



By reference to the calendar the Patrons of the Arts in the Vatican Museum's Mediterranean Cruise and Rome visit of May 1 - May 10, 2015 took place over a 10 day period. However, during that time many of the places we visited had us figuratively traveling from the present back over three millenniums of church history, art and architecture.

Starting in Barcelona, Spain we had a tour of the Basilica of the Sagrada Familia ["Holy Family"] whose now iconic towers have come to represent the city of Barcelona. Under construction since 1882 and primarily designed by Antoni Gaudi the Basilica is still under construction with a target completion date of 2026. We were blessed to have a guided tour given by a local priest who has been stationed in the parish next to the cathedral for the past 15 years and was intimately familiar with the elaborate statuary portrayed on the outside of the cathedral as well as Gaudi's symbolic architectural messages on the inside.

From Barcelona we sailed to St. Tropez, France where we stepped back nearly a thousand years while touring the grounds of Le Thoronet Abbey, a Cistercian monastery in Provence built in 1146 in the Romanesque style and still remarkably preserved.

Our travel back through the millenniums was then completed in Rome where we visited the Basilica of the Holy Cross with the Holy Stairs (brought back from Jerusalem by St. Helena and, according to Catholic Tradition, are the stairs which once led to the praetorium of Pontius Pilate and were climbed by Jesus during His Passion) and the Chapel of St. Lorenzo which was the center of the Church prior to when St. Peter's and the Vatican were built. This was then followed with a tour of the St. John Lateran's Basilica, the site of the very first Christian Church built on land given to the Christians by Emperor Constantine in 313 AD.

Of course, we did not visit these sites as wandering pilgrims. We were accompanied and guided by Dr. Elizabeth Lev who, as the Professor of Art History at Duquesne University's Rome campus, at each stop provided a seemingly endless fountain of fascinating background information.

In fact, in-between these stops Dr. Lev also treated us with additional on-board lectures on Matisse, Van Gogh, Chagall and Fr. Marie-Alain Couturier as well as on a separate tour to visit the Matisse-inspired Rosaire Chapel in Vence, just north on Monte Carlo.

While in Rome the Patrons were also able to visit the exquisitely beautiful Papal Gardens at Castel Gandolfo, the Papal summer residence, and had the opportunity to attend Mass at the Church of St. Tommaso da Villanova where the Pope would say Mass. In fact, Fr. Mark Haydu, LC remarked on the privilege of celebrating the Mass for us wearing the very same vestments that had been worn by St. John Paul II for many years.

Of course, no trip to Rome would be complete without the opportunity afforded to Patrons of the Arts in the Vatican Museums for special access to the Vatican Museums. This trip was no exception. One visit included a tour of the Tapestry restoration labs below the Vatican Museum where restoration projects are on-going. The Michigan Chapter members, in particular, were treated to an up-close-and-personal examination of the Raphael tapestry that is the focus of its current fundraising efforts to restore.

Finally, the after-hours tour of the Vatican Museum was a highlight all on its own. Perhaps only those who remember what it was like, prior to becoming a Patrons member, to visit the Vatican Museums with crowds of people can fully appreciate the privilege of being lecture-guided through the Raphael rooms by Dr. Elizabeth Lev and then sitting in the serene quiet of the Sistine Chapel while Dr. Lev spoke at length pointing out things that were fresh and new to you despite this perhaps being far from your first visit.