

The Via Francigena from Canterbury to Rome

Our Last Day in Rome

On 16th October last year, we found ourselves part of a crowd of around 80 000 people in St Peter's Basilica Square, Rome. The final day of our Via Francigena was spent attending a Papal Mass celebrating the canonization of seven saints. This was a special occasion for us because it marked the end of several journeys.

The first was the end of the pilgrimage we had made from Canterbury to Rome. We had spent one month lost in the world of Sigeric the Serious. In 990 AD, he travelled to Rome to receive his Archbishop pallium from Pope John XV. It amazes me that the path he took in the Dark Ages is being rediscovered in today's world!

But more importantly, during this Mass, my husband bid farewell to his mother who was dying in Sydney, surrounded by family. By mobile phone Paul said goodbye to his mother and then she and his family listened to the angelic music of the choir on speakerphone. She passed away just before communion.

We had taken communion to her every Sunday of her last year. So, we both felt that she had received communion with us one last time at this Papal Mass.

Finally, it was time to bid farewell to all the amazing Holy Doors that we had entered throughout the pilgrimage and fly home to Sydney in the evening.

Holy Doors in the Jubilee Year of Mercy

In this Jubilee year of Mercy, Pope Francis decreed that Holy Doors be opened in all places of worship so that the faithful may enter and receive the merciful forgiveness of the loving Father. Within the narrow confines of our own Parish in Sydney this did not seem all that extraordinary. But, travelling as we did from Canterbury, through France, Switzerland, Italy and finally Rome, the full extent of this gesture was overwhelming.

We passed through numerous Holy Doors on our journey and every one was unique. Although each Holy Door was decorated differently, they all displayed the same image of the loving Father with the message '*Misericordes Sicut Pater*'.

We really appreciated the Holy Doors in places with large tourist populations like Pisa, Siena, Florence, and Rome. This is because the 'Porta Sancta' had a separate entrance for 'pilgrims' and those who wanted to pray away from the tourist crowds.

I will certainly miss the Holy Doors when re-visiting these famous places of worship. But what made them so special is what we found once we entered the sacred space. This was the essence of our pilgrimage!

Our First Day at Canterbury Cathedral

From the outset, our pilgrimage was marked by mystery and surprise. I think of our first Holy Door as being the Christ Church Gate at the entrance to Canterbury Cathedral. We certainly felt like pilgrims with Christ in glory surrounded by his angels beaming down at us.

Entering the Cathedral we had our first surprise. I noticed there was a pilgrim Mass in the Crypt. So, in the first moments of our pilgrimage there we were in a Catholic Mass, receiving Communion and singing *Soul of my Saviour!*

We also encountered our first saint here because Thomas Becket had been buried in this Crypt. The pilgrims turned out to be parishioners visiting with their Parish Priest, but they were very welcoming and let us join their guided tour.

Later, we discovered a Via Francigena display near a Cathedral tour guide window. Here we obtained our Via Francigena Pilgrim's Credentials and felt very proud to receive our first stamp. Gazing at the milestone marking the beginning of the Via Francigena, we eagerly anticipated the path that lay before us.

Feeling like a pilgrim on the Via Francigena

Time restraints meant we could not follow in Sigeric's footsteps throughout France. So, heading south from Calais, we stopped at Amiens Cathedral and Besançon.

At the beginning of our pilgrimage, especially in France, I kept thinking about what it must have felt like to be a medieval pilgrim walking towards a massive Gothic Cathedral standing tall on the horizon.

The brightly coloured sculptures were there to warn the pilgrims about 'The Last Judgement' by using fearful images of the tortures awaiting them in hell. Then, entering through the 'Holy Door' and the darkness of the west end, the pilgrim processed to the light at the east and salvation.

I had this feeling every time we entered a 'Holy door' and visited all the shrines in the Basilicas, Cathedrals and village churches along the Via Francigena.

Although Amiens Cathedral is not a Via Francigena destination, I still felt so much like a pilgrim as we sat watching its famous west end sculptures lit by laser light in their original colours. Then, walking with the crowd towards the three famous Portals I stood beneath Christ the Judge, separating the good from the bad. As a result, I had a real sense of the fear instilled in the pilgrim at the sight of the bad being shoved into the mouth of hell.

Entering the Holy Door the next day I was eager to see all the marvels in the Cathedral. But, lost in the big labyrinth on the floor, I missed out on seeing all the amazing features of the apse because a funeral had begun and we were sent away.

One purpose of the labyrinth in Gothic Cathedrals was to warn the pilgrim about the complexity of the human path towards salvation. Well, this message followed me everywhere in my pilgrimage. There were many times when I knew for certain that the path to salvation is not straightforward.

In today's world our paths to salvation are not based on fear as in medieval days, but on our pilgrimage, we did experience the complexity of the path. No matter how determined I was to arrive at a particular destination, the more it seemed to evade us. It was as if unseen hands were directing us to where we needed to be to learn a particular lesson.

Mid-way through our journey at the Abbey of St Maurice in Switzerland, I was feeling frustrated; there were places we had missed and I wanted to go back and see them. A fellow pilgrim who had started his pilgrimage by bicycle in Montreux looked at me sternly and said, 'Why go backwards, when the way forward to Rome, is so much better!'

It struck me that I stop myself going forward by ruminating too much on past hurts due to my inability to forgive. This realization led me through the labyrinth a little closer to my final destination, Rome, and hopefully forgiveness.

The complexity of the labyrinth followed us everywhere. Throughout Italy there were many more frustrating moments when we could not find places, or, on arriving, found them shut for *siesta*. So I became philosophical about this and looked for the message I was being given.

For instance, in Asti, while the main Cathedral was closed till 4 pm, at the Collegiate Church of San Secondo we entered the Holy Door to discover a Mass in progress. Then we visited the ancient crypt dating from 6th century where San Secondo was martyred and buried.

We discovered that the ancestors of Pope Francis are from Asti and that his parents and grandparents migrated to Buenos Aires in 1929. Also, the Pope's father was born in Turin, very near Asti. So we went to Turin, and I have to say, entering the Holy Door of the Cathedral of Turin and praying at the Royal Tribune where the Shroud is kept, was deeply moving.

Entering the Holy Door of the Duomo of Piacenza is another place where we attended a Mass celebrated right next to the tomb of Blessed Giovanni Battista Scalabrini. I think this saint helped me to be less judgmental about the way my mother nursed the elderly and dying in a Scalabrini aged care facility until she was 84 years old.

The saint cared for Italian migrants and established the modern-day Scalabrinian order. I felt sure he is still interceding on behalf of the refugees in the camp we saw at Calais.

Experiences of this nature were the essence of our pilgrimage right up to the extraordinary set of circumstances that led to our attendance at the Papal Mass marking the end of our pilgrimage. I must say that I kept feeling sad that the Holy Doors would close in November and was hoping the Holy Father might change his mind and keep them open.

But I noticed, passing through the Holy Door in Pisa, that there was a sign above the door with the words 'Porta Sancta' telling me that Holy Doors never close. They have always been there and always will be!

The Holy Father, in his wisdom, is using the powerful symbol of a 'door' to invite everyone to enter and experience the power of God's forgiveness and mercy and enter a door that never closes.