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**OUR PILGRIMAGE—
MAY 20 TO JUNE 4, 2016
OUR TRIP TO THE HOLY LAND
OF ISRAEL AND TO ITALY—
DEACON RICH AND PAT BAGBY**

FRIDAY, MAY 20—TRAVEL

We woke at 4:00 am to pack the last few items for our pilgrimage. Our friend Betty Diesen came by at 4:40 to load luggage and to drive us to MetroLink for the ride to Lambert Airport in St. Louis. Youngest son Nick joined us for the ride from Belleville to Barnes Hospital where he works. (Nice surprise!) We arrive at Lambert at 6:15 and literally flew through check-in with TSA—only 5 minutes or so! We ate breakfast and visited with fellow travelers Deacon Tom & Dawn Helfrich from Sts. Peter & Paul in Waterloo. The 4 of us boarded Delta flight 1163 to Detroit, Michigan at 10:20. The flight lasted only an hour (+1 time zone), but the layover was 5 hours. We met up in Detroit with Deacon Bob & Diane Lanter from St. Luke in Belleville, Deacon John & Marlene Fridley from St. George in New Baden, Deacon Larry & Donna Mitchell from Shelbina, MO, and Steve & Debbie Elfrink (Diane's brother and sister-in-law and our friends too) from Belleville, then laid over until 6:15 pm when we all boarded Air France flight 3605 for Paris, France.

SATURDAY, MAY 21—TRAVEL & ISRAEL

We flew through the night, but we did not sleep much. We did watch several movies including one about the life of Pope Francis which was quite good. The airline food was surprising because I found that Pat and I were both served gluten-free food while the other passengers had pasta. I must get that straightened out! We landed at Charles de Gaulle Airport at 8:30 am Paris time, an 8-hour flight. Then we had a 2 ½ hour layover before boarding a 10:50 Air France flight for the 4 ½ hour trip to Tel Aviv, Israel. My, were we cramped!

We arrived in Tel Aviv at 4:25 pm (8 time zones from Germantown) after a bit of bumpy weather and, again, not much sleep. It was cloudy most of the way, but we did catch some glimpses of the snow-covered Alps, the Greek islands, Crete, and Cyprus. We were met at Ben Gurion airport by our Proximo Travel representative and had to wait for approximately an hour for several passengers from other flights. Finally, at 6:15 we boarded a bus bound for the city of Tiberias, located on Lake Galilee. Along the way we encountered a traffic

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accident, so we did not arrive at the Leonardo Plaza Hotel until shortly before 9:00 pm for supper. After a good buffet supper and wine, we retired to our rooms and were assured of a 6:30 am wake-up call by our guide Jarir who is a Christian Arab Israeli citizen who has worked for Proximo Travel for the past 16 years. Jarir gave each pilgrim an olive-wood rosary which we would carry with us each day on our pilgrimage and a ball cap to identify us as part of the tour group.

SUNDAY, MAY 22—GALILEE

We woke at 6:30 am with a good breakfast buffet to follow. (Hello—we're in Israel, so there's no bacon or ham!) All the food is kosher and all sorts of non-traditionally American breakfast foods are served to cater to Asians, African, and European pilgrims. I noticed a preponderance of salads, rice, beans, cheeses, pasta, fresh fruits, and pastries. It was difficult to get a cup of American-style coffee also. But it was all good.

We left first to visit the church at the Mount of the Beatitudes located in the hills above the Sea of Galilee about 10 miles northeast from Tiberias. It has a beautiful octagonal chapel, each side dedicated to one beatitude. The grounds were gorgeously planted and there was a breathtaking view of the Sea of Galilee from the church's portico. Next, we stopped at the nearby Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes. Each stop is marked by one of the deacons reading a matching Scripture passage. Deacon Larry Mitchell added, "And so began the Catholic tradition of fish fries." There was also an ancient mosaic of a basket of loaves and 2 fish. In addition there was a stone step/seat that may have been Jesus' seat as he preached the Sermon on the Mount.

Next we traveled a short distance to the Chapel of the Primacy at Tabgha where Jesus asked Peter to "Feed my sheep," thus naming him to lead the Church. It's also memorable for being the site of Jesus ordering Peter to put his nets out on the right side of the boat; and so, Peter caught 150+ varieties of fish, signifying that he was to catch all sorts of people and convert them. Here, Jesus also fed His disciples after His resurrection.

Finally before lunch we traveled to Capernaum where Jesus lived for 2 ½ years in a home belonging to Simon Peter. A beautiful modern church has been built elevated over Peter's excavated home and next to the ancient synagogue where Jesus and His disciples worshipped. There we celebrated Mass. Traveling with us in a partnered bus were Mexican-American pilgrims from Southern California and from Texas as well as Vietnamese-American pilgrims from Atlanta (they know Archbishop Wilton Gregory, our former bishop) and from Colorado. There were two priests—one from Beverly Hills and one from San Diego—who alternated celebrating Mass for us. As a result, Mass was

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usually celebrated in English along with hymns in English, Spanish, and the lilting melodies of Vietnamese. What wonderful multi-ethnic liturgies!

After Mass at Capernaum, we boarded a replica of St. Peter's fishing boat (it was built based upon a mud-preserved 2,000-year-old sunken boat found nearby) to sail across the Sea of Galilee for lunch at St. Peter's Restaurant—their daily special—Peter's Fish, of course! I'm not used to having my fish stare back at me, so I ordered chicken kebabs, but Pat ate the fish.

After lunch we traveled to Cana in Galilee where Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding, His first miracle. Here Pat and I renewed our 45th wedding anniversary vows; we were joined by the other deacon couples. We even bought a certificate suitable for framing to commemorate the event. After that, we did some light souvenir shopping and, of course, Cana wine tasting at a Christian Arab's shop. (We even bought a tiny clay wine jar as a memento.)

Next, we drove to the Church of the Annunciation in nearby Nazareth to pray briefly. The church is built above the home of Mary, and the room where the Archangel Gabriel appeared to her is preserved below the main floor. There is an entire railed balcony overlooking the home site in the main floor in front of the altar—very inspiring. Nearby is a chapel dedicated to St. Joseph. It is contained in a 2000-year-old family home with a workshop that could have been used by a husband who worked in wood and stone—a carpenter—Hmmm! Then we boarded the bus once more to return to the Leonardo Plaza Hotel in Tiberias for a Mediterranean-style buffet dinner, with wine of course, and to spend the night.

I was amazed at how populated the area of the Galilee is, largely one population center flowing into the next. There are some open areas, usually dedicated to farming, olive groves, and vineyards. It seems that every spare space is dedicated to kibbutz-grown produce—bananas, mangoes, citrus, date palms, olives, apples, pears, melons, grapes, vegetables, corn, and wheat—as well as some livestock like beef, sheep, and goats.

MONDAY, MAY 23—SAMARIA, JUDEA, JERUSALEM

Early wake-up and buffet breakfast at the hotel (I don't know that I'll ever get used to eating pasta, salad, olives, cheese, and beans for breakfast—but at least there are several kinds of coffee, pastries, and fresh fruit), then board our bus for a two-hour drive south through Galilee and Samaria into Judea. We followed the Jordan River Valley and the Judean wilderness. Most of the time we were skirting the Kingdom of Jordan while traversing Samaria. We saw irrigated field of crops alternating with dry sandy mountains and a smattering of villages and towns surrounding oases. We did see cattle and even camels in rocky pastures.

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We stopped at the Jordan River where John the Baptist baptized Jesus. There, we renewed our own baptismal vows, dipped our toes & fingers into the Jordan River, and were sprinkled with its water by one of the priests traveling with us. There were Israeli soldiers armed with submachine guns standing guard on our side of the river and Jordanian soldiers guarding the pilgrims on the east bank only 20 feet away. Nearby, there was a memorial to soldiers killed just a few years ago in military/border action. At the site, some Greek Orthodox pilgrims wore entire white baptismal albs over their clothing for baptism or renewal of vows. They told us that they would then take the garments home as burial garments in the future. It's also supposed that the Jews crossed the Jordan near here as they entered the Promised Land to which Moses had led them. Pat and I took along pieces of cloth which we rubbed at each of the sacred sites or, in this case, dipped into the Jordan River.

We saw Mt. Tabor where King Saul lost his last battle (and his life) to the Philistines. Next, we proceeded to Jericho, the oldest inhabited city in the world. We viewed the Mount of Temptation where Jesus fasted for 40 days and nights and was tempted by the devil. We also viewed from a distance a Greek Orthodox monastery clinging to the side of the mountain. In Jericho we saw Zaccheus' tree and the Tel Jericho, just a pile of rubble now, as a result of Joshua marching around the city with the Ark of the Covenant. We also celebrated Mass in Jericho shortly before noon.

Then we traveled a short distance to the nearby Dead Sea—what a magnificent view! Near our stopping point are the caves at Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in caves by shepherds in the late 1940s. They were written by the Essenes, a Jewish sect to which John the Baptist along with 100-150 others may have belonged. We watched a documentary and viewed excavations of Essene homes, cisterns, and cleansing baths. We stood nearly 1,300 feet or so below sea level; the weather was quite warm but dry. Again, armed soldiers were much in evidence. We ate lunch at Qumran, a delicious pita pocket filled with shredded seasoned chicken, potatoes, and salad.

After lunch, we boarded the bus to continue our journey through the Judean Wilderness to Jerusalem (south and west). We saw nomadic Bedouin dwellings along the way. We passed the Inn of the Good Samaritan, where the man in the parable stopped to help the unfortunate victim when the priest and Levite would not. The view as we came into Jerusalem was a series of mountains. Now we were more than 2,000 feet above sea level; the weather became very windy and cool, below 70 degrees. Many stone and block multi-story buildings were stacked one upon the other with little or no green space between. Water tanks and solar-powered water heaters dot the roofs of homes

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and commercial buildings to provide water pressure. The view from Mt. Scopus allowed us to see the old walled city of Jerusalem as well as the new city.

I was struck by the fact that there was so much trash strewn throughout the city in all the public places, outside shops, on the streets, even on the porches and roofs of buildings—homes and shops alike. Evidently the Israelis, especially the Palestinian Arabs don't recycle or use trash pick-up services. It's sad really.

We prayed the rosary today as every day in the bus on the way to the hotel. One of the deacons would take turns leading the rosary and the rest of the passengers would respond. Before we checked in to our hotel, we crossed into Palestinian Bethlehem's Christian sector to shop for olive wood souvenirs, jewelry, and icons. In one shop I bought a gorgeous Jerusalem cross that breaks into segments and matching earrings for Pat's 45th anniversary present. At the military checkpoint we were held for 15 minutes to enable a 20-25 car motorcade bearing VIPs to cross. Later, we arrived at the Grand Court Hotel to check in and enjoy a sumptuous buffet with wine. Finally we went to bed after a long and busy but fulfilling day.

TUESDAY, MAY 24

Our wake-up call came at 6:00 am and then we ate a delicious breakfast buffet. Once again, hooray for the fresh fruit, yogurt, coffee, and pastries while other pilgrim travelers ate a variety of what we'd consider lunch and dinner foods. Then we boarded our bus by 8:00 to tour Jerusalem and its environs. It was more noticeably warm and humid today.

We began by visiting the Mount of Olives, from which Jesus ascended into Heaven. We visited the Chapel of the Ascension, a Crusader domed and fortified building which actually sits in the courtyard of a Moslem mosque, but pilgrims are allowed to visit. It's very small and contains the stone on which Jesus stood when He ascended. It is purported that the shape of His footprint is imbedded in the surface of the stone. We also visited the Church of the Pater Noster where Jesus taught His disciples how to pray the Our Father. We also prayed it as a group—very moving! The church is maintained by Carmelite nuns and its courtyard features large ceramic panels of the Lord's Prayer in every language imaginable.

Next, we celebrated Mass and then walked the Palm Sunday road. We stopped at various spots along the way and deacons took turns reading Scripture appropriate to each stop. We passed a massive Jewish cemetery where countless Jews are buried overlooking the Kidron Valley and facing the Temple Mount. (If you're familiar with the movie *Shindler's List*, you'll be familiar with the scene of Shindler's burial and the placing of rocks on the

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tombs to signify those who have visited.) We visited the Chapel of Dominus Flevit (“The Lord Wept”) where Jesus wept over Jerusalem. It features a dome shaped like a teardrop. Archeologists have found an ancient Christian cemetery next to it. From there the view across the Kidron Valley to the Temple Mount (Mount Moriah) was both breathtaking and inspirational. Of course when Jesus wept, the Temple still stood, but Jesus foresaw that it would be destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD/CE. It would one day be replaced by the Muslim Dome of the Rock (the golden dome familiar in so many photographs).

Next we came to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prayed and was arrested by the Roman soldiers. We saw the exterior of the Russian Orthodox Church of Mary Magdalene and visited the Church of All Nations/Basilica of Gethsemane, whose front is decorated with an enormous mosaic of Christ praying in agony. We again read appropriate scriptural passages along the way through the Garden. In the Garden we saw ancient olive trees as well as the one planted by Pope Francis in 2015.

Then we boarded the bus to drive to Mt. Zion to visit the Upper Room/Cenacle where Jesus and His disciples celebrated the Last Supper when the Eucharist was instituted. Jesus also appeared to His Apostles here twice after His resurrection, once without Thomas and once with him present to answer his doubts about Jesus’ resurrection. It was also the site of the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. It was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD/CE, rebuilt as a church by the Crusaders in the eleventh century, later converted to a mosque when the Muslims overwhelmed the Holy Land, and later restored. (Once again, we rubbed our squares of cloth as we did at so many of the holy sites. Thus we believe that we have home-made 3rd class relics to share with family and friends. I might also mention that Pat and I prayed in all the holy sites for faith for ourselves, our sons and daughters-in-law, our grandchildren, our parishioners, those to whom we minister at St. Joseph’s Hospital and at Centralia Correctional Center, for family, and for friends.) Below the Upper Room is the burial tomb of King David, for which we men donned yarmulkes and the women veiled their heads.

Our tour guide Jarir explained that from the Last Supper, Jesus traveled to the Garden of Gethsemane, His favorite spot to pray, to await his betrayal and arrest. Jarir explained that the Roman soldiers marched Jesus up and down steep steps along the cliff faces of Mt. Moriah and Mt. Zion, back and forth from Herod’s palace to Caiaphas’ house, so that Jesus had to be exhausted from this ordeal.

Next we visited the Dormition Abbey, a Crusader church, which contains the Blessed Virgin Mary’s tomb and where she was assumed body and soul into Heaven. It’s built to resemble a lighthouse. (Pat mentioned that the Holy

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Spirit brought special insight to her as she prayed to Mary the mother of Jesus as she had prayed constantly when our son Nick was barely surviving after his traffic accident. Pat has a real mother-to-mother connection/devotion for the Blessed Mother as a result.)

Lunch was a special treat. We ate in a restaurant owned by Christian Israeli Arabs. We dined sitting on raised cushions, eating a typical Arab meal consisting of grilled spiced chicken, shish kebabs made from ground lamb, a variety of salads, olives, hummus, freshly baked warm Arabic bread, topped off by baklava and Turkish coffee.

After lunch we climbed steps (perhaps steps that Jesus walked) up Mt. Zion to the Church of St. Peter in Gallicantu, where Peter denied Jesus 3 times. The church is marked with a spire topped by a golden rooster to remind us of Jesus' prophecy that Peter would deny him 3 times before the rooster crowed twice. The church at Gallicantu is built on the site of the house of the high priest Caiaphas and the dungeon in which Christ was held before his crucifixion. In the dungeon there is a pit or cistern where, as the story goes, Christ was suspended during the night with only His toes touching the floor to further torture Him by tiring Him and stretching His body so that He could not rest. I was blessed to read aloud *Psalms 88* while everyone meditated with eyes closed. I and several others reported experiencing an intense feeling, a heart swelling of oneness with Jesus' presence. I could hardly finish reading I was so overcome with emotion.

Next, we traveled to Bethlehem where we visited the Basilica of the Nativity where Christ was born. We specifically visited the Grotto, venerated as the site of Jesus' birth and of the manger where Mary laid Him in swaddling cloths(es). There is a 14-sided silver star there to mark the spot. We prayed there especially for our cousin Cayla who has had difficulty conceiving that the Baby Jesus may bless her.

We also visited the Church of St. Catherine, the Crusaders' cloister, the Chapel of St. Jerome (who translated the Bible from the Greek into Latin), and the Grotto of the Holy Innocents, in commemoration of the baby boys killed by King Herod's orders to try to eliminate Baby Jesus after the visit by the Magi. Finally, we viewed the Shepherds' Grotto and the Shepherds' Fields where the angels visited the shepherds to tell these simple people of the birth of the Messiah. The grotto and chapel were actually converted from a natural cave, hollowed and further enclosed to protect shepherds and sheep from the cold. Its ceiling was blackened from the fires kindled by these men to keep warm.

Finally we returned to our hotel for a delicious buffet dinner with wine and then to rest for the night. What a glorious and faith-filled day!

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WEDNESDAY, MAY 25

This was a special day! After an early wake-up call and breakfast, we traveled to the Old City of Jerusalem to enter by the Lion's/St. Stephen's Gate, so called because St. Stephen was stoned to death just outside the wall at this spot. We walked first to the Church of St. Anne (Mary's mother), a Crusader church, and we also viewed the ruins of the Pool of Bethesda where on the Sabbath Jesus called the man who had lain lame by its side for 38 years to take up his pallet and carry it home. The pool and the ruins of an ancient church sat next to the courtyard of the Church of St. Anne.

We then walked to the Tower of Antonia where Jesus was tried (Station 1). We prayed at the Chapel of the Flagellation where Jesus was scourged before He began His Via Dolorosa (Way of the Cross) by accepting the cross (Station 2).

Then we walked and prayed the rest of the Stations of the Cross, stopping at each site or chapel to read a Scriptural meditation, to pray, and to sing "Jesus, Remember Me." We wound through a Moslem souk (marketplace), a set of narrow lanes lined by shops, shadowed by stone buildings and walls, and navigated by hundreds of shoppers, pilgrims, carts, motorbikes, and even micro-small cars at times. Occasionally, we were jostled by Moslem youths and even adults who seemed to resent our intrusion. For the most part though, people either ignored us or tried to sell us all sorts of goods from trinkets to t-shirts, jewelry to icons, scarves to shish kebabs.

Station 3 (Jesus Falls the First Time) and Station 4 (Jesus Meets His Mother) are marked by marble carvings attached to the walls of the alley way. Station 5 is a small chapel dedicated to Simon of Cyrene for his assistance in carrying the cross. Station 6 is housed in a church dedicated to St. Veronica who offered her veil to Jesus. Station 7 marks Jesus' Second Fall in a chapel that passes through a gate in the wall. Station 8 (Jesus Speaks to the Women of Jerusalem) hangs on the exterior of a Greek Orthodox Church.

We ate lunch al fresco at tables of a Christian Arab family restaurant at a plaza in the souk itself. We dined on a chicken snitzel—pulled spiced chicken with salad—delicious! While we were eating, a t-shirt salesman from the shop next door bargained with us to print Cardinal and Texas A&M shirts lettered in Hebrew. (We bargained him down from \$20 each to \$12.50. He still made money and we saved some, so we were both happy.) We also stopped in a Catholic Arab shop to buy a beautiful icon of the Holy Family. I told him that I was a deacon and he immediately dropped the price by 50%—Priceless!

Station 9 marks Jesus' Third Fall at a Coptic Church not far from Golgotha. The Stations of the Cross culminated nearby in the Holy of Holies for us Christians (Roman Catholics, Armenian-Orthodox, Greek-Orthodox, and

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Christians in general). The Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher contains Golgotha where Christ was stripped of His garments (Station 10), was nailed to the Cross (Station 11) featuring a magnificent Crusader mosaic, and died on the Cross (Station 12). This site is ensconced in an icon-covered, oil lamp-filled (currently being refurbished) Greek Orthodox basilica. Golgotha is crowned by an altar and huge crucifix at which pilgrims bow, kneel, and venerate the site where Jesus was crucified. Pilgrims actually place their hands in the crack in the rock where the cross was located. The crack was caused by the cataclysmic earthquake accompanying the Crucifixion. At Station 13, an altar marks “Mater Dolorosa,” the passion of Our Lady as her son Jesus is taken down from the Cross.

Just below one level is the Holy Sepulcher—Joseph of Arimathea’s borrowed/lent tomb of rock where Jesus was laid after His death. Nearby is the stone slab (The Stone of Anointment) upon which He was first laid as His body was wrapped. The tomb itself is surrounded by scaffolding, because early in the last century it had suffered damage from an earthquake and had fallen into disrepair. Now, King Abdullah of Jordan has begun to raise money to restore it finally after all these years. Inside the tomb is a stone, part of the rock rolled in front of the tomb to seal it, which is called “the center of the world,” because it lies at the center of Jerusalem, the center of the Mideast, the center of the continent.

In the inner chamber lies the stone shelf upon which Jesus was laid for 3 days, wrapped for burial—but most importantly, from which He rose from the dead on Easter Sunday! (Station 14) We were able to lay our hands on this stone bench. The Greek Orthodox Church has a second site located just behind the Holy Sepulcher which they claim as the true site of Jesus’ burial and resurrection. We prayed at both sites.

Located in a grotto below the basilica is the site where Empress Helena, mother of Constantine, found the True Cross. We visited and prayed there.

Afterwards, we visited the Western Wall (Wailing Wall) of the Temple of Jerusalem. It is the most sacred site for the Jews as the only remaining vestige of the Temple destroyed in 70 AD/CE. Today, the Moslem Dome of the Rock sits atop the Temple plaza. Security was tight; we passed through scanners once again. At the Western Wall men and women are separated to pray by gender. There, I placed a paper petition in a crack, asking God to bless family, friends, parishioners, prisoners, the infirm, my cousins seeking healthy pregnancies, and for faith. Dozens of pilgrims, mostly Jewish prayed as they rocked back and forth.

The Temple Mount is important to all. Some say that Adam’s skull was found there and that perhaps God had created Adam and Eve from the mount’s

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dust. Also it's proposed that Abraham was tested in his faith there when God asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac on that spot. Of course, King David chose that spot and his son Solomon built the Temple there. After the Temple's destruction, rebuilding, and second destruction, Mohammed is said to have ascended from there, and the Moslems subsequently built the Dome of the Rock, their holy site.

We boarded the bus to travel to St. John's Church, built on the site of the home of John the Baptist. The area is known as Ein Kerem; it means "the well." There, we honored Deacons John Fridley and Tom Helfrich on the 3rd anniversary of their ordination. They, of course, served as deacons of the Mass. Afterwards, we walked several blocks through the neighborhood of Ein Kerem and up the mount to visit the Church of the Visitation, built on the site where Mary traveled to visit her cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. On the way down the mount, we stopped for some gelato and to buy some hand-carved olive-wood angels from Arab-Christian shop owner and woodcarver Albert, who hopes to begin studying for the diaconate within the next two years. We returned to board our bus, headed to the hotel, ate a buffet dinner with wine, and dropped in bed, exhausted after a gloriously exhilarating day and anticipating an earlier-than-usual wake-up call in order to head to Italy for the next leg of our pilgrimage.

THURSDAY, MAY 26—TRAVEL & ITALY

Pat awoke at 4:15 am to primp and pack, but I slept in until 5:00 to prepare for our flight to Rome, Italy. Since we woke before the kitchen had set up the buffet breakfast, the hotel had provided box breakfasts to eat in the bus on the road to Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. Each box was the size of a shoebox and contained enough food for 2-3 people, but it was meant for one! It was also the oddest breakfast I've ever eaten: 2 hard rolls, olives, dill pickle, cottage cheese, feta cheese, crackers, a large tomato, an apple, a green nectarine, 3 slices of swirl cake, a bottle of grape soda, and a bottle of water. Luckily, Deacon John Fridley sneaked into the kitchen and begged several cups of coffee from the staff.

We loaded our luggage on the bus and rode to Ben Gurion airport (about a one-hour drive) for the 10:30 Alitalia 0815 flight to Rome. Security was stringent but it moved smoothly. (TSA in the USA has much to learn from the Israelis.) Oddly, we did not board directly from a gate but rode an airport transit bus to a parked plane about 3-4 miles away on the tarmac, and boarded via a set of roll-up stairs.

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We arrived at Fumicino da Vinci airport in Rome at 1:30 pm, gaining an hour in flying west. I had a problem with the meal. I wanted a regular passenger meal, not gluten-free like Pat had. The flight steward was adamant, but I stuck to my guns because I had told the Proximo Travel Company representatives 4-5 times that I was not signed up as gluten-free. Eventually, I got my wish and ate a delicious roast beef dinner, so I thanked the other flight attendants.

We cleared customs, retrieved our luggage, and met Sabina, our Italian travel guide. What a little Napoleon! She tells us one thing, then when we ask questions (She has a very heavy Italian accent) of her or her aide Rafaela who speaks broken Spanish/English, she contradicts herself and tries to cover.

We boarded the bus for a tour and for Mass at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. What a huge and magnificent cathedral! It's said that St. Paul's head (He was executed by beheading) was buried in 3 different spots, and that 3 springs spouted as a result. The original basilica burned in the 1800s and this beautiful structure was built to replace it. We entered through the basilica's Holy Doors. One thing of note: All the portraits of every pope line the walls near the ceiling of the basilica.

After Mass, the deacons were supposed to hail a taxi to the Vatican to register for the deacon conferences on Friday and Saturday as well as the Papal Mass on Sunday; but Sabina kept getting sidetracked and distracted. Then she told us that we had to check in at the hotel first. Long story short—we missed our window of opportunity. Deacon Bob Lanter volunteered to rise early to taxi to the Vatican on Friday at 7:30 am to register all of us. On the way to the hotel, the bus driver got lost 3 times. When we finally arrived at the Ripa Roma, we had to unload our own luggage and make our own room arrangements, both of which Proxima Tours were supposed to have taken care of.

Our hotel room at Ripa Roma is quaint and quirky. Ripa Roma looks like an old apartment building rehabbed. The king-sized bed (actually 2 single bed moved together) is situated in the middle of the room; the only other furniture is a refrigerator, a chaise lounge, and a four-foot-high half wall behind the bed sporting 2 headlights on each side. The wall holds a clothing bar and several shelves. There are no chairs. The door's lock spins multiple times until it engages or disengages. The bathroom sink is tiny, the bathroom is long and narrow, the lighting is dim, and the bathtub/shower is so high that one must climb on a stool to enter or exit. Steve and Deb Elfrink's room one floor above has a kitchen sink and a two-burner stove. We do have a small patio, much of it taken up by our air conditioner; but it's handy to dry laundry, which we sorely need to do.

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We ate a luscious meal in an equally quirky hotel dining room called the White Area. It features rounded walls with a large brightly colored orange kangaroo and a purple gorilla in the corners. The meal consisted of cheesy spinach lasagna, sliced roast pork with roasted potato wedges, parfait, and some tasty red wine. We ate and told seminary high school stories as well as family stories with the Lanthers, Elfrinks, and Helfriches. The word is that we get to sleep in tomorrow—Hoohoo!

FRIDAY, MAY 27

We were able to have a later wake-up and buffet breakfast today. At 9:30 we were ready to board the bus which finally departed by 10:00 am due to some habitually late pilgrims, bound for the Vatican Museum. We entered the main galleries at 11:00 and saw many beautifully rendered statues, paintings, murals, and tapestries from the great artists of antiquity as well as of early, medieval, and renaissance Church history. Outside one gallery window we could glimpse the palazzo home of Pope Benedict XVI. We saw a video of Popes Francis and Benedict opening the Holy Doors. My, has Pope Benedict grown increasingly frail!

The crowning location, of course, was the Sistine Chapel, covered in paintings by Michelangelo Buonarroti. It was interesting to see how it had been restored to its original brilliant glory when commissioned by Pope Sixtus IV in the 1500s. One small corner was left unrestored to show how time had darkened the artwork.

Next, we visited the crypts below St. Peter's Basilica where we saw some of the excavations of early burials as well as the crypts of the Church's popes up through Pius XII, Paul VI and John Paul I.

Then we proceeded up to the main body of the Basilica. How impressive and how immense! We viewed Bernini's Baldacchino over the main altar. We exited and then immediately reentered through the Holy Doors. Then we paid homage by praying before the tomb-altars of St. Pope John Paul II and St. Pope John XXIII. I was surprised to see the actual body of the favorite pope of my teenage years St. Pope John XXIII (covered, of course, by a wax death mask). After exiting the basilica once again at 1:45, we strolled through St. Peter's Square and passed to a nearby piazza/square for lunch and for shopping.

Our guide Sabina (who is difficult to understand) told us we could go to banks to exchange dollars for euros but neglected mention that they were closed from 2 to 4, so we were not able to go. Pat ate a salad and I had a pizza sandwich. At 4:00, our meeting time, the Proximo guides kept us at the piazza for an additional 45 minutes after lunch. They just have no concept of timeliness! Then we walked several blocks to our bus and drove across Rome to

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be dropped 8-10 blocks or more away from our deacon conference church. Our 3rd guide of the day—David—led us on a very brisk long walk to the Basilica of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva where we arrived ½ hour late for our conference about the service of the diaconate. Note: St. Catherine of Siena, one of the Doctors of the Church, is buried here at S. Maria beneath the main altar.

We enjoyed several presentations here about the deacon's role as husband and minister. The deacon presenter stressed that the diaconate should actually help strengthen the values of the marriage. The second presentation by an Australian pastor stressed the role of the deacon as evangelizer. The third speaker was Deacon Greg Kandra from Brooklyn, NY, who presented 2 years ago at the National Deacon's (NDICE) Conference in Cincinnati. Here in Rome, he spoke about deacons as the point men on the front line of service for the Church, a special role in this Year of the Jubilee of Mercy. Deacons are to bring witness to Christ much as Joseph did to his divine son. Greg stressed the importance of prayer and attendance at Mass. He stated that deacons are missionaries to the world of work, of hunger, and of the poor. Deacons are the faces of mercy according to Pope Francis.

Afterwards, on the way walking to the restaurant (8-10 blocks back the way we came), we strolled past the Pantheon with its memorable colonnaded facade, a pagan temple converted to a Catholic basilica in the 300s AD/CE. Then we crossed to the grand plaza in front of St. Agnes Church, a magnificent marble edifice from the late 1500s. It was designed by Borromini. In front was the Fountain of the Four Rivers by Bernini, the same artist who created the baldacchino (altar canopy) in St. Peter's Basilica.

Our deacon tour group, which had been split between S. Maria Sopra Minerva and S. Giovanni, met at Zio Ciro, a Mediterranean restaurant. We dined on antipasti—mozzarella sticks, insalada, bruscetta, etc. followed by pasta carbonara, then fresh fruit salad topped with gelato and accompanied by a delicious red wine. Afterwards we walked several blocks to the bus and drove back to the Ripa Roma Hotel for a good night's sleep and a 6:30 am wake-up call.

SATURDAY, MAY 28

We actually received a 6:15 wake-up call and enjoyed a buffet breakfast at Ripa Roma's White Area dining room. We left by bus at 8:15 (only 15 minutes late today) for Mass at the Basilica Church of the Holy Cross, built by Pope Benedict XIV in 1745. The basilica houses the remains of Empress St. Helena, mother of Constantine, and also contains many relics of the Holy Land including part of the True Cross, the finger of St. Philip, a nail from Jesus' Cross, the INRI sign from the Cross, thorns from Jesus' crown of thorns, and a

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replica of the Shroud of Turin. The basilica was built on the site of several earlier churches and the necropolis where St. Helen's remains were found.

Next we traveled to Saint Mary Major, one of the major basilicas of Rome. There Bernini is buried. There also Pope Leo XIII is interred, the author of *Rerum Novarum*, an encyclical about the modern age, ethics, and nobility of work. We also heard him singing "Ave Maria" on a recording, the first pope's voice ever recorded. Here also is a subterranean chapel dedicated to the Manger of Baby Jesus, fragments of which were brought from Bethlehem by Empress St. Helen. Another chapel is dedicated to the building of the original S. Mary Maggiore on the site chosen by Mary, who caused it to snow there on August 5 (reminiscent of Our Lady of the Snows Shrine in Belleville, Illinois, our home diocese). Pope Francis often comes here to pray.

There are many side chapels dedicated and maintained by wealthy families. There's also a baldacchino reminiscent of the one in St. Peter's Basilica. Modernization and expansion was made possible by Pope Benedict XIV in the mid 1700s (he was an extremely busy builder), and gold brought back from Columbus' and later voyages adorns the pillars and ceiling. Outside S. Mary Maggiore stands a huge obelisk with Madonna and Child on top; it stands in a line of obelisks at Saint John Lateran and St. Peter's Basilicas.

I might mention that there's a huge presence of Italian soldiers, police, and carabinieri ensconced in body armor and armed with submachine guns. No pictures are allowed for the soldiers' safety. Also, we were told not to drink the tap water in Israel or Italy, only to drink bottled water. However, the Ripa Roma taps offer safe water and there are constantly running taps/fountains at some locations in the Vatican and near S. Maria Sopra Minerva from which people are drinking freely and filling water bottles. When in Rome....

We drove again to the vicinity of the Vatican for shopping and lunch. At one shop staffed by two beautiful young Italian women we bought 100 "Year of Mercy" holy cards. Because I'm a deacon, they discounted them from ½ euro each to .30 euro apiece. Then we asked them for a recommendation for lunch (Pat is gluten-free, which has caused a problem almost everywhere, including our hotels where we've eaten.) We walked about 10 blocks to a restaurant called Mamas. Pate ordered eggplant parmigiana and I had a tossed chicken salad carbonara with a warm vinaigrette sauce. Both were *delizioso*.

Next we rejoined the group which had been split into 3 parts—one for deacon conference at S. Maria Sopra Minerva, one to S. Giovanni, and one for Eucharistic Adoration and reconciliation at S. Laurentio. After much coaxing, we were able to be on time today. At S. Maria Sopra Minerva we heard Cardinal Turksen from Ghana, head of the Council of Justice and Peace for the Vatican.

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The Cardinal stressed the relationship of the charity of works and the charity of words for the Church. The past 3 popes, especially now Pope Francis, state that the hands of charity lead us to Heaven. Thus, it's a blessing within the Church. One model for deacons is Moses who brought the Word of God to His people, the ultimate role of diaconal service. He also stressed the importance of including and combining the Sacraments of Matrimony and Holy Orders, roles that are elemental to the diaconate. That combination enables us deacons a chance to practice mercy and charity every day in joint mutuality with our wives. (Thank goodness that Deacon Bob Lanter noticed that I had laid my diary/journal on the rail of the pew. What a disaster that would have been, losing this daily log. Thank you, Lord!)

On a side note, my, oh my, the traffic in Rome is busy, busy, busy! All the cars are small. Every other car is a 1- or 2-seat Smart Car and drivers park them anywhere/everywhere—horizontally, diagonally, even vertically. There are also thousands of motor scooters/Vespas which weave in and out of traffic, cut in front of buses and cars, even drive on sidewalks or weave into opposite-direction traffic lanes. Pedestrians, "Beware!"

We ate supper in a trattoria/pizzeria set in a covered piazza. The owners offered us some local wine samples, including a sparkling red and a sparkling white. We dined on rigatoni Bolognese, bread with infused olive oil (one of the few times bread was served with our pasta), insalada (at the end of the meal as is the custom), followed by a fresh fruit cup. Our Mexican-American pilgrims, fortified with strong red wine, serenaded us. Then it was back to Ripa Roma for a 5:30 am wake-up and boxed breakfast to be on time for security checks before Mass with Pope Francis at the Vatican at 10:30 am.

SUNDAY, MAY 29

We woke early and picked up a boxed breakfast in order to board buses by 6:45 am to travel to the Vatican for Mass with Pope Francis for the Year of Mercy celebration for Deacons. We began lining up for security checks at 7:45. Our group was one of the last to clear the checkpoint and to be cleared one more time by the Swiss Guards. Then it was off to the huge hall where papal audiences are held to vest and to receive our Year of Mercy stoles—a gift from the Vatican. There we met Deacon Doug Boyer from Belleville and had our picture taken together on the assembly hall steps. Our wives cleared security on their own and were seated toward the front of Vatican Square.

At 10:00 we deacons processed in four abreast and were seated on the terrace on either side of the altar. Deacon Bob Lanter and I were seated in the last row on the right-hand side. The weather consisted of mixed sun and clouds; we had sprinkles off and on. At 10:10 we began with praying the

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Glorious Mysteries of the Rosary (in Italian). Pope Francis and other ministers processed from the Basilica of St. Peter at 10:25 and Mass began promptly at 10:30. The Mass was celebrated in Latin and Italian with readings and Prayers of the Faithful in a variety of languages. Pope Francis preached for approximately 12 minutes—in Italian, so I'll check ZENIT, the Vatican news site, to read the translation. Communion (bread/Body only) was distributed by pre-selected deacons. We prayed the Angelus and the final blessing/dismissal was given—all over by 12:00 noon or 1 ½ hours—very economical. Then Pope Francis went down both sides of the terrace and down into the crowd shaking hands. The warmth of his presence was palpable, even from 50 feet away. The choir sang magnificently and the sound was crystal-clear—it was truly a majestic celebration!

Afterwards we returned to the assembly hall to retrieve whatever we'd left. (I never did recover the sunglasses I had lost in the assembly hall) and tried to find our wives; however, our guide Sabina had given us fuzzy directions to the piazza where we were to meet, so Deacon Bob Lanter and I walked up and down the streets outside of St. Peter's Square, searching for our tour group.

Again, we noticed a huge police/military presence. We also noticed much graffiti and trash in the tourist areas. Someone said that both are due to the upsurge in terrorist alerts, leading police and military units to guard duty to protect tourists who were attending Vatican events and sightseeing.

After wandering for 1 ½ hours, Bob and I were finally able to reconnect with our wives and the rest of our pilgrims. It seems that Sabina told us to turn right as we exited Vatican Square, but she evidently doesn't know the English word "right" from "left." Her response is always (in heavily Italian-accented English) "Don't worry! It will be all right." We wound up later by turning left into the small piazza where we had shopped the day before. Eureka! There they were! So we ate lunch with the Lanters and Elfrinks in a Roman trattoria and shopped for a book about Rome and the Vatican.

We rejoined the group at 2:45 as instructed but, as usual, had to wait an additional ½ hour for the Hispanic guide Rafaela and her charges. Finally, we boarded the bus for another part of Rome near S. Maria Sopra Minerva. We left the bus, walked a dozen blocks or so, then visited the Spanish Quarter and the Spanish Steps (which were under renovation), plus an obelisk topped by a statue of the Immaculate Conception in front of the Spanish embassy. It's also the location of the Vatican's Palace of the Propagation of the Faith. Just to one side is the residence of poet John Keats and his friend Percy Bysshe Shelley. It seems as if all of Rome, citizens and tourists alike, were there in the area crowding the streets, fountains, and upscale shops.

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I was wrong. We proceeded several blocks to the Trevi Fountain which was packed with people. We posed for pictures, tossed in coins (a tradition which guarantees that you'll return to Rome). Next, we traversed several piazzas fronted by ancient Roman buildings and basilicas before we arrived once again before the Pantheon, formerly a Roman temple but now a Catholic church, S. Maria ad Martyres. It has a huge free-standing dome with an oculus (large opening like an eye) in the center. It's said that Julius Caesar's body was cremated here after his assassination. The artist Raphael and members of the Italian royal families are buried here. There was such a long line of visitors stretching several times around the piazza that we could not enter for a tour.

We visited once again the great artistic palace of Navonna with its fountain of The Four Rivers. And once again we waited ½ hour for Rafaela and her Hispanic contingent to arrive before we dined on pasta, grilled chicken, roasted potatoes, insalada, fresh fruit salad, accompanied by a delicious red wine at a nearby outdoor restaurant. We bused back to Ripa Roma, exhausted and in bed by 9:00 pm.

MONDAY, MAY 30

We woke at 6:00 am and went to The White Area to eat breakfast buffet with the Helfriches and Fridleys, prior to a 7:45 taxi ride back to St. Peter's Basilica. We circled the entire perimeter of Vatican Square on foot only to discover that we needed to return to our original entry point in order to clear Vatican security. Once inside the security station, we again entered the Holy Doors (our 3rd time) and posed for a picture beside it and in front of Michelangelo's *Pieta*, a representation by the 23-year-old artist of a youthful Blessed Mother holding her dead crucified Son.

Next, we were cleared by the Swiss Guards to a side entrance for the Scavi Tour, deep under (2 or 3 sublevels) St. Peter's Basilica in what is called the Dead City. It was originally an elaborate graveyard with individual family burial chambers. Some rooms held multi-generational burial niches (200 or more). Each was decorated with elaborate frescoes and mosaics. Some pagan rooms were decorated with paintings of peacocks, surprising to me because they represented Roman/pagan belief in resurrection. The tombs were well preserved because Emperor Constantine had the hill (the Capitoline?) there leveled and filled in order to build the basilica. Excavations in the 1800s brought the cemetery back to light. Archaeologists also found some well-to-do Christian grave rooms with Christian symbols disguised as generic paintings or openly symbolic Christian symbols such as the Chi-Rho and also some fish.

Next, we came to the most emotionally moving area in the deepest level. We could see what appeared to be an altar with pillars in front of what was

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called “The Graffiti Wall.” As Katie, our guide told us, during the excavations from the late 1950s to the late 1970s, archaeologists found an ossuary (bone box) with bones purported to belong to St. Peter the Apostle. Through DNA testing, it was discovered to hold a variety of bones belonging to men, women, and children—an obvious decoy.

St. Peter was a fairly sturdy and healthy 70-year-old in 68 AD/CE when he was crucified upside-down near to the location of this grave. However, the Graffiti Wall held a clue. Located in the bottom corner was an area that had been plastered over. As the plaster, an obvious later addition, was removed, another ossuary came to light. Its bones belonged to a 70-year-old Middle Eastern man with a strong build, and the dirt adhering to the bones matched the dirt found in the original graveyard. The bones of St. Peter had been found! They were later re-interred beneath the 1st century altar which is located beneath another altar in the Clementine Chapel, which in turn lies beneath the main altar in St. Peter’s Basilica. St. Peter’s bones are now encased in plexiglas boxes which are visible (with effort) from the back and side of the original altar. What an otherworldly moment! Archaeological work still continues today. Some of St. Peter’s bones were removed to be given to Pope St. John Paul II to aid in his recovery from the assassination attempt in the last century.

One level up, the same level in which 100 or more of the popes are interred lies the Clementine Chapel, backing on the upper part of the original altar/chapel and directly below the main basilica altar and Bernini’s baldacchino. The Clementine Chapel as commissioned by King Ferdinand of Spain and literally covered in gold from the Americas—walls, ceilings, altar, everywhere.

Special blessings to Deacon Tom and Dawn Helfrich for offering us the chance to use these hard-to-find tickets for this moving and memorable experience! Grazie! Grazie! Grazie!

We wandered through the basilica one last time, taking in the gorgeous artwork and praying at some of the altars/crypts of the popes.

We grabbed a taxicab and rode along the Appian Way (the original Roman highway) to join our group at the Catacombs. The other pilgrims had visited the Basilica of St. John Lateran while we were taking the Scavi Tour. We arrived just in time to join a tour guided by an English-speaking German guide. Many of the catacomb’s burials were Christian. (The catacombs’ temperature was a welcome cool 48 degrees.) One of the first burial sites was that of St. Cecilia. Her remains have been removed to a church built in Rome in her memory, but there is a reclining statue of her experiencing her death. The frescoes and mosaics are magnificent; the colors are vibrant, almost as if they had been recently rendered, not 2,000 years ago. Many depicted scenes of

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Christ's Baptism and Resurrection along with other Christian symbols of the Sacraments. Finally, we returned a short distance on the Old Appian Way to St. Tarcisius Church for Mass.

We climbed back on the bus at noon, actually 12:15 after waiting for stragglers, to head to area of the Colosseum for lunch. We dined at a rooftop ristorante al fresco with the Helfriches and Fridleys. We treated for lunch since they had arranged the Scavi Tour. The women all had Caesar salads in honor of the Colosseum which was just to our left, but the men ate Italian sandwiches. After lunch we visited the Basilica of St. Peter in Chains and took pictures of the chains St. Peter wore in prison from which he was freed by an angel's visit. The church was a bit macabre with representations of skeletons at many of the shrines and altars.

Then at 4:00 pm we descended the hill to enter the Flavian Colosseum. It is a gigantic circular arena built in the 1st century AD/CE. Most of the original walls are stripped of their marble casing and some/much of the brick has crumbled, but the substructure of the arena floor and some of the architectural stone show how magnificent and majestic it once was and still is. We circled the 2nd level but did not ascent to the 3rd because of all the steep steps. (Evidently the ancient Romans had not heard of Otis Elevators.) All around within easy eyesight lay ancient Roman buildings and ruins.

I was surprised to discover that the Colosseum was built by the pagan Romans but is considered to be a sacred Christian site, named so by Pope Pius IX in the 1850s due to all the Christians who were "martyrized" (Sabina's word) there. He had a large cross erected on the main concourse. Makes sense.

Nearby lay the ruins of the Roman Forum, built and rebuilt over many centuries as the center point of Rome. It contains the remnants o many Roman temples, government buildings, trade markets, columns, baths, and churches. Archeological work continues today to uncover these buildings which were built atop earlier edifices. It was truly a step back into time. Also nearby was the Circus Maximus, a huge oval built for chariot racing which held over 100,000 spectators. Truly magnificent!

At 5:30, after another 30-minute wait for Rafaela and her charges, we walked 5-6 blocks to a neighborhood ristorante for spinach and cheese ravioli, sliced roasted pork, roasted potatoes, insalada, and custard with a crust and covered by fresh fruit, as well as a fine red wine.

We took the bus back to the Ripa Roma to pack for the next leg of our Italian pilgrimage—after a sound night's sleep.

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TUESDAY, MAY 31—UMBRIA AND ASSISI

Up at 6:30 am for our final (early) buffet breakfast—Thank you Ripa Roma! We boarded the bus at 8:15 only after checking that our luggage was loaded.

Traffic exiting Rome was extremely heavy today, so the bus driver scouted several side streets on the way to the autostrade (4-lane restricted access highway, similar to the autobahn in Germany or interstate in the USA). We were on our way to the interior of northern Italy through the Appenines and the region of Umbria to Assisi. As we gained altitude, we drove through many tunnels. The Tiber River came into view numerous times and the bullet train often paralleled the highway.

As we near Assisi our guides Sabina and Rafaela fill us with information about St. Francis (originally named John) and St. Clare as well as the town and churches of the region of Umbria around Assisi. After about 2 hours we stopped for coffee and pastries at a roadside coffee shop and petrol station.

An hour later we arrived at Assisi. We first stopped at St. Clare (Chiara) Church to visit her tomb. Then we walked down a charming medieval cobblestone main street with shops lining the way to the town square for lunch and shopping. We bought two hand-carved Tau crucifixes—one for St. Boniface Parish where we are parishioners and one for St. Joseph Hospital (Franciscan) where I work as a chaplain. We ate pizza and salad alfresco before embarking on more window shopping and light purchases of t-shirts and sunglasses.

We ran into Deb Elfrink outside of one of the shops and she was promptly blessed by the Holy Spirit or a pigeon—I'm not sure which. Anyway, the bird made a deposit on her, so we helped her clean up and then go to find Steve. He had discovered the town's information center, so we entered to obtain maps of Assisi.

We proceeded to the Church of St. Francis for Mass at 4:00 pm which eventually started at 4:20. I know that the church was at the bottom of the hill, but I swear that we walked uphill to get there. The Mass was a multicultural affair as always—Mass in English, songs in Spanish, Vietnamese, and English. After Mass we visited the tomb of St. Francis and rubbed our “relic” cloths. We then boarded the bus for Florence, but only after the deacon wives bought out a purse kiosk near the parking lot.

On the way to Florence, we passed through the main city of the region—Perugia—which is the chocolate capital of Northern Italy. We tried to highjack the bus, but the driver said that he had a schedule to keep. Along the way we saw the Transiamento Lake, largest lake in Northern Italy, located along the route there Hannibal led his elephants across the Alps several thousand years ago.

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We stopped to eat at a warm and friendly family ristorante between Assisi and Fierenze (Florence) in Tuscany. We ate handmade linguine in Bolognese sauce crafted by the signora, an 80-year old family matron. She was coaxed out of the kitchen to great applause and even danced with Deacon Leo to a Mexican melody gratefully supplied by our Hispanic pilgrims (with the aid of a fine regional red wine). We also ate roast beef (melt-in-your-mouth delicioso), homemade roasted steak fries, and finished with a home-made crème-filled tart.

We prayed the rosary as we drove for an hour through fierce storms to Florence and our sleeping spot for the next 2 nights, the Nilhotel. Check-in and baggage were a nightmare. The bus driver unloaded half the luggage before closing the luggage bays and pulling around the hotel to a side entrance. Then the luggage was delivered to the wrong floor, and so we went to retrieve it ourselves. We finally crawled in bed after midnight.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 1—TUSCANY & FLORENCE

We awoke in Florence at 7:00 am and ate our usual buffet breakfast in the Nilhotel dining room. By this time we were craving bacon. In Israel we had no pork, and in Italy the hotel cooks barely heated it—“Crispy” evidently was not an Italian vocabulary word. We climbed on board the bus at 9:00 to explore the city. Florence lies on the Arno River and is known as a center of the arts and of the leather industry. The Uffizi gallery is a world-class art museum and the Santa Croce (Holy Cross) Church features the tombs of Michelangelo and Dante Alighieri as many other famed artists.

Sabina has informed us that we will have Paola join us as a tour guide for Florence’s museums. Graffiti is back in full force on new and old buildings alike. (How can people deface everything—even the buildings are works of art!?) Much of the main city’s downtown and residential areas are modern—lots of small cars, motor scooters, buses.

In the old medieval section of Florence, our art guide Paola filled us in on the importance of the city and its differences from Rome. She points out that it’s not as hilly as Rome; besides it’s less cluttered and more orderly in its architecture.

At 10:00 we walked to the Academic Museum to see Michelangelo’s *David* and other Michelangelo statuary, many of which are works unfinished at his death (in his 80s). *David* is 16 feet tall and made of Carrera marble; he’s holding a sling (we all know the story about him killing Goliath) and there’s a stone in his right hand (visible from the rear). I’m amazed that Michelangelo left so many unfinished marbles, most notably a standing version of the *Pieta*. I

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wonder if he easily grew bored, if he was dissatisfied, or if he had a slip of the chisel and hammer at times—Oops!

The museum also featured displays of ancient Roman and Greek statuary, paintings and crucifixes by Giotto, and other religious portraits by a variety of artists from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. However, Paola was transfixed by *David*, so we stood before that work of art for the better part of an hour admiring its beauty. Honestly, Paola was a knowledgeable art historian/professor, but I would have preferred to explore additional rooms and galleries in the museum.

Next we walked to *the Duomo*, the Cathedral of S. Maria del Fiore (St. Mary of the Flower), the 3rd largest cathedral in Europe after St. Peter in Rome and St. Paul in London. It's massive and constructed of 3 colors of marble—white, green, pink—and decorated by numerous marble flowers and mosaics on the front. Artists spent 80 years building the cathedral and carving its many statues. It also features a complimentary and equally massive campanile (bell tower) designed by Giotto. Across the cathedral's piazza is the Baptistery, itself 4 stories tall, octagonal, with huge carved bronze doors, itself as large as a church, all built starting in 1299 AD/CE.

We walked past the Arch of the Republic, built in the 1860-1870s to commemorate the unification of Italy under Victor Emmanuel with Florence as the capital for 6 years before Rome reclaimed the title. The next church that we saw was St. Michael, dedicated to the artists' guilds. Ironically, it was quite ordinary as was St. Carlo just across the street. Both had plain facades which blended in with the homes and shops next to them.

The next piazza (square contained several huge sculptures and a fountain with a huge statue of Neptune. There was also an enormous modern representation of a man astride an even larger golden turtle. To one side stood the Florentine municipal palace—the town hall. Directly in front was a stone building housing the Uffizi Gallery Museum. Just to the side and in front is a large open-air sculpture display which is free. Here stands the statue *Rape of the Sabine Woman* and the bronze statue of Paris holding up Medusa's severed head by Cellini, and also a scaled-down replica of Michelangelo's *David* (the original was removed to the earlier-visited museum for safekeeping).

We then strolled around a bit when our time with Paola had expired and we turned in our whisper radios. Pat and I ate at a streetside café. I had a dry overcooked warmed-over hamburger and Pat had a salad with shrimp and mushrooms. Unfortunately, anyone who dines *al fresco* also seems to want to smoke *al fresco*. The wait staff bring coffee and ash trays to those who finish eating. So we moved along to our next adventure.

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We wandered for a time; we bought a brown leather wallet for me and colorful light violet one for Pat. We thought about walking to the Ponte Vecchio (a series of exclusive jewelry shops built over the river), but it started to drizzle; so we ducked into a gelateria and spent way too much on two cones. (What the heck—it's part of the pilgrimage!) Then we opened our umbrellas and walked back to the cathedral square. We went in to the cathedral to escape the rain and to investigate this massively spectacular edifice. We had a 1 ½ hour wait until Mass, so we prayed the rosary, snapped some pictures of the art-covered ceilings (reminiscent of the Sistine Chapel), altars, and statuary.

At 4:15 we met the Proximo Travel group on the street corner only to reenter the cathedral by a rear/side door for Mass. I served as Deacon of the Altar and Larry Mitchell served as Deacon of the Word. Even though we celebrated Mass at one of the many side chapels, it was as large as many of our country parishes back home. It was truly a wonderfully moving and humbling experience.

After exiting the cathedral at 5:30 as it was closing, Lanter, Elfrinks, Mitchells, and Bagbys walked back down to the Uffizi Square to enjoy a pre-dinner cocktail. The Proximo group joined us at the Uffizi statuary gallery at 6:15 to walk to that evening's restaurant—about 4 blocks away. We ate Tuscan vegetable zuppa (soup), followed by stewed young rooster, and ensalada, finished off by gelato and accompanied, of course, by a fine Chianti.

An extremely long walk (12-15 blocks) back to the bus ensued and then we thankfully rode to the Nilhotel to pack for Venice the next day. Nilhotel was very nice—newly redecorated with lots of marble and warm rich wood—quite different from the timeworn and dated Ripa Roma. Oddly though, there was only one electrical outlet in the entire room. A note had been placed on our bed that we were breaking Italian law by using an extension cord and a curling iron. We slept comfortably and guilt-free though. We'd be gone and the evidence would be in our bags by morning—unless the carabinieri decided to raid our room during the night.

THURSDAY, JUNE 2—VENICE

We awoke at 6:30 am to a pleasant surprise. The Nilhotel kitchen staff opened early to supply us with a simple breakfast of pastries, coffee, yogurt, and fruit rather than boxed breakfasts on the bus. I've been hungry for bacon, but again the Italians (this time the Florentines) have barely warmed it, much less cooked it.) Oh well, soon we'll return to Germantown for home cooking. First, though, we placed our luggage in the hallway outside the buffet room for pick up by the bus driver. We boarded the bus at 8:15 and embarked for Venice.

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The morning's weather featured rain/mist/fog. We left Florence and soon found ourselves in rolling hills with farms, vineyards, and orchards dotting the hillsides. The ancient farmhouses and barns were built with sturdy stone walls and red tile roofs so typical of Tuscany. The homes in towns that we passed were also built of colorful stone and had tile roofs.

We soon came to the mountains as we drove through the fog and low-lying clouds. We passed through dozens of tunnels bored through the mountainsides, some of them several miles long. Once we had passed through about a dozen or so of these tunnels, the sun emerged and illuminated beautiful alpine meadows and deep tree-filled valleys. We exited the high mountains into a broad valley between twin sets of highlands.

Today we prayed the rosary in Spanish as we rode along; or should I say, our Hispanic pilgrims from California and Texas prayed in Spanish as we echoed responses in English.

Next we passed the northern Italian city of Bologna, famous for industry as well as for pasta. It was evident that this is pasta country as the spaghetti trees were in blossom while the fettuccini and tortellini plants would soon be ready for harvest. At 10:00 we became mired in heavy traffic, barely creeping, often stopped completely. Sabina tells us that today is a national holiday in Italy, which may explain the heavy volume and tie-up.

As we started moving again, Sabina mentioned that the landscape has changed once again. This is the Po Valley, the center of Italy's farming region. It's evident that the storms we drove through the other night have blown down much of the wheat and oat crops. The Po River, which is the longest river in Italy, flows from the Western Alps to the Adriatic Sea through a landscape that's flat as a pancake. Except for the stone farmhouses and barns with red tile roofs, this could be Illinois farmland. We even saw a great farmer—he was outstanding in his field!

At 11:30 it begins to mist again and the clouds are building into thunderheads. Sabina has just collected 30€ from each couple for a gondola ride once we reach Venice. The terrain is also growing mountainous again. We just passed a winding mountain road with a castle perched on top. I believe that we're in the foothills of the Dolomites. Sabina is also playing a Vivaldi violin recording, so I presume that he comes from this region of Italy. I'm noticing that there's a town every 5 miles or so with a church and campanile (belltower), just like Clinton County, Illinois. Next, we're near Padua, home of the Franciscan St. Anthony and of numerous vineyards. At Padua (Padova) we make the turn south for Venice (Venizia).

At 12:30 we arrive at the Adriatic and the lagoon that envelops Venice. We're driving on the causeway to the marine dock of the vaporetta—passenger

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boats which carry tourists across to the city of Venice. I'm looking for my sunglasses and the Mexican family is searching for some medicine when the bus driver locks us on the bus and leaves! We hammer on the glass and call for help. Finally, Deacon Leo and his daughter Rosie find an emergency handle and we're able to escape. No one has returned to look for us. They have all boarded the boat which is ready to leave the quay.

As we run for the boat, our tour guide Sabina comes off the boat to look for us. We tell her our tale of woe, but she tells us to get on the boat which is ready to back out of the slip—no sympathy! We board the vaporetto for a 20-minute ride across the lagoon and up the Grand Canal. We disembark in front of the Gabrielle Hotel, where we will gather later to walk to Mass and eventually to exit Venice.

We head down the grand promenade, crossing 3 pontae (bridges) to embark on a gondola ride with the Lanters. The water in the lagoon was murky and smelly, but our voyage was still romantic. The canals, as everyone knows, are used as streets and the gondoliers are magicians, turning tight corners, avoiding collisions, speeding up and slowing down as necessary.

Then at 2:00 we ate at a Venetian restaurant. As usual, we had to watch carefully for Pat's gluten-free diet. I ordered a pepperoni pizza with *speck*—surprise! not pepperoni, but peppers and undercooked bacon—as did the Elfrinks and Mitchells (after an additional ½ hour wait). Pat had gluten-free lasagna (*delizioso*) and the Lanters shared a meat and cheese *antipasti* plate. So much for the local cuisine.

Next, the women shopped for t-shirts, jewelry, and purses. We men shopped for gelato. We met again at St. Mark's Cathedral, but the lines were much too long because of the thousands of Italians added to the normal tourists because of the holiday. We were told that the cathedral contains the bones of St. Mark who was martyred in Egypt. From there, we started for a smaller church for Mass—San Giovanni (St. John the Baptist). Along the way on the grand Promenade, we noticed that Pat had lost her cane. She had been using it occasionally the last few days because her ankles and legs were aching. So she and I backtracked all the way to St. Mark's, the shops, and the restaurant, then back again. We found the cane that the jewelry shopkeeper had put behind the counter for Pat. We took some shortcuts through alleys, but we had no idea where the church was located where we were to attend Mass. We wound up on the Grand Promenade once again in front of the Gabrielle Hotel where Sabina, our guide, found us and guided us to San Giovanni.

Our last Mass in Europe at San Giovanni Baptiste started at 5:00, just as we arrived. Just as we entered the church, Pat's phone beeped. We received

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news that our dear friend and deacon classmate Dr. Richard Cole from Salem, MO, had died as a result of a traffic accident. I could not concentrate all during Mass, but I tried to pray for “Doc” and June. Both are the kindest, gentlest, truly holy people we know. Ministry will be lessened by his loss. *Requiescat in pacem!*

Mass again was an ecumenical blend of Latin, English, Spanish, and Vietnamese—a perfect liturgical ending to our large-group pilgrimage to Israel and Italy.

Then it was back to the vaporetto, down the Grand Canal, across the lagoon, onto the bus, and on to the hotel on the mainland. We drove through several towns and villages on the way to the Hotel Chrystale. All of the communities were quite clean and affluent in appearance. We passed several villas that were actually quite elegant. Sabina told us that the level of living/income is higher in Northern Italy than in Rome. At the Hotel Chrystale we unloaded our own bags from the bus bays and checked in. Rooms were nice—not spacious, but clean. The bathroom actually held an easily accessible shower, not an impossibly high bathtub.

At 8:00 pm we gathered in the hotel dining room for our special *arrivaderci* final supper. It consisted of ensalada, rigatoni Bolognese, flank steak, roasted potatoes, peas, roasted peppers with onions, roasted zucchini, gelato, and of course, good regional red wine. By 9:00 we were in our room repacking for our return flight home in the morning.

The weather was fairly good all day long. The rain held off and the temperature was comfortable.

FRIDAY, JUNE 3—HOMEWARD BOUND—MAYBE?

We left a wake-up call for 5:30 am, did our final repacking, and did the checkout routine. The hotel staff prepared a simple breakfast of coffee, juice, cereal, and pastries for us. Once again we avoided the dreaded boxed breakfast!

We boarded the bus for the Venice airport—10 minutes or so away—said our goodbyes to Sabina and Rafaela our guides, received our boarding passes, passed through security, and waited to board the 11:35 KLM flight 9389 bound for Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Our flight was delayed for almost an hour on the tarmac (air traffic delay of some sort). While we waited, we found out from Diane Lanter that our parishioner Joan Young’s father who is Diane’s cousin passed away yesterday as did high school classmate and friend Mike Kish’s mother from Columbia, IL, so I guess we’ll have several funerals to

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attend as well as celebrate our 45th Wedding Anniversary on Sunday, Pat's 65th birthday on Monday, and grandson Connor's 5th birthday on Tuesday—in addition to recovering from jet lag! As our tour guide Sabina said dozens of times, “Don't worry! It'll be all right.”

We were fed by KLM on the way and then were treated to a trade show by the air crew. I couldn't imagine buying some of the high-priced merchandise, but some passengers evidently were willing to part with their euros. After our 1 hour delay in Venice and subsequent flight to Amsterdam, we landed at Schiepohl Airport at 2:00 (we gained an hour) but then were held on the apron of the airport for a gate from a late-departing flight. We will need to hurry to make connections for Detroit. The weather's extremely foggy and we heard that there was an air incident somewhere in Europe. Too late—we missed our flight home!

Schiepohl Airport is not an easy place to find one's way around. It's massive and the signage is not well placed. In addition, the airport shares its space with an enormous shopping mall—no kidding! We were sent to several destinations to book another flight home. Elfrinks were lucky to find 2 seats on a Delta flight that evening, but the rest of us were not as fortunate. Finally, we convinced KLM that we had not missed the flight—the flight had missed us, so they agreed to spring for a hotel for the night, supper and breakfast, and a flight home early the next morning.

SATURDAY, JUNE 4—BONUS DAY IN AMSTERDAM?

We spent the night near the airport outside of Amsterdam because our flight home left before we could run to the gate. KLM set us up with a hotel room along with supper buffet and a light breakfast. When we finally arrived at the hotel at 6:45 pm, we checked in and joined the other deacon couples at the bar for drinks and dinner. It was actually quite tasty, and we received a complimentary glass of wine with the meal.

Pat and I checked into Room 222 to find that it should have been Room 666 for the luck we had. We had packed our CPAP extension cords in our luggage which was held by security at the airport, so we had to beg a power strip from the front desk. Luckily Pat had put our foreign power adaptors in with the machines which we carried on the plane with us. We found that the plumbing in the bathroom was clogged, so the sink would not drain. Half the lights in the room were burned out, so the bathroom and the bedroom were extremely dim. Finally, the A/C didn't work, so we had a “maintenance man” come up at 9:00, but he informed us that he wasn't a “techno.” So, at 10:00 we asked to switch rooms so that we could shower, go to bed, and get a few hours of sleep. We had packed toiletries in our suitcases which were still at the

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airport, so KLM gifted us with emergency packs that had a toothbrush & paste, a razor & shaving cream, deodorant, a hairbrush (Are you kidding—I'm nearly bald!), even a t-shirt & a pair of black socks. I was wearing shorts, a golf shirt, and tennis with white socks—yesterday's clothes, but I don't know anyone else except my wife and the Fridleys, so we all smell the same and look a bit ruffled.

We left a wake-up call for 4:30 am, ate a quick bowl of cereal, drank a cup of coffee, and caught the airport shuttle at 5:15. We arrived at Schiepohl Airport at 5:45 and it took over an hour to find the correct departure gate. There are some signs, but no one to tell a person where to go. Pat texted the Lanters, Mitchells, and Helfriches to arrive early for their flight at 10:00. Schiepohl is HUGE and it's easy to lose your way.

We were booked on a Delta flight to Atlanta that connected late Saturday afternoon to Lambert Airport in St. Louis. From St. Louis we'll take the MetroLink to SWIC station and our son Nick will pick us up to take us home. Hopefully we'll get home early enough tonight to get some rest so that we can celebrate our 45th Wedding Anniversary tomorrow (Sunday, June 5) in peace.

The food on the Delta flight was great! Sleep was not a commodity. I passed most of the time reading a novel I had brought along as well as playing trivia games on the airline network. We arrived in Atlanta at 11:30 am EDT. It took 2 hours to clear customs, passport control, and security! Airport personnel saw Pat using her cane, so they insisted in giving her a wheelchair. However TSA was a nightmare. We've never experienced ruder, nastier, less-willing-to-communicate-or-to-help personnel.

We arrived with Fridleys in Atlanta but became separated. We were reunited with them 2 hours after landing and then 2 hours after that with the Lanters, Mitchells, and Helfriches just in time to board our flight to St. Louis. Delta boarded Pat and me first because she rode in a wheelchair. The flight to St. Louis took only 1 ½ hours and was uneventful. We landed at 6:30 pm, retrieved our luggage, and boarded MetroLink for the 1 ½ hour ride to Belleville. Our son Nick, daughter-in-law Kim, and granddaughters Becca and Kenzie met us at MetroLink with flowers and a cute handmade "Welcome Home" sign. Nick offered to drive us home in our car which he had brought. After hugs and kisses, we decided to drive ourselves home to Germantown.

Our 15-day (+1 bonus day) pilgrimage of a lifetime had come to a conclusion. It was a trip we will never forget! At our ages, it's probably a trip we'll never be able to repeat. What an incredible journey that will keep us reminiscing and sharing for the rest of our lives! We arrived home, unpacked the essentials, and fell exhausted into bed to sleep for 12 hours. We missed Mass at St. Boniface, so we attended 5:00 Mass at Holy Trinity in Fairview

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Heights and then celebrated our 45th Wedding Anniversary at Outback Steakhouse. Quite an adventure from beginning to end!