



24th Week in Ordinary Time and Evangelii Gaudium Day-15 September 2024
Reflection by Mgr Daniel McHugh

“The cup that we bless is a communion with the blood of Christ; and the bread that we break is a communion with the body of the Lord”

(1 Cor 10:16)

This past week I have been on a long planned bespoke Pilgrimage “In the Footsteps of the Saints” in the North of Italy. In the main the group came from my former parish and we began planning it before the time Covid struck. We began in Bergamo, not far from Milan, at a small town Sotto il Monte, where Pope Saint John XXIII was born. He was the Pope who called the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and was an inspiration to me and other young students for the priesthood, especially those studying in Rome. He had many gifts, but especially that of openness to the wider world. He saw the Church as needing to open windows to let in fresh air! Above all he was concerned to reach out with the Gospel to a world that did not know Christ and His message for humanity. As young students in Rome we were there in October 1962 when the Council opened and Bishops came from all over the world. He was known as ‘good Pope John’ and radiated warmth and welcome to all. I recalled on Pilgrimage at a Mass in the Church where he was Baptised and celebrated his first Mass that he was a deeply spiritual man, traditional in his love of the Mass and Our Lady, and dedicated to Peace and Ecumenism.

Our Pilgrimage moved on to Concesio and Brescia, the birthplace of Pope St Paul VI, who is remembered mainly by most people for his document ‘Humanae Vitae’, and its teaching on birth control, but in fact he did so much to take forward the work of the Second Vatican Council after Pope St John died in 1963. It was this Pope who penned the Credo of the People of God, a complete and detailed profession of the Catholic Faith, so much needed at a time when the teaching of the Church was being questioned. I suggested we consider Pope St Paul VI as one who foresaw the outcome of separation of love and procreation in marriage, so leading him to present the idea of no contraception. We saw on our visit to Concesio the admiration of the community for him. In Brescia we celebrated Mass in the Cathedral where he was ordained and celebrated his “First Mass”.

In Verona, which is so famous for its beauty and Opera in the Arena di Virona we celebrated Mass at the tomb of St Zeno from the 4th Century. He was of African origin, probably Alexandria, and though not the first Bishop he is considered the founder of the Christian Faith in Verona because it was in his time and with his pastoral zeal that the Faith flourished. Pope St Gregory the Great, who sent St Augustine and his monks to

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England, wrote of his Confession of Faith and holiness of life. In times gone by there was a Benedictine Monastery where the Church of St Zeno is today, but Napoleon had destroyed it. This explained why Monsignor Ballarini the leader of the Parish of St Zeno is still known as “the Abbot” today. There is so much more to Verona than the story of Romeo and Juliet. We were inspired there by this great Saint’s Pastoral zeal all those centuries ago.

While staying at Verona we were able to travel to Padua and to imbibe the spirit of the great St Anthony who is also so much more than the Saint to turn to when you lose something. He was originally from Lisbon in Portugal and, inspired by the example of 5 Franciscans who died on the mission in Morocco, became a Franciscan himself. He ended up in Italy because of a shipwreck in Sicily. Anthony was known in his time for his preaching, his knowledge of scripture and his devotion to the poor and sick. He was much more a saint of lost ‘souls’ than of lost ‘items’. St Francis himself entrusted to him the theological education of the Friars, and within a year of his death he was declared a Saint. We were privileged to have Mass in a Chapel in the Basilica and had the opportunity to venerate his relics.

On the final day of our Pilgrimage we visited the great Basilica of St Mark in Venice where we celebrated Mass in the Chapel of St Theodore. Here we were able to reflect on St Mark’s witness to Jesus, especially in the writing of the Gospel which was impacted by the teaching of St Paul during his first missionary journey, and the witness of St Peter in Rome where Mark accompanied him too. It was in the great Basilica named after him that we were able to pray before his altar and relics.

This 24th Sunday of the Year the Church turns to St Mark’s Gospel for the famous identification of Jesus by Peter: he speaks for all the disciples when he says, “You are the Christ.” On our Pilgrimage we were very conscious of upcoming Jubilee Year 2025 The Year of Hope and Forgiveness and we were drawing inspiration for our own renewed witness to Our Lord from the witness of the different Saints we venerated. We had a special privilege on our journey to visit the unique Shrine of Our Lady of the Corona (Madonna della Corona) which goes back to about the year 1000 when hermits from St Zeno in Verona went to live in remote rocky caves in the region of Spiazzi. When we celebrated Mass there we asked Our Lady of Sorrows to stand alongside us in our renewal of witness to our Faith in the coming Holy Year. We were aware that it is especially in the Holy Eucharist that our thoughts and actions will be renewed.

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