

Christmas in Rome

By Bernice Anning and Patricia Donald

Feeling the desire for a change from the usual British Christmas with the inevitable overeating, turkey whether you like it or not, and endless television, two of us decided to go with Pax Travel to Rome for the festive period. We found ourselves with a party of thirty or so in two very comfortable hotels near St Peter's. We were a mixed Roman Catholic and Anglican group, including two canons of the Church of England (one male and one female). Our tour guide, Ann, was also Anglican but very familiar with Rome and as cognizant of the workings of Italian transport, restaurants and Vatican administration as anyone could be expected to be. We wondered in advance what we could expect from the weather. Fortunately, we took warm clothes and dressed for winter, since despite a warm sun for some of the time, the temperatures were quite low, and on Christmas day it rained, hard.

We took the opportunity of seeing and again being impressed by the sites of ancient Rome, the Colosseum, the Forum and the Pantheon. Interspersed were visits to various churches such as, on our first day, the Church of Sts Cosmas and Damian with its beautiful sixth century mosaic. The names of these saints are familiar to those of us who remember the Latin Mass, and they remain in the optional list of saints in the first Eucharistic prayer of our present day Mass. After walking to the Capitoline

Hill, we visited the Church of Sta Maria d'Aracoeli, a fascinating church but memorable at Christmas time especially for the Santo Bambino, which the children love and apparently send letters to, rather like Santa Claus. We saw Santa himself that afternoon in the Christmas market of the Piazza Navona, and many Befanas – ugly little witches on broomsticks who bring children gifts on the vigil of Epiphany, from which the name derives. That evening after dinner, some of us took a taxi across Rome to enjoy a concert of opera excerpts in the Anglican church of All Saints.

Christmas Eve was also a very full day starting in the Pincio Gardens, and walking down to the Piazza del Popolo, the Spanish Steps and the Trevi Fountain. We went into a number of churches such as St Charles Borromeo on the Corso, St Andrea della Valle (the one in which the first act of Tosca is set) and Cardinal Cormac's titular church of Sta Maria sopra Minerva. In all the churches and basilicas (and for that matter in every hotel and restaurant) there was a Crib scene, all very charming and varied, depicting a number of different scenarios in addition to the central theme.

We had rather expected to be able to attend the Pope's celebration of Midnight Mass, but (we were told) the Vatican had been so inundated with requests for tickets this year that it had stopped issuing them. This meant a long queue and probably an unseemly scrum to get into St Peter's, so we opted for the nearest church to our hotel to celebrate our Saviour's birth. It was very satisfactory with a small music group not unlike ours at St Thomas' to support the singing. We did go to St Peter's on Christmas Day to attend a Mass celebrated by cardinals. Afterwards we waited in the piazza, along with a sea of umbrellas, for the Urbi et Orbi blessing from the Pope. Immediately afterwards we had to make our way to the restaurant booked for the main celebra-

Mouse Wisdom with a message for you How true is this?

A mouse looked through the crack in the wall to see the farmer and his wife open a package. "What food might this contain?" The mouse wondered - he was devastated to discover it was a mousetrap.

Retreating to the farmyard, the mouse proclaimed the warning. "There is a mousetrap in the house! There is a mousetrap in the house!"

The chicken clucked and scratched, raised her head and said, "Mr. Mouse, I can tell this is a grave concern to you, but it is of no consequence to me. I cannot be bothered by it."

The mouse turned to the pig and told him, "There is a mousetrap in the house! There is a mousetrap in the house!" The pig sympathized, but said, "I am so very sorry, Mr. Mouse, but there is nothing I can do

about it but pray. Be assured you are in my prayers."

The mouse turned to the cow and said "There is a mousetrap in the house! There is a mousetrap in the house!" The cow said, "Wow, Mr. Mouse. I'm sorry for you, but it's no skin off my nose."

So, the mouse returned to the house, head down and dejected, to face the farmer's mousetrap alone. That very night a sound was heard throughout the house – like the sound of a mousetrap catching its prey.

The farmer's wife rushed to see what was caught. In the darkness, she did not see it was a venomous snake whose tail the trap had caught. The snake bit the farmer's wife. The farmer rushed her to the hospital, and she returned home with a fever. Everyone knows you treat a fever with fresh chicken soup, so the farmer took his hatchet to the farmyard for the soup's main ingredient.

tory Christmas meal. As any kind of transport was very difficult on Christmas day, the two of us elected to walk it despite the rain, and consequently arrived well ahead of everybody else at the restaurant L'Eau Vive. It is run by a Belgian missionary Order, and we were informed, is a favourite place for Cardinals to entertain their friends. We were certainly well entertained, in addition to the beautiful meal (which surprisingly was turkey, not a roast but in a white wine sauce), with carol singing and a tableau of the Nativity.

The following day included a welcome coach trip out of Rome, along the Appian Way, through the Alban Hills to the Pope's summer residence at Castel Gandolfo and the little town of Frascati, with another splendid meal and plenty of wine. On our free day, we took the opportunity to visit the Sistine Chapel (after a very long queue) and then went into St Peter's again to pay our respects to the tombs of Pope John Paul II in the crypt and Pope John XXIII. On our last day, we had tickets for the regular Wednesday Papal Audience which took place in the Piazza. It was preceded by the rendering of the psalm from the Vespers of that day, Psalm 139, "Lord, you have searched me and know me", then Pope Benedict arrived and did a tour in the pope-mobile, looking, as was reported in the press, not altogether unlike Santa Claus in his bright red cloak and ermine-trimmed cap.

We returned that same Wednesday to snow in Britain. Alas, our attempts to get away from turkey and excessive eating had not succeeded. We had however seen a variety of crib-scenes instead of endless repeats on TV, and we had enjoyed an Italian Christmas which on reflection was no doubt just as much a mixture of the religious and secular as our English celebrations. It was a very enjoyable and refreshing experience, however, and heartily to be recommended if you feel the need to do something a little different for Christmas.

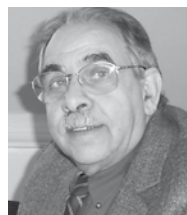
But his wife's sickness continued, so friends and neighbours came to sit with her around the clock. To feed them, the farmer butchered the pig.

The farmer's wife did not get well; she died. So many people came for her funeral, the farmer had the cow slaughtered to provide enough meat for all of them.

The mouse looked upon it all from his crack in the wall with great sadness. So, the next time you hear someone is facing a problem and think it doesn't concern you, remember – when one of us is threatened, we are all at risk. We are all involved in this journey called life. We must keep an eye out for one another and make an extra effort to encourage one another.

YOU ARE A VITAL THREAD IN ANOTHER PERSON'S TAPESTRY; OUR LIVES ARE WOVEN TOGETHER EACH THREAD INTERDEPENDANT ON THE OTHER.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK



This issue occurs during Paschaltide, therefore, we have devoted considerable space to the sacrament of baptism, the initiation of all to the Christian life. The Paschal candle prominent on the altar from its first lighting on the night of the Easter Vigil to Pentecost will be brought out again and again for baptisms throughout the year as a constant reminder that we are initiated into the baptism of the New Fire that sends us forth into the world to ignite all around us with the fire of God's love.

Review of the last quarter

Baptism is not just an initiation ceremony; it is a commissioning that requires from us pro-active participation in the world to further God's Kingdom. This so often means standing out from the crowd, demanding not only our own rights but also and more importantly, the same rights for others. We, in the past quarter, have been at the forefront of this latter necessity. Through our involvement with TELCO, a successful campaign in Docklands saw a major firm of accountants surrender to TELCO's demands for a living wage for its poorest paid workers, mainly migrants or immigrants. Over 200 parishioners gathered at a meeting to extract promises from those standing in the local elections of May 4th and St Thomas' was also present at a massive celebration on May 1st in Westminster Cathedral dedicated to making migrant workers feel at home in the Catholic Church of the UK.

A further campaign to see that every voting member of the House of Lords receives 100 letters encouraging them to vote against the Joffe Bill when it is debated on the 12th May was also mounted. There will be more on this in the next issue of 'In Touch' after the result of the debate is known, but in the meantime perhaps all those who had objections to the campaign might put their views in writing to the editor. If all who objected by email, phone call or in simply refusing a leaflet at the back of the church were to write, we would be able to fill the next issue with their letters alone. I threw out a similar challenge in the last issue and was delighted to have a letter giving another point of view on same sex couples having the same adoption rights as married couples. Those who have the courage to put their views in writing are to be admired for not only do they throw themselves open to challenge but they encourage others to do likewise.

Looking Forward

In a few days after writing this, the nation goes to vote in local elections. There is a real threat that the BNP has by subtle means and not a few downright lies increased its popularity. Christian leaders of all denominations are urging their congregations not to vote for this racist, right wing organisation.

In the January issue I suggested we bombard heaven with prayers calling for a solution to the increasing threat from Iran. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad continues his anti-Israeli rhetoric and Israel has launched the most sophisticated spy satellite ever to spy on Iran's nuclear development. Watch this dangerous space!

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