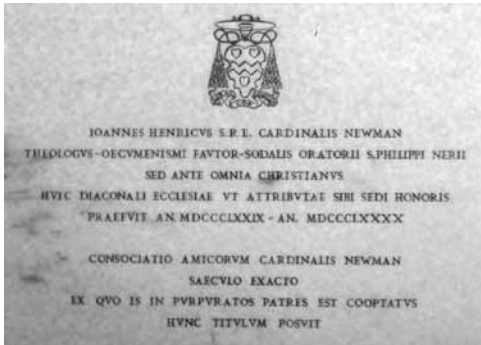


Pilgrimage to Rome and Assisi

By Barry Riley

Earlier plans for Newman pilgrims to travel through a war-torn Middle East, or on a search for the Northern British saints in places like Lindisfarne and Iona, had to be abandoned; but all roads lead to Rome and it was eventually decided to mark the Association's 70th anniversary with a John Henry-linked theme: his personal associations with locations in Rome. In addition the pilgrimage, the eleventh in the series going back to 1996, moved on to Assisi for two days.

Unexpectedly the pilgrimage, in early October, coincided with the opening of a Synod of Bishops on the "New Evangelisation" and the Year of Faith. This required some slight changes to our programme as the Pope held an open-air Mass in front of St Peter's Basilica on the Sunday and Rome was very busy. On the Monday we were able to observe busloads of bishops as they travelled to their conference centre, often carrying heavy briefcases, though sometimes junior clerics were there to help. Our short period in Rome also coincided with the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Vatican II Council. And as a bonus it included the feast day of John Henry Newman on Tuesday the 9th.



Newman's plaque in the church of St.Giorgio in Velabro

We stayed in Rome, only a five-minute walk from St Peter's, at the Hotel della Conciliazione, named after the political deal struck between Mussolini and the Vatican in 1929. Indeed, our first item on the timetable was at the great Basilica where we gathered early on the Saturday morning for Mass. Large numbers of visiting priests say Mass at St Peter's with its many altars and chapels and it was amusing to see the impatient celebrants replacing each other in

almost indecent haste. It was the privilege of our chaplain, Fr Fabian Radcliffe, to say Mass at an altar which housed the relics of Pope John XXIII who initiated the Council half a century ago.

We then spent some time exploring the baroque splendour of St Peter's. Markings on the floor compared the size of the Basilica with other churches around Europe and unexpectedly acknowledged St Paul's Cathedral in London as the runner-up – though the English place of worship was described as "pagan". It was also interesting to note a large plaque in the stone floor of the portico commemorating Vatican II.

In the afternoon we went to the Basilica of St John Lateran, the Pope's other church as the Bishop of Rome. It is the place where Newman was ordained as a deacon in May, 1847. First built in the fourth century it has been reconstructed several times since and, like most large Roman churches, it is extravagantly decorated. We visited the adjacent Scala Santa, the 28 steps of which can only be climbed by the

faithful on their knees; however, most Newman pilgrims were reluctant to test their delicate – and sometimes artificial - joints in this way and they climbed alternative staircases on foot. Our tour that afternoon closed with a walk to the Basilica of Santa Croce where Newman, after his ordination, spent his short Oratorian noviciate.

On the Sunday morning we avoided the crush around St Peter's and took in a bit of ancient Rome. Our bus took us around various parts of the city, including an external look at the Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls. Passing on foot through Michelangelo's Campidoglio Square we had an excellent view of the Forum from the hillside above. In the afternoon we celebrated Mass just off St Peter's Square at the church of Santo Spirito in Sassia, a church that has a significant Polish congregation and boasted a large picture of Pope John Paul II on its front wall. That evening several members of our group enjoyed dinner with three senior officials of Pax Romana who were in Rome in connection with the Synod.



Pilgrims on the steps of the Basilica of St. Clare, Assisi

The next day, Monday, we tracked down John Henry Newman again. Morning Mass was in the splendid Chiesa Nuova of St Philip Neri, actually in a charming side-chapel dominated by a portrait of the saint himself, who is in fact buried there. He was the founder of the Oratorians, the order which Newman joined; with the support of Pope Pius IX, Newman in 1847 established in London the Oratory of St Philip Neri and subsequently the Birmingham Oratory where he himself lived for almost 40 years. One or two of our group also visited the nearby Church of St Giorgio in Velabro – England's patron saint – which was chosen as Newman's titular church when he was made a cardinal in 1879. A tribute to IOANNES HENRICVS CARDINALIS NEWMAN is written in stone in St George's.

Our pilgrimage timeline was slightly out of order, however, because it was in 1846 that Newman had arrived in Rome, having been received into the Catholic Church

in England the previous year by an Italian Passionist Fr Dominic Barberi. So in the afternoon we, in effect, went back a year by visiting the College of Propaganda Fide where, at the age of 46, John Henry Newman engaged in brief studies for the Catholic priesthood. He was ordained by Cardinal Fransoni on May 30th 1847 in the College's Chapel of the Three Kings, which we visited. We were also given an opportunity to peer into the small upstairs Newman Chapel at Propaganda Fide where John Henry celebrated his first Mass, and from outside the doorway we could see his portrait hanging on the wall. Unfortunately, though, for some reason we were not permitted to go inside this elegant chapel.

We progressed on a walking tour to a number of other impressive churches that afternoon. At the church of St Ignatius of Loyola we walked into the academic Mass for the start of the new term at the Gregorian University; the singing was most impressive and most of our group spontaneously joined in the Kyrie from the *Missa de Angelis*. The Basilica of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva was next – it is Rome's only large Gothic church, and was the stronghold of the Dominicans, so it was a fitting place for Fr Fabian to inform our guide of the difference between a monk and a friar. Just down the road the Pantheon offered pagan splendour (though it has been consecrated as a Christian church since 609 AD); and the French Church of San Luigi dei Francesi gave the chance to look at three celebrated Caravaggios depicting stages in the life and death of St Matthew. Our perambulation ended at the spectacular Piazza Navona, packed with artists trying to sell their masterpieces, or at least offering to sketch portraits of the passing tourists for €10 a time.

On our final morning in Rome we visited the English College, a seminary for the education of English and Welsh priests since 1362. Our host was the chaplain to the students. In the sixteenth century newly-ordained priests were sent back from the College to almost certain death in England. A tragic death list on the wall is a commemoration of those terrible days. More recent history is very encouraging, however; after a fall in vocations during the latter part of the 20th century, when at one time the number of students dwindled into the 20s, the total has now risen to more than 40. At the English College we were able to celebrate our Mass on the Feast of Blessed John Henry Newman. It was an opportunity to sing *Praise to the Holiest in the Height*.

But it was time to say *arrivederci* to the Eternal City. The Newman Pilgrimage was moving on to Assisi. However, just before we reached there we stopped off at the Baroque Basilica built as a huge outer shell for the tiny chapel, the Porziuncola, which was Francis's original place of worship. That was down on the plain, but Assisi itself is perched up in the Umbrian hills and it is, of course, the site of the *real* Basilica of St Francis. That became the focus of the final two days of our pilgrimage.

Next morning we walked the short distance from our hotel down to the Basilica, which was shrouded in autumnal mist. Here we were privileged to celebrate our Mass in the underground chapel at the tomb of St Francis. Afterwards a local guide took us around both the lower and upper basilicas, giving us explanations of many of the famous frescoes, some by Giotto. In the earthquake of 1997 the lower part of the structure proved to be robust but the upper basilica was badly damaged:

collapsing debris killed four people who are commemorated by a plaque. Today, though, the damage is scarcely visible apart from the presence of areas of blank plaster where repairs to the stone walls have been carried out.

Our guide then escorted us along Assisi's main street – not surprisingly called the Via San Francesco – to the Basilica of St Clare, the follower of St Francis who founded the "Poor Clares". There was something of a hurry if we were to arrive there before the Basilica closed at 12 noon. In the crypt St Clare's remains are still the object of great devotion. In the afternoon we took taxis up the steep road to the Hermitage, a retreat where St Francis prayed, meditated and, at times, talked to the birds. Squeezing through tiny doorways we emerged on to a series of forest paths with several rustic altars. Then our taxis took us down the hill to the peaceful Santuario San Damiano, nestling amongst olive groves; this was where Clare founded her community.

Our last day, Thursday, began with our final Mass. The first had been in the sumptuous grandeur of St Peter's but this one, the sixth, was in the tiny but beautiful bare stone church of San Giacomo de Murorupto (St James of the Broken Wall), a thousand years old. In his sermon Fr Fabian remarked how peaceful and contemplative the churches in Assisi seemed compared with the crowds and the hustle and bustle of Rome. It was a tranquil and satisfying way to close our pilgrimage; there were no bishops to be seen in Assisi, only Franciscan friars.

London Newman Lecture 2013

CRISIS IN THE CHURCH

Michael Campbell-Johnston SJ



Father Michael has been a Jesuit for more than sixty years and is currently a member of the Jesuit community at Farm Street, London. A former provincial of the British province he has been at the centre of the Society's reforms following Vatican II, spending quarter of a century working alongside Father General Arrupe in Rome as Head of the Society's Social Justice Secretariat.

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