

Rome Oct - Nov 2014

The Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas

Background

My enthusiasm for this placement arose in part from my background. I was born and lived as a practising Roman Catholic until I acknowledged God's call to the priesthood in 2011. I had been worshipping for over thirty years with my Anglican husband in our village church, and we both suffered the pain of separate communion throughout our marriage. In February 2011 the path was made clear for me and I was formally received into the Anglican Communion on Palm Sunday 2011. My whole life has been ordered towards ecumenism and so, when the Rome placement was offered, I grasped it with both hands as a Spirit-inspired ecumenical opportunity!

For all that, or perhaps because of my past, I approached Rome with a little trepidation. Since 2011 I have experienced mixed reactions both to my vocation and to my new Anglican identity here in the UK. I was therefore keenly aware that this would undoubtedly be the case in Rome. I was also aware that growing together requires listening to the other, primarily to dispel the misapprehensions that exist on both sides of the divide. I had read Walter Kasper: "There is no ecumenism without conversion". So what would be my conversion process in Rome?

I went to Rome as part of my vocation to ecumenism - to *be*, to be a witness to the continuing activity of the Holy Spirit and to the gospel message that God is strong in and through our weakness.

The Community

The Lay Centre is the successor to the Ladies of Bethany's Foyer Unitas which used to be sited in Piazza Navona. Its role is to promote the lay vocation in the church and the world and to foster a rich ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, through hosting programs that welcome members of Christian denominations outside Roman Catholicism, and other diverse religious traditions.

The Lay Centre community is made up of students and staff from all over the world. It is great to have such a richness of cultural and religious traditions in one community. My colleagues came from countries as diverse as Brazil, Cyprus, Korea, Myanmar, Belarus, India, Canada, USA, China, Germany, Eire, Mexico and Honduras. I was the only student from England. The community is Roman Catholic but we included Orthodox (Greek, Russian & Syrian), Moslem, a Buddhist monk, a consecrated RC missionary, and myself as the sole Anglican representative of the Reformed tradition.

The essence of The Lay Centre is life in community, with communal meals at lunch and in the evening, and a weekly celebration together of the Mass, followed by a community evening on Wednesdays. We pray together at meals and at night, and share washing up duties in small groups. Hospitality is very important. During my stay we hosted Prof Paul Murray from Durham University, an authority on receptive ecumenism, and every week we hosted guest lecturers, one-off events - Marriage and the Family seminar, book launches - and weekly community evenings, which brought in people of different denominations/faiths and viewpoints.

The Lay Centre lives in a friendly co-existence with the Passionist Community whose monastery we share. They are a community of priests who follow the spirituality of St Paul of the Cross and who invited The Lay Centre to share their space. Their grounds are beautiful - an oasis of peace and tranquillity you wouldn't expect to find at a stone's throw from the Colosseum. The Passionists host silent retreats so we live respecting each other's space and boundaries in matters of dress and silence.

The Anglican Centre in Rome is another valuable community, sharing the Eucharist and lunch on Tuesdays. I was shown great kindness by the Director, Archbishop Sir David Moxon, and his team. There is frequent communication between The Lay Centre and Archbishop David: he is often there contributing to interreligious dialogue and is very keen for more women ordinands to come on placement. I think that the new Methodist minister, the Rev'd Tim McQuiban, who arrived in Rome this summer and who is a regular member of the Anglican Centre's Tuesday congregation, will also play an increasingly important role. I also met the Baptist minister who has served in Rome for many years.

All Saints Church on via Babuino is the place for regular Sunday Anglican communion; St Paul's within the Walls (which also runs a refugee centre) is the Episcopalian church. The congregations/communities overlap and move between each other and the Anglican Centre. Several of them come to The Lay Centre to the VPI lectures (see below) on Thursdays.

Study

I registered for four courses at the Angelicum, where lectures are in English. If I had been there for a semester or more it would have been useful from an academic point of view to take an intensive Italian course, of which there are many, and register for some lectures in Italian at the Gregorian. My choice of courses was somewhat ad hoc: I had been sent the link to the previous year's syllabus and consequently had to rethink my choices on the spur of the moment as I had arrived at the end of the registration period. In the event I enjoyed and learned from a somewhat mixed bag. It would be better if

future students could tailor their courses to dovetail with Common Awards modules so that appropriate credits could be transferred.

The Lay Centre hosts the Vincent Pallotti Institute (VPI) program of lectures, which for Autumn 2014 was: *Women making a Difference Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*. This series of lectures, on Thursday mornings, on Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, Therese of Lisieux, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Flannery O'Connor and Dorothy Day, was taken by visiting lecturers from the universities. Each lecture was followed by Mass for those attending. I much regret missing the final workshop - *Women and Men: Working together to share the gospel of joy today*, and the medieval lunch to follow, based on recipes from the time of Hildegard of Bingen!

Value/Benefits

- The primary benefit of the placement is **living in community at The Lay Centre**; this benefit is multiplied tenfold in that it is a truly *living* ecumenical community. Community living is grounded in a real spirituality which is Roman Catholic but flexible/sensitive enough to embrace other faiths. The retreat was a good example - we *all* went on (the voluntary) retreat - including the Buddhist monk and the Moslem.
- The **lectures, setting and people** inspired me to read around the classes and introduced me to a range of new authors. It was interesting to note how my mind went off at tangents, stimulated by something new to reflect differently on studies at home. Having the time and incentive to read around was an absolute luxury.
- **Living in Rome**: walking to lectures on a daily basis, through the Roman fora, past the Colosseum, past a church every hundred yards or so, named after a saint whose origins may be misty but who is still locally venerated, past the beggars, also every hundred yards or so and inevitably clinging to the church doorways; fighting through phalanxes of tourists who don't understand that you're running (literally!) late for a class! It is a different world. It brought home to me that time is even stranger than I had thought. Past, present and future exist in more of a continuum: the communion of saints came alive. Rome lives in this continuum of time as the "Eternal City".
- The Lay Centre is a good place to **learn about the Roman Church**, running talks, films and conversations for its students to find out more. It does not evangelise! It does not make the mistake of equating ecumenism with evangelisation which I experienced with one group of visitors from the USA! it is also an amazing opportunity to hear about other faiths from the inside, from believers, rather than from books or hearsay.

- An unexpected and unlooked for benefit to me was the informal **pastoral care** demanded of me. Most of the students were between 24-30 years of age, the same age as my sons! Foreseeing that this might be seen as a problem, I chatted it through with the Principal of The Lay Centre at the beginning of my stay, as I did not want to trespass over any boundaries. She was very relaxed and asked what I hoped for from the placement. I said that I expected in some way to be transformed by the experience and that I hoped others would also learn from my presence. That has happened. More than half of the current group of 24 students was new at the start of the semester - we bonded well as a group. Over time they would take me aside, individually, for chats and conversations, asking about my vocation, and talking about their lives. I didn't need to *do* anything; I just lived as one of them and shared their day to day lives. I was privileged to be placed in a position to give pastoral care in a completely new way, simply by living and being. I have grown and been immeasurably enriched by this experience.
- I have found **new friends** from all over the world who have **expanded my horizons** and my understanding. An unexpected pleasure has been learning the ukulele! The Principal of The Lay Centre is a contemporary with whom I feel a real bond. She started The Lay Centre in its current form in 1980, the year I was married. Our vocations are very different but the same. Ecumenism can be a lonely and difficult road for all of us but she negotiates the tightrope of ecumenism and women's ministry in a Roman landscape.
- Writing the **blog on CAVLE** was a new experience but became a useful discipline to focus my thoughts and reactions. I had never done anything like it before and rather enjoyed being able (I hope) to paint pictures with words.

Recommendations

- 6 weeks flew by. The **short period** meant that I could not take full part in the courses at the Angelicum - I registered as an auditing student only. It would be better to study for a whole semester, if not a year, and complete the courses to obtain credits towards Common Awards modules. A longer stay would have allowed more practical service: I regret not having the opportunity within the timescale to become involved with the Sant' Egidio community and the Missionaries of Charity, who are very close. The Lay Centre operates a food bank in conjunction with the clergy and religious locally at Navicella. At some point there might be an opportunity to structure a placement that incorporated a more **active community service** element with the academic study at the universities. The refugee centre at St Paul's within the Walls also uses volunteers and would be a possible community service placement.

- At The Lay Centre I stayed in a **guest room** which had an ensuite bathroom. Both rooms were large and comfortable. Most students live in rooms with a washbasin and share communal bathroom facilities. As an older student I appreciated the private plumbing!
- **Settling in might take longer** for someone with less grounding in Roman Catholicism. Rome is a hothouse! Roman Catholicism is "stronger" here than in England. Most students at the universities are in orders - monks, nuns, priests - even first year seminarians wear the collar! As a lay person one sticks out like a sore thumb! Young RCs from outside Europe are often stricter in their RC observance; whether this is a function of age or culture I'm not sure, but community living teaches all ages how to live peaceably together. Some people will find it harder to cope with the Mariology, the saints, the frequent Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. But at The Lay Centre others have to cope with culture clashes too - my Honduras missionary friend was initially horrified that there were so many priests *just* studying in Rome when there was such a need on the ground among the poor of Honduras. That is another reason why The Lay Centre is such a good place to be - in listening to each other we expand our horizons and learn so much about our different hopes and fears, and the prejudices we need to discard.
- Being **unable to receive the Sacrament** during community Mass is very painful, but it witnesses to a pain that is shared by the rest of The Lay Centre community and which *needs* to be seen by the RC community at large. We must make visible the brokenness of the body of Christ. The only time I felt totally rejected was at a weekend conference outside Rome of RC delegates from the mid west and deep south of USA. They seemed to be prejudiced against women, except insofar as they supported their husbands, and against anyone who wasn't RC. They equated ecumenism with evangelisation; for them I was an apostate. Not that they said so - they didn't speak to me - but they did keep making the point that those unfortunates who had been born into cultures where Roman Catholicism was unknown couldn't be blamed for whatever religion they had ! Ecumenism can be a heavy cross at times.
- On a practical note: take good **walking shoes** - students walk - and the cobbled streets are totally unsuited to any sort of heels! The food at The Lay Centre is plentiful and very good but if you rely on a car in England for transport you will probably lose weight, despite the pasta - it's a very healthy lifestyle! Also, dress is a little more **formal** at lectures and more so in churches. As 90% of the students are in clerical dress, jeans are slightly out of place!

- **Italian wi-fi is very unreliable** and the phone signal is intermittent. It was very difficult to access CAVLE and the Internet crashed totally about once a week. I was able to keep in touch with home on FaceTime most of the time, but we often lost the picture during conversation.

Thank you to everyone who has made this opportunity possible. It has been a blessing to me and I hope similar placements will be made available to many more women in the future.

Ruth Frampton

24/11/14