

SABBATICAL REFLECTIONS

The sun burnt down as I walked out of the airport in Pisa. For the next three and a half weeks I was to explore aspects of Renaissance and Romanesque art and architecture in Tuscany and Umbria. It was a rich and varied experience and I was to be deeply touched by the beauty of all I would see. I came away realising how much the Renaissance affected European thought right up to the beginning of modernism.

My knowledge of the subject was limited but I was to gain a sense of the immense creativity of that period (roughly from 1000 to 1500 CE) during the following weeks. Set on the banks of the Arno River, the ancient centre of Pisa is not overwhelming and I was able to begin my acquaintance with the masters of the Renaissance. Cimbuæ and Pisano stand out here and I was to meet them again in Florence and elsewhere. Where Pisa was intimate and fresh I found Florence noisy and overwhelming. Unfortunately I had chosen a B&B by Piazza della Repubblica and, after a week of having to listen to loud music until 1am I fled! But Florence contains so much Renaissance art in its great churches, museums and galleries. I was particularly taken by the work of Brunelleschi, whose development of architectural perspective and internal spatial construct was to dominate European thought for almost seven hundred years. I was delighted by his forms - his use of simple, balanced geometric design, elegant arches and muted colours. If you want to get a taste, visit the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery which seems to owe much to this mid Renaissance architect. Florence was made bearable by visits to Fiesole and San Miniato and I realised that I was not alone in wanting to escape this intimidating city. In the end I cut my visit short and took the train to Siena.

Where Florence seems to trumpet its power, Siena does so in a more muted way, even its artists. A short stroll from my hotel brought me to Il Campo, scene of the famous Palio, and the Duomo. In their different ways, both are majestic. The duomo - as all the churches in Siena - seemed to proclaim the pride the city had in itself. Whilst there I also travelled to San Gimignano, the city of towers which, over the centuries, has changed even less than Siena. It is a remarkable place and I enjoyed visiting its small, 12th cent. Collegiata with wonderfully fresh frescoes.

From Siena I moved into Umbria and to Perugia, city of Raphael and an ancient university. I stayed in a small apartment overlooking a grim alley next to the cathedral and was serenaded most nights in a way that reminded me of Romford on Fridays! Apart from that the city has many fine works of the Renaissance but, unlike Tuscany, the baroque has had its influence. I spent time in all the major churches and visited the small city of Borgo San Sepulchro (where Butonie has its spaghetti factory ... but more importantly, Piero della Francesca was born and worked). I spent time at the Museo Civico and saw the great 'Resurrection' by della Francesca. I was also very impressed by the cathedral 11th c. cathedral which has retained its Romanesque solidity and is bathed in a gentle light from its alabaster windows. There was some great art there, too. An Ascension by Perugino; a moving 11th c. Volto Santo; and 15th c. Madonna. The whole place, in its simplicity, provides a moving setting for these polychrome works. And, as a final gift, I found the 14th c. fresco of St. Thomas Becket.

My final week was spent in Assisi. Assisi - this city of pink and white stone nestling on the green slopes of Mt. Subassio. I last came here in 1977 dressed in the habit of Francis. At first sight little seemed to have changed, except it all looks - fresher. But on second looks there are still the cranes rebuilding houses shattered in the terrible earthquake of 1997. I staying with the Atonement Sisters whose convent guest house overlooks the basilica of Santa Chiara. The views were breathtaking. I discovered I had arrived at the beginning of the Novena for the Feast of San Francesco and, on many days, I attended the Concelebrated Mass, often accompanied by wonderfully haunting folk music which brought on an overwhelming sense that here one touches the divine. I also valued being able to spend time at Santa Chiara and most days were filled with walking in the wonderful countryside around the city. San Damiano, Rivo Torto Santa Maria della Angeli and the Carceri up on Mt. Subassio were a delight to visit. On Sunday I joined the Anglican congregation for Mass at St. Leonard's. They were very hospitable and numbered about 20 many of whom, like me, were visitors.

The next stage of my journeying took me into another world - Los Angeles and the parish of St. Bede. Here I was shown great hospitality by Fr. Jim Newman and his partner as well as members of the congregation. I had come there because our two parishes are 'twinned' and, apart from attending parish events, saying Mass and preaching on the Sunday, I was taken on tours of the city, visited Pasadena and met up with a number of old friends. From Los Angeles I took the train (24 hours) to Raton and then the bus to Colorado Springs where I was to undertake the 30 Day Retreat at the Mercy Center.

I had not quite known what to expect, although I had stayed at the Mercy Center in San Francisco some years back. What I encountered was different from anything I had expected! This Mercy Center had been founded in 1988 by Fr. William Jarema. As their website says: "The Mercy Center for Healing the Whole Person is dedicated to an eclectic and whole-person approach to healing and wholeness and prides itself on the intimate dialogue maintained between the physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual and social dynamics of each person who comes to seek their personal healing and well-being." The Center also acts as a focus for the Society of Missionaries of Mercy. The Society is a Lay Association within the RC Church which "welcomes men and women, single and married, Priest and Laity who desire to celebrate a spirituality of mercy, participate in the healing ministry of Jesus Christ and serve as a lay missionary to families, friends, neighborhood and the community at large." As their website continues: "Our Way of Life is a four-fold awareness that we share in common: a celebration of our spirituality of mercy, dedication to the healing ministry of Jesus Christ, living the vow of conversion of life and the prayer of mentoring that is two-fold: Monthly Veneration of the Cross and the shared Examination of Consciousness."

Apart from meeting members of the Society I shared the Center with a group of Catholic religious and priests from the US, England, Mexico, Nigeria, Kenya, Ireland, the Czech Republic, Trinidad and Uganda who were on a three-month Sabbatical programme and from whom I gained a great deal just by living alongside them, sharing food and attending Mass with them each day.

The 30 Day Retreat is the means whereby one is taken through the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola. Whilst this is not the place to write of my experiences, the Retreat proved a most valuable period and I am deeply grateful to Fr. Bill Jarema who directed the Retreat. I hope to meet up with him again when he visits the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham near Brentwood in June.

So ended my three month Sabbatical. A journey which embraced brought me into contact with different cultures, expanded my understanding of art, cemented bonds with our twin parish and renewed my own faith. For all this, I am deeply grateful.

*"In the Lord, I'll be ever thankful;
In the Lord I will rejoice!
Look to him, do not be afraid,
in God rejoicing, the Lord is near.
in God rejoicing, the Lord is near."*