Reflection on My Pilgrimage Journey to Rome

My pilgrimage to Rome was a journey of both the soul and the mind. Over the course of one week, I was immersed in an extraordinary blend of faith, history, engineering and tradition that deepened my spiritual life while also expanding my understanding of the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, and the Modern Age's cultural and political heritage. What made the experience even more enriching was traveling in the company of 18 people from 16 different countries. Sharing the journey with such a diverse group added layers of perspective, conversation, and friendship that made the pilgrimage even more memorable.

One of the most moving moments of the trip was my visit to the Basilica of St. Peter. Standing under Michelangelo's dome and looking upon the altar above Peter's tomb, I felt the weight of centuries of Christian faith. To kneel and pray at Peter's tomb filled me with profound happiness and a spiritual closeness that words can barely contain, a moment where heaven felt nearer and time seemed to pause. The grandeur of the basilica reflects the devotion of thousands who came before me, and of the countless workers, artists, and ordinary laborers who gave their lives to its construction. Their story is everlasting, written into the very stones and carried forward through the ages. Afterward, we climbed to the top of the dome, where the breathtaking view of the Vatican and the eternal city of Rome unfolded beneath me. The sight stretched endlessly, a living reminder of the faith, history, and human effort that built this sacred heart of Christianity.

Being in St. Peter's Square for a regular weekly Papal Audience was a remarkable experience.

Surrounded by pilgrims from around the world, I felt a profound sense of unity and devotion. Seeing the newly elected Pope Leo IV from the crowd was awe-inspiring. His presence radiated both humility and authority, and the moment made the centuries-old continuity of the Church feel tangible and alive.

The visit to the German Embassy at the Holy See and the discussion with the advisor of the Ambassador gave us another dimension of Rome, its diplomatic and cultural bridge-building role. The very structure of the Church, both central and universal, has allowed it to reach into nearly every corner of the world, touching countless lives and creating bonds that transcend borders. This global presence has naturally drawn the attention of governments, many of which maintain embassies at the Holy See in recognition of its influence and unifying voice. It was inspiring to see how faith and diplomacy intersect here, fostering dialogue and cooperation across nations. No less impactful was our visit to the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development under the head of cardinal M. Czerny. The conversation with the representatives of the Dicastery reminded me that the Church is not only the guardian of tradition but also an

active voice in shaping a sustainable future for humanity. I found it particularly interesting to learn that the Dicastery has around 80 staff members, far more than I had expected which reflects the seriousness and scope of its mission. Beyond environmental issues, the Church's commitment here extends to fostering every element of human development, with the profound goal of alleviating and ultimately eliminating human suffering.

The visit to the headquarters of the FAO revealed another face of Rome, its role as a center for global solidarity. Learning about its mission to combat hunger and promote sustainable agriculture reminded me how deeply interconnected our world is, and how the dignity of every person begins with the right to food.

Walking through the *Centro Storico* was like stepping into a living museum. From the Castel

Sant'Angelo to Piazza Navona, from Santa Maria dell'Anima to Santa Maria sopra Minerva, I was struck by the endurance of Rome's history. Rome's churches, adorned with post-Renaissance Baroque architecture, stand alongside the ancient ruins of the Forum Romanum and the Colosseum. All stood as silent witnesses to the passage of empires and centuries. In the Forum, once the vibrant heart of Roman public life where laws were debated and triumphs celebrated, the broken columns and scattered stones still whisper of voices that shaped much of the world we knew today. It struck me to realize that, nearly two millennia after the Romans, we still live in a world where the public expression of opinion is not guaranteed in many places, a sobering reminder of how fragile and unfinished the pursuit of freedom remains. The Colosseum, magnificent in scale yet scarred by time, spoke more starkly: it was an arena of spectacle, but also of suffering, where gladiators fought and early Christians may have faced martyrdom. All testify to human genius, but also to human suffering. How many nameless slaves and laborers must have died building these wonders? Their lives, like the stones they cut and carried, are part of Rome's story, even if history books remain silent about them. I carried this awareness with me as I marveled at the sheer beauty and symmetry of Roman and medieval architecture.

Equally enriching was the spiritual dimension of the pilgrimage. Celebrating Mass in the Catacombs of St. Callixtus. Those ancient burial chambers carved in the 2nd century for early Christians who sought both dignity in death and refuge in times of persecution brought me into profound communion with the roots of our faith. These underground passageways, forgotten for centuries until their rediscovery in the 16th century, still carry the silent witness of martyrs and the courage of a community that risked everything to remain faithful to Christ. To stand there in prayer was to feel that unbroken chain of belief stretching across the ages. Our visit to

Ostia, the ancient Roman port town, offered a vivid glimpse of the city's significance as a gateway to the wider Mediterranean world. Walking among its ruins, I could almost sense the bustling life that once flowed through this hub of commerce and culture.

The visit and conversation with Father Thomas G. Brogl, OP, socius of the master of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans) at the General Curia deepened this experience. His words reminded me that faith is not static but a living tradition, one that challenges us to integrate prayer, study, and action in the spirit of those who came before us.

Looking back, I feel profoundly grateful for this pilgrimage. It was not just a journey through space, but through layers of history, faith, and human resilience. I saw Rome as a city of beauty and contradictions, where glory and suffering coexist, where memory and hope intertwine. Beyond the monuments and churches, I will also remember the excellent taste of the food and the friendliness of the people working in restaurants, the rich flavor of espresso and cappuccino, and the smiling faces of Rome's residents that welcomed us at every turn. The experience has deepened my faith and given me a greater sense of belonging to a story larger than myself.

Finally, I must express my heartfelt gratitude to our team leaders, Prof. Dr. Thomas Eggensperger OP and Prof. Dr. Ulrich Engel OP, whose patience and tireless efforts in organizing every visit and guiding us allowed us to gain the fullest from each experience. I also extend my sincere thanks to Dr. Mirjam Rosa, head of KAAD's Latin America department, for her dedicated support throughout the journey. Above all, I commend KAAD for granting me and my friends this precious opportunity. Without their generosity, I could not have experienced this pilgrimage, which will remain one of the most meaningful journeys of my life. It was not just a trip to Rome, but a pilgrimage of the heart: an encounter with faith, history, and humanity.

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