



The Good Steward

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Gifts by Jean LaJesse, Stewardship Manager

Mark 5: 19... "go home to your family and announce to them all that the Lord in his pity has done for you"

That reading from Mark 5 is the first one I read upon my return to work after a nine day pilgrimage. Recently, I had the opportunity to join Fr. Bob Schreiner and a group from the Cathedral in Crookston and St. Peter's in Gentilly on a pilgrimage to Rome and Assisi. There is only one word that can describe this special trip...Awesome!

After an 8½ hour flight from Minneapolis to Amsterdam and another 2½ hour flight from Amsterdam to Rome, we arrived at our hotel long enough to put our luggage in our rooms and then board the bus for our first mass. Upon arrival at the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore (St. Mary Major), we were greeted by police, barriers and a helicopter that was patrolling the area because of a demonstration taking place very near the Basilica. My first thought was, "What are we doing here?" That was Saturday.

Sunday morning we walked from our hotel to St. Peter's Square...about 3 blocks. This was my first trip to Rome and upon walking inside of St. Peter's Square, I was overcome with emotion. The beautiful architecture and thoughts about who had walked here before me in this holy place was a little more than I could handle. What a gift!

We proceeded through security and walked through the doors of St. Peter's. The magnificence of this place is too much to consume in one visit. We followed our guide downstairs to the crypt where we passed the resting place of Pope John Paul II and stopped in the Polish Chapel, where we celebrated our next mass. Another gift!

Monday and Tuesday brought us to the Colosseum, the Arch of Constantine, the Roman Forum, the Pantheon, the Catacombs of St. Calixtus, the Basilica of San Paolo Fuori le Mura (Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Wall) and the Basilica Di St. John Laterano (St. John Lateran). Across the street from St. John Lateran is the Lateran Palace, which was at one time the residence of the popes. Inside this building is the Holy Staircase and, as tradition has it, is the stairs Jesus Christ ascended to be presented to Pilate. It was brought to Rome from Jerusalem. There are 28 steps and the only way to ascend them is on your knees. Even though I have knee problems, I decided to try it. After only three steps, I was unable to continue and had to back down. Because of what happened next, I was made more aware of Jesus' love for us in the fact that he is always watching over us. The security guard, upon noticing what had happened to me, motioned to me and pointed to a poster on the wall telling about gaining a plenary indulgence for going up the steps on your knees. But the poster also stated

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something about an indulgence for walking up the side stairs. So I followed the guard up the stairs, where he walked into a side chapel and unbolted an iron door. I followed him inside what turned out to be the Chapel of St. Laurence, also called the Sancta Sanctorum, at the top of the Holy Staircase. This is where the popes use to pray. The guard pointed to the mosaic of Jesus above the altar and showed me with sign language (I do not speak Italian) to keep my eyes fixed on Jesus' eyes. He had me walk back and forth in front of the altar and as I did so, Jesus' eyes followed me. I could not stop the tears as I told Fr. Schreiner about my encounter. All he could say was, "Jean, no one goes in there." The mosaic above the altar could not be seen from outside the chapel. Again, a blessing!

Visiting and celebrating (with a little shopping in between) brought us to Wednesday morning – the Papal Audience. Our group, along with nearly 5,000 others, assembled in Pope Paul VI Auditorium to await Pope Benedict XVI's arrival. One-half of the group decided to head for the back of the hall, hoping to be close to the aisle in the middle of the hall, should Pope Benedict enter there. The other half of the group moved closer to the front of the hall, hoping to get a better view of his face once he arrived.

Fortunately, I followed the group who chose the back of the hall since Pope Benedict did enter from that side of the building. As he walked from side to side down the aisle, he shook hands with all who could reach him. Yes, I did get to shake his hand...one more gift!

Our visit to Assisi was next. My hotel room overlooked the courtyard of the Basilica of St. Francis. This holy man walked the streets of Assisi and there I stood at the window of my room, thanking God for an unrecognized gift...the gift of tears. They came easily, as I was overwhelmed at the holiness of that place (and Rome) and the closeness I felt to Jesus, our Savior.

What does any of this have to do with stewardship? It reminds me and you to always be thankful for all the gifts that we receive each day. Happy Easter!

What would it be like?

I recently read about a leper colony where a visitor observed the noon-time lunch line. When the bell rang for lunch, one leper was riding on the back of another one like a horse and rider, which made the others in line laugh. The visitor learned that the "rider" could not walk and that the "horse" was blind. By combining their strengths, they made it to the lunch line together.

Imagine what our communities (church and civic) would be like if we all combined our strengths (time, talent, treasure) like the lepers did.