



Anyone ready for another trip report?? Just returned from an incredible Pilgrimage to Rome, Italy. Our Bishop Sam Jacobs of Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux had to travel to Rome for his Ad Limina Visit with Pope Benedict XVI. Every five years, each Bishop travels to Rome to give a report to the Pope

on the state of their Diocese. These were the first Ad Limina Visits during Pope Benedict XVI's reign since the death of Pope John Paul II in 2005. There were 22 Bishops meeting with the Pope from Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee and Kentucky. Bishop Sam graciously organized a pilgrimage to coincide with his trip, which Lonny and I were privileged and blessed to join. Father Josh Rodrigue also joined us as an amazing Spiritual Director. Check back each day for exciting news about our trip!

This is a pic of Bishop Sam and the other Louisiana Bishops with Pope Benedict during their Ad Limina meetings at the Vatican while we were in Rome.





Seeing St. Peter's Square for the first time can be somewhat overwhelming. I was very surprised to see their Christmas Tree and Life-Sized Nativity Scene still up! The first Nativity Scene in St. Peter's Square came from the idea of Pope John Paul II only since 1982. The

Nativity Scene stays up until February 2 and the setting changes throughout the Christmas season as the Annunciation, Birth of Jesus, and Magi Visit dates are celebrated. Notice the infant Jesus is now a larger baby sitting on Mary's lap. In the background is Michelangelo's Dome of St. Peter's Basilica. With the largest interior of any Christian Church in the world, St. Peter's holds a unique position as the greatest of all Christian Churches. To the right, is the Pope's residence. When the shutters are open, it means the Pope is in town. Many nights we saw lights come on and off in the windows of his residence. In the middle is the Vatican Obelisk which is the centerpiece of Bernini's magnificent piazza and is the only obelisk in Rome



that has not toppled since ancient Roman times. The colonnades and open space were designed so that the greatest number of people could see the Papal blessings. Like arms outstretched, the Square's 300 columns welcome everyone like a mother gathers her young. There are statues of Saints at the top of each marble column sort of like the Hall of Famers cheering us on -- LOL!





Little did we know that the highlight of our trip would occur on the first full day in Rome. We got to see Pope Benedict not once, but TWICE in one day! We saw him first during the regular Wednesday Papal Audience and then at a

Vespers service later that same night. When we received our tickets for the regular Wednesday Papal Audience, there were words in Italian that read: "Reparto Speciale". We soon learned that meant we were a "Special Party" to be seated in the front rows of the Auditorium! During Winter, the Papal Audience is held indoors in the Paul VI Auditorium instead of outdoors in the Square. This link will direct you to the message given to us by the Holy Father.

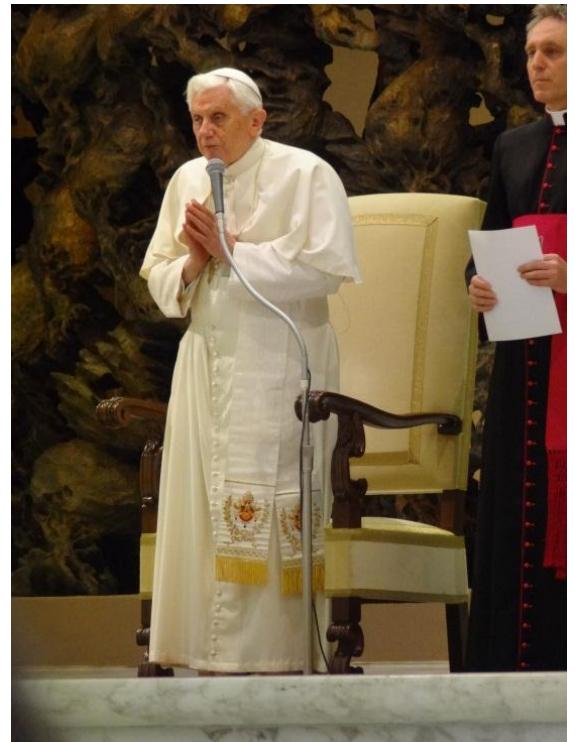


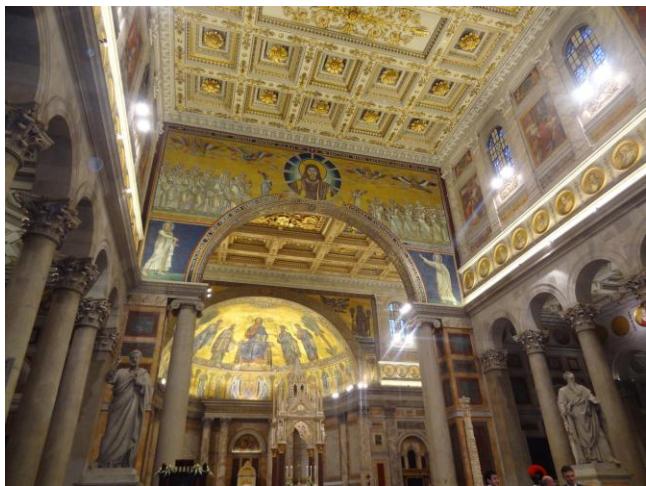
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20120125_en.html



He was speaking in English, but was very difficult to understand. Also, from this page, you can see the entire video of our Papal Audience. If you advance to around the 32-minute mark and again several times during the 58-minute mark, you might see some familiar faces! Then, at the end, after Pope

Benedict sings the "Our Father" in Italian, my cousin, Mike Callais and his wife, Blanche can be seen in the video. They were in the "Private" seats (better than "Special"). They got to walk up to meet the Pope, kiss his ring, and take photographs. The Holy Father bestowed his Apostolic Blessing on us which extended to all our families and loved ones. He also blessed all religious articles we brought. The 65-foot-wide brass and bronze sculpture behind the Pope is Christ's Resurrection by Fazzini. In my opinion, he looked rather frail, weak and very tired. Apparently, being Pope along with the daily pressures and fatigue has taken its toll on him. At age 78, he was the oldest Pope elected in nearly 300 years. He is now 85 years old.





Later on the same day as our Papal Audience, we were extremely blessed and fortunate to attend a Vespers (Evening Prayers) Service with Pope Benedict XVI. He celebrated Vespers on the Solemnity Feast of the Conversion of the Apostle Paul at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside-the-Walls.

Because the week we were in Rome was the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, there were many other Christian Religions represented at the Vespers service. We witnessed an amazing procession of a multitude of Cardinals, Bishops, Priests of many different Christian Religions. Finally, Pope Benedict XVI surrounded by security and the Swiss Guards followed the procession. He was brought in on a moving platform to spare him the long walk up the aisle. But, it also allowed us to see him above the crowds. This is a picture of his moving platform. We saw it in the back of the Basilica after the service and took these pics. Not real sure how it moves when he is on it. You can see him moving on it in the video.



The entire Vespers service is on Catholic TV with English commentary at this link:

<http://www.catholictv.com/Pope-Benedict-XVI-Saint-Paul-Vespers-2012.aspx>

The English translation of the Holy Father's Homily is located at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20120125_week-prayer_en.html. The Basilica of St. Paul Outside-the-Walls is an extraordinary church built over the burial place of St. Paul. Surrounding the church are mosaic portraits of all of the Popes in history beginning with St. Peter through Pope Benedict XVI. Although they spoke Italian, we were able to follow along with a program which included an English Translation of the Vespers Service. This is a link to our program:

http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/libretti/2012/20120125.pdf.

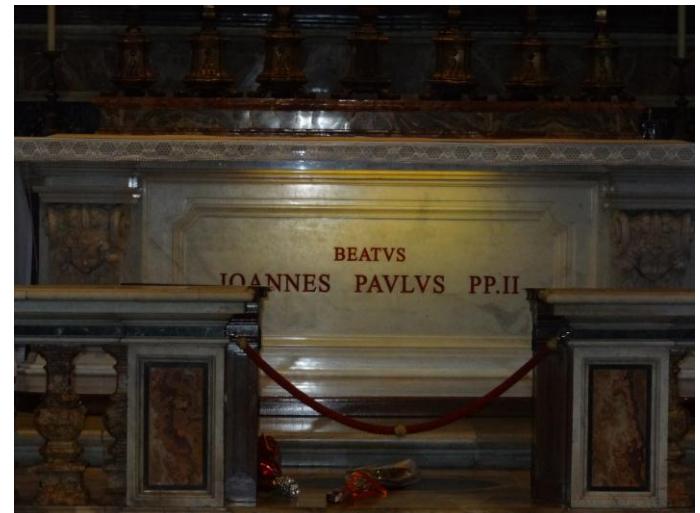
Still in shock in having been able to see Pope Benedict XVI twice in the same day!





We celebrated mass in the Vatican Grotto in front of St. Peter's tomb, underneath the main altar of the Basilica. There are over 90 Popes buried in the Vatican Grotto. We were only allowed to take one photo and this is the photo I took.

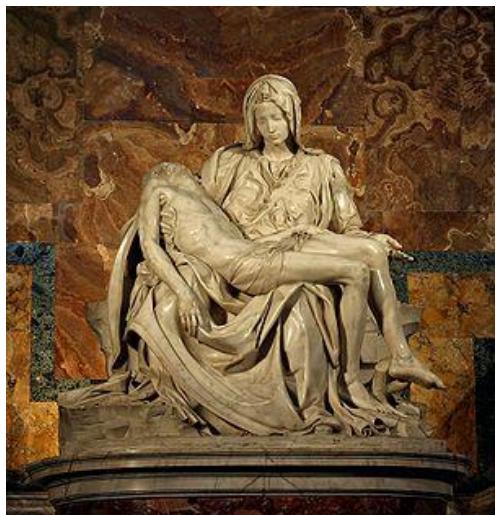
After the beatification of Pope John Paul II last year, his remains were removed from the Vatican Grotto and brought up to the Chapel of St. Sebastian in the Basilica above. Also, Pope John 23, who called for Vatican Council 2, lies in a glass coffin near the altar. There are so many



amazing things to tell about the Basilica of St. Peter's. I wish I could share every story. But, I

am only hitting the highlights that I think would interest most people. Hope you are enjoying the stories of this incredible trip.





Probably the world's most famous sculpture of a religious subject is Michelangelo's amazing masterpiece of the Pieta (meaning "pity"). It is located in the first chapel to the right in the Basilica of St. Peter's behind bullet-proof glass. At 24 years old, Michelangelo was given a block of Carrara marble and commissioned to build a sculpture. Supposedly, he put his ear to the block of marble for one week listening to what "was inside".

In less than two years, he carved one of the most magnificent sculptures ever created. Michelangelo boldly celebrated the intimacy and majesty of a single moment frozen in time. Notice the face of Mary as a young girl, not the face of a woman who would have a 33 year old son. Her face is a divine symbol of eternal youth. The two figures are quite out of proportion. Mary is much larger in comparison to Jesus. Notice she is barely holding him. Seems like she is offering him to the world. The sculpture was originally unsigned and when it was unveiled, he stood in the crowd and overheard a group of people naming other artists as its creator. Later than night, he carved his name into Mary's sash. However, he vowed to never sign another one of his works again. In 1964, Pope John 23 gave permission for it to be brought to the US for the NYC World's Fair for the Vatican Exhibit. During the time it was on display in the US, a reproduction took its place in St. Peter's. In 1972, the sculpture was damaged by a mentally disturbed man with a hammer which gouged her face and arms. Michelangelo was known first as a sculptor (Pieta), then as a painter (Ceiling of Sistine Chapel), and then as an architect (Dome of St. Peter's).



We toured the Vatican Museums which house an extraordinary collection of sculptures, paintings, and tapestries. Unfortunately, most of the museums are under a very strict "No Photo" rule. At the end of the over 50 rooms of exhibits is the famous Sistine Chapel. This is where the Papal

Council convenes to elect the new Popes. It is extremely difficult to explain the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Last time I saw the Sistine Chapel, it was still under the nine-year restoration scaffolding many years ago. Michelangelo painted the ceiling after he did the Pieta. He was somewhat reluctant to take on this task. The old belief that he painted the ceiling while lying on his back is not true. He actually stood upright to paint and tilted his head back. In four years, he painted over 5,000 sq ft of the ceiling in various scenes from the Old Testament. In the center of the ceiling, he created the famous "Creation of Adam". We heard a story about the maroon cloak surrounding the figure of God representing a perfect cross section of the human brain. If you look carefully, you can see the angel on the bottom only has two toes. It is said it represents the brain stem and the angels are the different



parts of the brain. God is granting Adam not only the “gift of life” but also the “gift of supreme intelligence”. Twenty years after painting the ceiling, Michelangelo painted the back wall’s massive “Last Judgment” scene. With almost 400 figures, this awe-inspiring work combines art, religion, and science.





We toured ancient Rome by visiting the Coliseum and Roman Forum built in the first century.

The Coliseum was built in the heart of Rome and capable of seating 50,000 people. The opening ceremony lasted 100 days killing 5,000 animals. What we see today is just the skeleton of the arena. It had fallen by the year 1000 and much of the building was pulled down to be reused to build many churches and buildings around Rome. Even parts of the Basilica of St. Peter's used marble from the Coliseum. They even pried out the bronze clamps and nails which held the stonework together leaving the pockmarks you see today. The remainder of the present-day exterior wall is in fact the original interior wall. If you can imagine, the outer wall was completely covered in white travertine stone slabs. It originally had a retractable linen awning over the top covering about two-thirds of the arena. The Coliseum could be evacuated very quickly by using the



80 numbered staircases and exits. During the early days of the Coliseum, many martyred Christians died in the bloody arena. It is believed that the first Christian executed there was Saint Ignatius. Today, it is ironic that it is now a symbol for the anti-death penalty with many demonstrations held here. There is even a cross erected to remember the Christians who died in the arena. The cross is placed where the Roman Emperors once sat. The Pope now starts the Stations of the Cross there on Good Fridays.





Opposite Rome's Basilica of St. John Lateran, are steps brought from Jerusalem by St. Helena, mother of Constantine. These are supposedly the steps that Jesus used to get to Pontius Pilate's palace. There are 28 white marble steps covered by wood to protect them. Many pilgrims climb these steps on their knees in devotion saying prayers. Those who ascend on their knees are granted full indulgence of their sins. However, when we were in Jerusalem, we saw the true original set of stairs while walking the Via Dolorosa. Obviously, these are reproduced. I guess Jesus climbed several sets of stairs in his lifetime!



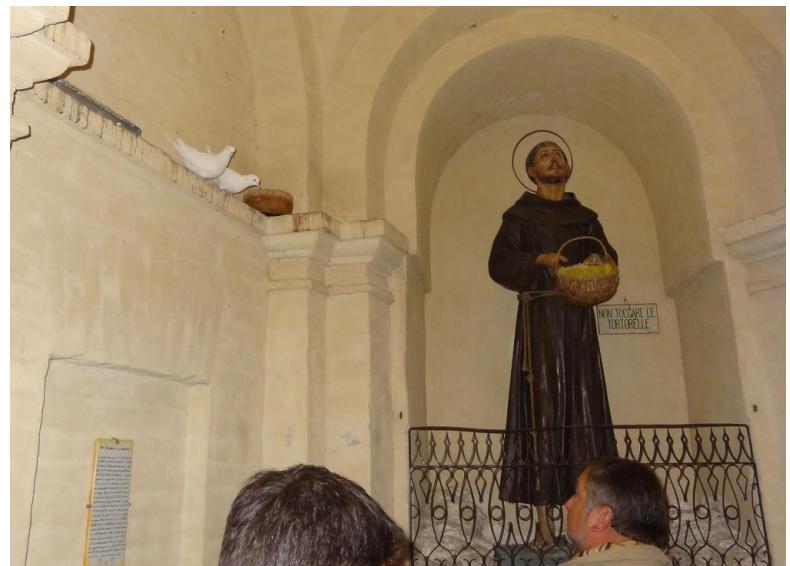
Assisi, Italy is a town several hours outside Rome and looks like how Italy is portrayed in the movies. It is a beautiful town and is the birthplace of St. Francis and St. Clare.

The town is dominated by their Basilicas. The Basilica of St. Francis was damaged by the massive earthquake in 1997 which

killed four people in the church. St. Francis, known as the Patron Saint of Animals and the Environment, was the first to suffer with stigmata (bearing the wounds of Christ). He devoted himself to a life of poverty and also arranged the first Christmas Manger scene by using real animals. Also, on behalf of all Christianity, it is the Order of the Franciscans who is the Custodian of the Holy Land since 1217 due to St. Francis' works. On top of the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels is a gold-plated statue of the Madonna. The



little chapel of Porzinuncola, where St. Francis preached, is inside this church. Also, the miracle garden of thornless roses is in the



courtyard of the church. After bearing so much torture from his way of life, St. Francis had tried to roll himself in a briar-brush garden in order to harm him. The garden immediately turned to thornless roses in order to protect St. Francis. St. Clare, after hearing St. Francis



preaching, became deeply touched by his message and became one of his first followers. She helped care for him when he became ill during the last years of his life. Together they founded the Order of Poor Clares, a monastery for nuns. St. Clare is also the patron saint of television

because she was supposedly able to see and hear mass on the wall of her room when she was



too ill to attend mass. EWTN was founded by a Poor Clare nun, Mother Angelica. St. Clare lies incorporeal in a perfect state of preservation in a glass coffin in the crypt of the Basilica of St. Clare.

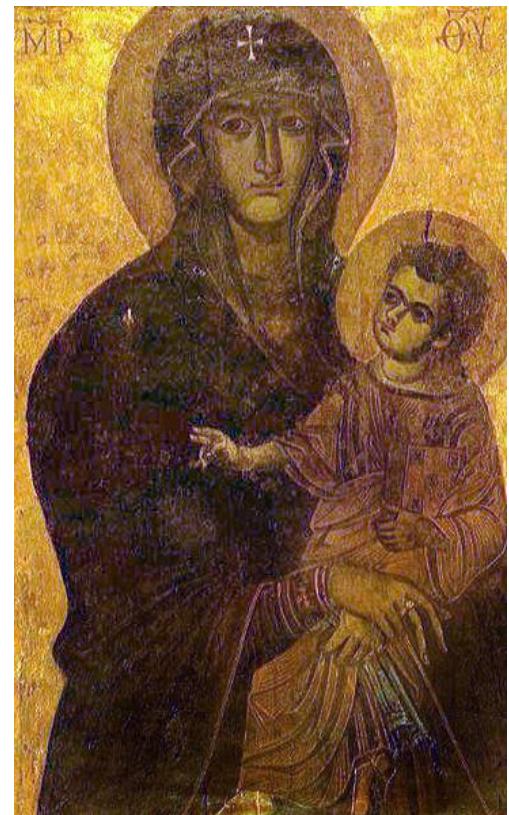


The church I was most looking forward to seeing was the Basilica of St. Mary Major. It is the largest church in Rome dedicated to Mary to justify the name "Major". The church is also called "Our Lady of the Snows" due to the legend that snow fell during one hot summer in

August on the spot where the church was built. Showers of white confetti mimic the celebration of the feast day every August 5. Ironically, it snowed in Rome five days after we left for the first time in 26 years! Under the high altar of the basilica is a relic said to contain wood from the Holy Crib of the Nativity of Jesus. This is the image of the reliquary containing the wood. St. Jerome and the artist Bernini are also buried in this church. However, it was the famous painting of the Virgin Mary that I most looked forward to seeing in this church. The icon is at least 1,000 years old and was painted on a thick cedar panel from life by St. Luke using the wooden table of the Holy Family in Nazareth. According to legend, after the crucifixion, when Mary moved to the home of St. John, she took with her a few personal belongings. This table built by Jesus in the workshop of St. Joseph was among her things.



St. Luke listened carefully as Mary spoke of the life of her son, facts which St. Luke later recorded in his Gospel. The painting is considered miraculous and has been prayed to and carried around Rome many times. The icon of the Mother of Perpetual Help is a true copy of this painting.





On our last day in Rome, Lonny and I decided to try to go to as many of the places we didn't see all week. This impossible task means that we will have to return to Rome. Therefore, our first stop was the Trevi Fountain. Legend says that you must throw a coin in the fountain in

order to ensure a return to Rome some day! An estimated 3,000 euros are thrown into the fountain each day. The money has been used to subsidize a supermarket for the needy in Rome. Trevi Fountain is the largest fountain in the city and one of the most famous fountains in the world. Part of the fountain is replicated at the Italy Pavilion at Epcot in DisneyWorld. Also, one of the best preserved Roman buildings, the Pantheon, was originally a pagan temple

of Ancient Rome. Almost 2,000 years after it was built, the dome of the Pantheon is still the world's largest unreinforced concrete dome. The opening of the dome emits the only light in the building. The bronze roof of the building was melted down and used by Bernini to create his





famous canopy above the high altar at the Basilica of St. Peter's. We also visited the famous Spanish Steps, which is the widest staircase in Europe with 138 steps leading to the church at the top. In 1986, the first McDonald's in Italy was opened near the Spanish Steps.



Our last day in Rome was a Sunday, the Lord's day of rest. We wanted to be sure we were as blessed as we could be, so Lonny and I went to mass four times on this day! Our first mass was by Bishop Sam and Father Josh Rodrigue at the Pontifical North



American College. This is where Father Josh studied as a Seminarian. Our second mass was a return trip to the Basilica of St. Mary Major with the Cardinals in Italian. We finally ended up at St. Peter's Basilica for our third and fourth mass of the day. Between the two masses at St. Peter's, we experienced a Vespers service with the Cardinals. There was an American Choir staying in our hotel that did the music for the last Mass of our day! What an incredible trip!