

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

The Detour

Why is it that the best journeys are often the ones you don't plan?

My wife and I once spent ten days on a bus rolling through Italy's Apennine Mountains, from Venice down to Rome and various places in between. We were on pilgrimage, visiting some of Italy's holy sites. It was an eye-ful, and it was exhausting—and it took some turns we didn't quite expect. One of those happened late one afternoon in Assisi, the hometown of St. Francis.

We had a couple hours free, and the priest, Fr. Chris, asked if anyone wanted to wander down the road from our hotel, to a nearby church, to pray the Stations of the Cross. A handful of us decided we were up for that, so we gathered in the hotel lobby at the appointed time and started down the hill, toward a small church called St. Peter's.

We thought the place would be empty. It wasn't. We rounded the corner and found dozens of Italians in evening gowns and tuxedos. Turned out, a wedding was about to begin.

Undaunted, Fr. Chris led us into the church, where a soprano had just launched into the opening strains of *Ave Maria*. We couldn't bring ourselves to leave, so we slid into a pew and listened. (A few wary Italians cast hard looks at the sweaty Americans sitting in the back—convinced, I'm sure, that we must have been from the groom's side of the family.) But the music! It was beautiful, sung as only an Italian can sing it—with a passion that left no doubt that these were the people who had invented Grand Opera.

We lingered a while longer, watching the bride arrive (in a Mercedes topped with a white ribbon and bow), before we regrouped to decide what to do. We figured there was another Catholic church just down the road—there always is in Italy—so we set out to find it. What we found, a few hundred yards away, was an old convent, with a massive wooden door that I managed to open with a tug.

We stepped inside—and into the Middle Ages. We were suddenly inside a chapel, where the nuns were chanting vespers.

They were Benedictines, perhaps twenty of them, wearing the habit and veil, and singing to God in Italian. As they sang, there was only one word I could clearly understand: "Maria." Mary. Just then, I realized that this particular day was the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. They were singing Mary's office. We sat for a few moments, savoring the psalms and the sweet voices, until the office ended, and the nuns left for the cloister.

We left, too, Fr. Chris leading the way out to the street, in search of another church. We found it just a few steps away—St. Mary's, the former cathedral of Assisi. And it was there, in one of old Assisi's oldest churches, where we finally caught our breath and prayed the Stations.

That afternoon, we had set out to walk to Calvary, but ended up walking in another direction—a direction that was guided every step, it seems, by the Mother of God, on one of her feast days. From the Ave Maria, to the church of St. Mary, she shared our journey.

"Life is like that," my wife later said. "You set out to do one thing, and find God has something else planned." Surely, no one understood that better than the Blessed Mother, whose own life took detours she never imagined.

I am grateful to the Mother of God for the earthly pilgrimage she took all those years ago, and for the way she redirected my own pilgrimage to places of unexpected beauty and grace.

A familiar cliché says that devil is in the details.

If so, then perhaps God is in the detours.

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