

Roman Reflections from an American Dreamer

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“We saw the Pope. And the ‘School of Athens’ and the Sistine Chapel,” said Alyssa. It was lunchtime and a crowd of us was clustered around a table in our junior high cafeteria. Alyssa was recounting her family’s recent trip to the Eternal City, and it all seemed unspeakably glamorous to the rest of us, clad as we were in knee-socks and oxford shirts. “We had gelato every evening at the Trevi Fountain. Gelato is like ice-cream but much, much better.” I took a bite of my humble peanut-butter and jelly sandwich and chewed wistfully. “And,” she leaned in on her elbows. “A boy on the Spanish Steps offered me a rose.” We ooh-ed and ahh-ed, duly impressed, and Alyssa smiled triumphantly.

As I continued on my way through high school and college, more and more of my friends found their way to Rome. They came back with glowing reviews, profound impressions, handfuls of Rosaries, and the occasional box of Baci chocolates. I heard so much about Rome that I felt I’d been there myself. At the same time, the city began to acquire an almost mythical quality in my mind—not that I doubted it existed, or even less what it stood for—but for me, a homegrown Pittsburgher who’d never crossed the Atlantic, Rome seemed as exotic and romantic as Middle Earth or Narnia.

Until my chance finally came. When I announced to my friends that I was going to study at Santa Croce, they shrieked with delight (one or two may have groaned with good-natured envy). And so I arrived at the Fiumicino International Airport with my Italian phrasebook in hand and expectations higher than Trajan’s column.

My first impression was: “Phew, it’s hot and sticky.” I looked around the baggage claim. “And grungy.”

My second impression: Annoyance because the cab I had ordered beforehand hadn’t shown up.

Third (looking out the window of the taxi): “Man, there’s a lot of graffiti here.”

I have to say, after my first week in Rome, I was slightly disappointed. Sure, seeing the Pope was fantastic, and praying in front of John Paul II’s tomb was cool. But I didn’t feel any different. I wasn’t swept off my feet with excitement at seeing the Coliseum, the obelisk in St. Peter’s was shorter than I’d imagined, and I emerged from my first trip to the Spanish Steps disgruntled by the half-dozen or so energetic young men who ambushed me with their long-stemmed roses... and accompanying price tag. Why the sensation of let down? I think I was expecting Rome to be some sort of time machine... that would whisk me out of the present and take me back to the days of toga-clad senators, persecuted Christians who sketched fish in the dirt of the street, or Renaissance artists bespeckled with paint. But on every street corner I found vendors hawking cheesy souvenirs and restaurants plastered with menus in English. Even when I was craning my neck to see the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the moment was partially marred (but only partially) by the clicking of cameras and the loudspeaker that repeated “No photos. Please maintain a respectful silence” every thirty seconds. Here I was, surrounded by antiquity and I thoroughly felt like a denizen of the twenty-first century.

Still, Rome was Rome, even if strolling along the streets required extra vigilance thanks to the inhibitions of the canine pedestrians, and I wasn’t going to let grunge and globalization keep me down. One day, some friends invited me to go on an excursion to visit the Seven Chiesi—four major and three minor basilicas—and advised me to wear

sturdy walking shoes. After stopping at Santa Maria Maggiore, we headed out of the city towards the Basilica of St. Lawrence outside the Walls. After the opulent splendor of Santa Maria, I was struck by the relative simplicity of St. Lawrence. Tan brick on the outside, a cool pale interior... No tourists, just silence, space, and slanting beams of light. I made my way to the crypt under the nave and found myself face to face with a slab of marble mounted on the wall. A brown stain discolored most of the surface. I read the explanatory plaque: "After his death, the body of St. Lawrence was laid upon this marble." I shivered. St. Lawrence had been burned alive. I imagined his friends taking what was left of him after the execution and placing the charred mess reverently on that very slab of marble. Back then, those Christians didn't know that that stained piece of rock would be hanging in a church a thousand years later as a testimony to the martyr's faith. They were only heartbroken that Lawrence was gone, yet at the same time rejoicing that their friend had entered into glory. And as I contemplated this piece of marble, I realized that I had left my present and entered into the present of the friends of St. Lawrence. And that distant present, a thousand years ago, was no more extraordinary—and no less—than the present in which I live. The friends of Lawrence didn't know what was going to happen next, as they kept vigil by the charred corpse. They certainly didn't know that the Church would raise Lawrence to the altars, or that history would immortalize the saint's last joke—"I'm done on this side, flip me over!" They may have thought nothing of living in an age of persecution—just as I think nothing of living in an age of globalization. This is life, and we live and worship and suffer and love where and when we are.

An hour or two later we were walking along the Appian Way—and trying to avoid getting hit by the modern cars that came speeding down the ancient road. I smiled at the irony, amused rather than annoyed at the incongruence. I looked at the sky: brilliant blue, heaps of cloud, the fringes tinged pink by the rays of the golden sun. It could have been a painting by Titian or Raphael. I had seen such skies staring at me from the pages of my art history books, (and more recently from the walls of the Vatican Museums), and I'd always given a lot of credit to the imagination of the artists for coming up with such fantastic sky-scapes. But again a thought struck me, and I entered into the present of the artist. The paintings look the way they do because the Italian sky looks the way it does. Titian had gone out on many a day like today, when the clouds were billowing mountains in the sun-drenched sky, and the beauty of Italy penetrated his canvas only after it penetrated his eyes. Without feeding on reality, the imagination would be less than useless. So instead of expecting Rome to be as I had always imagined, I had to allow the reality to speak to me, to show itself, as it had in the stained marble and now in the sky.

My feet were beginning to hurt, so I was glad to kneel for a bit in Santa Croce in Jerusalem in the chapel with relics related to the Passion—a shard of the True Cross, the nails, a few thorns, the finger of St. Thomas. We really are a tactile people, we Catholics. The sacraments, sacramentals, relics... of course this business of physicality is all tied up in the Incarnation, the mystery of the Word made flesh. The mystery that imbues the temporal and material with an ineffable transcendence. I considered the finger of St. Thomas, up there somewhere in one of those shiny reliquaries. The finger must be black and shriveled by now, but at one point—in the present of St. Thomas, who was then just Thomas without the "Saint"—it was a living finger. With muscles and skin that wrinkled

over the joints and a cuticle and maybe even a hangnail. And that was the finger that touched the open side of the resurrected Lord. That finger, right up there. I shifted my weight. I wasn't consumed with emotion or anything at finding myself in the presence of such sacred relics. But it didn't matter. The reality of the things spoke for itself. It seemed so normal, so natural that I should be kneeling in front of a splinter of wood, a few shards of metal, a shriveled finger. Because it all meant a lot more than that. I wiggled my finger. St. Thomas had no idea they were going to cut off his finger after he died and enclose it in gold to be venerated for ages to come. In his imagination, he may have often gone back to that memory of his encounter with the risen Lord and marveled at his finger, which was so ordinary, so unremarkable—hangnail and all—for this was the finger that went into the glorious wound. I wiggled my finger again. It could have been my finger.

People living in extraordinary times probably don't realize just how extraordinary they are. What was going through Peter's mind when the carpenter from Galilee told him, "You are Peter, on upon this rock I will build my Church"? I don't know, but surely he never dreamed that "Tu es Petrus" would be inscribed in golden letters six feet tall inside the most famous basilica in the world. At the last stop on our excursion, I stood looking up at those letters for a long time, thinking of how those words had once resounded in the ears of a scruffy, loud-mouthed fisherman. That moment had come and gone—the sound waves broke the air and dissipated again—but was still present here in Rome. Yes, Rome was grungy, crumbling, covered in graffiti—and all the more glorious for it. This gritty, earthy materiality, the accumulation of the centuries, is a testament to the Incarnational reality that gives transcendent meaning to the skies and fingers and fishermen. In the end, reality of Rome—grit, globalization, and glory—has revealed a world much richer than what my idealized expectations had prepared me for. I left St. Peter's with a new-found fondness for Rome's ruins, cramped narrow streets, and even graffiti—which is, after all, an Italian word. And I headed over to the Old Bridge Gelateria, because Alyssa was right about one thing: gelato is way better than normal ice-cream.