



In the footsteps of Saint Augustine

By BISHOP FELIPE J. ESTÉVEZ

In honor of the Canonization of Blessed Popes John XXIII and John Paul II in tracing all the places Augustin had been before and after.

Our pilgrimage to Italy this past April began in Milan where St. Ambrose had baptized the young adult Augustin. It took us an entire day to simply visit the Duomo (the Cathedral), an architectural jewel completely done in marble. Ancient Milan boasts a culture, a life of faith worthy of admiration. Our group was particularly interested in tracing all the places Augustin had been before and after his conversion.

A foundation in Milan keeps custody of the world famous painting of the multi-talented Leonardo de Vinci's, *The Last Supper*. Standing in awe of this famous, world-renowned piece of art, I realized how altered the reproductions are from the original masterpiece that we know and display in our homes.

It was so fitting for us to visit the nearby city of Pavia where the most important reliquary of Augustin is kept by the Augustinian Fathers. There we listened to a very fine lecture given by our seminarian Briggs Hurley, a student at the North American Pontifical College who has a particular interest in the patron saint of our diocese.

Before leaving this particular area, we had the opportunity to renew our baptismal promises at the baptismal font in Duomo – the very place where St. Augustin was baptized.

We then continued to the city of Rome via Florence to experience and witness the canonization ceremony of blessed Popes John Paul II and John XXIII, presided by Pope Francis and with the prayerful presence of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. It was an amazing privilege to be there. Our pilgrims had the opportunity to join the multitudes of people getting into Rome, coming to the plaza of San Pedro to prepare in prayer in expectation of this historic event. At the same time, one could not help but notice how well the Romans are able to accommodate with ease and confidence the millions who would come to the city for this event.

The canonization Mass was blessed with the splendor of a shining day and a cool breeze. The light of the Easter octave filled the setting with grace. The huge plaza was filled to the brim with people from all nations. I was thrilled to be present and to hear the warm and gentle voice of Pope Francis leading the Mass. A tone of simplicity and surprising brevity characterized the entire ritual. In his very brief homily on this Divine Mercy Sunday, Pope Francis recognized that these two saints were animated by the Holy Spirit in the pristine renewal of the Church:

“Let us not forget that it is the saints who give direction and growth to the Church. In convening the Council, Saint John XXIII showed an exquisite openness to the Holy Spirit. He let himself be led and he was for the Church a pastor, a servant-leader, guided by the Holy Spirit. This was his great service to the Church; for this reason I like to think of him as the pope of openness to the Holy Spirit.

In his own service to the people of God, Saint John Paul II was the pope of the family. He himself once said that he wanted to be remembered as the pope of the family. I am particularly happy to point this out as we are in the process of journeying with families towards the Synod on the Family. It is surely a journey which, from his place in heaven, he guides and sustains.”

Wonderfully assisted by Father Andy Blaszkowski, pastor of St. Luke Parish in Middleburg, our pilgrimage then went on to Assisi, the medieval city per excellence where we prayed at the tombs of Saints Francis and Claire, returning then to Rome for our last day of the pilgrimage.

Our last Mass took place at the Basilica of St. Augustine, on the altar near the tomb of St. Monica. This mother, who had prayed to God with such persistence for the conversion of her lost son, came to realize that God cannot be outshone in generosity. Her prayer was heard but God outdid her desires in leading her son to become a remarkably holy bishop and an outstanding theologian. God is always greater and this axiom is especially revealed in his masterpieces in creation and above all in his creatures who excel in virtue and good deeds.

Our final day on pilgrimage happened to be on the liturgical feast of St. Catherine of Siena, the patroness of Italy, a genius in diplomacy, in theological insights and with a personality bigger than life. A group of us went to her tomb found in Plaza Minerva. We joined a long line of fervent young, consecrated and lay faithful honoring St. Catherine.

Our pilgrims represented well most of the regions of our diocese. We were blessed to be joined by Fathers Andy Blaszkowski, John Tetlow, Sal Di Fazio, Richard Pagano and Lam Nguyen and Deacon Larry Hart, who contributed to a remarkable experience of unity and joy.

Our pilgrimage revealed how interconnected faith is to culture. It's so rich to be Catholic, being able to relate to the rich communion of saints surrounded with such witnesses who are also our friends and our family of faith. 🕊