

Dear Friends,

With hearts full and heads spinning (from jet lag), we have returned from our pilgrimage to Italy. The trip was full of blessings and many wonderful experiences and encounters. Each time I lead a pilgrimage, it is a joy to see how the pilgrims connect with each other and form a community during the trip. We had a group of 48 to begin with in Rome, and two pilgrims that only joined us for that portion, which left us with 46 for the rest of the time.

Usually, we would end our journey in Rome at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, and that was my original plan, until we remembered that the Holy Father would be headed out of town for World Youth Day on the final days of our pilgrimage. This caused us to flip the trip around and start in Rome, which then had us ending in northern Italy, and our second to last stop being Padua and the tomb of our patron St. Anthony. This turned out to be a great blessing, as the whole time we were carrying the intentions that were entrusted to us and placing them on the altars of all the shrines and tombs where we celebrated Mass until we arrived at the tomb of St. Anthony and left our intentions with him. Ending in northern Italy this time of year made for some freezing temperatures, but certainly didn't chill the spirit of our pilgrims.

Beginning in Rome, we spent our first days in and around the Vatican. The Carmelite guest house we were staying in was near the Castel Sant' Angelo and not far from St. Peter's. Our first full day began with a walk to St. Peter's for Mass at 8am. To be in St. Peter's before the tourists arrive is a great blessing. For anyone who asks me for tips as they head to Rome, I always tell them to go to St. Peter's before 8am and enjoy the largest church in Christendom while it's quiet and empty. As we approached the square, we were able to enjoy the nativity made of sand which was still up and the massive Christmas Tree. Mass for us that morning was at the tomb of St. John Paul II. I went to the sacristy, checked in, and got vested. Someone shared a photo of me walking through St. Peter, vested and chalice in hand and said, "you were really moving". Well with the schedule and the lengths that one must cover across the grand basilica, I guess I was walking faster than I would at St. Anthony.

The Collect for the Mass (opening prayer) was: *Attend to the pleas of your people with heavenly care, O Lord, we pray, that they may see what must be done and gain strength to do what they have seen.* This immediately reminded me of St. John Paul II's tireless encouragement in the face of the daunting tasks that lie ahead of us as he so frequently echoed Jesus' "Be not afraid". With the origins of my own vocation beginning to stir at that very place after having encountered that bold Vicar of Christ in the year 2000, I was heartened as I celebrated Mass at his tomb. This prayer was perfect for the day and gave much inspiration to the pilgrims as we began our journey.

I pray that St. John Paul II and our heavenly patron St. Anthony will help us in this regard as we chart the course for the future here in finalizing the Pastoral Plan we have been working on for the past year.

Sincerely yours in Jesus Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fr. Jack D. Shrum". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Fr. Jack D. Shrum

Pastor