

On Pilgrimage in Italy

BY ERIC HOWELL

Unlike a vacation escape from life, pilgrimage is a journey nearer to the heart of God and deeper into life with God. The hope of all pilgrimage is realized when we have renewed eyes to be happily surprised by God's mysterious presence in all times and places, even at home.

If home in the simplest sense, as Joseph Wood Krutch once said, is “the place where one opens one’s eyes without surprise,”¹ then the decision to travel to faraway places requires a willingness to be surprised. Every experienced traveler has a story of the unexpected, whether it occasioned pleasure or pain. Those usually make the best stories.

Yet there is a different kind of travel possible for those who dare leave home. To travel as a Christian to faraway places of spiritual pilgrimage is a desire for even more than surprise. It is a willingness to be not only surprised, but transformed. Christian pilgrimage is born of yearning for spiritual renewal; the pilgrim seeks a different kind of travel experience than the one merely logged by photos and souvenirs. In his Asian notes, Thomas Merton observes, “There is another side of Kanchenjunga and of every mountain—the side that has never been turned into postcards. That is the only side worth seeing.”²

I believe two spiritually oriented, travel-related maxims. The first is, when you travel well, the most important journey is the one that goes inward, no matter the outward destination. Diana Kappel-Smith makes a wonderful observation in *Desert Time* when she writes, “Plants and animals change as one goes up the mountain, and so apparently, do people.”³ The second maxim I believe is this: you do not have to go anywhere to find ground for the soul’s journey toward God. The quest for meaningful spirituality is not *out there* or *over there* somewhere. Mindfulness of God’s faithful presence is found everywhere by the Holy Spirit’s ministry of comfort and

conviction. "Sit in your cell as in paradise," begins the Brief Rule that guides the Camaldolese monks.⁴

Spiritual wisdom has long insisted on stability and perseverance. Even with that wisdom in mind, this essay is about actually going somewhere far away, traveling as a Christian pilgrim to distant places experienced as sacred ground. This truth also is passed down through the ages from our Christian heritage: *there's nothing like actually being there*. From the earliest centuries, Christianity has a vibrant tradition of pilgrimage to holy sites associated with the life of Jesus, the apostles, and the saints. Generations of Christians have experienced sacred places as windows to the divine.

There's nothing like being there! What follows is an itinerary for a pilgrimage through Italy. I offer it for two primary reasons: as an actual recommendation for a pilgrimage to Italy drawn from my experience there on sabbatical for seven weeks, and, more broadly, as a template for pilgrimage to any part of the world. The rhythm of travelling well translates to different locations. On a pilgrimage trip there should be scheduled time plus free time; activity plus empty space. There is "Hurry-up let's go. We don't want to miss this!" and there is "Slow down and breathe. Take a book or a journal and find a tree to sit under for a while." And a larger rhythm arcs through the whole trip: movement from city to town to countryside, from fast to slow, from mind to heart to soul, from walking off the soles of your shoes to kneeling in reverence in a quiet, holy place.

PREPARE WELL: STUDY AND ORIENTATION

The footprint for a spiritual journey is much bigger than the actual days on the trip. In addition to the typical preparations necessary for international travel, we want to be intentional about our readiness for the experience. So here is a suggested reading list. Yes, this is homework! And it is worth the effort. This preparation will help us be more fully immersed in the wonder of the places we visit.

Robert M. Edsel's *Saving Italy: The Race to Rescue a Nation's Treasures from the Nazis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013) is a gripping suspense story that orients us to the significance, and fragility, of the Christian art and architectural heritage we will encounter. Edsel's earlier work was the basis of the popular movie *Monuments Men* (2014).

We will be traveling in the footsteps of Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226). Reading either Elizabeth Goudge's *My God and My All: The Life of St. Francis* (New York: Plough Publishing House, 2015 [1959]) or St. Bonaventure's *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, translated by E. Gurney Salter (1904), will prepare us to more fully appreciate him and the places he lived. Lucinda Vardey's *Travelling with the Saints in Italy: Contemporary Pilgrimages on Ancient Paths* (Mahwah, NJ: Hidden Spring, 2005) introduces other Christian figures, some well-known and others more obscure, and recommends specific destinations to visit as we are grateful for and learn from their faithful lives.

Our pilgrimage will include some remarkable churches. They are too much to absorb in one viewing, but reading Ross King's *Brunelleschi's Dome: How a Renaissance Genius Reinvented Architecture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000) and Margaret Visser's *The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, Meaning, and Mystery in an Ordinary Church* (New York: North Point Press, 2000) can help us decode their inspiring architecture.

TRAVEL WELL: 10 DAYS ON PILGRIMAGE

Imagine with me now a pilgrimage in central Italy. Lodging in all cities will be in the guest quarters of active monasteries. Italy has a fine tradition of simple, affordable monastic hospitality.

Day 1, Saturday: Depart from home for Rome

Day 2, Sunday: Arrive Rome

We arrive in Rome mid-morning. Even with jet lag, this gives us time to visit the Pantheon, the best-preserved ancient building in Rome, and in continuous service as a church since the seventh century. From the Pantheon we will join in the Roman tradition of the evening *passaggiata*, a lovely stroll from around Piazza Navona, past Trevi Fountain, to the Spanish Steps. This will be a relaxed day and an early bedtime will have us ready for the next morning.

Day 3, Monday: Rome

In the morning we will visit Saint Agnes Outside the Walls, the subject of Margaret Visser's book on our reading list. In this seventh-century church we will be immersed in a visual tour through church history and revere one of our ancient martyrs at her burial place. From St. Agnes it is a short distance to the Catacomb of Pricilla. On our tour we will pass through the burial place of popes, martyrs, and ordinary Christians from early Rome.

The afternoon is available for rest or for other interests. Options include the Roman Coliseum and Forum, the Borghese Gardens and Art Gallery, St. John Lateran Basilica, or St. Paul Outside the Walls Basilica.

Day 4, Tuesday, Rome

It's Vatican Day! Early in the morning we will queue in line for the Vatican Museum, one of the most renowned art collections in the world. From there we will gain access to the Sistine Chapel and then to St. Peter's Cathedral.

After lunch, the afternoon is again flexible. Options include the same for Monday, plus the Scavi Tour of the necropolis under the Cathedral, including a view of the site of St. Peter's burial.

Day 5, Wednesday, Florence

Early in the morning we will catch the train for Florence, the birthplace of the Renaissance. After a ninety-minute train ride, we will arrive in one of the most beautiful cities in the world! On the schedule for today are visits to Santa Maria Novella Basilica, San Marco Monastery,

the Baptistery of St. John, and the Duomo (or cathedral church). A climb to the top of the dome of the cathedral church is an option for those with strong legs!

Both evenings in Florence at 6:00 p.m. we will join the Monastic Community of Jerusalem for vespers in the tenth-century Badia Fiorentina abbey. The Jerusalem community's vocation is "to provide an oasis of prayer, silence, and peace in the 'desert' of modern cities."⁵

Day 6, Thursday, Florence

Museum Day! We will visit the Uffizi Gallery, one of the world's top art museums, and the Accademia Gallery, home to Michelangelo's statue of David.

We will watch the sunset from the front steps of San Miniato al Monte, the oldest church in Florence. From this perch, the whole city will lay below us as we prepare for the final leg of our journey.

Days 7-9, Friday-Sunday, Assisi

Early Friday morning we depart for Assisi, the City of Peace. Over the next three days the pace slows as we visit many of the sites most closely associated with Saint Francis and Saint Clare, including San Damiano, the Portiuncula, and the crypt where Francis is buried. At the Basilica of Santa Clara, the Cross of Francis presides over a small prayer chapel. We will visit the "Lest We Forget" exhibition at the Memorial Museum, which tells the Assisi story of hiding three hundred Jews from the Nazis during World War II. Time for prayer and reflection will be shared throughout our stay in Assisi, and on Saturday there will be an opportunity for a half-day side trip to Montecasale and La Verna, two tranquil and important Franciscan pilgrimage sites. We will worship Sunday morning at San Francesco Basilica in Assisi.

Sunday afternoon we depart for one final night in Rome.

Day 10, Monday: Depart Rome for home

This will conclude the organized, group trip. If you wish to extend your stay in Italy, here are four suggested options for a few days or up to a week. Any of these options would be a wonderful end to your trip.

Option 1: Depart from Assisi and head north for Ravenna and Venice by bus or train. Fly home from Venice. Why would you go? To see Ravenna's glittering Byzantine mosaics and Venice's San Marco Basilica and unique beauty.

Option 2: Depart from Assisi and go northwest to Milan and Lake Como by train. Fly home from Milan. Why go? To visit Milan Cathedral, see Da Vinci's *Last Supper*, and enjoy Lake Como's stunning shores.

Option 3: Depart from Assisi and drive west for a Tuscan hill town. Fly home from Florence or Rome. Why go? Visit Cortona, Montepulciano, Siena, San Gimignano, or so on — take your pick and live *la dolce vita!*

Option 4: Depart from Rome south for the Amalfi Coast by train. Fly home from Naples or Rome. Why go? Visit Pompeii, Positano, and the captivating Mediterranean coast.

RETURN WELL: REFLECTION AND REORIENTATION

Unlike a vacation escape from life, pilgrimage is a journey nearer to the heart of God and deeper into life with God. When you have returned from your physical trip, the pilgrimage continues as the artwork, architecture, conversation, the places and spaces stay with you long after you are back home. They are now a part of you in ways you will unpack for years to come. The hope of all pilgrimage is realized when we have renewed eyes to be happily surprised by God's mysterious presence in all times and places, even at home.

NOTES

1 Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Desert Year* (Iowa City IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010 [1951]), 171.

2 Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, edited by Patrick Hart, et al. (New York: New Directions Books, 1973), 153.

3 Diana Kappel-Smith, *Desert Time: A Journey through the American Southwest* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 139.

4 *St. Romuald's Brief Rule*, Camaldolese Oblates website, www.camaldolese.com/information.html (accessed June 18, 2016). Saint Romuald, who founded the Holy Hermitage of Camaldoli in the Benedictine tradition, wrote this rule in about 1006.

5 "Who We Are," The Jerusalem Community website, jerusalem.cef.fr/jerusalem/en/en_21tous.html (accessed June 18, 2016).



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