

## A PILGRIMAGE WITH THE FRIENDS OF THE HOLY FATHER

In June 2017 the Friends of the Holy Father went on pilgrimage to Rome, mainly to celebrate the feast of Sts Peter and Paul, as the theme of our pilgrimage was, 'In the footsteps of St Peter'; the itinerary was drawn up by our Vice-Chairman, Dr Michael Straiton. (View the pilgrimage details at [www.thefriendsoftheholymother.org](http://www.thefriendsoftheholymother.org))

There were numerous highlights, but those that stand out for me were attending our very own Mass in one of the crypts in the catacomb of St Callixtus, where our Ecclesiastical Director, Fr Guy Sawyer, assisted by Canon Gerard Hetherington, celebrated Mass. There was something very special and moving about attending Mass in that holy and venerable place where so many Christians had perished. On another occasion, we were privileged to have our chaplains celebrate Mass on the altar of St Gregory the Great in St. Peter's Basilica. Some of us sneaked into the sacristy afterwards to get a quick peek at Caravaggio's Deposition from the Cross.

Another very special visit was to the 'Scavi' where excavations were carried out below the Grottoes of St. Peter's Basilica during the Second World War. These revealed the bones of St. Peter in a small shrine or 'aedicula' immediately below the Papal High altar of the Basilica. We were able to glimpse the box in which they are kept in the actual place where they were found.

We visited the 'Domus Aurea' an amazing golden palace designed by Nero, which extended over 90 hectares. It was built because his first palace had burnt down in the Great Fire of AD 67. During the visit we donned head sets and so experienced a virtual reality tour, giving the impression that we were actually in the palace and walking in the gardens. Afterwards we adjourned to a nearby building to go up on the roof terrace for prosecco and canapes, kindly hosted by some friends of Anthony Cole, our Pilgrimage Director. The views from the roof

all over Rome were amazing. So that we did not forget we were on pilgrimage, some of us went on afterwards to sung vespers with the Augustinian sisters at the Basilica of Santi Quattro Coronati, quite close to our hotel.

We managed to fit in a fascinating exhibition in the Braccio di Carlo Magno Museum in St Peter's Square, 'The Menorah: Worship, History and Myth'. This exhibition had a simultaneous display with the Jewish Museum of Rome. It was enlightening to discover the importance of the menorah in Jewish history and how it has evolved over the centuries and that it was eventually used in the design for the Israeli flag in 1948.

The British Ambassador, H.E. Sally Axworthy, had kindly invited the group to a reception in her residence one evening. This is located on the top floor of the Palazzo Palavicini, which belonged to the Borghese family. However, before arriving we had time to fit in some more culture in the form of two Caravaggios in the Basilica of Santa Maria in Popolo, thanks to our assiduous Tour Director, Anthony Cole, and Dr. Straiton. One of these was a very striking and muscular image of the crucifixion of St. Peter, requiring a number of soldiers to tie him upside down on the cross, as tradition has it. The other one was of St Paul, falling off his horse in the 'Conversion on the Road to Damascus'.

We all had a most enjoyable evening at the Ambassador's. In her speech of welcome, she referred to the reception that the FHF had held for her in London before she took up her post and of how valuable and welcoming she had found it. The Ambassador spoke about the areas of common ground between the UK and the Holy See, such as joint work to combat modern slavery and climate change. She was particularly keen to see religion taking a more positive role in politics.

Another memorable visit was to the Pontifical Swiss Guards Barracks inside Vatican City. Manuel, our Guide showed us their Museum and all the armoury

and uniforms dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. We had included this visit because the FHF had given them a donation of £8,000 for gym equipment. Again we inspected this and were assured that it was being put to good use. Judging by the fit young men we saw we had no difficulty in believing it.

On another day we walked from our hotel over the Esquiline Hill to visit the church of Saint Prassede, which is quite close to the Basilica of St. Mary Major. This saint was reputed to shelter persecuted Christians and to gather up the mutilated bodies of martyrs in the arena and to collect their blood with a sponge. The sponge is preserved with other relics under the high altar. We also saw the well in the church where she had deposited the bodies and the blood.

Afterwards, we went to the Santa Pudenziana Church, the oldest one in Rome, although it does not look it. It was built over the house of Senator Quintus Cornelius Pudens; Pudienza and Prassede were his daughters. When it was excavated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century several levels were revealed. The lowest one was a villa, reputedly the house of Pudens where St. Peter had lodged and baptised all the family members. The house became the earliest residence of the Popes until Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Empire in 315 when the Lateran Palace then became the official residence. There is a remnant of a table, in a side chapel of the St. Pudenziana Church from the time of Pudens, which is believed to be the one on which St. Peter celebrated his first Eucharist in Rome.

In connection with another project supported by the FHF, a mayoral conference held in Rome to discuss people trafficking, we had arranged to meet Abp. Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo, Chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. Unfortunately, he had been called away so we were looked after by his Deputy, John McCaffrey KCSG KCHS, who has now become a member of the FHF Council. John met us in the Casina of Pius IV in the Vatican Gardens, and gave us a

wonderful tour of the building and grounds. You can see from the photographs how beautiful it all was.

In a slight change from sightseeing, we were very honoured to be received by His Eminence Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State in the Apostolic Palace, and to have a group photograph with him. He said he was impressed by the extensive input of our programme and congratulated Dr Straiton. He was interested to hear of our previous pilgrimages and the projects to which we had given support. His offices were truly spectacular and a joy to behold. Cardinal Parolin was very gracious and presented each of us with a Rosary blessed by Pope Francis.

While we were in Rome the Pope held a Consistory for the creation of 5 new Cardinals. Thanks to the British Ambassador, we were lucky enough to be allocated tickets for this event and the Papal Mass the following day.

Some of us were able to visit the Mamertine Prison, which traditionally is the site where Saints Peter and Paul were imprisoned. Again it was a very moving and spiritual experience to be able to stand outside the cell and offer a prayer to these two wonderful Saints in the very spot where they had been detained.

A visit to the Irish college where we heard Mass was another highlight. The Vice-Rector welcomed us and gave us a tour of the College.

Our creature comforts were well catered for too. We were accommodated in a very comfortable hotel where the wine flowed and we were presented with cocktails before dinner each evening. Although it was very hot, it was a delightful experience to be sitting outside eating our dinner in the hotel courtyard under the vines and the stars.

What an honour it all was and how lucky we were to be part of this very special and exclusive visit to Rome.