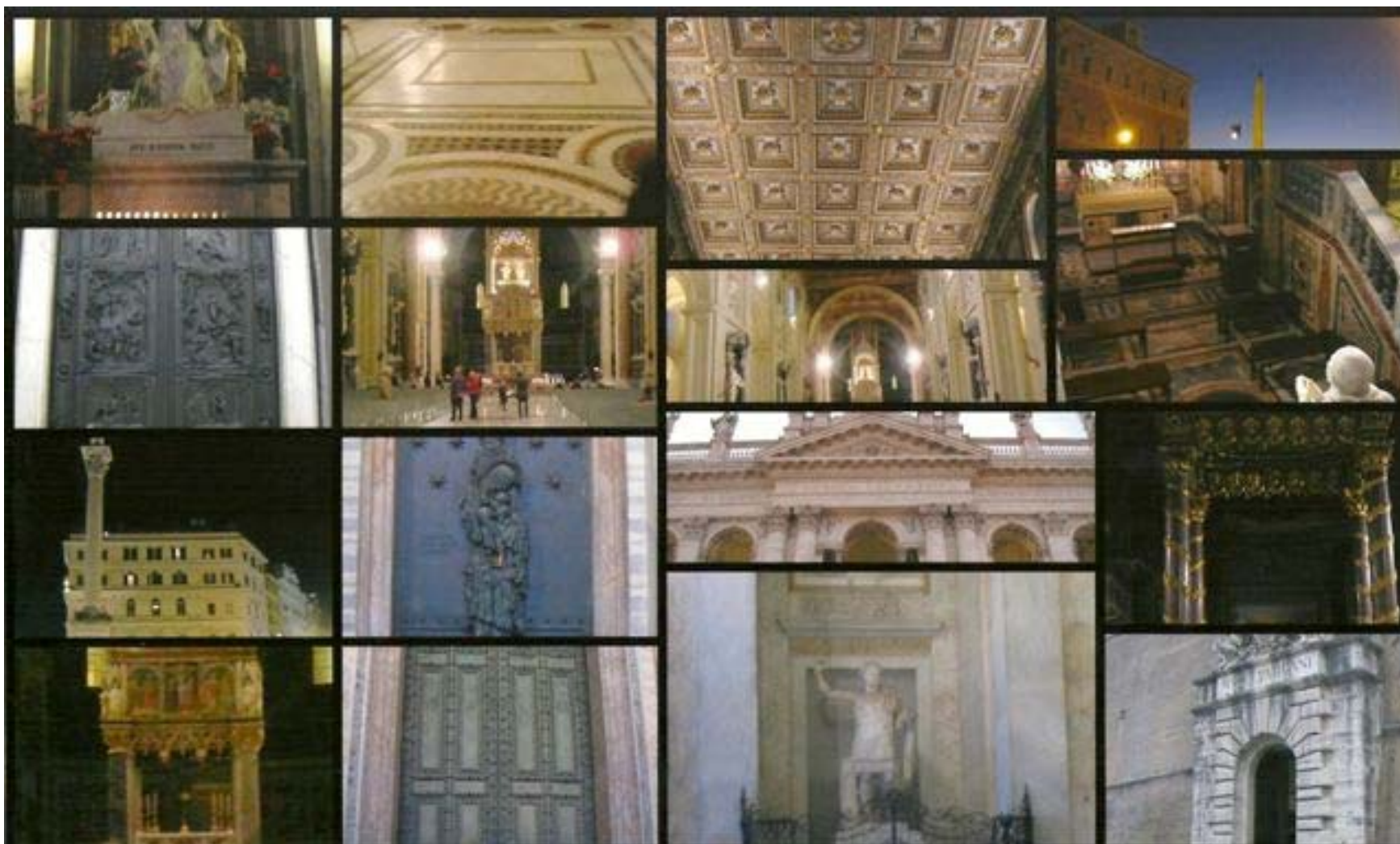
A **CHOIR**⁸ IS BEHIND THE HIGH ALTAR

ON THE WAY BACK TO THE HOTEL, WE CAUGHT SIGHT OF THE **COLLESEUM**. THE ELLIPTICAL BUILDING IN ITS IMMENSITY COULD ACCOMMODATE SOME 55,000 SPECTATORS WHO COULD ENTER THE BUILDING THROUGH NO LESS THAN 80 ENTRANCES!

⁶ A BALDACHINO IS A CANOPY ABOVE THE ALTAR IN A CHURCH.

⁷ CONFESSIO, IN CHURCH ARCHITECTURE, REFERS TO THE TOMB OF A SAINT, ESPECIALLY THAT OF A MARTYR WHO "CONFESSED" THE FAITH BY HIS OR HER DEATH.

⁸ THE CHOIR OR QUIRE IS, IN CHURCH ARCHITECTURE, THE AREA IN WHICH THE SERVICE IS CELEBRATED. IT IS SO NAMED BECAUSE IT IS THE PLACE WHERE THE CHOIR GATHERS TO SING THE HOLY OFFICE.



Magnificent Churches
of Ancient Rome

CHRISTMAS PARTY/PRAYER BUDDY REVELATION

IT WAS A SIMPLE, YET JOYFUL CELEBRATION AT THE GIOVANNI XIII'S ROOM OF THE HOTEL DOMUS MARIAE PALAZZO. WE STARTED WITH SINGING CHRISTMAS CAROLS IN BETWEEN SIPS OF CHAMPAGNE AND SLICES OF PANETTONE AND PAN AMOROSA ESPECIALLY PICKED BY FR. SABINO FOR THE PILGRIMS TO SAMPLE AND ENJOY.

FOR ABOUT 10 MINUTES, EVELYN SHARED WITH THE GROUP, A TENDER FRIENDSHIP OF 36 YEARS WITH ALICE ON THE OCCASION OF HER NEW YEAR'S EVE BIRTHDAY. EVELYN'S BIRTHDAY TRIBUTE CONCLUDED WITH DELICIOUS SLICES OF THE NATIVITY CAKE SHE HAD ORDERED THE NIGHT BEFORE.

THIS WAS FOLLOWED BY OUR ***LEFT- RIGHT NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS GAME***, IN WHICH THE GROUP FORMED A CIRCLE, EACH HOLDING THE GIFT BROUGHT TO THE PARTY. AS VICTOR READ [WITH ZEST AND DELIGHT!] THE POEM, EACH PILGRIM PASSED HIS/HER GIFT TO THE PERSON ON HIS RIGHT WHEN VICTOR SAID RIGHT; WHEN VICTOR SAID LEFT, EACH PASSED THE GIFT HE/SHE HAD TO THE LEFT. IT WAS EXCITING TO SEE WHOSE GIFT EACH PILGRIM HAD IN HIS/HER HANDS AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE POEM!

THE CLOSING MOMENTS OF THE PARTY WAS YET TO COME — OUR ***REVELATION OF OUR PRAYER BUDDY***. AFTER OUR VERY FIRST PILGRIMAGE DINNER ON DECEMBER 14, WE DREW LOTS TO PICK OUR PRAYER BUDDY. THIS PRAYER BUDDY SYSTEM IS AIMED TO ESTABLISH A STRONGER PRAYER RELATIONSHIP AMONG THE PILGRIMS. PRAYER BUDDIES MUST DO THEIR BEST TO ASSIST EACH OTHER TO BE A STRONG INTERCESSOR INVOKING GOD'S PRESENCE IN OUR LIVES DURING [AND AFTER] THE PILGRIMAGE. ALTHOUGH WE HAVE ALL KEPT THE IDENTITY OF THE

PRAYER BUDDY WE PICKED A SECRET, WE EXERTED EFFORTS TO "KNOW" AND "SHARE" WITH OUR PRAYER COMPANION. AND NOW IS THE TIME TO REVEAL OURSELVES.

REVELATION WAS MADE MEANINGFUL AS EACH OF US, NOW IN A PITCH-BLACK SPACE, TOOK OUT CANDLES HANDED OVER TO US AFTER OUR TOUR OF THE JASNA GORA MONASTERY AND HELD IN RESERVE FOR THIS NIGHT OF REVELATION. I RECALL THAT IT WAS FRANK BATINO, WHO WAS THE FIRST TO REVEAL HIS PRAYER BUDDY, NORY JOSE. AS APRIL, IN HER REFLECTION STATED: "*IT WAS TRUTHFULLY OBVIOUS THAT THE HOLY SPIRIT CHOSE OUR BUDDIES, BECAUSE SOME OF THE BUDDIES THAT WERE PAIRED OFF SEEMED TOO PERFECT TO BE COINCIDENTAL*".

MARILYN GOT HER MOTHER, WHOSE OTHER KIDNEY SHE NOW HAS; APRIL GOT VICTOR, HER DAD; FRANK GOT NORY, HIS BEST FRIEND ARMANDO'S WIFE — THE VERY PERSON WHO INTRODUCED HIM AND HIS WIFE TO THE 1ST SATURDAY AND 2000 HAIL MARYS DEVOTIONS; AU AND ROM DE GUZMAN GOT ALICE AND VICTOR ARANETA, RESPECTIVELY — LONG-TIME PARTNERS OF GOD THE FATHER DEVOTION; -- AND THE LIST GOES ON.

THE GATHERING ENDED WITH A FEW MORE UNOPENED BOTTLES OF CHAMPAGNE AND SPECIALTY BREAD PROLONGING THE REVELRY INTO A COUPLE MORE HOURS UPSTAIRS AT THE ARANETAS HOTEL ROOM — TALKING ABOUT GOD'S AWESOME MANIFESTATIONS AND BLESSINGS!

WE HAVE YET TO IDENTIFY THE PILGRIM WHO PAID FOR THE BOTTLES OF CHAMPAGNE AND THE SPECIALTY BREAD — BUT WHOEVER YOU ARE -- MANY, MANY THANKS FOR YOUR GENEROSITY!

Prayer Buddy Reveal





Prayer Buddy Shoots2
& Birthday Tribute

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2011

OUR FIRST STOP: THE VATICAN MUSEUMS AND SAINT PETER'S SQUARE. IT WAS OUT IN THE **VATICAN MUSEUM COURTYARD** WHERE MARGUERITE RECOUNTED TO US THE HISTORY AND THE HIGHLIGHTS OF WHAT WE WILL SEE INSIDE.

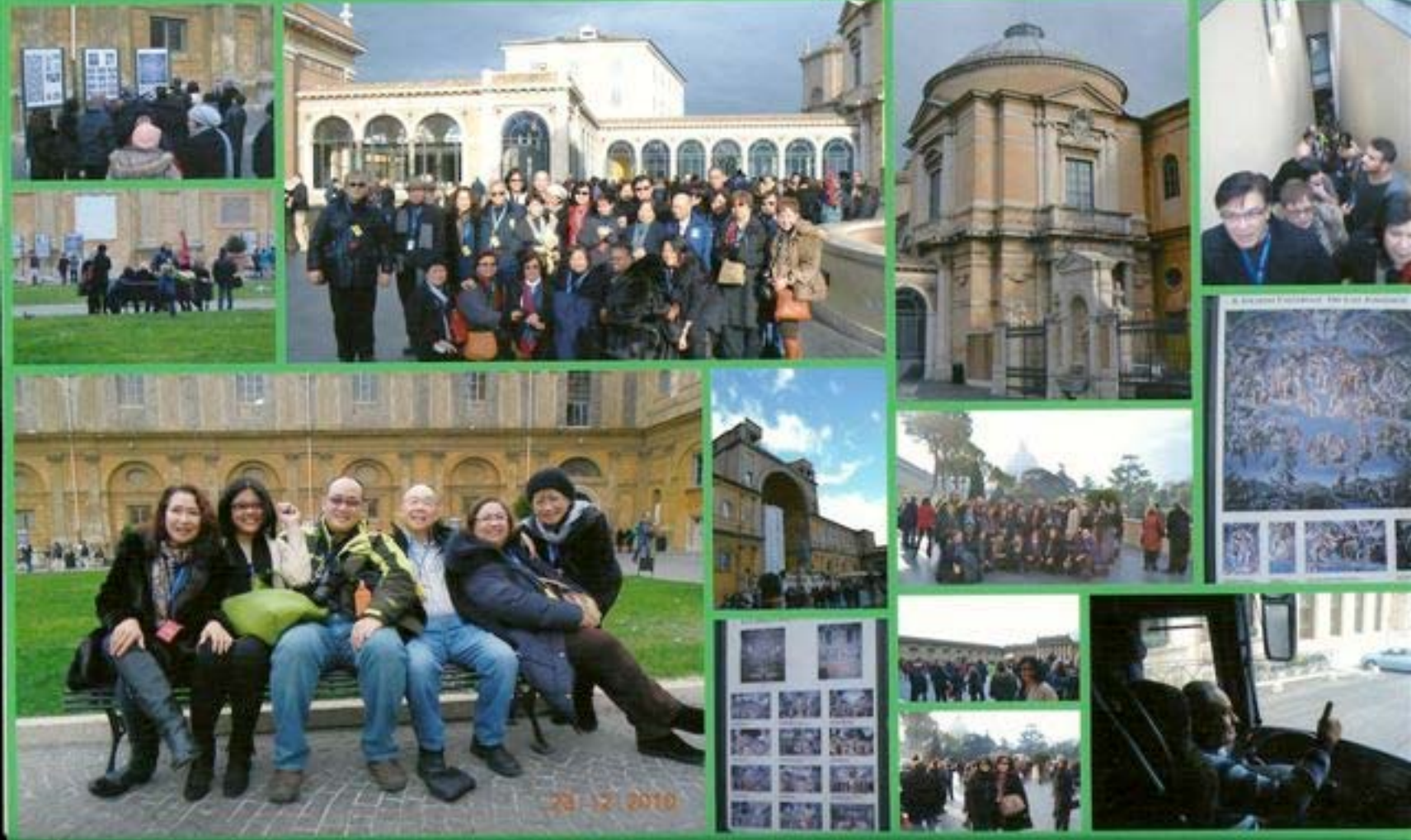
THE SISTINE CHAPEL WAS DESIGNED TO BE - AND STILL IS - THE POPE'S CHAPEL AND THE SITE OF PAPAL ELECTIONS. THE CHAPEL HAS A RECTANGULAR SHAPE AND IS DIVIDED INTO TWO BY A MARBLE BARRIER. THE PART FACING THE ALTAR IS ONLY ACCESSIBLE TO PRIESTS. EACH OF THE TWO LONG WALLS HAS SIX LARGE ARCHED WINDOWS. AT FLOOR LEVEL IS TAPESTRY DESIGNED BY RAPHAEL, SHOWING SCENES FROM THE GOSPELS AND THE ACTS. IN THE MIDDLE ARE FRESCOES WITH SCENES FROM THE LIVES OF MOSES AND JESUS. THE TOP ROW, NEXT TO AND BETWEEN THE WINDOWS, SHOWS IMAGES OF POPES.

MICHELANGELO'S FAMOUS **SISTINE CEILING** IS DIVIDED INTO NINE SECTIONS IN WHICH NINE STORIES OF GENESIS - FROM THE STAGES OF CREATION TO THE DRUNKENNESS OF NOAH - ARE DEPICTED. THE SCENES BEGIN FROM THE ALTAR WALL AND PROCEED TOWARD THE ENTRANCE. THE TWISTING MALE NUDES THAT DECORATE THE CORNERS OF THE CEILING WERE HIGHLY CONTROVERSIAL AT THE TIME.

MICHELANGELO'S OTHER GREAT WORK, **THE LAST JUDGMENT**, IS ON THE ALTAR WALL. THIS POWERFUL WORK CENTERS ON CHRIST THE JUDGE, WHO COMPELS THE DAMNED TO HELL WITH HIS LEFT HAND AND LIFTS UP THE SAVED TO HEAVEN WITH HIS RIGHT. SURROUNDING CHRIST ARE THE PLANETS, THE SUN AND SAINTS.

IT WAS AFTER THE SISTINE CHAPEL TOUR WHEN WE LOST HALF OF THE PILGRIMS [AGAIN!]. THEY APPARENTLY EXITED THROUGH THE DOOR LEADING TO SAINT PETER'S SQUARE RATHER THAN THE DOOR THAT LEADS TO THE **UPPER GALLERIES** - WHERE WE SAW AN ARRAY OF HISTORIC **CANDELABRAS, TAPESTRIES, MAPS** AND OTHER WORKS OF ART. WITH SO MANY THINGS TO SEE AND FACTS OF HISTORY NARRATED TO US BY MARGUERITE, I CANNOT NOW REMEMBER IF WE DID GET A CHANCE TO SEE THE OTHER TOURIST SPOTS LISTED ON OUR ITINERARY [I.E., SAINT RAPHAEL ROOMS AND SAINT PAUL OUTSIDE THE WALLS]. ROME IS JUST TOO MUCH HISTORY, ARCHITECTURE AND ART TO MUSTER ON OUR SECOND DAY THERE!

at the Vatican
Museum Courtyard





Vatican Museum

SAINT PETER'S BASILICA

SAN PIETRO IN VATICANO (SAINT PETER'S BASILICA) - A MAJOR BASILICA IN VATICAN CITY, AN ENCLAVE OF ROME. IT REMAINS AS ONE OF THE HOLIEST SITES IN CHRISTENDOM. ST. PETER'S BASILICA STANDS ON THE TRADITIONAL SITE WHERE PETER - THE APOSTLE WHO IS CONSIDERED THE FIRST POPE - WAS CRUCIFIED AND BURIED. ST. PETER'S TOMB IS UNDER THE MAIN ALTAR OF THE BASILICA.

NEAR THE STAIRS TO THE BASILICA AT THE FRONT OF THE SQUARE ARE COLOSSAL ***STATUES OF SAINTS PETER AND PAUL***, THE PATRON SAINTS OF ROME. THE NORTHERNMOST DOOR IS THE ***HOLY DOOR*** (IN BRONZE), WHICH IS BY TRADITION ONLY OPENED FOR GREAT CELEBRATIONS SUCH AS JUBILEE YEARS. THE DOOR IN THE CENTER DEPICTS JESUS AND MARY ENTHRONED; ST. PAUL WITH THE SWORD; ST. PETER GIVING THE KEYS TO THE KNEELING POPE EUGENE IV; THE ***DOOR OF DEATH*** IS THE FAR LEFT DOOR INTO THE BASILICA. ITS NAME DERIVES FROM ITS TRADITIONAL USE AS THE EXIT FOR FUNERAL PROCESSIONS.

INSIDE THE BASILICA, WE WERE TREATED TO ANOTHER SPECTACLE OF HISTORY, SCULPTURE AND ARCHITECTURE AS WE VIEWED AND TOOK PHOTOS OF: THE ***VAULT IN THE PORTICO*** (PORCH); THE ***CENTRAL NAVE***, MICHELANGELO'S FAMOUS ***PIETA***; THE MUCH-LOVED ***BRONZE STATUE OF SAINT PETER***; THE ***STATUE OF SAINT VERONICA WITH HER VEIL***; THE ***PAPAL ALTAR*** AND THE ***BALDACCHINO*** OVER IT; ***MICHELANGELO'S DOME*** HIGH ABOVE THE BALDACCHINO; THE ***UNCORRUPTED BODY OF POPE JOHN XXIII*** ENCASED IN GLASS; THE ***THRONE OF SAINT PETER***, AND THE NUMEROUS ***ALTARS OF SAINT JOSEPH*** AND MANY OTHER SAINTS.

AT LUNCH AT OUR HOTEL, WE WERE ONE, BIG, HAPPY FAMILY AGAIN — EXCITEDLY LOOKING FORWARD TO A ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME EXPERIENCE — A CHRISTMAS EVE MASS WITH POPE BENEDICT XVI AT SAINT PETER'S BASILICA.

SAINT PETER'S SQUARE

SOMEWHERE AT THE SQUARE, MARGUERITE AND HER 12 PILGRIMS WERE DELIGHTED TO SEE THE 17 LOST PILGRIMS WITH THEIR SHEPHERD, VALENTINA, WHO IMMEDIATELY CAME TO FIND THEM AS SOON AS SHE GOT THE DISTRESS CALL! TOGETHER, WE WALKED THE MONUMENTAL ELLIPTICAL SPACE SHOWING OFF MORE MAGNIFICENT ARCHITECTURE -- THE ***COLONNADES***⁹ AND ***140 STATUES***; THE ***BRONZE DOORS*** [WITH ***SWISS GUARDS***¹⁰ STANDING] USED AS AN ENTRANCE TO THE

APOSTOLIC PALACE; THE ***OBELISK***¹¹, WHICH STOOD BETWEEN TWO FOUNTAINS; THE ***APOSTOLIC PALACE***, A GROUP OF BUILDINGS WHICH INCLUDE THE ***PAPAL RESIDENCE***; THE ***PAPAL APARTMENT***, WHICH OCCUPIES THE TOP FLOOR OF THE APOSTOLIC PALACE. WE WERE TOLD THAT THE TOP TWO RIGHT WINDOWS ARE ***THE STUDY AND BEDROOM OF THE POPE***. ON SUNDAYS AT NOON, THE POPE USUALLY APPEARS AT THE SECOND WINDOW FROM THE RIGHT TO PRAY THE ANGELUS AND BLESS THE CROWD IN THE SQUARE; AND THE ***LOGGIA OF BLESSINGS***, WHERE THE NEW POPE IS ANNOUNCED WITH "HABEMUS PAPAM", AND GIVES THE "URBI ET ORBI" (TO THE CITY AND THE WORLD) BLESSING.


THE GUARDS OF THE VATICAN AND THE POPE IN PARTICULAR. ALL ENTRANTS TO THE ARMY MUST BE SWISS, CATHOLIC AND THEY MUST TAKE THE OATH OF LOYALTY TO THE POPE. THIS OATH IS TAKEN MAY 26TH, TO COMMEMORATE THE SACKING OF ROME ON THE SAME DAY IN 1527 WHEN SWISS GUARDS PROTECTED POPE CLEMENT VII DURING HIS ESCAPE TO CASTEL SANT'ANGELO. OF THE 189 GUARDS, ONLY 42 SURVIVED.

¹¹ A TALL, FOUR-SIDED, NARROW TAPERING MONUMENT WHICH ENDS IN A PYRAMID-LIKE SHAPE AT THE TOP, AND IS SAID TO RESEMBLE A PETRIFIED RAY OF THE SUN-DISK.

⁹ DENOTES A LONG SEQUENCE OF COLUMNS.

¹⁰ SINCE 1506 WHEN POPE JULIUS II INVITED HELVETIAN SOLDIERS TO JOIN THE SMALL VATICAN ARMY, THEY HAVE BEEN

St. Peter's Basilica



The collage features 12 distinct photographs:

- Top left: A wide view of the Basilica's exterior, showing the colonnade and the upper levels with statues.
- Top middle-left: A narrow, brightly lit corridor with a polished floor.
- Top middle-right: A view looking down a long, arched hallway with a checkered floor.
- Top right: A close-up of a large, seated marble statue, likely the Pietà.
- Middle left: A night view of the Basilica's illuminated dome and the Obelisk of St. Peter.
- Middle center: A circular stained-glass window featuring a central figure, possibly the Holy Spirit.
- Middle right: A view through an arched gateway with people walking through.
- Middle far right: A display case containing a religious artifact, possibly a relic.
- Bottom left: A view of the Obelisk of St. Peter in St. Peter's Square, with a large Christmas tree in the foreground.
- Bottom center: A close-up of the massive columns of the Basilica's portico.
- Bottom middle-right: A view of the Fontana del Gallo, a large stone fountain.
- Bottom right: An interior view of the Basilica, showing the ornate ceiling and architectural details.



CHRISTMAS EVE MASS

AFTER LUNCH, WE TOOK TIME TO REST AND GET READY FOR THE CHRISTMAS EVE MASS. FR. SABINO SUGGESTED THAT WE WEAR FORMAL ATTIRE IN SUBDUED COLORS AND HOLD ON DEARLY TO OUR ENTRY TICKETS TO THE BASILICA. WE SENT IN OUR REQUESTS FOR THESE TICKETS TO THE PREFECTURE OF THE PAPAL HOUSEHOLD A GOOD 10 MONTHS BEFORE THE PILGRIMAGE. WE COULD NOT THANK FR. SABINO ENOUGH FOR HIS CHARM AND CONNECTIONS GUARANTEEING OUR SEATS FOR THE CHRISTMAS EVE MASS!

VALENTINA REMINDED US TO PACK A SNACK OR TWO IN CASE WE GET HUNGRY — ESTIMATED WAITING TIME WAS ABOUT FIVE HOURS! BUT NO MATTER, THIS IS AN EXPERIENCE OF A LIFETIME, NOT ONLY FOR ALL OF US PILGRIMS, BUT FOR OUR BONA FIDE ITALIAN TOUR GUIDE AND MOTOR COACH DRIVER. ANGELO WHO SAID HE IS NOW 50 AND VALENTINA, WHO SEEM TO BE IN HER MID TO LATE TWENTIES!

AT THE STRIKE OF THE ANGELUS, WE WERE ALL BEAUTIFUL AND HANDSOME PILGRIMS STANDING IN LINE AT THE SQUARE. THE ATMOSPHERE WAS FESTIVE — DESPITE THE COLD DECEMBER NIGHT SHOWERS. AS WE WAITED, WE SHARED STORIES, SNACKS AND THE PAIN OF OUR FREEZING TOES. MARILYN SUDDENLY DETERMINED TO BE A JOURNALIST ON A LIVE TELECAST FROM THE VATICAN FOR EYEWITNESS NEWS — AS SHE FILMED HERSELF USING HER IPAD!

AT ABOUT NINE O’CLOCK, THE LINE STARTED MOVING - TO A SECURITY CHECK-POINT, THEN TO A CORDONED

AREA TO THE STEPS OF THE BASILICA. WE SAW SYLVIA LINING UP A SECOND SECURITY CHECK — AND TO WHICH SHE NON-CHALANTLY TOLD US SHE HAD A PACEMAKER AND THAT SHE WILL SEE US INSIDE SOON!

INSIDE, WE SAW A COMPLETE TRANSFORMATION THE BASILICA’S INTERIOR -- THE HUNDREDS OF EMPTY SEATS FRONTING THE PAPAL ALTAR, 10 HOURS AGO THAT MORNING ARE NOW FILLED UP AND ALL AROUND THAT CORDONED AREA WERE YET HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE STANDING! WE [VICTOR, APRIL AND MYSELF] FOUND OURSELVES SOMEWHERE THE FIRST 20 ROWS OF SEATS. I HAVE NO DOUBT THIS IS ALL BECAUSE VICTOR BEGGED GOD ON HIS KNEES! HE SAID THERE WERE THESE TWO MEN, MICHAEL AND JOHN, WHO CALLED HIS ATTENTION TO A VACANT SEAT IN THAT ROW, WHICH HE THANKFULLY ACKNOWLEDGED. THEN A FEW MINUTES LATER, TWO PEOPLE IN THE SAME ROW, JUST STOOD UP AND LEFT. THAT’S WHEN HE ASKED MICHAEL AND JOHN TO SAVE THE SEATS SO HE COULD GET APRIL AND I, WHO WERE SEATED SEPARATELY SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE ROWS. AS APRIL AND I SETTLED IN OUR “PREMIUM” SEATS, A LADY STOOD UP AND LEFT. QUICKLY, VICTOR STOOD TO GET FR. SABINO.

WHILE WAITING FOR THE SERVICES TO BEGIN, MICHAEL, JOHN AND I TALKED A WHILE. THEY ARE IN ROME FOR A CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY WITH A LONG-TIME FRIEND — A PRIEST WHOM THEY PARTNER WITH FOR VARIOUS PARISH UNDERTAKINGS. HE’S NOW A CARDINAL — AND THEY GOT THERE JUST ABOUT AN HOUR AGO OR SO, COMING IN TO THE BASILICA THROUGH ANOTHER ENTRANCE — WITH THE CARDINAL!

IT WAS SUCH AN AWESOME EXPERIENCE TO SEE OUR POPE BENEDICT IN PERSON — I HAVE NEVER SEEN ANYONE EXUDING SO MUCH HOLINESS AND PEACE! HIS FACE WAS GLOWING, WAVING AND SMILING AS HE WAS UNHURRIEDLY BEING ROLLED ON A PLATFORM TO THE ALTAR. YOU HEAR PEOPLE SHOUTING “VIVA EL PAPA!” VICTOR QUICKLY WALKED ON SEVERAL CHAIRS TO THE CORDONED CENTER AISLE TO GET A GOOD CLOSE UP SHOT OF THE POPE!

BY THE TIME THE MASS STARTED, THE THREE OF US [AND SOME OTHERS AROUND US] WERE REALLY FATIGUED FROM ALL THE EXHILARATION OF THE EVENING.

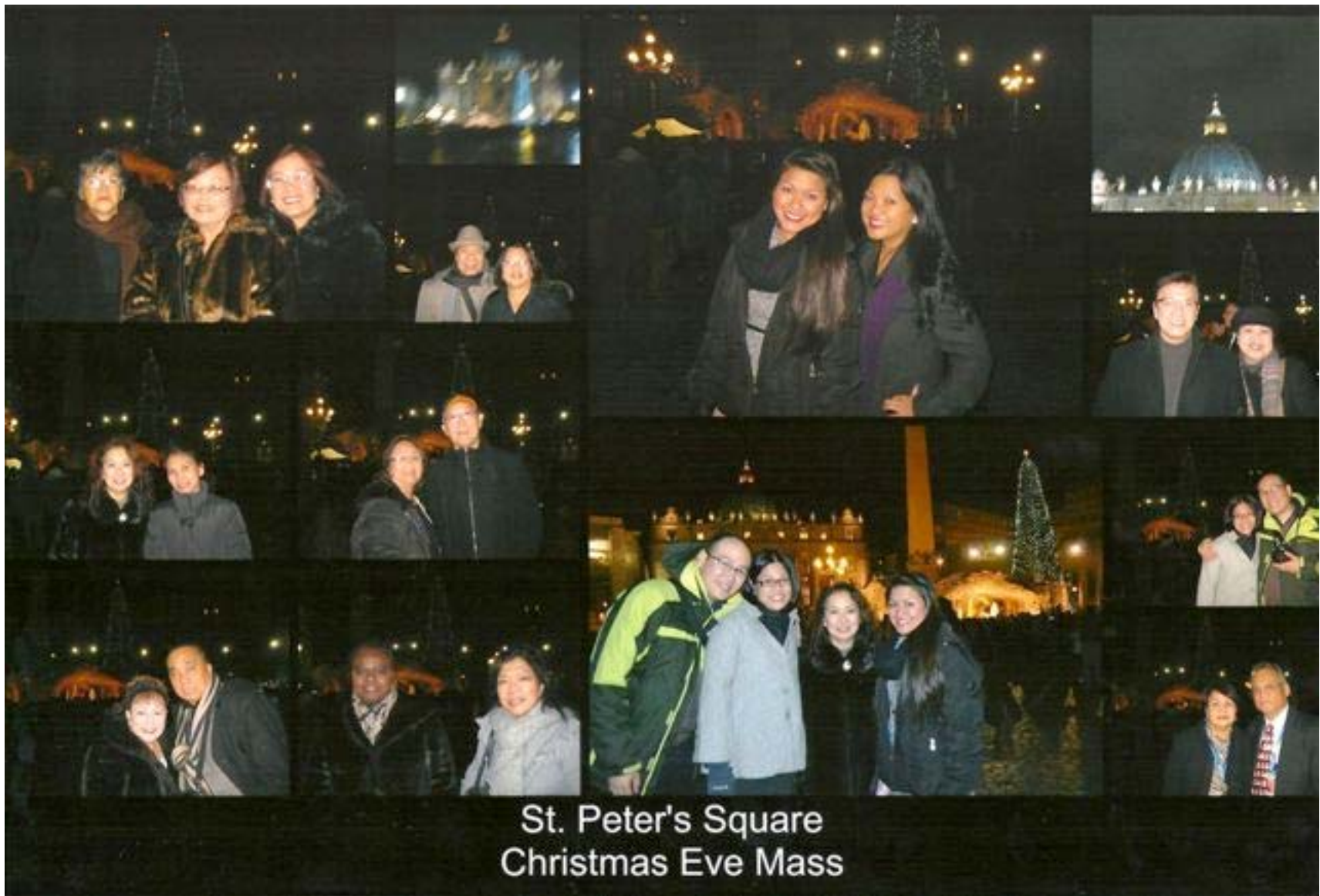
AT MASS IT WAS A CHALLENGE TO KEEP AWAKE AT ALL OF THE HOLY READINGS AND THE POPE’S HOMILY. IT DIDN’T HELP THAT EVERYTHING WAS IN ITALIAN [AND SOME OTHER LANGUAGE], EXCEPT FOR THE 1ST READING. I HOPED AND PRAYED THAT SOMEONE IN LOS ANGELES WAS TAPING EWTN’S LIVE COVERAGE OF THE CHRISTMAS EVE MASS, WITH ITS ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF EVERYTHING TAKING PLACE!

AS I RECEIVED THE BODY OF MY LORD TODAY, I TOLD HIM I DON’T KNOW HOW TO THANK HIM FOR THIS AWESOME, AWESOME CHRISTMAS PRESENT TO ALL OF US — ALL THROUGH THE LOVING INTERCESSION OF OUR MOTHER MARY.

IT WAS ALMOST TWO O’CLOCK IN THE MORNING WHEN WE CONGREGATED AT THE NATIVITY SITE OF SAINT PETER’S SQUARE — THIS TIME, NOT JUST FULLY AWAKE BUT “HIGH” FROM ALL OF TONIGHT’S HAPPENINGS!

. in the cold, long
wait at the Square





St. Peter's Square
Christmas Eve Mass



Our Holy Mass
of a lifetime!

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2011

CHRISTMAS DAY IN ROME

OUR FIRST CHRISTMAS IN ROME – WE WONDER HOW THE ROMANS CELEBRATE IT. WE WERE TOLD THAT MOST STORES AND RESTAURANTS WILL BE CLOSED – JUST LIKE ANYWHERE ELSE IN THE WORLD. OUR SHOP-A-HOLIC PILGRIMS ARE RATHER DISAPPOINTED BUT STILL HOPEFUL SOME SHOPS WILL BE OPENING!

TODAY WE DROVE PAST THE “ISLAND” WITH THE HOSPITAL WHERE THE REAL ROMANS WERE BORN. OUR FIRST STOP WAS THE **CAPITOLINE HILL**, THE RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL CENTER OF ROME. WE WALKED UP THE LONG, BEAUTIFUL STAIRCASE TO THE SQUARE KNOWN AS THE **CORDONATA**. IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SQUARE IS A REPLICA OF AN EQUESTRIAN **STATUE OF MARCUS AURELIUS**. WE MOVED ON TO THE **PALAZZO SENATORIO**, ITS NAME DERIVED FROM ITS FUNCTION AS SEAT OF THE SENATE UNTIL 1870 WHEN IT BECAME THE SEAT OF THE CITY OF ROME. WE WALKED DOWN TO THE **VICTOR EMMANUEL MONUMENT**, TO TAKE A GROUP PICTURE. THIS MONUMENT, ALSO KNOWN AS *IL VITTORIANO* WAS BUILT IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY AND HONORS ITALY'S FIRST KING.

OUR NEXT WALKING STOP WAS A VISIT TO THE *FORUM ROMANUM* [**ROMAN FORUM**], THE CENTER OF LIFE IN IMPERIAL ROME, EVIDENCED BY THE MANY REMAINS OF TRIUMPHAL ARCHES BUILT BY EMPERORS TO COMMEMORATE VICTORIES, TEMPLES AND BASILICAS. TODAY, IT LOOKS LIKE A DISORDERLY COLLECTION OF RUINS TO THE UNINITIATED, BUT WITH SOME IMAGINATION YOU CAN SEE THE ROMAN EMPIRE COME BACK TO LIFE AT THIS SITE.

THE **TREVI FOUNTAIN** -- ONE OF THE MOST WELL-KNOWN SYMBOLS OF BAROQUE ROME AND ONE OF THE FAVORITES FOR SIGHTSEEING IN ROME. *LA FONTANA DI TREVI*, ACCORDING TO VALENTINA, IS AT THE ENDING PART OF THE AQUEDUCT WHICH SUPPLIES THE FOUNTAINS IN THE HISTORIC CENTER OF ROME. THE AREA AROUND THE TREVI FOUNTAIN IS CHARMING. WE HEARD MANY LANGUAGES AND SAW PEOPLE FROM AROUND THE WORLD CROWDED AROUND THE BEAUTIFUL FOUNTAIN.

TREVI FOUNTAIN LOOKS LIKE THE STAGE OF AN OPEN AIR THEATER WITH A LARGE ARCH, WITH TWO SETS OF FOUR COLUMNS. THE SEA GOD NEPTUNE IS STANDING ON A SHELL SHAPED CARRIAGE BEING PULLED BY TWO HORSES WITH TWO TRITONS BLOWING THEIR HORNS. THE WATER SHOOTS OUT OF 24 WATER SPOUTS AND POURS OVER STEPS AND BOULDERS INTO A GREAT MARBLE BASIN WHICH OCCUPIES THE WHOLE BREADTH OF THE PIAZZA.

AND OF COURSE, WE JOINED IN THE TRADITION OF HOLDING A COIN IN OUR RIGHT HAND AND THROWING IT OVER OUR LEFT SHOULDER INTO THE ROMA FONTANA DI TREVI – AS WE WOULD LIKE A GUARANTEED RETURN TRIP TO ROME. THIS TRADITION WAS MADE FAMOUS BY THE 1954 FILM *THREE COINS IN A FOUNTAIN*.

A FEW STEPS ACROSS THE TREVI FOUNTAIN IS THE **CHURCH OF SAINTS VINCENT AND ANASTASIA**. THE CHURCH IS NOTED AS THE PLACE WHERE THE EMBALMED HEARTS OF SOME 25 POPES ARE PRESERVED. A FEW STEPS FROM THE CHURCH, IS AN ICE CREAM PARLOR WHERE WE HAD AN ABUNDANT SAMPLING OF YUMMY GELATO!

WITH CONES OF GELATO IN HAND, WE WALKED TO *PIAZZA DI SPAGNA* [**SPANISH STEPS**]. THE ELEGANT STAIRCASE CONSISTS OF 137 STEPS OVER TWELVE DIFFERENT FLIGHTS. THE STEPS LEAD TO A FRENCH CHURCH ON TOP OF A HILL. ROBERT AND A FEW OTHERS DARED CLIMB ALL THE STEPS AND SOME JUST THE FIRST FEW TO TAKE PHOTOS! AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SPANISH STEPS IS THE *PIAZZA DI SPAGNA* [**SPANISH SQUARE**], NAMED AFTER THE SPANISH EMBASSY TO THE HOLY SEE. ALSO AT THE SQUARE, AT THE FOOT OF THE SPANISH STEPS IS A SMALL BOAT FOUNTAIN, THE **FONTANA DELLA BARCACCIA**. ALSO IN THE SQUARE IS THE **COLUMN OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION**, TOPPED WITH THE STATUE OF THE VIRGIN MARY.

JUST AROUND THE SQUARE OF THE SPANISH STEPS, WE WALKED ALONG THE LUXURY SHOPS OF BENETTON, VERSACE, VALENTINO, GUCCI, FENDI, LOUIS VUITTON, PRADA, SALVATORE FERRAGAMO – AN ALMOST ENDLESS ROW OF BOUTIQUES – AND WEREN'T WE GLAD, THESE WERE CLOSED ON CHRISTMAS DAY! WALKING ON, AWAY FROM THE BOUTIQUES WE FOUND SOME SHOPPING STALLS OPENED – TO THE DELIGHT OF SOME OF US WHO NEEDED ANOTHER LUGGAGE TO HOLD SOUVENIRS AND PRESENTS OR TO REPLACE A BROKEN LUGGAGE BECAUSE OF THE SOUVENIRS AND THE PRESENTS! WE ALSO FOUND SUPER-QUICK PEDDLERS OF “KNOCK-OFF” GUCCI, LOUIS VUITTON AND FENDI PURSES. THEY HAVE THEIR WARES SPREAD OUT ON SOME KIND OF BLANKET, YOU HAGGLE AS THEY SHOW YOU THEIR FAUX PURSES, AND YOU DECIDE QUICKLY FOR THEY CAN, IN THE WINK OF AN EYE, FOLD UP THEIR WARES AND RUN AT SIGHTINGS OF POLICE OFFICERS!

WE WERE HUNGRY AFTER OUR WINDOW SHOPPING AT THE RODEO DRIVE OF ROME. WE STOPPED AT A RESTAURANT FOR A FILL AND SOME BONDING TIME.

WE PASSED THE MAGNIFICENT **PANTHEON** BUILDING, BUILT MORE THAN 1800 YEARS AGO, BUT STILL STANDS AS A REMINDER OF THE GREAT ROMAN EMPIRE. THE PANTHEON NOW CONTAINS THE TOMBS OF THE FAMOUS ARTIST RAPHAEL AND OF SEVERAL ITALIAN KINGS. IN FRONT OF THE PANTHEON ARE ARTISTS DRESSED IN 1800 BATTLE GEARS, POSING FOR PICTURES WITH TOURISTS FOR A FEE.

GUESS, WHO WE SAW ENJOYING THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE AT THE SQUARE – MICHAEL AND JOHN!

WALKING ON, WE WERE LED TO A **CHRISTMAS MARKET** IN **PIAZZA NAVONA**, A LARGE AND LIVELY SQUARE WHICH FEATURES NO LESS THAN THREE MAGNIFICENT FOUNTAINS: (1) THE **FOUNTAIN OF FOUR RIVERS**, WHICH FEATURES FOUR FIGURES, EACH REPRESENTING A RIVER FROM A DIFFERENT CONTINENT - THE NILE, GANGES, DANUBE AND RIO DELLA PLATA. THE STATUES ARE AT THE BASE OF A ROCK SUPPORTING AN OBELISK; (2) **NEPTUNE FOUNTAIN**, WITH NEPTUNE SURROUNDED BY SEA NYMPHS; AND (3) **MOOR FOUNTAIN**, WITH A STATUE OF A MOOR WRESTLING WITH A DOLPHIN.

CHURCH OF SAINT ALPHONSUS LIGUORI

WE DROVE TO THE **CHURCH OF ST. ALPHONSUS LIGUORI**. IT IS DEDICATED TO ST. ALPHONSUS LIGUORI, THE FOUNDER OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE MOST HOLY REDEEMER, WHO FOUNDED AND STAFFED THE CHURCH, AND IS ONE OF THE THIRTY-THREE DOCTORS OF THE CHURCH.

THE FACADE IS OF BRICK AND TRAVERTINE AND FEATURES THREE DOORS. OVER THE MIDDLE DOOR IS A MOSAIC DEPICTING **OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL HELP**. INSIDE, THE APSE¹² IS CROWNED BY A MOSAIC, DEPICTING THE REDEEMER ENTHRONED BETWEEN THE VIRGIN MARY AND ST. JOSEPH. ABOVE THE MOSAIC HANGS THE **ORIGINAL ICON OF OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL HELP**.

WE HEARD THE CHOIR REHEARSING AS WE ENTERED THE CHURCH. IT WAS NOSTALGIC TO RE-LIVE THE MASSES IN THE PHILIPPINES – THE HYMNS, THE COMMUNION SONGS AND PHILIPPINE CHRISTMAS CAROLS SANG BY THE CHOIR WERE PROJECTED ON A SCREEN BIG ENOUGH FOR EVERYONE TO SEE AND SING ALONG. ITS PIANIST NUN AND MOST, IF NOT ALL, OF ITS MEMBERS WERE FILIPINOS. OUR FATHER SABINO CONCELEBRATED THE MASS WITH A VISITING FILIPINO PRIEST.

AS EXPECTED, THE PILGRIMS WERE AT THE GIFT SHOP AFTER THE MASS FOR SOME SOUVENIRS AND A LITTLE CHAT WITH THE FILIPINO PARISHIONERS WHO EXTENDED US INVITATIONS FOR SOME ADOBO, PANCIT AND LUMPIA FOR DINNER AT THEIR HOMES.

OUR LAST STOP FOR THE DAY WAS **SAN PIETRO IN VINCOLI (SAINT PETER IN CHAINS)**, A MINOR BASILICA IN ROME THAT HOUSES ST. PETER'S CHAINS AND MICHELANGELO'S FAMOUS MOSES STATUE.

THE BASILICA WAS FIRST BUILT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE 5TH CENTURY TO HOUSE THE RELIC OF THE CHAINS THAT BOUND SAINT PETER WHILE IMPRISONED IN JERUSALEM. ACCORDING TO LEGEND, WHEN THE POPE HELD THEM NEXT TO THE CHAINS FROM PETER'S FIRST IMPRISONMENT IN THE MAMERTINE PRISON IN ROME, THE TWO CHAINS MIRACULOUSLY FUSED TOGETHER!

A LONG, JOYFUL DAY – WE GOT BACK TO OUR HOTEL FOR DINNER AND SOME REST, AND TO PACK UP. WE GO BACK HOME THE NEXT MORNING.

¹² AN APSE IS A SEMI-CIRCULAR OR POLYGONAL RECESS AT THE END OF A BUILDING.

at Rome's
Political Center



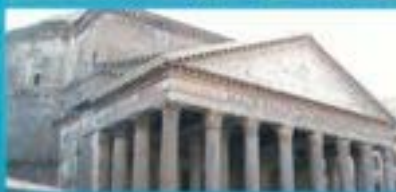
Trevi Fountain and Gelato!



Shopping Europe!!!



Piazza di Spagna Piazza Navona



St. ALiguori Church
SanPietro in Vincoli



MONDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2011

MARIPAZ, CHEN, EILEEN AND GLENDA ARE STAYING A COUPLE MORE DAYS TO SEE MORE OF ROME — WITH FR. SABINO AS THEIR TOUR GUIDE. THEY ALL JOINED US FOR AN EARLY BREAKFAST TO SAY OUR GOODBYES AND FR. SABINO TO CONFER OUR END OF PILGRIMAGE BLESSING.

VALENTINA MADE SURE THAT ALL OF US WERE CHECKED-IN FOR OUR FLIGHTS TO WASHINGTON, D.C. AND NANETTE TO ZURICH. SHE WAS TEARY-EYED WHEN SHE SAID GOODBYE TO US — SHE WAS ANOTHER FRIEND GAINED AT THIS PILGRIMAGE.

THE FLIGHT BACK HOME WAS RATHER EMOTIONAL AS I MUSE OVER THE EVENTS OF OUR PILGRIMAGE. A FEW TIMES, I WISHED WE COULD HAVE STAYED A FEW DAYS MORE IN EACH LEG OF THE TRIP — ESPECIALLY IN MEDJUGORJE. I THOUGHT OF ALL THOSE DEAR AND NEAR TO ME AND DESIRED THAT THEY HAVE CHOSEN TO JOIN RATHER THAN CANCEL; THOSE WHO LONGED SO MUCH TO GO BUT WHO MOST UNFORTUNATELY WERE NOT GRANTED VISAS. I RECALLED THE SCORES OF CHALLENGES THAT OCCUR WITH PLANNING, NEGOTIATING AND ORGANIZING A PILGRIMAGE. THE ABLE ASSISTANCE OF LINDA, AMANDA, PATRICK AND LIZ OF 206 TOURS CAME TO MIND. EVERY PRAYER WE SAID AND EVERY INTERCESSION WE ASKED OUR ANGELS AND OUR SAINTS!

AT DULLES AIRPORT, WE WAITED A COUPLE OF HOURS FOR OUR FLIGHT BACK TO LOS ANGELES. ALSO WAITING FOR THEIR FLIGHT WAS A COUPLE WHO OVERHEARD OUR GROUP TALKING ABOUT OUR JUST-CONCLUDED PILGRIMAGE AND GRACIOUSLY ASKED: “*FOURTEEN DAYS . . . AND YOU GUYS ARE STILL ALL FRIENDS?*” AND TO WHICH WE RESPONDED, ALMOST IN UNISON, “OH, YES, WE ARE!”

THE COUPLE RECOUNTED THE PILGRIMAGE “*DISASTERS*” THEY HAVE HEARD AND THE ONES THEY THEMSELVES EXPERIENCED. AND A FEW OF US HAD OUR VERY OWN, TOO — BUT IN OTHER PILGRIMAGES, NOT THIS SPECIAL ONE!

WITH GOD’S GRACE, AND THE LOVING INTERCESSION AND GUIDANCE OF OUR MOTHER MARY, WE ARE LOOKING FORWARD TO THE NEXT PILGRIMAGE!



Fun! Fun! Fun!

Pool of Smiles!



Smileys Galore!!



REFLECTIONS

By FRANK LIM

EACH HOLY SITE WE VISITED EVOKED DIFFERENT EMOTIONS, ONE DEEPER THAN THE OTHER. OUR CLIMB UP THE APPARITION HILL IN MEDJUGORJE WAS ONE OF THE LATTER. GAZING AT MOTHER MARY'S STATUE, YOU CANNOT HELP BUT MARVEL HOW PROPHETIC HER MESSAGE FOR PEACE WAS WHEN SHE APPEARED A DECADE BEFORE THE OUTBREAK OF THE ETHNIC WAR IN FORMER YUGOSLAVIA WHICH BROUGHT ABOUT WIDESPREAD SUFFERING AND TREMENDOUS LOSS OF LIVES. THOSE WHO WONDERED WHY SHE CHOSE THIS REMOTE PLACE TO APPEAR WONDERED NO MORE WHEN THE SENSELESS VIOLENCE STARTED. THE SAME COULD BE SAID ABOUT THE APPARITION IN KIBEHO WHERE ANOTHER CONFLICT FLARED UP RESULTING AGAIN IN THE LOSS OF MORE INNOCENT LIVES.

THE HIGHLIGHT OF OUR PILGRIMAGE WAS THE MIDNIGHT MASS AT ST. PETER'S BASILICA.

YOU STAND IN AWE AT THE SHEER MAGNITUDE OF ST. PETER'S BASILICA WITH ITS SOARING CEILING AND MASSIVE COLUMNS AND ITS MAGNIFICENT ARCHITECTURE. YOU CANNOT HELP BUT APPLAUD AS HIS HOLINESS IS WHEELED IN A PLATFORM TOWARD THE ALTAR. YOU ARE WITNESSING A CEREMONY CENTURIES OLD MADE MORE GRAND BY

THE SOUND OF TRUMPETS THAT ECHOED THROUGHOUT THE HALLOWED BASILICA. THE MASS, THOUGH CELEBRATED MOSTLY IN ITALIAN, DID NOT LOSE ANY OF ITS MEANING AND SOLEMNITY AS WE FOLLOWED THE RITUALS AND PRAYED IN OUR OWN LANGUAGE. WE WERE JUST GLAD AND FELT BLESSED TO BE THERE. WE THANK THE LORD, THROUGH FR. SABINO, OUR SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR, FOR MAKING THIS ONE-IN-A LIFETIME OPPORTUNITY HAPPEN.

THE PILGRIMAGE WAS A GREAT TIME TO BOND WITH ONE ANOTHER AS WE EXPERIENCED ITS MEMORABLE MOMENTS TOGETHER. ONE THAT COMES TO MIND HAPPENED AT A RESTAURANT IN ITALY. WE WERE SEATED AT A TABLE AND WERE BEING SERVED WITH A PASTA DISH. THE FOOD WAS GOOD AND SOME OF US ORDERED A SECOND HELPING. WE THOUGHT THAT WAS OUR LUNCH BUT THEN THE SERVER BROUGHT OUT ANOTHER PLATE OF A DIFFERENT KIND OF PASTA. EVENTUALLY WE REALIZED THAT THE CHEF HAD PREPARED A THREE-COURSE LUNCH FOR THE GROUP. A NUMBER OF US ENDED WITH BOXES OF FOOD TO GO (A WISE MOVE), OR SUFFER INDIGESTION FROM OVEREATING.

THE PILGRIMAGE, TRULY WAS A TRIP THAT LEFT US WITH LOTS OF GOOD MEMORIES TO TREASURE. AND WE THANK VICTOR AND ALICE FOR INSISTING THAT WE GO.



NOTE: AUTHOR FRANK LIM [HIS EYES COVERED BY HIS CAMERA] IS SEEN ON EWTN'S LIVE TELECAST OF THE CHRISTMAS EVE MASS WITH POPE BENEDICT XVI ABOVE.

By BEN ONG

LOOKING BACK, THIS PILGRIMAGE HAS TOUCHED ME IN MORE WAYS THAN I CAN IMAGINE. I FOUND MYSELF DRAWN CLOSER TO OUR LORD. THE SHAKY FAITH THAT I HAVE IS NOW STRONGER THAN EVER. MY BIGGEST FEAR IS THAT THE “EVIL ONE” WHO IS FOREVER WAITING FOR A WEAK MOMENT, WILL SUCCEED IN DESTROYING THAT FAITH. THIS PILGRIMAGE HAS REINFORCED MY TRUST THAT THE LORD WILL NEVER ABANDON ME, THAT HE WILL ALWAYS BE THERE TO GIVE ME THE NEEDED STRENGTH TO WITHSTAND THE TEMPTATIONS. WITH HIS GRACE, I’M NO LONGER HOUNDED BY THE SPIRITUAL DRYNESS IN MOMENTS OF LONELINESS. MY ONLY HOPE IS THAT THIS FAITH CAN SURVIVE THE PASSAGE OF TIME AND I PRAY THAT WITH THE INTERCESSION OF OUR MOTHER MARY THE LORD WILL KEEP ME STRONG AND STEADFAST IN MY SERVICE TO GOD.

THIS PILGRIMAGE HAS EXCEEDED ALL MY EXPECTATIONS. I FOUND MYSELF AWED AND INSPIRED BY THE BLESSED EVENTS DURING THIS TRIP. TWO OF THE BIGGEST HIGHLIGHTS WERE OUR VISIT WITH ONE OF THE VISIONARIES IN MEDJUGORJE AND THE CHRISTMAS MASS AT THE VATICAN. EACH TIME I LOOK AT OUR PILGRIMAGE PICTURES, FOND MEMORIES START FLOWING BACK INTO MY MIND. EVEN THE LITTLE THINGS THAT CAN BE CONSTRUED AS UNPLEASANT IS NOW PART OF THE WHOLE BEAUTIFUL EXPERIENCE. THERE IS NOT A DAY THAT I DON’T THANK THE LORD FOR THIS PRIVILEGE AND I WILL DO MY BEST TO HONOR AND SERVE HIM.

A SPECIAL BOND WAS FORMED THAT MADE TOTAL STRANGERS CLOSER TO ME THAN BLOOD RELATIVES. I WILL TREASURE AND NURTURE THIS PRICELESS EXPERIENCE AS LONG AS I LIVE.



I have been to a few pilgrimages but the one that I could describe the best and what you may call “priceless” is this very pilgrimage!

- Loida Mance



Well, I would say this is the most spiritual and precious experience we had. Every time we had the private Mass, I became so emotional and can't control my tears. The most emotional of which was the sound of the trumpet heralding the unveiling of the Black Madonna icon.

I can't believe I actually participated in the Christmas Midnight mass celebration at the Vatican which has been my lifetime dream!

The Pilgrimage was a well worth trip.

- Vincie Ong

By TESS ALMERO

THE VISIT TO THE CHURCH OF OUR LADY OF VICTORY, WHERE THE INFANT JESUS OF PRAGUE IS ENSHRINED, THE VISIT TO THE BIRTHPLACE AND THE CRYPT OF BLESSED JOHN PAUL II, THE VISIT TO THE DIVINE MERCY AND THE PLACE WHERE SISTER FAUSTINA BREATH HER LAST, THE VISIT TO THE BEAUTIFUL CASTLES IN CZECH REPUBLIC AND MANY OTHER PLACES ARE NOT BEING DISCOUNTED ON THIS TRIP. BUT THE FOLLOWING ARE “PRICELESS” EXPERIENCES TO BE PERSONALLY RECOGNIZED IN THIS PILGRIMAGE.

FIRSTLY, FROM THE VERY START OF OUR PILGRIMAGE, MY FEELINGS HAD BEEN UPLIFTED BY A SPECIAL MESSAGE FROM MOTHER MARY THROUGH THE “SON HELPER”. THAT NIGHT ON DECEMBER 15, A FEW OF US WERE CALLED FOR SOME SPECIAL MESSAGES FROM THE LORD AND MOTHER MARY. THE SPECIAL MESSAGE THAT I RECEIVED FROM MOTHER MARY, OUR LADY OF GRACE, WAS THAT MY HUSBAND WHO PASSED ON THREE AND A HALF YEARS AGO, HAS NOW JOINED THE PLACE OF OUR HEAVENLY FATHER AND NOW ENJOYING EVERLASTING LIFE. ISN’T THAT A SPECIAL GIFT FOR ME THIS CHRISTMAS?

SECONDLY, AT THE CHURCH OF CZESTOCHOWA, WHERE THE BLACK MADONNA, THE HOLIEST ICON IN POLAND, IS ENSHRINED, BESIDES BEING PLACED IN THE ELEVATED FRONT SEATS OF THE ALTAR BEFORE THE LOCALS FOR THE 2:00 PM MASS, EXPERIENCING THE OPENING CEREMONY WAS A MAJESTIC SIGHT TO BEHOLD. ALSO, GRAND MUSIC IN THE BACKGROUND GAVE YOU GOOSE BUMPS, TEARY EYES, A THRILL INSIDE YOU. THE BLACK MADONNA IS SO REVERED IN THIS PLACE THAT YOU FEEL HER PRESENCE WITHIN YOU. THAT MOMENT WAS INDESCRIBABLE AND ONE OF A KIND, ONLY IN CZESTOCHOWA. NOWHERE ELSE. IN SPITE OF THE PRESENCE OF MANY TOURISTS AND LOCALS AROUND THE CHURCH, YOU CAN FEEL THE SOLEMNITY OF THE MASS CONCELEBRATED WITH OUR SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR, FATHER SABINO. FROM WHAT I HEARD, THE LOCALS TOO WERE TEARY-EYED LISTENING TO THE ANGELIC VOICE OF MARILYN BATINO, OUR CANTOR, SINGING, “HOW BEAUTIFUL,” DURING COMMUNION. THIS WAS AN EXPERIENCE OF A LIFETIME.

THIRDLY, IN MEDJUGORJE, WE WERE GIVEN THE CHANCE TO MEET PERSONALLY ONE OF THE VISIONARIES, VICKA. INITIALLY, OUR GUIDE WAS SAYING THAT VICKA HAS NOT APPEARED BEFORE A BIG CROWD FOR A LONG PERIOD OF TIME DUE TO HEALTH ISSUES. SO THERE WAS NO GUARANTEE THAT SHE COULD COME. BUT HERE AGAIN, ANOTHER GIFT AND BLESSING TO OUR GROUP. WE HAD A PRIVATE AUDIENCE WITH VICKA, WHO CONTINUALLY SPEAKS TO MOTHER MARY AT 9:00 PM ON A DAILY BASIS. SHE WAS THERE BEFORE OUR OWN EYES, TALKING TO US. WE WERE ABLE TO ACTUALLY TOUCH AND HUG HER AND EVEN HAD A GROUP PICTURE WITH US. SHE ALSO GAVE HER WORDS TO US TO ASK THE BLESSED MOTHER TO BLESS US ALL. ISN’T THAT AN AMAZING EXPERIENCE?

FOURTHLY, BEING GIVEN A SECOND CHANCE TO CLIMB UP THE APPARITION HILL IN MEDJUGORJE WAS ANOTHER THRILL OF THE PILGRIMAGE. GOING UP THE HILL WAS NOT EASY. THE AID OF A CANE IS A MUST TO SUPPORT YOUR BALANCE AND THERE ARE NOT VERY MANY FLAT SURFACES TO STEP ON BUT RATHER SMALL AND LARGE ROCKS WITH SHARP EDGES. IT WAS A VERY RISKY CLIMB. THE FIRST ATTEMPT TO CLIMB UP THE HILL WAS ON A RAINY DAY, AND WE WERE WARNED THAT THE CLIMB WILL BE SLIPPERY AND DANGEROUS SO A LOT OF US FELT DISAPPOINTINGLY LOST AT THAT TIME. ONLY A FEW TOOK THE RISK HEADED BY THE “SON HELPER”. OUR TOUR GUIDE PROMISED US THAT IF THE WEATHER THE NEXT DAY WILL BE GOOD, SHE WILL SCHEDULE US FOR ANOTHER CLIMB. THE FOLLOWING DAY WAS A BLESSING FROM HEAVEN -- WITH COOL, DRY, AND BREEZY AIR, PERFECT FOR GOING UP THE HILL. MAJORITY OF US WERE ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH THE GOAL TO EXPERIENCE OUR LADY AT THE TOP OF HER APPARITION HILL. WE WERE FULFILLED....ANOTHER BLESSING!

FIFTHLY, IN ROME, THE CHANCE OF BEING INSIDE THE BASILICA TO CELEBRATE THE MIDNIGHT MASS WITH POPE BENEDICT XVI WAS ANOTHER GIFT. WE WERE VERY LUCKY THAT OUR SPIRITUAL GUIDE, FATHER SABINO, HAVE SOME SPECIAL CONNECTIONS AT THE VATICAN! OUR SINCEREST THANKS TO HIM FOR HE HAD WORKED SO HARD TO GET THIS CHANCE OF A LIFETIME FOR US. GOD BLESS HIM. ACCORDING TO OUR TOUR GUIDE AND BUS DRIVER, THEY HAVE BEEN ATTENDING MIDNIGHT MASSES AT THE BASILICA BUT IT WAS ALWAYS OUTSIDE OF THE CHURCH. THEY EXPRESSED THEIR EXCITEMENT THAT THIS IS THEIR FIRST TIME ALSO TO BE INSIDE THE BASILICA FOR THE MASS. THE BEST CHRISTMAS GIFT ON CHRISTMAS DAY FOR ALL OF US!

THIS PILGRIMAGE WAS TRULY A BLESSING, A BEAUTIFUL CHRISTMAS PRESENT FOR ME, AND A VERY MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE. WHAT MORE COULD YOU ASK FOR! THANK YOU LORD AND MOTHER MARY.



. . . Our pilgrimage was indeed outstanding. It was an excellent idea doing the incessant prayer – which took the pilgrims away from useless chatter, at least from my hearing distance....

As you know, spats and arguments occur frequently in tours that extend over 10 days. Ours was just wonderful. The fellowship was genuine or if there were some snags, impressions are reversed, hence, peace and harmony were restored speedily.

I miss everyone. And I mean every single person. It's like having 10 fingers, missing one, you can't do a good job. Well, I can't do a good job in recalling happy memories if I don't think of each and everyone in the group.

In Manila, there are several reunions that are organized after the tour. First weekly, then monthly, then every other month and then no more. This time, due to proximity, I must content myself with holding everyone close to my heart and recollect the happy memories . . . a lot of times with outrageous laughter!

- Maria Paz Buenaventura-Cua



I thoroughly enjoyed our trip, more so in Italy. The Christmas Eve Mass at the Vatican was a once in a lifetime event! I thank Father Sabino for his generosity.

I just realized what a great bunch of people we had on this trip -- no prima donna, no ego personality clashes.

And I enjoyed the walking tour in Rome. I fulfilled a promise to myself that I was going to climb the Spanish Steps (after three visits). The only thing left on my wish list is to visit Castelangelo.

- Robert Pua

By APRIL K. ARANETA

ON THIS SPIRITUAL JOURNEY, I HAVE LEARNED AND EXPERIENCED SO MUCH. MANY OF THE PLACES WE VISITED ON THIS PILGRIMAGE, I HAVE VISITED BEFORE. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEN AND THIS TIME AROUND WAS MY AGE AND THE PEOPLE THAT ACCOMPANIED US. WHEN I WAS AROUND 13 YEARS OLD I WENT ON MY FIRST PILGRIMAGE TO POLAND, PRAGUE AND ITALY, THREE OUT OF THE FOUR PLACES WE VISITED THIS TIME. SEEING THE RELIGIOUS SITES AGAIN, I HAD A NEW APPRECIATION. WHEN WE WERE IN POLAND AND WE SAW THE BLACK MADONNA, I FELT SOMETHING I CANNOT FULLY DESCRIBE. WHEN WE SAT IN FRONT OF THE IMAGE AT MASS, I FELT SO SERENE. WHEN THE TRUMPETS BLASTED, SLOWLY UNVEILING OUR LADY'S IMAGE, I TRULY COULD FEEL HER PRESENCE. AND WHEN ATE MARILYN SANG "HOW BEAUTIFUL," I GOT CHILLS. I HAVE HEARD HER SING THAT SONG MANY TIMES BEFORE AND EVERY TIME I FEEL THE SAME WAY: MESMERIZED BY GOD'S LOVE. I FELT THAT SAME EMOTION, BUT THIS TIME IT INTENSIFIED. I FELT LIKE I WAS IN THE MIDST OF GOD'S LOVE. AND THAT WAS JUST THE BEGINNING OF OUR JOURNEY!

ANOTHER MEMORABLE MOMENT ON THE TRIP WAS GOING UP THE APPARITION HILL. NOW FROM THE BEGINNING, I KNEW THAT THIS WAS GOING TO BE ONE OF THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THE TRIP. THE MAIN REASON WHY WE WENT ON THIS TRIP WAS TO SEE THIS HOLY PLACE IN MEDJUGORJE. BUT WHEN WE GOT THERE, THE WEATHER WAS NOT IN OUR FAVOR. THE RAIN WAS POURING AND THE AMOUNT OF MUD AND WATER RUSHING DOWN THE HILL LOOKED TERRIFYING. A LOT OF US WERE TURNING BACK AND SAYING IT WAS TOO DANGEROUS TO CLIMB. EVEN OUR TOUR GUIDE WARNED US THAT IT MIGHT BE TOO DANGEROUS. IN MY HEART I WANTED TO CLIMB THAT HILL, BUT SINCE EVERYONE ELSE WAS GOING DOWN, I THOUGHT MAYBE TODAY WAS NOT THE DAY TO CLIMB IT. BUT ONCE I SAW MY DAD CLIMBING UP THE HILL, I KNEW I HAD TO FOLLOW. SO I GOT A CLIMBING STICK FROM MY MOM AND TRAILED ALONG. I KEPT ASKING MOTHER MARY'S GUIDANCE UP THE HILL AND TO GIVE ME STRENGTH TO MAKE IT UP. SHE ANSWERED MY PRAYER, AS SHE ALWAYS DOES. WHEN I GOT UP, I FELT SO HAPPY. MY DAD, TITO FRANK, ATE MARILYN AND I PRAYED THE ROSARY AND TOOK PICTURES. I REMEMBER DURING THE ROSARY I ASKED MOTHER MARY TO AT LEAST LET IT STOP RAINING WHEN WE GO DOWN THE HILL, SO WE CAN GET BACK DOWN SAFELY. AND AGAIN, MOTHER MARY ANSWERED MY PRAYER. WE WERE ABLE TO GET DOWN SAFELY WITH NO RAIN. ONCE WE WERE NEAR THE BOTTOM, IT STARTED TO DRIZZLE LIGHTLY, BUT NOTHING LIKE IT WAS BEFORE. IT TRULY WAS AN EXPERIENCE!



ANOTHER MEMORY I WOULD LIKE TO MENTION WAS THE NIGHT WE REVEALED OUR PRAYER BUDDIES. IT WAS TRUTHFULLY OBVIOUS THAT THE HOLY SPIRIT CHOSE OUR BUDDIES, BECAUSE SOME OF THE BUDDIES THAT WERE PAIRED OFF SEEMED TOO PERFECT TO BE COINCIDENTAL. ATE MARILYN GOT HER MOTHER, A VERY SIGNIFICANT PAIRING CONSIDERING THAT ATE MARILYN'S KIDNEY ONCE BELONGED TO HER MOTHER. ANOTHER PAIR THAT STOOD OUT TO ME WAS MY OWN. MY DAD TURNED OUT TO BE MY PRAYER BUDDY. I LAUGHED AT FIRST BECAUSE EVERY DAY, WITHOUT FAIL, MY DAD WOULD TELL ME IN AN ANNOYING VOICE, "I PRAY FOR YOU!" BUT I NEVER THOUGHT



THAT MY DAD WAS MY ACTUAL PRAYER BUDDY UNTIL THE NIGHT OF THE REVELATION. IT NEVER CROSSED MY MIND BECAUSE MY DAD BEING ANNOYING AND REPEATING A SENTENCE TO ME OVER AND OVER AGAIN WAS NORMAL COMING FROM HIM. THERE TRULY WAS NO COINCIDENCE IN THESE PAIRINGS. NO ONE COULD HAVE PAIRED THESE PEOPLE OFF BETTER THAN THE HOLY SPIRIT.

IF I WROTE ABOUT ALL THE MANY WONDERFUL EXPERIENCES I WITNESSED ON THIS PILGRIMAGE, MY REFLECTION WOULD GO FAR TOO LONG. I AM TRULY LUCKY AND BLESSED TO HAVE BEEN ABLE TO BE A PART OF IT. I AM THANKFUL THAT GOD HAS GIVEN ME PARENTS WHO WOULD SPEND ANY AMOUNT TO BRING ME TO ALL THE PILGRIMAGES THEY JOIN OR ORGANIZE DESPITE THE MONETARY BURDEN. THE PEOPLE ON THIS TRIP WERE ALSO WONDERFUL. THE LOVE I FELT FROM EACH PERSON ON THE TRIP, WHETHER I HAVE KNOWN THEM FOR 14 YEARS OR 14 DAYS, WAS UNIMAGINABLE. FOR 14 DAYS, WE WERE A FAMILY. A SPIRITUAL FAMILY WALKING TOWARDS GOD.

By JIM WAYDA

THE PILGRIMAGE WAS A ONCE IN A LIFETIME EXPERIENCE FOR ME. IT WAS A PLEASURE AND A BLESSING TO BE IN THE MOST HOLY SITES ON THE ITINERARY -- CZECH REPUBLIC, POLAND, BOSNIA, AND ITALY. IT ALL STARTED DURING THE MASS AT AN ORPHANAGE IN MEDJUGORJE. I HAD A VERY PROFOUND SPIRITUAL ENCOUNTER.

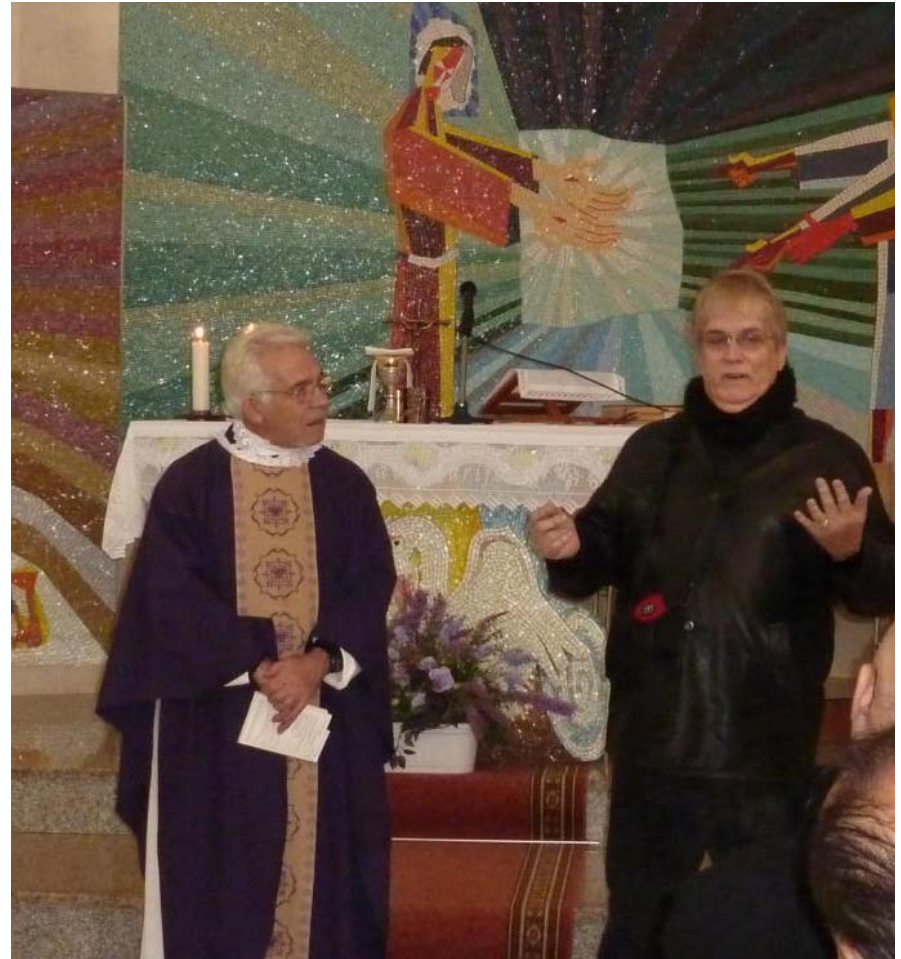
HAVING BEEN A BAPTIST FOR THE PAST 28 YEARS, I WAS TAUGHT AND CONVINCED THAT THOSE REPETITIOUS PRAYERS AND HAIL MARY'S OF THE CATHOLIC FAITH WERE UNNECESSARY AND SIMPLY REDUNDANT. MY PERSONAL GOAL OF THE PILGRIMAGE WAS TO EXPERIENCE ENLIGHTENMENT REGARDING MY FAITH. EVEN THOUGH I AM A BAPTIST, I HAVE ALWAYS HAD AN OPEN-MIND REGARDING OTHER CHRISTIAN-BASED FAITHS, BUT I REALLY HAD NO INTENTION OF CONVERTING TO THE CATHOLIC FAITH.

DURING THAT TIME WHEN THE VISIONARY, VICKA, WAS STANDING STILL FOR A GOOD 20 MINUTES PRAYING FOR THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY'S INTERCESSIONS FOR THE PILGRIMS' PETITIONS, I WAS ALSO PRAYING -- YEARNING FOR MY ENLIGHTENMENT.

MOTHER MARY OVERLOADED MY MIND WITH IMAGES AND ANSWERS REGARDING MY FAITH DURING THIS PERIOD OF TIME. IT WAS A VERY EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE THAT LEFT ME SIMULTANEOUSLY VERY SAD AND VERY JOYFUL. I UNDERSTOOD THAT THE REASON FOR THE REPETITIOUS PRAYERS WAS TO REACH A SPIRITUAL STATE OF ESTABLISHING A CONNECTION WITH MOTHER MARY, THE LORD, AND THE FATHER. DURING THAT TIME WHEN VICKA WAS PRAYING, I EXPERIENCED THAT CONNECTION LIKE NEVER BEFORE. I REALIZED THAT MY CRITICISM OVER THE YEARS OF THE CATHOLIC FAITH HAD BEEN UNJUSTIFIED AND JUDGMENTAL, PRIMARILY DERIVED FROM HEARSAY RATHER THAN ACTUAL EXPERIENCE. THIS REVELATION BROUGHT A MIXED EMOTION OF SORROW AND DELIGHT, REALIZING THAT THE CATHOLIC FAITH IS THE WAY FOR ME TO CONNECT WITH MY GOD.

ALSO DURING THE PILGRIMAGE, I WITNESSED AMAZING ATTESTATIONS OF FAITH FROM OTHER MEMBERS OF OUR GROUP, AT TIMES WHEN MY VERY OWN WAS LACKING.

AS A RESULT OF THIS EXPERIENCE AND THE OTHER WONDERFUL SPIRITUAL VALUE OF THIS PILGRIMAGE, MY CONVICTION TO CONVERT TO THE CATHOLIC FAITH BECOMES EVEN STRONGER WITH THE SUPPORT OF MY FELLOW PILGRIMS. MY GRATITUDE TO ALL OF THEM BECOMES EVEN MORE MEANINGFUL AS I CARRY ON THIS JOURNEY OF FAITH IN CATHOLICISM -- WHERE MY HEART CALLS IT, HOME!



By EVELYN PUA

IN THE PAST, PILGRIMAGES AND REGULAR TOURS TO ME WERE SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT AND THAT IS, THE SITES VISITED. I THOUGHT OF BOTH AS “SIGHTSEEING.” YES, I FELT IN AWE AT THE HOLY SITES VISITED AND HAD SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES AS I PRAYED AT THE DIFFERENT SITES. BUT THAT WAS IT. IN FACT, WHEN I FIRST SAW THE ITINERARY, I MENTIONED TO ALICE THAT WE HAVE ALREADY BEEN TO MOST OF THE PLACES. AND ALICE’S RESPONSE WAS: “YES, THE SAME PLACES, BUT WE COULD HAVE A DIFFERENT SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE.” AND SHE WAS RIGHT.

THIS TIME, THE EFFECT OF THE VISITS TO THE HOLY SITES REINFORCED SPIRITUAL LESSONS ALREADY LEARNED AND THE WHOLE PILGRIMAGE BECAME A TEST — LIKE AN ACTUAL DRIVING TEST, ONLY IT WAS A TEST OF MY SPIRITUAL LIFE. SOMETIMES OR RATHER MOST OF THE TIMES, I FULLY WELL KNEW I FLUNKED.



FIRST LESSON IS ABOUT FAITH. WITHOUT FAITH, HOW COULD I HAVE BELIEVED THAT THE HOUSE OF MOTHER MARY WAS TRANSPORTED TO LORETO, SPAIN BY THE ANGELS WHO MADE A HEART-SHAPED HOLE AS THEY CARRIED IT; THAT THE PAINTING OF JESUS ON THE CEILING OF THE HOLY STAIRS INSIDE THE HOLIEST OF HOLIES WAS PAINTED BY THE ANGELS; HOW COULD I HAVE BELIEVED IN THE MIRACLES OF THE HOLY INFANT JESUS OF PRAGUE; IN THE APPARITION OF JESUS TO ST. FAUSTINA; IN THE APPARITION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY IN MEDJUGORJE; IN THE HEALING OF MY LEFT SHOULDER BURSITIS AS I TOUCHED THE TOMB OF ST. PIO OF PIETRELCINA?

SECOND, “BE NOT AFRAID” OF ISSUES AND CHALLENGES, OF DEATH, OF ANYTHING BECAUSE “THE ANSWER IS IN THE CROSS” (AS MENTIONED BY THE NUN AT THE DIVINE MERCY SHRINE) AND IN OUR ACCEPTANCE OF GOD’S WILL. IN FACT, WHEN WE HAVE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS, WE SHOULD FEEL HONORED THAT JESUS HAS GIVEN US THE PRIVILEGE OF SHARING HIS PASSION, THE “REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING.” THIS LESSON WAS CONSTANTLY REINFORCED TO ME WHEN WE VISITED THE MUSEUM OF BLESSED JOHN PAUL II; AT THE GOSPEL READING DURING THE MASS IN MEDJUGORJE; AS I CLIMBED THE APPARITION HILL, AND EVERY TIME WE PRAYED THE SCRIPTURAL ROSARY OF THE FIRST GLORIOUS MYSTERY.

GOING UP APPARITION HILL (WHICH I WAS PRIVILEGED TO DO ON THE SECOND DAY AFTER I TRIED AND FAILED TO DO IT ON THE FIRST DAY), I FIRST NOTICED THE ROCKS AND THE QUITE STEEP HILL. AS I WAS CLIMBING, THE ROCKS AND HILL BECAME A BLUR. INSTEAD, I SAW LIFE — THE ROCKS BEING OUR ISSUES AND CHALLENGES AS WE JOURNEY TO HEAVEN, WHICH WAS THE TOP OF THE HILL. THE ROCKS PREVENTED US FROM SLIPPING DOWN TO WHERE WE STARTED — IN MUCH THE SAME WAY THAT OUR TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS BECOME OUR STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN. AS I CONTINUED CLIMBING WITH THE HELP OF ROBERT, MY HUSBAND, WE TRIED TO LOOK AHEAD TO FIND AN OPEN TRAIL ONLY TO FIND OUT THAT IT WAS WORST. IT WAS LESS ROCKY BUT HARDER TO WALK ON BECAUSE OF THE MUD. YES, THE ROCKS HURT OUR FEET BUT THOSE ROCKS BROKE

OUR FALL. PRAYING THE ROSARY AS WE CLIMBED THE HILL HELPED US IN OUR DETERMINATION TO CONTINUE GOING UP, IN SPITE OF OUR HUFFING AND PUFFING. HERE, I PONDERED: IF HEALTHY EATING AND CONSTANT EXERCISE KEEP OUR BODIES FIT, THEN CONSTANT PRAYER AND DOING GOOD DEEDS KEEP OUR SOULS FIT.

AS WE GOT UP CLOSER, WE HAD A VIEW OF THE CRUCIFIX. LOOKING AT THE CROSS, I REGAINED MORE STRENGTH TO KEEP ON CLIMBING. BEING A FEW FEET FROM THE CROSS, WE STOPPED AND PRAYED THE "PRAYER BEFORE THE CROSS." THEN, ON OUR RIGHT, WE SAW THE STATUE OF MOTHER MARY, THE QUEEN OF PEACE. SINCE WE WERE THE LAST TO GET THERE, OUR GROUP WAS ALREADY WAITING FOR US IN FRONT OF MOTHER MARY'S STATUE AND WE ALL PRAYED TOGETHER - (WE EXTEND OUR APPRECIATION AND GRATITUDE TO THEM FOR WAITING). IN FRONT OF MOTHER MARY, I FELT AN INDESCRIBABLE JOY, INNER PEACE AND SERENITY. I DID NOT WANT TO LEAVE. I FELT LIKE I WAS "IN HEAVEN."

THIS WAS THE FIRST TRIP THAT MY HUSBAND AND I WERE ALWAYS TOGETHER. PREVIOUSLY, WE WOULD MAKE AN AGREEMENT THAT WHEREVER DIRECTION ONE OF US WOULD WANT TO GO, THE OTHER DOES NOT NEED TO FOLLOW. AT THE OUTSET OF THIS PILGRIMAGE, WE HAD THAT SAME AGREEMENT AGAIN. HOWEVER, THE LORD WILLED US TO BE TOGETHER MOST OF THE TIME.

FINALLY, MY PATIENCE AND HUMILITY WERE TESTED DURING THE WHOLE TRIP. ON THOSE DAYS I FLUNKED, I KNOW I HAVE EMERGED LEARNING SOMETHING NEW.

OVERALL, EVERY DAY AND EVERY PLACE WE VISITED IN THIS PILGRIMAGE WERE EQUALLY INCOMPARABLE. IT WAS MONEY WELL SPENT. I FELT GOD'S LOVE FOR AND THROUGH EVERYBODY IN THE GROUP. AFTER MORE THAN A MONTH, I AM STILL REELING FROM IT AND WOULD NOT LIKE TO GET OUT OF THAT FEELING. I THANK GOD DAILY FOR GIVING ME THE PRIVILEGE OF JOINING AND ALLOWING ME TO EXPERIENCE HIS GREAT LOVE FOR US AND FOR REINFORCING MY LOVE FOR MOTHER MARY. I ALSO THANK GOD FOR ALLOWING ME TO GET ACQUAINTED AND MAKE FRIENDS WITH THE OTHER PILGRIMS, FOR GIVING ME MY PRAYER BUDDIES (LOIDA WHOSE NAME I PICKED AND

BEN WHO PICKED MY NAME) AND ROBERT'S (GLENDA WHOSE NAME HE PICKED AND FRANK LIM WHO PICKED HIS NAME) WHO WE CONTINUE TO PRAY FOR, FOR HAVING VICTOR AND ALICE AS OUR COORDINATORS (THEY PREPARED THE MEDITATION BOOKLETS AND PLANNED ACTIVITIES FOR OUR TRIP), FOR OUR SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR, FR. SABINO WHO HELPED US GET TICKETS FOR THE MIDNIGHT MASS OFFICIATED BY POPE BENEDICT XVI, FOR OUR TOUR GUIDES, AND FOR DIRECTING OUR COORDINATORS TO 206 TOURS. SOUNDS LIKE AN OSCAR AWARDEE? YES, THAT IS HOW I FEEL NOW, ONLY IT IS AN AWARD GIVEN BY GOD (I HOPE).

AND THE TEST OF MY SPIRITUAL LIFE CONTINUES



By ROBERT PUA

WAY BACK BEFORE THE TRIP, REMEMBER THE MESSAGE, I WILL HAVE MORE CHARISM PICTURES. I HAVE BEEN ANTICIPATING OUR TRIP EVER SINCE. BUT I WAITED AND WAITED UNTIL WE WERE IN POLAND, AND THE MESSAGE WAS "PICTURE FROM HEAVEN I WILL SEND YOU WHEN YOUR HEART IS PURE".

THE FIRST THING I DID WHEN WE REACHED MEDJUGORJE WAS TO GO TO CONFESSION AT ST. JAMES CHURCH. THEN CAME THE PICTURE OF VICKA . THAT WAS THE FIRST ONE.



AFTERWARD, WE REACHED LANCIANO, ITALY. I REMEMBER THAT VERY DAY, IT WAS COLD AND BALMY THAT MORNING, WE GOT OFF THE COACH AT THE PARKING LOT AND STARTED TRUDGING OUR WAY LEISURELY TOWARD THE CHURCH OF ST. LEGONTIAN AND ST. DOMITIAN, I FELT GOOD, EVEN LIGHTEARTED, ENJOYING THE STREET SCENE, THE COBBLESTONE AND OF COURSE, TAKING PICTURES. I WAS HAPPY AS WE APPROACH THE CHURCH, IT WAS SO RUSTIC, EVEN MEDIEVAL. I FELT GOOD ALL OVER EVEN MIXED WITH A LITTLE EXCITEMENT.

WHEN I ENTERED THE CHURCH, I SAW THE STONE WALLS, THE COURTYARD AND THE WALKWAYS, THE FIRST THING THAT CROSSED MY MIND WAS THIS REMIND ME OF A MONASTERY. WHAT'S NEXT I MUSED TO MYSELF.

I SAT NEXT TO THE BACK PEW AS WE ATTENDED MASS AT THE CHAPEL. ALL THROUGHOUT THE SERVICE, MY EYES KEEP RIVETING BACK TO THAT ALCOVE GLASS WINDOW WHERE THE RELIQUARY (CONTAINING THE MONSTRANCE AND THE CHALICE) OF THE EUCHARISTIC MIRACLE WAS ENCLOSED. I WAS RESTLESS ALMOST TO THE POINT OF ANGUISH -- HOW COME WE CAN'T GO TO THE TABERNACLE IN THE ADJACENT CHAPEL?

AS SOON AS THE MASS WAS ENDED, I APPROACH THE GLASS WINDOW DETERMINED TO GET THE BEST SHOT I COULD UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCE. THEN OUT OF THE CORNER OF MY EYE THE SIDE DOOR OPENED, AND THE ATTENDANT BECKONS US TO GO IN. I WILL TELL YOU THAT I WAS THE FIRST PERSON TO CROSS THAT DOOR, AND BEFORE I KNEW IT I STOOD BEFORE THE TABERNACLE AND TOOK MY FIRST SHOT, EXCITEMENT COURSING THROUGH MY VEINS. I WENT THROUGH ALL THE ANGLES, THE FRONT, THE BACK, THE SIDE, IT WAS MY MOMENT OF FULFILLMENT COME TRUE AND HOW. THEN I TOUCHED THE GLASS ENCLOSURE AND HAD MY MOMENT WITH THE LORD.

IN RETROSPECT, THE CHARISM SHOWED UP AFTER THAT DAY, I WAS BACK TRACKING THE PICTURES ON MY CAMERA WHEN I SAW IT, I REALIZE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MOMENT. IT WAS SENT FROM HEAVEN, AND I WAS THE FIRST ONE TO WITNESS IT. IT WAS THE MOST POWERFUL CHARISM I HAVE SO FAR. THE DRAMATIC IMPACT DID NOT STRIKE ME UNTIL A FEW DAYS AGO , WHEN I COME TO REALIZE WHAT THE IMAGE MEANT FOR ME. IT WAS AS IF

THE LORD STOOD IN FRONT OF ME AS I TOOK THE PICTURE, RESPLENDENT IN ALL HIS GLORY (THE LIGHTNING , THE LIGHTS THE ARCS) AND SPOKE TO ME , TRIUMPHANT IN HIS PRESENCE!

IT HAS CHANGED MY LIFE. FROM THAT DAY AND FOREVER ON THE EUCHARISTIC SACRIFICE AT THE MASS WILL HAVE A SPECIAL MEANING FOR ME.

IT WILL REMIND ME OF THAT FATEFUL DAY WHEN FOR A BRIEF MOMENT HE HAS CHOSEN TO MANIFEST HIMSELF FOR ALL OF US SEE HIM AS THE LIVING FLESH AND BLOOD PRESENT IN THE HOLY SACRIFICE AT THE CONSECRATION.

UNLIKE THE BASILIAN PRIEST (8TH CENTURY) WHO DOUBTED HIS PRESENCE, I WAS BROUGHT UP TO BELIEVE THE TRANSUBSTANTIATION WHILE STILL YOUNG, THE MIRACLE HE WITNESSED WIPE OUT HIS DOUBTS. THE CHARISM I RECEIVED HAS SIGNIFICANTLY IMPACTED MY SPIRITUALITY. LANCIANO WILL BE ETCHED IN MY BEING AS A SOJOURN, A PILGRIMAGE THAT BROUGHT ME AS CLOSE AS I HAVE NEVER BEEN TO JESUS . I HAVE NO DOUBT THAT EACH ONE OF US IN THIS PILGRIMAGE HAVE HAD THEIR OWN EPIPHANY. I HAVE THIS ONE TO KEEP FOREVER.



Thank you God very much for the great pilgrimage! .I will treasure this experience forever.

Blessings to all.

- Ate Venia