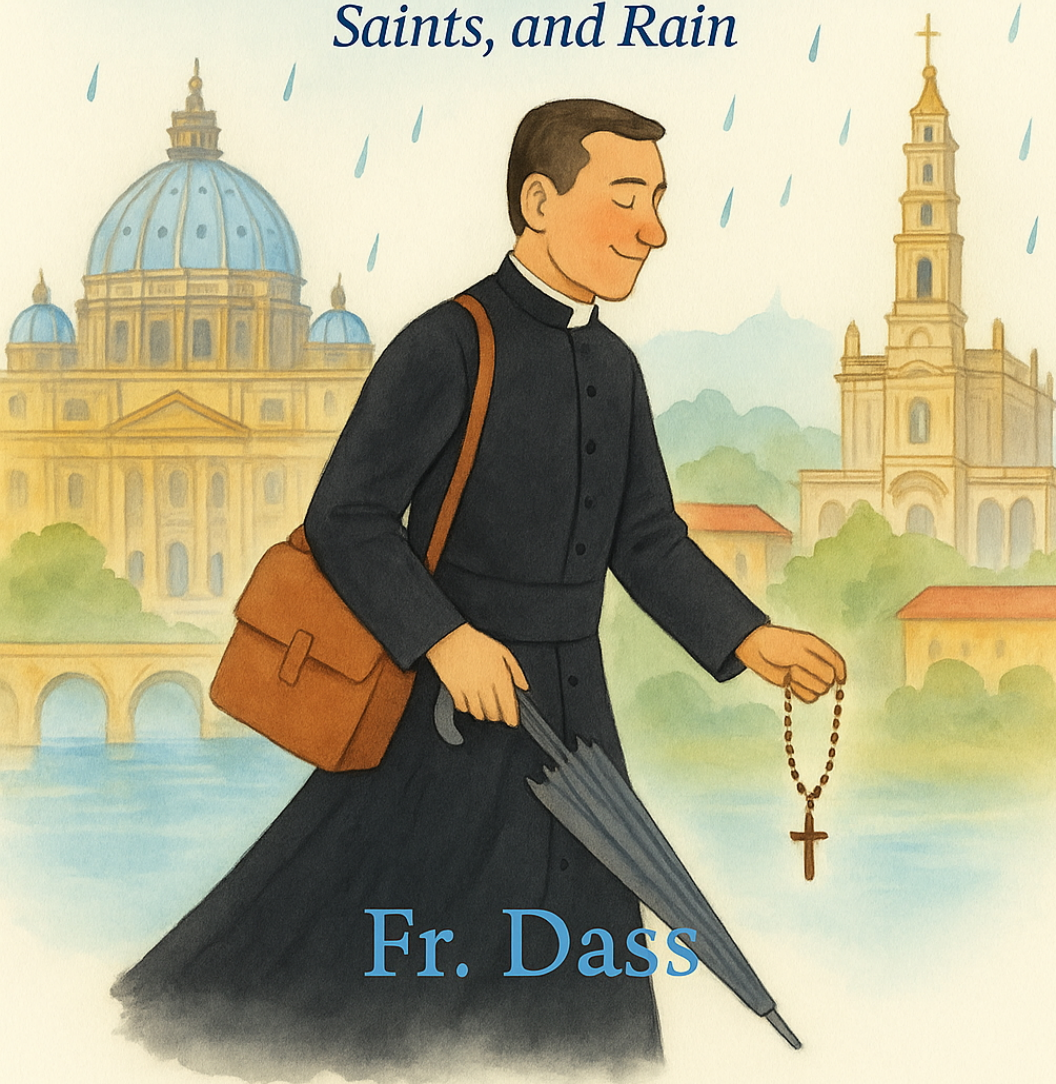


A Pilgrim Priest's Journey *from* Rome to Fatima

*Finding God Between Flights,
Saints, and Rain*



Fr. Dass

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Journey from Rome to Fatima
*Finding God Between Flights,
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BY FR. DASS

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“They set out, and the Lord went before them.”

— Exodus 13:21

Dass

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Dedication

To my beloved parents,
David and Jebamalai Mary,
whose faith was my first catechism,
whose love was my first homily,
and whose sacrifices became the altar
on which God shaped my vocation.

"The just shall live by faith." — Romans 1:17

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PROLOGUE

In the Beginning, There Was Packing Tape

Every holy journey begins with chaos.
Before saints march, pilgrims misplace things.

For some, the call to pilgrimage sounds like angels singing. For others, like me, it begins with the sound of packing tape sticking to itself for the tenth time. Somewhere between laundry piles and flight confirmations, grace quietly unpacks itself. Because that's how God works, not only in incense and silence, but in misplaced chargers, wrinkled cassocks, and the mild panic of realizing you've packed more socks than sermons.

They call it *"a pilgrimage to holy places."*
But it's really a pilgrimage toward a holier heart.

When I first agreed to lead forty pilgrims from Utah through Rome, Florence, Padua, Lourdes, and Fatima, I imagined serene prayer and solemn beauty.

Reality was holier, and noisier. I became a part-time travel agent, full-time luggage chaplain, and occasional referee in the espresso line. Yet somewhere in that holy commotion, the sacred began to shimmer.

Pilgrimages are paradoxes. You think you're going to meet God in basilicas, but He finds you first at the boarding gate. You expect to see Him in marble and mosaics, but He appears in turbulence, in traffic, or in the face of a snoring

pilgrim. It's as if Heaven keeps whispering, *"You came to see My wonders, I came to show you yours."*

There were moments of awe, candlelight processions, whispered rosaries, and the quiet ache of kneeling where saints once knelt.

And there were moments when the only miracle was that espresso worked faster than grace.

But through every delay, detour, and dose of DayQuil, I learned that holiness hides best in the unplanned.

Because in the end, a pilgrimage is not about the miles you walk, but the space you make for God to walk with you.

Every delay becomes a lesson in trust, every lost bag a test in detachment, every Mass, whether in a basilica or a hotel room, a doorway into heaven.

So here begins not a travel guide, but a story of grace between airports and altars, a journey of laughter, faith, and the quiet humor of a God who refuses to travel without us.

"Blessed are those whose strength is in You, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage." — Psalm 84 : 5

Day 1 – The Art of Holy Procrastination

Though I was excited for this pilgrimage and already imagining myself walking through the Holy Doors of Rome, I somehow did... absolutely nothing about it.

Two days before departure, the only thing that sat ready, like a faithful disciple, was my passport. Everything else was still wandering in the wilderness of my room.

Not that I didn't want to prepare. Time simply refused to cooperate.

Saturday: Oktoberfest with the Knights of Columbus.

Sunday: Mass from 8:00 a.m. to 5:45 p.m., plus Confirmation class.

By the end, I was the one who needed Confirmation that I was still alive.

How it *actually* went down when I started packing, true pilgrim fashion: one holy item at a time, with commentary from heaven and the laundry basket.

- Priest's vestments — check. (If I forget socks, at least I'll still look liturgical.)

- Stole for confessions — check. (Because grace doesn't take vacations.)

- Essentials (Bible, breviary, passport) — check. (In that sacred order.)

- Rosary — check. (Primary turbulence system.)

- Toiletries — found hiding behind holy water, looking more blessed than organized.

- Universal adapter — check. (Because the only thing less compatible than outlets is airline Wi-Fi.)

- Chargers — phone, watch, hope. All fully charged...ish.

- Neck pillow — check. (Purely decorative.)
 - Snacks — check. (Spiritual consolation in crunchy form.)
 - Coffee packets — check. (Preventative penance.)
 - Extra socks — check. (For when charity begins at feet.)
 - Duct tape — check. (Miracle kit for luggage and attitudes.)
 - Mini first-aid — bandages for blisters, pride for humility.
 - Laundry bag — check. (Future home of heroic odors.)
 - Copies of the Pilgrim Prayer Book — check. (For when the Wi-Fi converts no one.)
 - Small gifts for hosts — check. (Evangelization via chocolate.)
 - Tiny notebook + pen — check. (Emergency homily device.)
 - Pilgrim patience — packed in theory.
 - Humility — double-packed. (Airport security will test it.)
- Final audit: spiritually overprepared, physically overpacked, emotionally optimistic. Proceeding in faith... and rolling suitcase.

Sometimes I feel I'm the living proof of St. Augustine's line:

"Lord, make me holy—but not yet." (Confessions VIII.7)

Only in my case, it's: *"Lord, help me pack—but not yet."*

Every trip I say, "Next time, I'll start early."

And every trip, I don't. It's like a spiritual *déjà vu*—the lesson you never quite learn, repeated until heaven takes pity on you.

Still, somehow, by divine mercy (and mild panic), I managed to pack everything... or at least almost everything. I'm sure

I'll discover what's missing halfway across the Atlantic, like every pilgrim before me.

Monday Morning Revelation

The alarm went off at 5:00 a.m. I didn't have to leave until 10:00, so I thought, "I'll get a bit more sleep."

At 6:10 a.m., I was wide awake, staring at the ceiling, realizing once again that the human body only wants sleep when it shouldn't.

I told myself, "Don't worry, I'll sleep on the flight."

But like Peter promising, "Even if I must die with You, I will not deny You" (Matthew 26:35), I break that promise every single time. I never sleep on flights.

The Journey Begins Before You Move

The real pilgrimage starts not when you board the plane, but when you say "yes" in the middle of the mess.

Abraham didn't have his itinerary, Sarah didn't have her luggage tags, and Moses forgot his sandals somewhere near the burning bush—but they went anyway.

"Go from your country... to the land that I will show you." — Genesis 12:1

Every holy journey begins with a little bit of uncertainty, a little bit of mess, and a lot of faith.

Travel Tip from Fr. Dass's Hard-Earned Wisdom

If you ever think you'll sleep on a plane—you won't. Instead, pack:

- A neck pillow (for decoration)
- A prayer book (for repentance)
- A rosary (for turbulence)
- Snacks (for consolation)
- And humility — because you'll need that most.

By the time I reached the airport, my mind was still half at the parish, half in my suitcase, and half (yes, three halves) wondering if I packed my toothbrush. But somehow, grace covered it all.

Perhaps pilgrimages begin best not in perfect order, but in holy dependence. After all, the disciples didn't pack efficiently either. Jesus sent them saying:

"Take nothing for your journey." — Luke 9:3

And yet they changed the world.

So maybe my scattered start isn't failure—it's faith in disguise.

Remembering the Last Pilgrimage (and Counting My Blessings This Time)

As I packed this time, I couldn't help but remember my last pilgrimage — the "adventure" I never asked for.

That was the trip when Hamas attacked Israel on October 7th. One minute we were praying in the Holy Land, the next minute the world outside turned to chaos.

That experience was unforgettable — not because of the sights, but because of the silence. Churches closed, streets empty, pilgrims stranded. On that Sunday, we could not even celebrate Mass. Imagine: the very land where the Word became flesh... and no place to say the Word of Life!

Our guide said, “You’ve had Mass every day already.”

I looked at him the way Martha must have looked at Mary when she left her to do all the work.

But grace has a way of finding a door when every gate is locked. After much searching, priests from Shepherd’s Field gave us hosts and wine, and a Greek Catholic church offered us their altar. That humble church became our Upper Room.

“When I am afraid, I put my trust in You.” — Psalm 56:3

And truly, that day faith turned fear into worship. The bombs did not stop, but heaven opened in that small borrowed chapel.

The Birth of the Pilgrim’s Prayer Book

So this time, I wanted to be ready — spiritually and practically. I thought, “If another crisis happens, at least let’s have prayers and songs to keep us united, along with Mass Kit”

So I decided to make a *Pilgrim’s Prayer and Hymn Book* — something that could lift weary hearts even if the Wi-Fi failed and the world went silent.

Anthony Mazur, our Director of Communication, helped

design and format it. He said yes immediately — proof that miracles still happen outside the Bible.

By Thursday, the book was printed. When I finally held it in my hands, it was better than I imagined — reverent, joyful, and far more polished than the priest who commissioned it.

“Do whatever He tells you.” — John 2:5

So yes — my suitcase may have been half-organized, but my soul was carrying something richer: a prayer book born out of fear, faith, and friendship.

Reflection

That experience in Israel taught me something I’ll never forget:

God doesn’t promise an easy pilgrimage; He promises a meaningful one.

When plans collapse, He rebuilds altars in unexpected places.

When guides lose their way, He sends shepherds from Shepherd’s Field.

And when Church doors are locked, He opens hearts wider than cathedrals.

“In all things God works for the good of those who love Him.” — Romans 8:28

So this year, as I zipped my overstuffed suitcase, I smiled.

Yes, I was disorganized again.

Yes, I probably packed three bottles of shampoo and forgot something important.

But I also carried something new — a peace that comes only from surviving the storm once and still daring to go back out to sea.

“A ship in harbor is safe, but that’s not what ships are built for.” — St. John Henry Newman

And that’s why I go — not for comfort, but for conversion. Not for the perfect plan, but for the perfect Presence.

The Airport: Where Patience Goes to Be Tested

By the time I left for the airport, I felt surprisingly calm — which, given my history of last-minute miracles, was either a sign of spiritual growth or sheer exhaustion.

I arrived early, passport clutched like a relic of St. Christopher himself. I whispered a small prayer:

“Lord, if You multiplied loaves and fishes, please multiply the patience in this line.”

The check-in counter looked like Judgment Day — everyone waiting to see which line led to glory (boarding) and which to purgatory (baggage overweight).

“Patience is the companion of wisdom.” — St. Augustine

So I stood there, arms raised like Moses parting the Red Sea, waiting for the security wand to declare me righteous.

Among Pilgrims and Paperwork

Once through security, I spotted familiar faces — fellow pilgrims, appearing like apostles gathering in the Upper

Room. I greeted each one, handed out copies of the Prayer Book, and watched their eyes light up.

Of course, right after that, I opened my laptop to finish parish work — spreadsheets and emails at Gate 42.

If only people knew that parish paperwork is 90% receipts and 10% penance.

“Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” — 1 Corinthians 10:31

Even budget spreadsheets at Gate 42.

The Gate That Moved (and Moved Again)

Just as I started feeling productive, the loudspeaker crackled:

“Attention passengers: your gate has been changed.”

Of course it has. It always has.

I packed my digital altar and walked across the airport to the new gate — under construction.

Scaffolds, orange cones, and signs saying “Pardon Our Progress” everywhere.

I thought, *That’s fine — so is my soul.*

“Here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” — Hebrews 13:14

Between changing gates, construction noise, and coffee that tasted like penance, the day was long but grace-filled. Because that’s what pilgrimage is: divine purpose amid human delay.

Layovers, Laughter, and Lost Hours

The flight from Salt Lake City to San Francisco felt short—as if the plane had a divine tailwind. But then came the real pilgrimage: a three-hour layover. Long enough to get bored, but not long enough to repent of it.

Everyone gathered near the gate, and soon the sacred ritual began — handing envelopes of euros to Leonora, our unofficial treasurer. Each pilgrim gave 145 €, except two rebels: one was another priest, the other was yours truly. We priests have a special charism called *Delay until clarity*.

Someone suggested exchanging dollars to euros, but the rate was so bad even Zacchaeus would have blushed.

While others went to lunch, I fasted — not out of holiness, but fear of public restrooms. There are martyrs, and then there are airport bathrooms.

I walked the terminal, browsing books I wouldn't buy and reading articles I wouldn't finish. Watching travelers rush as if salvation depended on boarding time, I thought of:

"Be still, and know that I am God." — Psalm 46:10

Two pilgrims from New Mexico were re-routed through D.C. I prayed for them — and for their luggage's salvation.

Finally, boarding was announced. Excitement filled the air like incense before Mass. Mr. Frank had accidentally reserved my seat, but the airline reassigned me, free of charge — a miracle, since airports charge for air itself.

Providence placed me beside my former parishioners, Angel and Justin, whose laughter made the flight feel like a parish potluck at 35,000 feet.

The Liturgy of Lost Hours

As the plane taxied, a different anxiety stirred — the Liturgy of the Hours.

When do you pray Vespers if your evening vanishes over the Atlantic?

It was mid-afternoon in San Francisco, midnight in Rome. So I switched to Italian time, finished Vespers, and then Compline before take-off — the earliest “night” of my life.

“Seven times a day I praise You.” — Psalm 119:164

While others watched movies, I prayed softly from my breviary. The hum of engines became a Gregorian background chant. Between psalms, I gazed at the sun setting over the Pacific.

“The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night.” — Psalm 121:6

There, somewhere above the clouds, I felt that quiet joy only pilgrims know: time was no longer mine—it belonged to God.

Conversations at 35,000 Feet

As the flight settled, the little screens glowed while Angel and Justin traded snacks and movie opinions. Meanwhile, I sat in my clerical collar — a universal magnet for questions.

"Are you a priest?"

"Yes."

"From Utah? Really? There are Catholics there?"

Yes — a few of us, holding the line between ski slopes and Starbucks.

After the fifth round, I thought of St. Paul explaining himself on every ship: "Yes, I'm an apostle. No, I'm not selling souvenirs."

Still, those questions reminded me of who I am — a visible sign of the Church's presence in unexpected places.

"You are the light of the world." — Matthew 5:14

Apparently, that includes airplanes.

Later, I met two women from Taiwan, Catholics now in San Francisco. They spoke of their homeland, where devotion endures but youth drift away.

I told them gently, "Conversion isn't our project — it's God's. We plant, we water, but only Jesus gives the growth." (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:6)

Their eyes softened. One whispered, "That gives peace."

"Hope has two beautiful daughters — anger and courage." — St. Augustine

We talked until the lights dimmed. I whispered a prayer for Taiwan, for San Francisco, for every land where faith flickers but never dies.

"Our hearts are restless until they rest in You." — St. Augustine

That night, over the Atlantic, with seat belts fastened and souls lifted, I rested mine.

A Providential Passenger

Between Salt Lake City and San Francisco, God arranged one of those surprises He delights in.

My seatmate turned out to be a Filipina doctor — a baby specialist, kind and cheerful.

She noticed my collar only after take-off and asked, “Father, are you a Catholic priest?”

“Yes.”

Then the usual: “Where are you from?”

“Utah? Really? There are Catholics there?”

But then she added:

“Father, with all the LDS people in Utah — what are you doing to convert them?”

I smiled: “Honestly, that’s Jesus’ job. We just try not to get in His way.”

I explained how in Utah our mission is connection, not confrontation — meeting people where they are, especially the young, in the fields they know best: technology and creativity.

“The soil is digital now; we just plant seeds.”

She laughed. “That makes sense — Jesus met people where they were too.”

“I have become all things to all people.” — 1 Corinthians 9:22

Then she told me something remarkable: she had been at my own parish's 8 a.m. Mass the previous Sunday — in Park City! Out of all the flights, all the seats, God seated us side by side.

"The steps of a man are established by the Lord." — Psalm 37:23

We spoke about faith, family, and medicine; how every baby is proof God still believes in humanity. When we landed, she smiled: "Father, maybe God wanted us to have this chat." I agreed. God loves surprise appointments.

That flight reminded me that pilgrimage begins not when your feet touch holy ground, but when you notice holiness sitting beside you at 30,000 feet.

"Christ has no body now but yours." — St. Teresa of Avila

Even at Gate C-14.

Day 2 – The Flight That Never Ends (and the Night That Wouldn't Either)

They say a pilgrimage is a journey of the soul.

Who knew it also involved losing **eight hours, three meals, and most of your dignity** in an aluminum tube at 35,000 feet?

I boarded the plane full of faith, energy, and mild delusion. Eleven hours later, I was praying for purgatory, **just to stretch my legs**. Somewhere over the Atlantic I realized that time isn't relative; **it's irrelevant**.

Still, there's something strangely sacred about watching the sunrise above the clouds, trapped between heaven and an in-flight meal that smells suspiciously like **penance disguised as pasta**.

So begins **Day 2, The Flight That Never Ends**: the story of how I prayed, resisted pretzels, laughed at *The Office*, and landed in Rome slightly holier, slightly hungrier, and very grateful.

Eight Hours Lost and a Plane Full of Temptations

Time on a trans-Atlantic flight is like grace: invisible, mysterious, and completely beyond your control.

The flight attendants, bless them, worked tirelessly feeding us like benevolent Italian nonnas who mistook **"fasting pilgrims"** for **"starving orphans."** Every two hours: first pretzels, then juice, then pasta, then sandwiches that looked like they had survived the fall of the Roman Empire.

I resisted heroically at first. I opened my breviary and began the **Liturgy of the Hours** with the solemnity of a monk. For two hours, I was focused and holy.

Then came the pretzels.

My seat neighbor, a cheerful pilgrim from another group, waved hers like a Eucharistic offering.

"It's delicious," she said.

"It's salty," I replied.

Thus ended her ministry of snack evangelization.

Next rolled the wine cart, **the serpent in the aisle**, and then dinner: "Vegetarian pasta, chicken pasta, or beef something?"

Since I don't eat pork or beef, I chose vegetarian. It tasted like **penance in white sauce**, proof that humility can be served *al dente*.

Sleep was a theological concept, not an experience. Every time I closed my eyes, someone coughed, a baby cried, or the captain announced "mild turbulence" (which in pilot language means "**brace for sanctification**").

A fellow pilgrim at the window gasped, "I can see the **Aurora Borealis!**"

I rejoiced with him, in theory. The only light I could see was the restroom sign.

For distraction, I watched *The Office* (American version, of course). I laughed so loudly the flight attendant gave me the "**Father, behave**" look—the same one I use on teenagers

during Confirmation class. Feeling guilty, I switched to something “edifying”: a documentary on Italy, emerald hills, vineyards, terracotta rooftops, **God’s screensaver**. I remembered I’d been here two years ago and fell in love with the country all over again before we even landed.

I dozed briefly, dreaming of Rome and ravioli, and woke to the captain’s announcement:

“Good morning... or afternoon... or possibly Tuesday. We’ll be landing shortly ... or whatever.”

At that point, I no longer knew what day, year, or liturgical season it was.

Welcome to Rome: The Eternal City (and Eternal Jet Lag)

At last, **Rome!** The plane touched down, a few pilgrims clapped (ancient Catholic instinct), and I whispered, “Thanks be to God,” from the depths of my heart (and lower back).

First order of business: money.

Fr. Rowland and I exchanged dollars for euros and handed everything immediately to **Leonora**, our financial apostle. Better to give than be tempted, especially since **espresso and gelato** are very strong temptations in Italy.

Immigration was a breeze. The officer looked at my passport, looked at me, stamped it, and said nothing. I admired his monastic discipline. After eleven hours of tourists, silence is not just golden, it’s **holy**.

The Guide With My Name

As we emerged, a man held a sign: "**Fr. Arokia.**"

"Poor guy," I thought. "He's been waiting a while."

Then it dawned on me: **Oh ... that's me.**

My brain was still somewhere over Greenland.

Our guide, **Aloisio**, smiled the calm smile of a man who has shepherded many lost sheep before. He announced our first destination:

"Mass at the **Basilica of Sant'Anselmo**, on the Aventine Hill."

Everyone nodded piously, secretly dreaming of coffee and horizontal surfaces.

A Missing Two and a Biblical Reflection

The bus was on time, **miracle #2**. But we soon learned two pilgrims were missing; their Washington, D.C. flight was cancelled.

We were supposed to be **40**, a perfect biblical number. The Israelites wandered forty years, Jesus fasted forty days, and we were prepared to wander forty minutes in the Roman heat.

Now we were **38**.

I told myself, "It's still biblical. The other two are just wandering in their own desert for one more day. They'll reach the Promised Land tomorrow."

"The Lord will complete what He has begun." — *Psalm 138:8*

Every pilgrimage begins with a little chaos and a lot of grace.

Mass at Sant'Anselmo

Sant'Anselmo was our first stop, a Benedictine church so peaceful that even Roman traffic whispered. Soft light through arched windows, the scent of old wood, and the hushed joy of our first Mass in Rome, it felt like a homecoming of the soul.

"At last, Lord, I can see with my eyes what my heart has long desired." — *St. Anselm of Canterbury*

A Roman Welcome (with Traffic, of Course)

After Mass, we plunged into Rome's sacred chaos. Within ten minutes we learned the Eternal City has **eternal traffic**. Cars honked, Vespas buzzed, pedestrians crossed wherever the Spirit moved them, and yes, we joined them, crossing with the bravery of modern martyrs and the balance of rolling suitcases.

To lift spirits, we prayed **Night Prayer** from the Pilgrim's Book—thirty-eight voices turning a gridlocked bus into a mobile monastery.

Dinner With a Side of Bacon (Almost)

We arrived at the hotel around **7:20 p.m.** The manager smiled: "Go have dinner; we will take your luggage to your rooms."

That sounded generous and terrifying. “How will you know whose bag is whose?” I asked.

“Father, the name tags,” he replied confidently. **Faith without sight, Rome was already teaching theology.**

Dinner appeared: **pasta with bacon.** I don’t eat pork and didn’t want to make a scene. I quietly told the waiter, an apron-clad guardian angel, who whisked my plate away and returned with a humble dish of **tomato pasta.** Everyone else declared their creamy bacon version the best of their lives. I smiled and offered up my tomato sauce as a small red martyrdom.

The **fish** that followed was excellent, and the **dessert** made me forget all suffering. Italians can turn repentance into a five-course joy.

Hotel Drama and Holy Insomnia

Just as I thought the day was done, the clerk approached our guide: “We’re missing reservations for three guests, including Fr. Rowland.”

Rome keeps priests humble. Aloisio handled it like a saint, booking them into a nearby hotel and even calling taxis. I waited until they were safely gone, then headed to my room.

I have a ritual: even for one night, I make the room look like I meant to live there. Unpack, arrange, then a long glorious shower (yes, I’m a shower junkie). Then I remembered—**it was Tuesday!** Back home, that means my **Novena to St. Anthony of Padua.** So after the Chaplet I prayed my St.

Anthony novena (he's never failed me yet) and then ended with **Night Prayer** before finally lying down.

Sleep came fast... until **1:30 a.m.** Then, wide awake. I tried every position on the small Italian bed: left, right, diagonal, saintly prostration. Nothing. At **3:00 a.m.** I surrendered, got up, and prayed the **Divine Mercy Chaplet**. The beads felt heavier but holier in the silence.

By **4:30** I drifted off, only to be resurrected by the alarm at **5:30**.

The body groaned, but the soul whispered: "You're in Rome.

Espresso: The Ninth Beatitude

Confession: back home I own an **espresso machine**. My morning routine is sacred, open the church, then pull a double shot so strong it could raise Lazarus.

So when I saw the Italian hotel espresso station, my heart sang the *Gloria*. It was love at first sight, or first sip. I had **three shots** before breakfast and felt the power of the Resurrection flowing through my veins. It gave me enough grace (and caffeine) to face **Day 3**.

And that was my first full day in Italy: tired, tangled, hungry, caffeinated, and profoundly grateful. Because sometimes grace doesn't arrive through perfect plans, it comes through **traffic jams, tomato pasta, 3 a.m. chaplets, and a triple shot of mercy**.

"The Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore." — *Psalms* 121:8

Day 3 – The Papal Queue, the Perpetual Help, and the Espresso That Worked Miracles

After surviving the sleepless night of Day 2, I woke up in Rome with two firm convictions,

1. I was now operating entirely on divine assistance,
2. That divine assistance came in small porcelain cups called espresso.

Breakfast of the Just (and the Jet-Lagged)

After my morning shower (yes, again), I went down for breakfast.

I'm still not sure whether to call it breakfast or an all-you-can-eat pastry novena.

There were croissants, danishes, tarts, rolls, basically every carbohydrate that has ever received a papal blessing.

I told myself, "This isn't gluttony, it's missionary fuel."

Sugar in all its Latin forms, fructus, sucrosus, glukos, and maybe something invented by angels, was welcome.

As for vegetables, I was on pilgrimage, not penance.

Then I saw it, the espresso machine.

Back home in Utah, I have a small espresso maker in the rectory. Every morning after opening the church, I pull a double shot strong enough to make St. Jerome put down his quill.

But here, in Italy, the espresso gleamed like a sacramental. The machine itself seemed to whisper, "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden," (Matthew 11:28).

One shot, then another, then a third.
Not superstition, Trinitarian theology in practice.

By the end, I felt ready to face anything, Rome, traffic, or even 300,000 Catholics before breakfast.

The Papal Audience, 38 Pilgrims and 300 Thousand New Friends

We left the hotel on time, already a miracle to rival the loaves and fishes.

All 38 pilgrims boarded the bus, fueled by espresso and enthusiasm.

When we arrived at the Vatican around 8:10 a.m., we discovered that "on time" in Rome means "two hours late." About 200,000 souls had already arrived before us, and another thousand were still trying to cut the line.

The queue looked like Judgment Day, with flags. We sang *Immaculate Mary*, prayed the Rosary, and waved at other groups.

I met pilgrims from France and the Netherlands. English failed us, but Catholic sign language worked just fine, smiles, handshakes, and the occasional "thumbs-up to Jesus."

Then a spirited group from Vietnam gracefully merged into our line. The Swiss Guards tried to redirect them, but they

smiled serenely and claimed not to understand Italian, or gravity. Eventually, the guards gave up. I thought of the woman with the hemorrhage (Mark 5:25–34) who pushed through the crowd to touch Jesus' cloak. Sometimes faith refuses to queue.

Finally, we entered St. Peter's Square, and before us spread a sea of humanity, 300,000 people swaying like a living mosaic of faith.

I called my mother on video and said, "Amma, look, the whole world came to church today."

Then, trumpets sounded, and the Popemobile appeared. The crowd erupted into cheers, flags, and tears. Pope Leo XIV circled the square, blessing babies, smiling, waving, radiating paternal joy.

For one brief second, I wished I was one of those babies, no paperwork, no budget meetings, just pure blessing.

The Holy Father spoke in Italian, preaching on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35), how Christ walks beside the weary and is recognized in the breaking of bread. Even without full translation, his warmth transcended language.

And then it rained.

Umbrellas opened like Eucharistic lilies. Not a soul moved. I thought, "This is what Catholic perseverance looks like, we don't flee from rain, we process through it."

It was, without question, one of the most breathtaking, unforgettable sights of my life.

“Upon this rock I will build My Church.” (Matthew 16:18)

Divine Mercy and a Heavenly Coincidence

By noon, we flowed out of St. Peter’s like a river of humanity. It was cold, and naturally, I had forgotten my jacket. Apparently, sanctity doesn’t guarantee foresight.

As we walked, we noticed a sign, “Mass in Honor of St. John Paul II – Original Divine Mercy Image.”

Instantly, our group pivoted like a choir of synchronized saints.

Inside the church, the original painting of the Divine Mercy stood before us, the same one painted under St. Faustina Kowalska’s direction in Vilnius. Nearby was a relic of St. John Paul II.

It struck me deeply. At 3 a.m. that same morning, I had prayed the Divine Mercy Chaplet in my hotel room. Now, hours later, I was standing before the image itself. God has a wonderful sense of timing, He’s never early, rarely late, but always poetic.

I prayed for everyone, my parishioners, my family, my bishop (for patience), and all who’d ever asked for prayers. Grace upon grace, right there under the soft glow of candles and Polish hymns.

Reunited at Our Mother of Perpetual Help

Outside, Aloisio, our unflappable guide, received joyful news, the two missing pilgrims had finally arrived.

They met us at the Church of St. Alphonsus Liguori, home to the miraculous icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, the original one entrusted to the Redemptorists in 1866 by Pope Pius IX.

At last, we were 40 again, the Biblical fullness restored. I told the group, "Forty is the number of transformation, Israel wandered forty years, Jesus fasted forty days, and we waited forty minutes for a bathroom break."

We celebrated Mass there. Before we began, I shared a brief reflection on the icon, how Mary's gaze is both sorrowful and steady, how the Archangels Gabriel and Michael hold the instruments of the Passion, and how the golden background reflects divine light (cf. Redemptorist Archives, Rome).

After Mass, I met an Indian lady working there, and, to my surprise, one of the resident priests was from Chennai, my hometown.

He even knew my cousin, Fr. Sengol, a Redemptorist whose name literally means crozier.

We spoke by phone. The conversation was 10 percent English, 20 percent Tamil, and 70 percent laughter. The Catholic Church really is universal, and occasionally bilingual in miracles.

We nearly lost one pilgrim inside the church (likely trapped between the gift shop and the Holy Spirit), but she reappeared just in time for departure.

The Major Basilicas, Three Visited, One Promised

Our afternoon guide specialized in the great Roman basilicas, equal parts tour guide and theologian.

First stop, St. Paul Outside the Walls.

Crossing its Holy Door for the Jubilee felt like stepping into eternity. The basilica is enormous and serene, with golden mosaics that could convert an atheist on sight. A choir was singing before the Blessed Sacrament, and for a few minutes, it felt like time stood reverently still.

Next, the Scala Sancta (Holy Stairs), twenty-eight marble steps said to be those Christ ascended to face Pontius Pilate, brought to Rome by St. Helena (the emperor's mother and the original "holy relics influencer") around 326 AD. Many pilgrims climbed on their knees in silence. Each step felt like a small act of cleansing, a slow-motion journey to Calvary.

Finally, we arrived at the Basilica of St. John Lateran, the Cathedral of the Pope, the Mother Church of the world, and, frankly, a masterpiece that could make Michelangelo cry.

Inside we saw,
the relics of Sts. Peter and Paul above the main altar,
the first Holy Door ever opened, in 1300 by Pope Boniface VIII,
ancient bronze doors from the Roman Senate now baptized into service,
and the wooden table believed to have been used at the Last Supper (Lateran Museum archives).

I stood there thinking, emperors came and went, but this table still preaches Christ.

No wonder St. John Lateran's façade proclaims, "Omnium urbis et orbis ecclesiarum mater et caput," Mother and head of all the churches of the city and the world.

Time ran short, so we postponed St. Mary Major to the next day. Even pilgrims must admit human limits, especially after three espressos and one long theological queue.

Evening Reflections

As our bus wound through Rome at dusk, the domes glowed gold against a violet sky. Somewhere a church bell tolled, and I thought,

"Today I didn't just visit monuments, I met the living memory of faith."

We had seen papal joy, Marian tenderness, and the timeless call to mercy.

And somehow, on espresso, sugar, rain, and wonder, I made it through.

"Where Peter is, there is the Church, where the Church is, there is Christ." — St. Ambrose of Milan (Ep. 11.10)

Day 4 – Closed for a King, Opened by Providence

If pilgrimages teach patience, Rome awards the doctorate — in traffic jams, tight schedules, and divine surprises.

Breakfast of the Blessed (and the Buzzed)

At 7 a.m., our pilgrim fellowship gathered in the hotel restaurant like a conclave convened by pastry. I, as usual, bypassed the fruit with conviction and headed straight for the croissants. Flaky, buttery, and unapologetically holy.

“Don’t worry,” I told myself, “this isn’t gluttony; it’s missionary fuel.”

Then came the espresso. Four tiny porcelain cups, four holy mysteries of caffeine.

- **Shot 1:** “Okay, let’s wake up.”
- **Shot 2:** “Strength for the schedule.”
- **Shot 3:** “Joy for the journey.”
- **Shot 4:** “Grace for the surprises.”

By the end, I was fully awake — body, mind, and (I hope) soul. My fellow pilgrims watched in awe, unsure whether to call it breakfast or a minor miracle.

The Waiting, the Praying, and the Gelato

Everyone was ready on time — a small miracle — but the bus was not. Rome was still stretching. Twenty minutes passed, so instead of complaining, I gathered everyone for

the **Rosary** and **Morning Prayer** right there in the lobby. By the final decade, our guide **Frederica** appeared, smiling and explaining the story of **Santa Maria Maggiore**, her words flowing faster than Roman traffic.

When the bus finally arrived, the streets were still jammed — apparently the entire city was escorting **King Charles III**, in town for his historic visit with **Pope Leo XIV**, the first public prayer between a British monarch and a pope in almost 500 years ([The Guardian, Oct 23 2025](#)).

As we waited later for pickup, I spotted a gelateria. I went in “just for water” and came out with my first **chocolate gelato** of the pilgrimage. It was heavenly.

“Taste and see that the Lord is good.” — *Psalm 34 : 8*

St. Mary Major — Heaven in Mosaic

We arrived at **Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore**, the oldest church in the West dedicated to the Mother of God. Inside, golden mosaics glittered like frozen hallelujahs. Beneath the high altar rests the relic of the **Holy Crib**, said to hold wood from the manger of Bethlehem — where history met humility.

Kneeling before the tomb of **Pope Francis**, I whispered a prayer of gratitude. The same hands that blessed millions now rest near the cradle that once held the Word made flesh.

“He who falls asleep in the Lord awakens in light.” — *St. John Chrysostom*

Outside, police sirens announced the royal motorcade. We smiled and waved as **King Charles III** passed. He didn't see us, but I like to think heaven did.

"Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." — *Matthew 22 : 21*

Rome by Foot, Faith, and Foot Blisters

Once traffic thinned, Frederica led us through Rome with the zeal of a saint and the stamina of a tour guide who's seen everything twice.

The Colosseum rose before us, massive and majestic, a fossil of courage built in 80 A.D. by Vespasian. Here, the early Christians faced beasts and blades, yet faith outlasted the empire.

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." — *2 Timothy 4 : 7*

"They came to silence faith here," I told the group, "and faith answered by singing louder." Even the pigeons seemed to nod solemnly.

Then, the **Pantheon** — once a pagan temple for "all gods," now a church for *Santa Maria ad Martyres*. A single beam of sunlight poured from the oculus above, spotlighting the marble floor like heaven's own projector.

"Look," I said, "even the sun knows where to kneel."

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." — *John 1 : 5*

And then the **Trevi Fountain**, Rome's grand baptism of marble and water. Tourists tossed coins backward over their shoulders while taking selfies — proof that faith and superstition sometimes travel in the same tour group. Tradition says one coin ensures a return to Rome; two coins, you'll fall in love; three, you'll marry an Italian. I tossed one and prayed softly, "Lord, let me return — without paperwork."

"With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." —
Isaiah 12 : 3

No Mass, But Much Grace

We were scheduled to celebrate Mass at **St. Ignatius of Loyola**, but our Vatican entry time left no room. I told the pilgrims, "We'll offer our walking as penance, our patience as prayer, and our blisters as burnt offerings." Smiles all around.

The Vatican Museum Marathon

By early afternoon we reached the **Vatican Museums** for our 2 p.m. slot — and the real trial began. The guards requested **passport documents for every visitor**. It was as if St. Peter's keys had turned into bureaucracy. Papers rustled, stress rose, prayers doubled.

Then one guard eyed my bag suspiciously. "Sir, please step aside."

They confiscated it for further inspection.

"Come back after your tour," they said kindly, meaning, *walk another mile uphill later*.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit ... the baggage claim."

They divided us into two groups, and the journey through art began. Corridors stretched endlessly — the **Gallery of Maps**, the **Tapestry Hall**, the **Raphael Rooms** — each one a sermon in color and patience.

And finally, the **Sistine Chapel** — reopened after the royal visit!

Standing beneath Michelangelo's ceiling, fatigue vanished. The **Creation of Adam**, those almost-touching fingers between dust and divinity, seemed to reach into our own restless hearts.

"You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You." — *St. Augustine*

I half-expected someone to hand me a brush and say, "Father, touch up the corner."

The One-Mile Return

After the tour, while everyone else drifted toward the exit gift shop, I began my penance — the long walk to retrieve my "suspicious" bag. A mile there, a mile back.

When I arrived, the guard smiled. "You see, Padre, all safe." "Of course," I said. "Only rosaries and snacks — weapons of mass conversion."

By the time I returned, my feet had completed their own Via Dolorosa, but the morning espresso was still performing miracles.

Night Prayer, Scampi, and Serenity

As twilight wrapped Rome, I led **Night Prayer** on the bus. Our psalms mingled with traffic noise — a hymn of weary gratitude.

"Let my prayer rise before You like incense." — *Psalm 141 : 2*

Dinner was mercy itself: **scampi and fish**, fragrant and fresh. Italians have a gift for turning seafood into theology — every bite a quiet hallelujah.

We laughed about the bag incident, toasted the Sistine Chapel miracle, and gave thanks for grace that doesn't depend on timetables.

"Give thanks in all circumstances." — *1 Thessalonians 5 : 18*

"Do small things with great love." — *St. Teresa of Calcutta*

That night, as the city lights blinked below my window, I thanked God for the day: for art, for saints, for unexpected delays, and for every little mercy that turned irritation into joy.

Then I added one last prayer before sleep:

"Lord, tomorrow's miracles — could they come with a little less walking?"

Day 5 – Florence: Where Faith Became Art and Art Became Prayer

The day began, as usual, with that familiar pilgrimage rhythm, half prayer, half packing.

I rose early, packed my suitcase like a disciplined monk, and left it obediently outside the door for pickup. By the time we all finished breakfast, our luggage stood in a solemn line like little soldiers ready for deployment.

Because it was Friday, I practiced my sacred fast: no breakfast, just a quiet offering and a longing glance at everyone else's cappuccinos.

Soon, news arrived, two of our pilgrims decided to brave the train to Florence instead of the bus. They were feeling a bit nauseated and thought the train might be gentler. We prayed for them and promised to reunite later. Our group of forty was now thirty-eight, the mystical number of patience, prayer, and shared snacks.

As we boarded the bus, our guide wisely warned:

"We'll stop after two hours... so don't fill your bladder with water."

A very practical piece of spiritual advice: *Blessed are those who ration their espresso, for they shall travel in peace.*

The road unfolded like a hymn, green hills, sleepy towns, and sunlight dancing over olive groves. We began our Rosary and morning prayer, voices weaving together as the bus rolled toward Tuscany.

Somewhere along the way, we passed a breathtaking little town called **Orte** — perched dramatically on the edge of the mountains, as if trying to touch heaven before we did.

After two hours, just as our guide promised (and our bladders confirmed), we stopped in a small town called **Fabro** — a humble pit stop, but at that moment, it felt like a foretaste of paradise.

The green hills rolled open before us as we continued our journey and passed the ancient town of **Orvieto**, perched high on a volcanic cliff.

Orvieto's beauty hides a miracle: inside its 13th-century cathedral lies the corporal stained with the blood of Christ from the **Miracle of Bolsena (1263)**, when a doubting priest saw the Host bleed during Mass. That miracle inspired **Pope Urban IV** to institute the **Feast of Corpus Christi**. Looking up at that magnificent cliff, I couldn't help thinking — even the rocks seem to cry, *"This is My Body."*

Then, divine peace gave way to a near-divine adrenaline rush, a van swerved dangerously close to our bus. For a moment, we saw eternity flash before our eyes (and maybe a few cappuccinos).

Our driver, calm as a Carmelite, maneuvered like an angel on four wheels. We were saved, no scratches, just gratitude and one renewed commitment to the **Guardian Angels devotion**.

A little later, we stopped again at **Fabro**, a small Umbrian town famous for its rustic charm and its wine shops that could make even monks pause. Inside one store, the tables

overflowed with free samples — wine, olive oil, truffle spreads, and even chocolate infused with red wine. I tasted one piece before remembering my fast.

“Oh no,” I whispered, “I just broke fast by chocolate evangelization.”

But the Lord is merciful, and the chocolate was divine.

Our pilgrims shopped joyfully, bottles, boxes, and laughter everywhere. Then, back on the bus we went, heading toward Florence, the city of flowers, frescoes, and famously slow traffic. Coffee cups in hand, we listened to our guide **Lisa**, whose knowledge of history was matched only by her ability to walk backward while talking.

The Medici — Bankers, Builders, and (Occasional) Saints in Progress

Before entering the city, Lisa told us about the **Medici family**, Florence’s most ambitious dynasty. Beginning as humble merchants in the 14th century, they rose to become Europe’s most powerful bankers.

Cosimo de’ Medici (the Elder) quietly funded churches, convents, and artists, while his grandson **Lorenzo the Magnificent** turned Florence into a living symphony of genius. Under the Medici’s patronage worked **Botticelli**, **Leonardo da Vinci**, and a teenage **Michelangelo** — proof that sometimes God funds miracles through very good accountants.

They ruled with both piety and politics, sponsoring popes and surviving plots. Yes, they sinned magnificently, but they built magnificently, too. Out of their ambition came

altarpieces, hospitals, and a cultural rebirth that still sings of divine beauty.

The Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore (The Duomo of Florence)

When you first see it, the mind goes silent and the soul shouts, *"How did human beings build this?"*

Florence's Duomo is not merely a church, it's a **sermon carved in marble**.

Historical Highlights

- **Begun:** 1296, designed by **Arnolfo di Cambio**, who envisioned a temple to outshine every cathedral in Christendom.
- **Completed:** 1436, when **Filippo Brunelleschi** crowned it with his revolutionary dome — the largest brick dome ever built (45 m / 148 ft wide).
- **Dedicated to:** *Santa Maria del Fiore* — *St. Mary of the Flower*. The "flower" recalls both the lily of purity and *Florentia*, the city's name meaning "flowering."

The Dome Miracle

Brunelleschi's dome was an engineering leap of faith. Using a **double-shell structure** and **herringbone brick pattern**, he built a 37 000-ton miracle that stood without scaffolding. Pilgrims often say the dome is *"a prayer in stone,"* rising heavenward without visible support — like faith itself.

The Façade and Interior

Its façade of white, green, and rose marble (completed in

the 1800s) marries Gothic passion with modern devotion. Inside, **Giorgio Vasari's** vast fresco of the *Last Judgment* fills the dome — angels and sinners spiraling toward eternity in a visual catechism of mercy.

Spiritual Symbolism

Every line of the Duomo points upward:

- The **dome** signifies heaven.
- The **octagonal base** evokes resurrection — the eighth day of creation.
- And the entire structure proclaims that **Mary, the Flower of Humanity**, bore within her the Word made flesh, the true Beauty of God.

Even **Dante Alighieri**, Florence's exiled poet, wrote of her:

"The rose in which the Word became flesh." (*Paradiso* 23)

Standing before that radiant façade, I thought: *This is what faith looks like when imagination and grace shake hands.*

The Basilica di Santa Croce — "Temple of Italian Glories"

A few streets away, another marvel awaited — **Santa Croce**, the Franciscan heart of Florence. Begun around 1294, possibly by the same **Arnolfo di Cambio**, tradition says **St. Francis of Assisi** himself blessed the site.

A Church of the Cross and of Geniuses

"Santa Croce" means *Holy Cross*, and its very floorplan is

cruciform. Walk its nave and you're tracing the Passion story. Beneath that cross-shaped roof rest Italy's greatest minds:

- **Michelangelo Buonarroti** – artist of the Sistine Chapel; tomb designed by Vasari.
- **Galileo Galilei** – astronomer once condemned, later honored.
- **Niccolò Machiavelli** – political philosopher, proof that grace reaches even complex souls.
- **Gioachino Rossini** – composer of *The Barber of Seville*.
- A monument honors **Dante**, though his body lies in Ravenna.

Saints and scientists together under one roof, a theology of grace in marble: even flawed geniuses find rest beneath the Cross.

Art and Architecture

Giotto's frescoes in the Bardi and Peruzzi chapels narrate the lives of St. Francis and St. John the Baptist — masterpieces of early perspective and tenderness.

The **Pazzi Chapel**, another Brunelleschi jewel, is a miniature harmony of proportion, a visual Magnificat.

And the **cloisters** offer monastic stillness amid Florence's chatter.

Franciscan Spirituality in Stone

Unlike the Duomo's skyward grandeur, Santa Croce invites

downward humility. It breathes the poverty of Francis, the joy of letting go. Its motto could be:

“Where the great rest, the humble rise.”

During **Mass** there, **Fr. Rowland** celebrated while I concelebrated — joining a 700-year procession of priests who have whispered the same words: *Hoc est enim Corpus Meum*.

Incense drifted upward, mingling with the dust of centuries and the quiet applause of angels.

The Pilgrim March

After Mass we walked, and walked, and kept walking. Through cobbled alleys, past Medici palaces, gelato temptations, and statues that looked suspiciously alive. By sunset my legs felt medieval, but my heart was Renaissance.

Back at the hotel, our two train-travelling pilgrims had already arrived safely. Once again we were **forty**, the number of testing and transformation. We had crossed miles, centuries, and perhaps a few calories burned for the Kingdom.

Pilgrim's Reflection

Florence is theology in Technicolor.

- The **Duomo** lifts the eyes: God is infinite Beauty.
- **Santa Croce** bends the knees: God is infinite Mercy.

- The **Medici** remind us that even power, when converted, can serve the Gospel of Beauty.

"You are beautiful when you confess His beauty." — St. Augustine (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 26)

Prayer of the Day

Lord of Beauty and Truth, who inspire artists, architects, and pilgrims alike, let my life become a cathedral of praise. May I build not in marble but in mercy, not in domes but in devotion. Amen.

Day 6 – Padova: Where Saints Teach and Pilgrims Lose Things

We left our Roman hotel fashionably late, the kind of “pilgrim delay” that would make even St. Monica sigh. As usual, we began with morning prayer and the daily journey rosary.

Our new bus driver greeted us with the air of a Benedictine drill sergeant. He laid down his rules with monastic clarity. No eating. No dropping trashes. He reminded me of a priest I know in Salt Lake City who considers orderliness the eighth sacrament.

By now, we’d had more drivers than there are mysteries in the rosary. Each day brought a new bus, a new driver, a new temperament. I began calling it “The Novena of Bus Drivers.”

A Lesson in Geography and Humility

Somewhere north of Rome, we stopped for coffee, and I learned something humbling: I’d been mispronouncing our destination for decades. It’s not *Padua* — that’s the English version. The Italian is **Padova**, from the Latin *Patavium*, a settlement beside the **River Po**. Thus, Padova means “place by the Po.” Even my tongue needed conversion.

Meanwhile, the pilgrims discovered free chocolate samples. I practiced Friday fasting heroically while holding three “samples” in my hand.

Our guide, Laura, explained that Padova draws two kinds of pilgrims: those who come for **the saints**, and those who come for **the science**. She began with the former, the saints buried in *Santa Giustina*, before leading us to the halls where Galileo once lectured.

Faith and Reason – Galileo’s Ghost at the University of Padua

We went to The **University of Padua** (founded 1222) is one of the world’s oldest — a medieval think-tank where anatomy met astronomy. Here **Galileo Galilei** taught for 18 years, peering at the heavens while his students peered at him.

Our guide, an ardent disciple of “Team Galileo,” took playful swipes at the Church. I smiled quietly; the full story is more nuanced — and more human.

1. The Scientific Issue: Heliocentrism

Galileo championed the **heliocentric** model — Earth orbiting the sun — first proposed by Copernicus (1543).

At the time, proof was lacking; stellar parallax hadn’t been observed, and Joshua 10:13 (“the sun stood still”) seemed to contradict it.

In 1616 the Church judged the model “contrary to Scripture until proven,” permitting Galileo to discuss it only as hypothesis, not dogma.

2. The Personal and Political Issue: The “Simplicio” Controversy

In 1632 Galileo published *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* with three characters:

- **Salviati** – Galileo’s voice (heliocentric)
- **Sagredo** – neutral observer
- **Simplicio** – geocentric traditionalist

Unfortunately *Simplicio* sounded like “simpleton.” Worse, his arguments echoed Pope Urban VIII’s own phrasing. The Pope, once Galileo’s friend, felt mocked.

3. The Trial and Sentence

In 1633 the Roman Inquisition summoned Galileo. He was pressured (not tortured) to recant, found “vehemently suspected of heresy,” and sentenced to house arrest. From his villa near Florence he continued studying motion, tides, and mechanics until his death in 1642.

4. The Deeper Lesson

It was both:

- A **theological** tension — claiming as fact what wasn’t yet proven, appearing to contradict Scripture.
- A **human** tension — pride, sarcasm, and political imprudence.

Galileo’s science started the fire,
his arrogance supplied the fuel,
and politics fanned the flames.

When St. John Paul II officially acknowledged the Church's mishandling in 1992, it was here in Padova — a reconciliation between telescope and tabernacle.

Il Santo – The Basilica of St. Anthony

Then we reached **the Basilica of St. Anthony of Padova**, affectionately called *Il Santo*. Its Byzantine domes rose like prayerful helmets.

Inside, my heart sank: I'd left my family photo in the suitcase — on the bus — at the hotel. St. Anthony, patron of lost things, must have smiled. I borrowed a pen, tore a page from my notebook, and scribbled my intentions. Around me, hundreds pressed photos and prayers against the marble railing.

Mass was scheduled for 3 p.m. At 3:10 p.m., no pilgrims. Someone quipped, "Father, maybe this is *The Pilgrimage of Bathrooms*." Accurate.

Finally Xander, our altar server, rounded up the flock. Despite technical chaos, we ended exactly at 3:58 p.m. — a miracle of precision worthy of Galileo's stopwatch.

Moments later, I realized I'd left my pen and booklet behind. In St. Anthony's church, people find things. I lose them.

Of Gelato, Delays, and Divine Mercy

On the way back, I saw it — dark chocolate gelato. Love at first sight. I stopped; eight others followed. We were five minutes late; totally worth it.

The Basilica of St. Justina – Where Saints Rest and Students Wander

Crowned by the domes of the **Basilica di Santa Giustina**, beside the great **Prato della Valle**, Europe's largest square, ringed with statues of philosophers, saints, and long-gone dukes who all seemed to be judging us for being late.

Saints and Sacred Souls of the Basilica di Santa Giustina

1. **St. Justina of Padua (Santa Giustina)** – Virgin & Martyr, executed c. 304 AD; relics under the main altar.
2. **St. Luke the Evangelist** – Gospel writer; relics in the left transept; authenticity confirmed in 1998.
3. **St. Matthias the Apostle** – Replacement for Judas; relics near those of Luke.
4. **St. Prosdocimus** – First bishop of Padua, disciple of Peter; relics in his ancient chapel.
5. **St. Maximus of Padua** – Bishop & martyr; relics in a side chapel.
6. **Early Christian Martyrs** – Unnamed witnesses of the faith; relics in crypts and side chapels.

Saint / Person	Role	Location in Basilica
St. Justina of Padua	Virgin & Martyr, Patroness	Main Altar
St. Luke the Evangelist	Gospel Writer	Left Transept
St. Matthias the Apostle	Apostle Replacing Judas	Near St. Luke's Relics

St. Prosdocimus	First Bishop of Padua	Chapel of St. Prosdocimus
St. Maximus of Padua	Bishop & Martyr	Side Chapel
Early Martyrs	Various	Crypts & Side Chapels

At **Santa Giustina**, I prayed at the tombs of **St. Luke** and **St. Matthias**. Meeting Luke and Matthias felt like shaking hands with the Gospel itself — one wrote mercy; the other replaced betrayal with fidelity.

Evening Grace – Lost Luggage, Found Peace

When we finally reached the hotel, the scene in the lobby looked like a miniature Tower of Babel — pilgrims, porters, and piles of luggage all speaking different languages of exhaustion. Our bags were stacked neatly in the lobby like penitents awaiting judgment.

There was only **one elevator**, and it was so small that two people and a rosary were already a crowd. So, I carried my suitcase up the stairs, reminding myself that this was “purgatorial cardio.” Halfway up, I told another pilgrim, “I have a feeling I’ll come back to this city someday.” There was something magnetic about Padova, perhaps the presence of so many saints quietly tugging at the heart.

Once in my room, I dropped my bag, washed my face, and went back down to check if anyone needed help with theirs. We were told dinner would be served at **7 p.m.** I glanced at my watch — **6:35 p.m.** Twenty-five minutes. What to do?

I checked Google Maps: the **Basilica of St. Anthony** was only **1.4 kilometers** away. My heart leapt, could I make it

before it closed at **7:30 p.m.?** It felt like a divine dare. I whispered, "Alright, St. Anthony, if you want to see me, make my legs fast."

So I ran, body flying, heart pounding, shoes protesting. Ten minutes later, breathless but beaming, I slipped through the basilica doors just before the guards began closing them. I might well have been the last pilgrim admitted that night.

Inside, the quiet was almost luminous. I knelt before **the tomb of St. Anthony** and wept, not out of sadness but gratitude. He has been woven through every stage of my life: I received my **First Communion, Confirmation**, and even celebrated my **First Mass** there. Returning now, as a priest and pilgrim, felt like closing a long-awaited circle of grace.

I thanked him for every miracle, for every "lost and found" moment of my priesthood. Then I left the basilica with peace so tangible it felt like incense clinging to the soul.

The walk back was pure poetry, Padova glowing in the golden twilight, shop lights winking, the air scented with espresso and evening prayer. I reached the hotel at **7:16 p.m.**, just in time for dinner.

The meal was humble and heavenly: **lasagna** and **polenta with broccoli**, proof that God's mercy sometimes comes layered with cheese. During dessert we learned there would be a **time change** that night — one extra hour of sleep! The kind of miracle only pilgrims and parents of toddlers truly appreciate.

After dinner, I took a warm shower and settled in. Curiosity nudged me to watch a **documentary on Our Lady of Lourdes**, preparing for our next destination. Then I discovered another surprise: we'd soon visit **Santarém**, Portugal — one of the earliest recorded **Eucharistic Miracle** sites in the world. I shared the good news with our pilgrims on WhatsApp, sent one last "Peace be with you," and closed my eyes.

That night I slept deeply, the kind of rest that only comes when your heart has run, prayed, and finally found home.

Pilgrimage Lesson of the Day: Finding Wonder Between Faith and Reason

Padova reminds us that holiness and intelligence are not rivals but companions. In Santa Giustina, saints sleep in hope; in the University of Padua, minds awaken in wonder. Faith guards humility; reason guards curiosity. Both meet at the tomb of St. Anthony — the saint who finds what's lost.

"To the eyes of faith, every truth discovered is a mirror of the Truth revealed." — St. John Paul II

And somewhere between a lost pen, a found gelato, and a basilica full of saints, God quietly smiled.

Day 7 – From Retardo to Revelation

The day began, not with angelic choirs, but with the alarm on my phone — the modern pilgrim's rooster. Truth be told, I hadn't slept much. Vehicles rumbled all night outside the hotel, each one humming its own psalm of distraction. Around 2 a.m., I gave up chasing sleep and started counting blessings instead of sheep: *"Thank You, Lord, for a safe room, a soft bed, and no luggage to lift right now."*

That spiritual gratitude worked — until a nightmare joined the night vigil.

Morning confusion followed. I thought we were leaving at 7 a.m., so when the Tour Director called asking, "Father, where are you? Everyone's on the bus," I performed the miracle of the five-minute checkout: cassock, breviary, passport, toothbrush — all packed at lightning speed. I dashed downstairs and boarded the bus with the grace of a startled angel.

We began our journey with prayer, thanking **Aloisio**, our Italian guide, who was leaving us that day. He had become more than a guide — he prayed with us, shared faith, and even attended Mass daily. A man of Caritas indeed. He was emotional as he said goodbye, ready to return home near **Lanciano** — the land of another great Eucharistic miracle.

At **Venice Airport**, everything went smoothly... until we met a familiar foe of pilgrims everywhere: the departure board flashing **"RITARDO."** I learned a new Italian word that morning — meaning *delay*. (I also learned that pilgrimages are basically theology lived through "holy delays.") The

flight was two hours late, so we wandered through duty-free shops, practiced French phrases, and savored what would be our last Italian espresso.

Finally, we boarded a small but full flight bound for France. The descent was bumpy — strong turbulence had everyone clutching rosaries and armrests equally. When we landed safely, someone whispered, “Thank you, St. Joseph of Technicolor Dreams — patron of smooth landings.”

Outside, the air of **France** greeted us like a baptism in cold wind. Our new guide, **Sophia**, met us at the terminal with a smile as warm as her scarf. She advised us to exchange euros in **Lourdes** and buy water on the bus for one euro. Naturally, a few enthusiastic pilgrims ran to airport kiosks and bought it for three. I admired their zeal, if not their economics.

On the Road to Lourdes

As the bus hummed through the French countryside, we prayed the **Chaplet of Divine Mercy** for the first time on the pilgrimage. The rhythm of prayer blended with the engine’s gentle drone — mercy on wheels. Afterward, we held a friendly **Men vs Women Gospel Quiz**, mixing questions from the Gospel of Luke with fun trivia about our trip so far. Laughter filled the aisles — the surest sign that grace was traveling with us.

Our driver estimated **two hours and fifteen minutes**, and, miraculously, he was right. We arrived in **Lourdes** just as the sun dipped low — but the town was anything but quiet.

A City Transformed by History and Faith

The streets buzzed with excitement. Our guide explained that we had arrived during a **grand medieval-style reenactment** — a spectacular pageant held only **once every two years**. For three days, the town celebrates its Christian and cultural heritage with a **parade of around 200 white horses and more than 2,000 men and women** dressed as ancient French soldiers, nobles, and townsfolk.

The event commemorates France's medieval past — a time when knights rode under the banner of the Cross and faith shaped both art and chivalry. Locals and volunteers from across the region spend months preparing costumes and training the horses. Some historians say it originated as a way to honor the region's Catholic legacy and draw pilgrims and visitors together in joyful unity.

Standing there, watching the horses trot past banners emblazoned with fleur-de-lis, I felt as if the centuries had folded in on themselves. The Church Militant — once literal knights and nobles — now lives on in us, ordinary pilgrims carrying the banner of faith in backpacks instead of armor.

The parade lasts several days, culminating with music, processions, and reenactments of historic French victories, all designed to celebrate heritage, community, and enduring faith. It happens only once every two years, making our arrival at precisely that time feel providential — as though Our Lady wanted to welcome us with both rosaries and horses.

After dinner — our **first meal on French soil** — we joined the **Candlelight Procession** at the Sanctuary. The cold bit at our faces, but thousands of pilgrims raised candles high as they sang *Ave Maria*. The light rippled through the crowd like a river of faith, moving toward the great Basilica. It was breathtaking.

As I walked with my candle, I thought of Mary standing beneath the Cross — steadfast when all seemed dark. The flickering lights of the pilgrims looked like little hearts aflame, each saying, *"Here I am, too, Mother."*

We returned to the hotel around **11 p.m.**, shivering but glowing. Lourdes had already begun to work its quiet miracle — in our laughter, our prayer, and our shared wonder. I fell asleep whispering, "Tomorrow, the waters of grace await."

The next morning, I woke up sick. Perhaps Our Lady decided to teach me that healing often begins with humility — and sometimes with a cough.

Day 8 – Grace Beneath the Mountain

This was the first morning we didn't have to rush. Our meeting time was mercifully late, 9:30 a.m., and for once, everyone arrived on time. It was as if Lourdes itself had whispered, "Rest, pilgrims. Even holiness needs sleep."

The day was relaxed, but I was not. The cough from yesterday had made itself at home, and my body felt like it had done penance without permission. Still, the pilgrimage spirit won over the symptoms, and I joined the group as we walked toward the **Basilicas of Our Lady of Lourdes**.

Our guide began by teaching us how to pronounce it properly: "*Not-ruh Dahm duh Loord*." Then she smiled and added, "But if you say it with faith, even mispronounced, Our Lady still understands."

She explained that there are **three basilicas** in Lourdes, each built in a different century, stacked like a living cathedral of faith:

1. **The Basilica of the Immaculate Conception**, built directly above the Grotto, the earliest and most elegant, crowned with spires that seem to point pilgrims straight toward heaven.
2. **The Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary**, built later, with fifteen chapels, each one depicting a mystery of the Rosary.
3. And then the most surprising one, **The Basilica of St. Pius X**, an underground basilica, the only

subterranean basilica in the world, capable of holding up to 25,000 people. It feels like a modern catacomb, a temple hidden beneath the earth, where faith grows in silence and simplicity.

The guide spoke movingly about **St. Bernadette Soubirous**, the humble shepherd girl who saw the Blessed Virgin in 1858. "Bernadette," she said, "was not educated but was deeply intelligent, not in the way of books but in the way of hearts." She explained how Bernadette endured poverty, skepticism, and constant questioning from Church officials, yet remained steadfast and serene.

Later, Bernadette entered the convent in Nevers, where she lived a life of hidden holiness. "I am not called to make the world believe in Lourdes," she once said, "but to be holy." And indeed, her holiness grew not in fame but in **suffering**, as tuberculosis ravaged her body. Her last words were a whisper of faith: *"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for me, poor sinner."*

Mass at the Grotto: Where Heaven Kissed the Earth

Our group's Mass was scheduled for **3:00 p.m.**, but I asked everyone to gather early so we could pray together the **Chaplet of Divine Mercy**. It was a perfect preparation: *"For the sake of His sorrowful Passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world."* The words seemed to echo through the Grotto itself, that holy space where Our Lady once said, *"I am the Immaculate Conception."*

The Mass was solemn and serene, the sound of flowing water accompanying our prayers like a living hymn. After the

final blessing, we began the **Rosary Procession** toward the Grotto, beads in hand, voices in unison. As the last *"Hail Mary"* faded, I felt what so many pilgrims describe but few can explain, that deep, unmistakable peace that comes only from standing on sacred ground.

Each person then went their own way for quiet reflection until dinner. I chose to go to **Confession** because this is Lourdes, and you don't pass up grace when it is flowing freely.

The **Reconciliation Chapel** was enormous, an entire building dedicated to confession, with priests from all over the world. Lines in every language. It was the most beautiful form of spiritual chaos: French, Spanish, Italian, Tagalog, Polish, all rising like incense toward heaven. I brought a few pilgrims with me, and by the time we left, I realized that half our group had followed. The mercy of God was contagious.

Night of Suffering, Morning of Grace

By evening, my body had declared a revolt. The fever returned with reinforcements, and every joint felt like it was taking part in its own Stations of the Cross. I swallowed my Tylenol like a sacramental act of faith, whispered a prayer to St. Bernadette, and crawled into bed.

I woke several times during the night, sweating, coughing, aching. Yet in those moments of weakness, I felt strangely close to Bernadette herself. She too had suffered silently, uniting her pain with Christ's. I remembered her words: *"Suffering passes, but having suffered for love remains."*

When dawn came, I woke with a little strength, enough to thank God for another day of grace and pilgrimage. My fever had softened, my cough was bearable, and my heart was full.

Sometimes the greatest healing in Lourdes doesn't happen in the baths or through a miracle. It happens when your weakness meets God's tenderness, and you realize that grace can dwell even in exhaustion.

Day 9 – Goodbye, Lourdes; Hello, Lisbon

We were asked to check out of the hotel by 9:00 a.m., so I woke up early and began the slow-motion dance of packing. My strength was still limited, but grace gives wings even to the weary. I showered, folded what I could, and placed my suitcase outside the door as instructed. Then I went downstairs for breakfast, hoping for both food and medicine. I asked around for Tylenol, and one kind pilgrim came to the rescue. I took it immediately, my breakfast blessing in capsule form.

I still wanted to visit the Basilica one last time before leaving Lourdes. When I returned to my room, my bag was still sitting in the hallway. Apparently, the “bag angels” had missed it. I brought it downstairs myself, and the receptionist said, “Father, you were supposed to leave it in front of your room.” I replied, “I did.” She looked puzzled. I decided not to turn it into a theological debate about location and intention, so I smiled, thanked her, and moved on.

Outside, I met **Frank** and asked if he’d like to join me for one last walk to the shrine. He agreed. On the way, he mentioned that some of our pilgrims had already gone to visit **St. Bernadette’s House**. I was tempted to join them but decided to find a store instead, one that sold priestly items like an amice and a round Roman collar. Unfortunately, the shops were still closed, Lourdes sleeps late after the candlelight vigils.

We stopped at a nearby chapel to inquire about Mass and discovered that there was a **Tamil Mass at 9:30 a.m.** for the **Feast of Saints Simon and Jude Thaddeus**. Frank and I decided to stay. The liturgy was vibrant and prayerful, filled with families from India, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia. During the homily, the celebrant shared a recent miracle: a couple who had been married for fifteen years without children had come to that very chapel to pray. The following year, they returned with **twin boys** to give thanks.

The story touched me deeply. It reminded me of my own prayer intention, that my brother **Robinson** and **Stephanie Linda** might conceive naturally. I left that chapel feeling renewed, holding that hope before Our Lady.

After Mass, I walked to the **Grotto** one last time. The wind was cool, the candles flickered softly, and I whispered, "Thank you, Mother. I will see you again." I left Lourdes quietly, like saying farewell to a dear friend whose presence you still feel long after goodbye.

Frank and I stopped briefly at a store that had finally opened, but they didn't carry the items I was looking for. My strength was fading, so I sat and started typing my notes before the next journey began.

From the Pyrenees to Portugal

Our tour guide **Sophia** arrived, cheerful as ever, and began sharing a few final details about Lourdes. She told us that some pilgrims had gone to visit Bernadette's family home, but with a smile added, "Which one?" Apparently, Bernadette lived in several houses during her youth,

including the **Cachot**, a former prison where her family took refuge when they were destitute. It seems that even in Lourdes, holiness grows in humble spaces.

We started our journey toward the **Toulouse Airport**, and the drive was long but peaceful, except for the toll gates. Each gate seemed to test our patience. In Italy, our driver used to pass tolls with the precision of a Formula One racer, but here in France, every gate took about five minutes to read the card. At one point, the driver even had to step out, talk to the attendant, and wave his arms like a conductor in a silent orchestra.

By the time we reached the airport, I was exhausted and thirsty. I wanted to buy water but had no euros left, only dollars. Hesitating a bit, I finally asked the driver if he could accept them. The guide overheard and said, "For you, Father, it's free." A small kindness on the road to recovery. I drank the whole bottle quickly, knowing it was the last water I'd be allowed until after airport security.

The Toulouse Airport lived up to its reputation for being **meticulously thorough**. Security checks were intense. One pilgrim's bag was flagged, then another's, and finally mine. My bladder, meanwhile, was making novenas for relief. The security officer took my bag aside, spent a solid 25 minutes checking everyone else's, and finally came to me. Ten seconds later, she waved me through. I thanked her silently and dashed for the bathroom. It was, at that moment, the holiest place in France.

Once cleared, I found a refill station for free water, a gift that made me feel like I'd discovered another Lourdes spring. We waited for the flight, praying that it wouldn't be delayed. This time, God heard us.

When boarding began, everyone got in line except me. I sat quietly, half-asleep, until I heard the loudspeaker call my name. Some pilgrims panicked, waving their hands to get my attention, but I waved back cheerfully, convinced they just liked my name. Eventually, I joined the line, only to stand outside in the cold for 15 minutes while others boarded. Lesson learned: the last shall indeed be coldest.

We climbed the steps to the plane, just like in old black-and-white movies. Once seated, we waited another 30 minutes before takeoff. I closed my eyes and prayed, "Lord, please get us safely to Portugal and not leave us stranded in Toulouse."

The flight was rough with turbulence, and between half-sleep and half-prayer, I dreamed of flying relics, floating candles, and luggage that actually arrived on time. Finally, after what felt like an exorcism of the air currents, we landed in **Lisbon**.

As we came out, the airport was packed with people cheering. For a moment, I thought our group had achieved local fame, but it turned out they were there to welcome a famous soccer player. God keeps priests humble.

Outside, our new guide, **Daniel**, held a sign that read "**Holy Land Travel Centre**." I introduced myself, though even in

my Roman collar, no one seemed convinced I was a priest. Daniel smiled warmly and helped us to the bus.

We arrived at the hotel, and what a hotel it was. Spacious rooms, elegant décor, and, best of all, a **buffet dinner** that looked like heaven's rehearsal. I filled my plate eagerly but soon felt nauseated and couldn't eat much. I apologized for wasting food and went up to my room.

On the way, I stopped by **Lori**, one of the pilgrims, who kindly gave me **NyQuil**. I took it, said a quick prayer for healing, and finally surrendered to sleep.

Tomorrow, a new country, a new chapter, and hopefully a healthier priest.

Day 10 – From Coughs to Consecration

I woke up thinking I had turned a corner with this pilgrimage flu. “Finally, I’m healthy again,” I told myself with priestly optimism. But no — my body had other plans. The cough continued its Gregorian chant, and now I had a new companion: a runny nose. My bedside table looked like a battlefield of tissue paper and cough drops. Seeing my situation, the kind pilgrims — always ready to practice corporal works of mercy — handed me an *entire new bag* of tissues. I accepted it like a sacred relic.

Breakfast was spectacular, possibly the best buffet yet. There was everything — fruits, eggs, pastries — a banquet worthy of a Fatima feast day. But I settled for something simple, partly because I didn’t want to feed the fever and partly because I was too tired to chew. After eating, I trudged back to my room, packed my bag, and sighed at the sight of my suitcase. I’ve lifted so many bags in and out of buses that I’m now qualified to work part-time for TAP Portugal Airlines. I muttered my daily lamentation: “This is the last time I touch another bag.” (Reader, it was not the last time.)

Once we got on the bus, I started scanning for a pharmacy. My guide, ever helpful, stopped at one. Some pilgrims took advantage of the break to visit the nearby mall — where there were stores, cafés, and of course, a bathroom (which was the main pilgrimage attraction at that moment). I, on the other hand, went to find relief. The pharmacist took one look at me — pale face, cough like a diesel engine — and handed me a tonic for cough and a tablet for fever. I took

them right outside the door... and within minutes, my cough got worse, and every muscle started to ache. I thought, "Lord, either this is the medicine working or I've just been upgraded from mild penance to full purgatory."

The Eucharistic Miracle of Santarém

We continued our journey to **Santarém**, one of the most unexpected and profound stops on our pilgrimage. Unlike our other destinations — Rome, Padua, Florence — this wasn't a shrine built in honor of a saint, but a place where **Heaven itself broke into history through the Eucharist.**

The story dates back to the 13th century. A woman, deeply troubled by her husband's infidelity, turned in desperation to a sorceress. The price of the magic spell? A consecrated Host. So she received Communion at Mass, hid the Host in her veil, and hurried home. But before she arrived, **the Host began to bleed.** Terrified, she hid it in a chest, but that night, radiant light filled her room. Overwhelmed, she confessed her sin, and the parish priest came to retrieve the miraculous Host. He placed it in a wax-sealed reliquary, but years later, when the seal was opened, **the wax had melted and the Host was found enclosed in crystal, suspended in blood.**

What might sound like legend is recorded in the parish archives, with the first written document dating to **1340**, preserved in the Church of St. Stephen (now called the **Sanctuary of the Most Holy Miracle**). The miracle has been **approved by the Church**, and several popes, including **Pius**

IV, St. Pius V, and Pius VI, granted indulgences to pilgrims visiting the site.

Modern documentation, such as the study found in *The Real Presence Eucharistic Education and Adoration Association* (updated 2024), confirms that **numerous canonical and scientific analyses were performed** on the relics. The samples — still preserved — were verified to be human cardiac tissue, consistent with **living heart muscle**, similar to the famous Eucharistic miracle of **Lanciano**.

When I stood before the relic — enclosed in its glass reliquary, the tiny Host still visible — I felt as if the Gospel words came alive: *“This is my Body... This is my Blood.”* There was no need for argument, no need for theological debate. The miracle stood silent yet eloquent, proclaiming what countless martyrs, mystics, and missionaries have believed: **that Christ is truly, substantially present in the Eucharist.**

As a priest, it moved me deeply. Every day I hold in my hands the same mystery — the living Christ under the appearance of bread. But here, faith met flesh. The bleeding Host wasn’t a metaphor; it was a revelation of divine love in visible form. As St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, *“Sight, touch, and taste are all deceived; only the hearing safely is believed.”* Yet here, even the senses bowed before belief.

We stayed for several minutes in quiet awe. Then we walked back through groves of olive and orange trees. Nobody

seemed to be picking them — perhaps a poetic reminder that God’s graces, too, are often left unharvested.

The Road to Fátima

After Santarém, we continued toward **Fátima**, the crown jewel of Portugal’s faith. Our guide announced that our first stop would be a restaurant that doubled as a religious store. Imagine a holy version of Walmart — aisles of rosaries, candles, icons, and incense strong enough to fumigate a basilica. I didn’t plan to buy anything (famous last words), but I eventually picked up a few things: a keychain, a small statue of Our Lady of Fátima for our Park City procession, and some Miraculous Medals for my parishioners.

While I was checking out, a lady approached and said, “Father, we have some gifts for you.” She handed me a statue and a set of rosaries — I was touched by her kindness. Our guide, ever alert, asked if I needed anything else. I said, “I’m looking for an amice and a Roman collar.” He smiled and said, “Across the street — that’s a store only for priests.”

I crossed over and entered what can only be described as the **Vatican Outfitters**. Shelves of cassocks, albs, chasubles, collars, stoles, and even clerical socks (apparently now available in liturgical colors!). I bought what I needed and hurried back to the bus. Before leaving, the store hosted a raffle. Three of our pilgrims won prizes — proof that heaven even blesses shopping sprees.

The Angel of Portugal Shrine

Our next spiritual stop was one that few tourists even know about: **the place where the Angel of Portugal appeared to the three shepherd children — Lucia, Francisco, and Jacinta — in 1916**, a year before Our Lady's apparitions.

The angel came three times, preparing the children to receive Our Lady's message. He introduced himself as "*the Angel of Peace*" and later "*the Guardian Angel of Portugal*." He taught them profound prayers, one of which is still recited by pilgrims today:

"My God, I believe, I adore, I hope, and I love Thee.
I ask pardon for those who do not believe, do not adore, do not hope, and do not love Thee."

During the third apparition, the angel appeared holding a chalice with a Host above it. Drops of blood fell from the Host into the chalice — a powerful Eucharistic vision. The angel left the chalice and Host suspended in the air, knelt beside the children, and said:

"Take and drink the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, horribly outraged by ungrateful men.
Repair their crimes and console your God."

Modern studies, including a **2025 eBook published by Raízes de Fátima** titled "*The Apparitions of the Angel of Peace*," analyze these events in detail, drawing from Sister Lúcia's memoirs and historical sources. The work explains that these apparitions were a **preparation for the children's Eucharistic devotion**, teaching them to make reparation for sins through prayer and sacrifice.

Theologians describe this as a **catechesis from Heaven** — a kind of divine novitiate before Our Lady's arrival. The angel's message intertwined Eucharistic theology, angelology, and intercessory reparation. In 1930, when the Church officially approved the Fátima apparitions as "worthy of belief," it included these angelic appearances as authentic preludes.

To reach this sacred site, we prayed the **Stations of the Cross** using St. Alphonsus Liguori's meditations, which I shared via phone. The path wound through quiet hills and olive groves, and by the 10th Station, we arrived at the very spot where Heaven had once bowed low. As we prayed, a lively discussion broke out among the pilgrims:

"How did the angel get the Host?"

"Did he borrow it from a church?"

"Maybe the priest later discovered it missing!"

We laughed, but beneath the humor lay wonder — because the mystery remains: the Eucharist is never far from Heaven's hand.

Evening Reflections

We arrived at the hotel exhausted but filled with grace. Dinner was served at 8 p.m. — first veal (which I politely declined), then codfish. Sadly, it had two mortal sins: too many bones, and it tasted suspiciously like it had been microwaved by a distracted angel. Still, gratitude is the best seasoning, so I ate what I could and gave thanks.

As I returned to my room, coughing but content, I reflected: today I had witnessed blood — both divine and human. From Santarém's miraculous Host to the angel's chalice at

Fátima, God had woven one continuous thread through history — the thread of the **Eucharist**, His beating heart among us.

My prayer that night was simple:

“Lord, may my illness remind me of my weakness,
and may every cough become a prayer of reparation.
Let my body ache, but keep my soul burning with love for
Your Eucharistic Heart.”

And with that, I fell asleep — priest, pilgrim, and patient —
held by the same mystery that has held the Church for
centuries.

Day 11 – When Heaven Chose the Humble

Last night, some of our pilgrims went to the night Rosary procession, candles in hand and faith shining brighter than the rain. I, however, chose the more contemplative devotion—horizontal prayer. After dinner, I went straight to bed, exhausted but grateful, and woke up feeling a little stronger. My body still ached, but I could finally say, “I’m healing.”

For the first time in days, Mass was at **9:30 a.m.** a true miracle of mercy for weary pilgrims! We began a **walking tour** of Fatima, starting with the **Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary**, built exactly where the little shepherds saw the Virgin Mary in 1917.

This Neo-Baroque masterpiece, built from the local “white of the sea” limestone, stretches **70 meters long** and rises to a **65-meter bell tower** crowned with a bronze dome weighing seven tons. Inside, there are **14 side altars** for the Mysteries of the Rosary and a fifteenth carved into the vault above the nave. Light streams through the stained-glass windows bearing the invocations of Mary from the Litany of Loreto, bathing the nave in color and prayer. Beneath these windows rest the **three shepherd children**, *Sts. Francisco, Jacinta, and Lucia*.

Though often called “shepherd children,” they were really shepherds of humanity. Standing before their tombs, I couldn’t help but think: in choosing these three tiny ones, the Blessed Mother changed the world — perhaps even saved it.

As I stepped outside, I stood in the vast open plaza that can hold **300,000 people**. Looking at the sun, I recalled the *Miracle of the Sun* on October 13, 1917. And in that same year, the world was being torn apart by the **Bolshevik Revolution**. It struck me how heaven speaks even as earth trembles. Decades later, during the **Cuban Missile Crisis**, *Robert Kennedy's* book *Thirteen Days* described how close the world came to nuclear annihilation — an irony not lost on me as I pondered the difference between **nuclear fusion** (the light of the sun) and **nuclear fission** (the fire of destruction). Fatima's call to repentance was no gentle reminder; it was heaven's emergency broadcast.

We next visited the **Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity**, a striking contrast to the Baroque elegance of the Rosary basilica. Completed in **2007**, designed by Greek architect **Alexandros Tombazis**, it can hold nearly **9,000 people**, making it one of the largest Catholic churches in the world. Its modern design, simple, white, and circular, symbolizes eternity and inclusivity. No columns block the view; it feels as though heaven itself wanted nothing to obscure the sight of the altar. It even won an international award for its innovative engineering.

Inside, chapels dedicated to the Sacred Heart, Immaculate Heart, Resurrection, and the Eucharist offer quiet places of adoration. The crucifix above the sanctuary is deliberately abstract, less a face, more a mystery — reminding us that the risen Christ transcends every image. Standing there, I thought: *Fatima began with three children; now it welcomes nations*. What began in whispers is now sung in every language.

Afterward, we visited **Aljustrel**, the humble village where the three visionaries lived. Their homes were tiny, one could mistake them for playhouses, yet filled with laughter, faith, and poverty's hidden joy. At the **Well of the Angel**, I remembered the scene where the Angel of Peace appeared and gently scolded the children, saying, *"What are you doing? Pray!"*

Inside **Jacinta's little house**, I realized her entire doorway barely reached my hip. I smiled and whispered, "Lord, You truly confound the proud." God does not choose the great; He makes the chosen great. Bethlehem had its manger; Fatima had its shepherds. Both changed history.

We returned to the hotel for a short rest. Some went shopping; I went to the most undervalued form of penance — a nap. Later that afternoon, I walked to the **Chapel of the Apparitions**, unaware that Masses there are **live-streamed worldwide**.

When I arrived early, the sacristan checked my **celebret**, very seriously, before allowing me in. Soon, **Fr. Rowland** and a priest from England joined me. To my astonishment, I was told that I would be the **main celebrant** at the very altar where the Virgin appeared!

The Mass was heavenly. Two professional singers led the liturgy with angelic voices. The air seemed to shimmer with faith. When the final blessing ended, a man in the crowd shouted, "Beautiful Mass, Father!" I smiled and whispered, "Thanks be to God."

Afterward, a couple from **Goa** approached me with two small children, a boy and a girl. They told me they had prayed to Our Lady of Fatima for twelve years, unable to conceive. They promised to visit her shrine if their prayer was answered. Now they stood before me, living proof of heaven's generosity. Their eyes glistened as they said, "Father, these are our miracles." I nearly cried. I blessed them, and thanked Our Lady for reminding me that the most extraordinary miracles often come in diapers.

Later that evening, I prayed the **Rosary** and **Vespers** quietly in the chapel. At 9:30 p.m., despite the drizzle, the faithful gathered again for the **Eucharistic Procession**. In Lourdes, the season had already ended, but here, the procession continued like a luminous river of faith. Candles flickered, umbrellas swayed, and the sound of the *Ave Maria* rose like incense into the damp Portuguese night.

By the time we returned to the hotel, it was almost **11 p.m.** I fell into bed, tired but deeply at peace. Tomorrow was a free day, a sabbath for both body and soul.

Spiritual Insight of the Day

At Fatima, God proved again that **grace loves small beginnings**. The Rosary basilica shows how prayer carves beauty in stone; the Trinity basilica shows how faith builds bridges for the nations. From the simplicity of shepherds' homes to the grandeur of marble and modern steel, the message remains the same: *Heaven begins wherever humility kneels.*

Day 12 – Clouds, Curry, and the Communion of Saints

Our guide announced cheerfully: “Tomorrow we have Mass at **10:15 a.m.** in the **Chapel of the Holy Family.**”

I thought, *Perfect—Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and 38 of their distant cousins from America.*

I asked **Fr. Rowland** to celebrate. The chapel was small, but when we all squeezed in, it felt like Bethlehem—no room at the inn, but plenty of grace. “*Where two or three are gathered in My name*” (Mt 18:20)—and apparently, thirty-eight still count.

After Mass, some pilgrims went off again to revisit the **village of the shepherd saints**, while I slipped quietly to the **Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary**. I prayed the **Rosary** at their tombs, where three little children who once watched sheep now shepherd the hearts of millions. Outside, the clouds looked ready to baptize us all by sprinkling.

Sure enough, it rained—and kept raining. “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps 19:1), but sometimes they declare it through drizzle.

I wandered toward the great plaza and stopped at something striking: a **piece of the Berlin Wall**. It stood there like a scar turned into a sacrament. The world once divided by fear now kneels in prayer. I thought of Our Lady’s words: “*In the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph.*” The wall fell; the Heart remains.

Then I went to the **Chapel of Reparation**. At first, it was almost empty. I sat there enjoying the silence—fifteen

minutes later, silence was a rumor. The chapel filled with **schoolchildren** shouting “Ave Maria” with the energy of a Pentecost rally. The priests led the Rosary, the kids responded like heavenly thunder. I realized: in Fatima, **everything** is priest-guided—rosaries, adorations, maybe even naps.

Needing quiet, I retreated to the **Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity**—the modern one that could fit a small diocese inside. There, beneath its vast white ceiling, I prayed my **breviary** in peace. The stillness was divine; only the occasional squeak of a shoe echoed like an “amen.”

By now my fast-Friday stomach was staging a revolt: “*Man does not live by bread alone*” (Mt 4:4), it protested, “*but a little rice would help.*” I found an **Indian restaurant**—a sign of God’s providence—and ordered prawn curry. It was so good I nearly made the Sign of the Cross over every bite.

As I walked back to the hotel, the drizzle followed like incense. Then an inner nudge whispered, “*Celebrate another Mass tonight—for All Saints’ Eve.*”

October 31 is my **Dad’s birthday**, and although All Saints’ is not a holy day of obligation this year in the U.S., it **is** in Portugal—where even the calendar keeps the faith.

I asked the hotel receptionist if there was a place for Mass. “Yes, Father,” she said, pointing to a small meeting room. A humble space, but so was the Upper Room, and that worked out rather well.

I texted the group: *"Mass at 6 p.m.—optional but encouraged!"*

To my delight, **25 pilgrims showed up.**

The Mass kit I used had a story of its own. It belonged to **Fr. Michael Buckley**, who passed away a year ago. His mother had given it to me after I celebrated his anniversary Mass. The kit looked tiny—but like the widow's jar of oil (1 Kgs 17:16), it contained everything needed for the sacred feast. That evening, I offered Mass for **my father and Fr. Michael's soul**, wrapped together in the same prayer.

When Mass ended, I realized there was one task left: to deliver my **petition to Our Lady of Fatima**. Beneath her original statue, there's a box where pilgrims drop their written intentions—heaven's mailbox. I wrote mine carefully, walked to the chapel before dinner, but a Spanish Mass was in progress. I waited through *"Dios te salve, María"* and when it ended, slipped forward, placed my letter in the box, and whispered, *"Here, Mother—it's all Yours now."*

Later that night, our group was chosen to **carry the torches and canopy** for the Eucharistic Procession—a great honor! But just as we lined up, the skies opened like the Flood of Noah, Round 2. Rain poured, torches sputtered, and the procession was canceled. I told Our Lady, *"We'll process next time in heaven,"* and sprinted to the hotel, soaked but smiling.

There I packed my bags for the final time. Wake-up was **5:30 a.m.**, departure at six. Sleep was optional. When I came down, the guide was already ready—clipboard in

hand, halo pending. After **Aloisio**, he was the best: kind, efficient, and capable of finding lost pilgrims faster than the shepherd in Luke 15.

Two pilgrims from New Mexico had already left, so no goodbyes. As the bus rolled toward **Lisbon Airport**, the wipers kept time with the Rosary. Someone said, "Father, the flight is delayed." I smiled and said, "So is the Second Coming—but both will arrive right on time."

At the crowded terminal, I found a seat, took out my notebook, and began to write these last lines. Fatima faded behind us, but its echo stayed within: "*Do whatever He tells you.*"

Spiritual Insight of the Day

The last chapter of a pilgrimage is like the last chapter of Revelation—rain, trumpets, and a new beginning. God's humor hides in small details: children shouting Hail Marys, a curry that tastes like consolation, a canceled procession that becomes an unexpected Sabbath.

"The Lord gives rain to the just and the unjust" (Mt 5:45)—and to pilgrims who need reminding that grace sometimes falls in drops.

Epilogue – Do Whatever He Tells You

Every pilgrimage ends twice: once when the airplane lands, and once when the heart realizes it has changed address.

When our group boarded the flight from Lisbon, I thought the journey was over. I had my rosary, my memories, and just enough cough syrup to survive the turbulence. But as the engines roared, I realized something sacred had happened: the priest who left Utah had been quietly rewritten somewhere between Rome and Fatima.

In Rome, I learned that faith begins with yes — the same yes that echoes from Mary's lips to Peter's tomb.

In Florence, I learned that beauty is another form of prayer — that marble and melody can preach the Gospel.

In Padova, I found reason kneeling before mystery, Galileo and St. Anthony both teaching that truth and humility are siblings, not rivals.

In Lourdes, I learned that healing isn't always instant; sometimes it begins with a fever, a tear, or a surrender.

And in Fatima, I learned that Heaven always chooses the small — shepherds, sinners, and sleepy priests — to tell the world that grace still reigns.

Somewhere between the airports, the altars, and the umbrellas, I began to see that God's voice is most distinct not in thunder or visions but in the interruptions.

Delayed flights, lost luggage, wrong turns — every inconvenience was really a classroom in trust.

We called them "holy delays," but perhaps they were divine appointments.

I remember standing before the statue of Our Lady of Fatima on that final night, the rain falling like baptismal water. I whispered, “Mother, I’ve brought so many intentions, and somehow You’ve answered all of them — though not as I expected.”

She didn’t answer, of course. She just looked toward Heaven, as she always does, and pointed me back to her Son.

That’s when it struck me: her last recorded words in Scripture are not a speech, but a direction.

“Do whatever He tells you.” (John 2:5)

That line is the entire theology of pilgrimage.

Every journey, whether across continents or through the corridors of our own hearts, leads to that same invitation.

When I returned home, I unpacked souvenirs and found something I hadn’t packed at all — a quiet certainty that God had been in every detail:

in the espresso that kept me awake for morning Mass,
 in the blisters that reminded me I was walking on holy ground,
 in the laughter that turned strangers into fellow travelers,
 and in the rain that kept falling, as if Heaven refused to close the curtain.

And as I look back, I am **immensely grateful for the thirty-nine pilgrims who walked this path with me** — each one a living chapter of faith, patience, humor, and love. Together, we became a moving parish without walls, a choir without rehearsal, and a family formed by grace on foreign soil.

Their prayers, laughter, and kindness were the true miracles of this journey.

So here I am again, back among parish schedules and Utah's mountains, but carrying the same call the angel gave at Fatima:

"Pray. Believe. Repair. Console your God."

And perhaps that is the secret of every pilgrimage —
You go far away not to escape your life, but to see it again with resurrected eyes.

If I learned anything on this journey, it's that grace never waits for perfect plans; it simply asks for open hands.

And sometimes, those hands are holding a rosary in one and a cup of coffee in the other.

"Do whatever He tells you."

Even if it means boarding another flight, blessing another crowd, or simply smiling in the rain.

A Pilgrim's Prayer of Gratitude

Lord Jesus,
You called us to leave the familiar,
to step out with faith like Abraham,
to walk the roads where saints once prayed,
and to find You not only in shrines of stone
but in hearts made tender by grace.

Thank You for the thirty-nine souls
who shared this road with me —
for their laughter that turned fatigue into joy,
for their patience that turned delays into lessons,
and for their faith that made every Mass
feel like a foretaste of Heaven.

Bless them, Lord,
as they return to their homes and daily lives.
Let every photograph become a prayer,
every souvenir a reminder of Your mercy,
and every memory a seed of hope
planted in their hearts.

Teach us to keep walking—
even when the road is ordinary,
even when the miracle is simply waking up
and saying, "Here I am, Lord."

May the same Virgin Mother who guided us
from Rome to Fatima
keep pointing us, as always, toward You.

And when the final pilgrimage of our life is done,
may we all arrive, laughing and singing,
at the gates of the Eternal City—
where there are no more flights,
no more delays,
only arrival.

Amen.

*"The Lord will watch over your coming and going, both now
and forevermore." — Psalm 121 : 8*