

Sebastian Harries – Report for Ministry Division on the Rome Placement

The Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas

September 20th 2015 – February 11th 2016

I am incredibly fortunate to have been able to undertake the Rome placement, and am very grateful to those people who made it possible. It was one of the most important aspects of my entire training – I matured considerably in my five months there and learned a huge amount. I would thoroughly recommend it to other ordinands and hope that many more people could have the opportunity to go.

1. a) Community

The Lay Centre community is diverse and vibrant because of its international, ecumenical, and interfaith nature. The centre acts as a home for lay students to study at the pontifical universities and we had twenty resident members living on site who hailed from different countries and from different religious backgrounds. The director of the centre, Donna Orsuto, lives in the community and is a lecturer in spirituality at the Gregorian and Angelicum universities. Most of the students were studying theology or interreligious dialogue, but some were subjects such as art history and social sciences. Some were living in the community just for a semester whereas others lived there for several years - it depended on their particular academic programme.

The Roman Catholics were the largest religious denomination represented at the Lay Centre and they made up half the community: five from the USA, two from Italy, one from Brazil, one from Canada/Korea, and one from Mozambique. The other denominations and faith traditions consisted of two Greek orthodox (one from Greece and one from Cyprus), a Copt from Egypt, a Calvinist (female) from Hungary who was training to be a pastor; a Unitarian from Canada; and two Sunni Muslims, one from Indonesia and one from Germany but of Turkish descent. The week I departed a Buddhist monk and a Jewish scholar joined the community.

Students were studying for a variety of reasons – most individuals were independently undertaking further study in an area of interest - they were funding themselves or had applied for scholarships. Some were there because obtaining a degree from a Pontifical University would open doors for them in the Roman Catholic teaching world. Others had been sent for further study by their dioceses and others were there on specific programmes such as the Vatican funded *Nostra Aetate* scholarship. A sizable number were on the *Russel Berrie* fellowship for interreligious dialogue.

Over the course of the semester we were joined by others staying in the centre for sabbaticals, research, finishing off their doctorates etc who participated fully in community life. It was fascinating being able to talk with and learn from these, particularly a religious sister from the US and a Catholic professor of Islamic studies from CTU in Chicago. The office staff, the cooks and the cleaners were also very much a part of the community as were various friends of The Lay Centre, both living in Rome and also abroad, who regularly came to visit. The Lay Centre really did feel like a big family: people looked out for one another, were very supportive and there was much stimulating conversation, but we also had many lively debates surrounding our differences.

Community life centred round our meals together, the weekly community night, excursions to religious and cultural sites (both within Rome and further afield), talks and seminars in the Lay Centre, and the classes we shared at the Pontifical universities. At the start of year we had a weekend retreat which was led by a Jesuit priest with a long standing connection with the centre. It was particularly good for forming bonds before classes got under way and we all got swept up in the bustle of lectures. The Jesuit priest also acts as the closest thing the community has to a chaplain and came to the centre regularly throughout the semester – I could have contacted him for pastoral concerns if I had needed to.

An important part of community life was practical work which was done in teams: a weekly shift doing washing up duty and cleaning and tidying the common areas (there were also professional cleaners who did the bulk of the cleaning). Everyone had a community job of some kind, such as being a sacristan, a chapel musician, guest welcome team. This really helped the sense of community deepen as it provided practical opportunities for us to serve one another. We also took it in turns to go shopping for a local food bank and take the food to the local church for distribution.

A unique feature of the Lay Centre was the many interesting guest speakers they invited: there was a regular Thursday lecture series and there was normally a guest speaker at weekly Wednesday evening community night. Speakers were usually of some significance in the world of the Vatican but Donna also invited very interesting people to the Lay Centre for an informal chat over a meal. I learned a huge amount from talking to these people and over the course of my time there I met Archbishop Paul Gallagher – the Vatican Secretary of State; Monsignor Marini – the head of liturgy for the Pope; the head of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Interreligious Dialogue; a priest placed in charge of investigating the abuse scandal, and the heads of numerous religious orders who had their mother houses in Rome. There were also frequent visits to the Lay Centre by various ambassadors to the Holy See and one occasion we hosted a lunch for all the ambassadors to discuss peace building – this was quite a momentous occasion.

Members of the community regularly blogged about our activities and one of my posts can be found [here](#):

<https://laycentreblogger.wordpress.com/2016/01/29/christians-called-to-glorify-god-with-one-voice/>

b) Study

I enrolled for nine courses, most ran for the whole semester but some were intensive courses. My aim was to take modules that gave me an idea of the sort of theology that Roman Catholic Seminarians and religious studied, to learn about ecumenism and interfaith dialogue, and to take modules that seemed very different from ones that are on offer at theological colleges. I took eight modules at Angelicum (The Pontifical University of Thomas Aquinas, run by the Dominican order) which were:

The History of the Ecumenical Movement

Grace and Deification in the Western Fathers of the First Three Centuries of Christianity

Spiritual Theology

The Lived Theology of Catherine of Sienna

Fundamental Theology – the nature of revelation and the development of doctrine

The Catholic Epistles

The Psalms and Wisdom Books of the Old Testament

The Problem of Evil in the Hebrew Bible (this was taught by a rabbi)

I also took one module taken at the Pontifical Gregorian University (run by Jesuits)

The Sacrifice of Isaac in the Eyes of the Rabbis – rabbinic struggles with monotheistic violence (this was also taught by a rabbi)

There are a huge number of classes available to study, but the teaching can be variable in quality. Fortunately Donna could recommend the better classes and she also put me in touch with students who could advise which teachers were good, and which were to be avoided! The best courses I studied were taught by Rabbis and they set us reading and the classes were more like as seminars, with much debate and discussion. A couple of my other classes set general background reading, but others required little or nothing beyond the ability to write down what the lecturer was saying! For two papers the lecturers even gave us the script they were reading from – I had been advised not to take these ones but I had wanted to experience the ‘old fashioned’ dictatorial way of teaching! Donna had recommended that I just registered for six classes in order to allow enough time to make the most of the other things Rome has to offer, such as volunteering with religious communities. In hindsight I should have listened to her as the number of hours I spent in the lecture rooms was higher perhaps a little higher than I’d have liked,

but I felt I got a good sense of what the Italian/Pontifical University system was like from the number I signed up to!

I had planned to take the exams, but ended up not doing so for a number of reasons: I had not realised that one has to register for exams midway through the semester and I thus missed the registration deadline at the Gregorian. When I spoke to some of the professors at the Angelicum they said there was little point sitting them if it wasn't counting for a formal degree, and other professors had scheduled their exams for times I couldn't manage. There is not a formal timetable for exams, the professors just ask the class and try and come to a consensus for a good time, or send a piece of paper round the class for people to sign up for a time! Most of the assessment is done by a ten minute oral exam though, though there are some hour long written papers. Students tend only to be examined on material covered in the lectures – no supplementary reading is required unless set over the course of the semester. I got the impression that independent thinking was not required, more a regurgitation of the facts learned over the semester.

2. Ecumenical issues that arose

Participating in the Eucharist was probably the main point of ecumenical division at the Lay Centre, but because there were a number of us who could not receive (the Orthodox, the Copt, the Calvinist, the Unitarian, and of course the non-Christians) I did not feel isolated or find it problematic – in some ways it was a helpful reminder that unity has not been reached yet. I was encouraged to participate in leading the liturgy where possible – doing music, readings etc. I was very grateful to have the Tuesday Eucharist at the Anglican Centre and the option to go to All Saints' and St Paul's on a Sunday (and midweek) if need be. I often opted to go to places I could not receive on a Sunday, because I wanted to experience the breadth of the different churches in Rome.

At the Lay Centre we said Night Prayer on every weekday in Italian. During Advent, Donna and I prayed the Divine Office together in English each morning as an ecumenical gesture. Besides that there was little ecumenical prayer praying the offices, mainly because of the diversity of the community, but I regularly visited religious communities in the neighbourhood to pray the offices with them (there's no shortage in Rome!): I was made particularly welcome by the Crosiers at St George in Velabro, which was Cardinal Newman's church.

I was welcomed with open arms at the VEC, and made some very good friends there, though my friends told me that had I been staying there I might have been given a tough time by some of the younger seminarians who would have wanted to convert me! Perhaps the most alienating experience I had was attending martyrs day and being offered the opportunity to venerate the relic of a priest killed by Anglicans – an offer I declined! On another occasion at the VEC a couple of American lay members in the

congregation who made barbed remarks to me about the persecution of the Catholics by the Anglicans: while I felt uncomfortable with this seemingly tribal attitude, the day did help me witness the pain of our divisions and the killings in the past that leave us still wounded today – I felt the shame from the how different Christian denominations have behaved to one another in the past, but it also felt very real and pertinent that people really were prepared to die for their convictions. Thus I realised that in our quest for unity today – we cannot just brush the past tensions under the carpet when the wounds are still open.

The teaching method at the Pontifical Universities was an ecumenical education because in some of my classes it was clear that students were meant to learn the dogma of the Roman Catholic faith without questioning it: students were there to remember and regurgitate rather than critically engage. One lecturer seemed unaware that there were students from other denominations in his class, and proceeded to teach why Luther and the Protestants were wrong and there could be no deviation from the faith! Another class on fundamental theology attempted iron out contradictions in Church teaching particularly pre/post Vatican II, but the professor thought very highly of Anglican scholars. In my class on ecumenism, a number of students openly criticised the Anglican Church over the ordination of women and inclusive attitudes to homosexuality and even the lecturer joined in to agree with them. However, in this same class the lecturer taught about on the positive contributions that the Anglicans had made to the Ecumenical movement and I actually learned a lot about the Anglican Church I did not know.

Much of the most interesting ecumenical developments occurred during conversations within the Lay Centre community and also at the Anglican Centre, and it was in these that I learned a lot about the similarities and differences between the denominations. I formed good links with the Methodist Church in Rome, and Tim MacQuiban made me very welcome – I also attended the meetings of all the English speaking churches in Rome and thus met Baptists, Lutherans, Pentecostals etc. At the Lay Centre the students were fascinated by the Anglican Church and kept asking me questions about Anglican teachings on women priests, priests marrying, the real presence and the saints and I felt I had a real duty and opportunity to fly the Anglican flag!

3. Key points of learning

The things I learned most about were the culture and history of the Roman Catholic Church, and the development of Christianity in the west. This came from being immersed in a different culture: one gets a sense of a universal Church in Rome from seeing and meeting the Christians from all over the world – this was particularly noticeable at the papal audiences. The structure of the Roman Church is very formal, with hierarchies to be respected, and high levels of diplomacy were required.

Donna encouraged me to see the city of Rome as my classroom and I learned a huge amount about the history of our faith just from visiting the Roman remains, the sites of the early churches, the galleries of religious art, and seeing the architecture of the many churches. It was good to make connections from what I had learned from books with the actual physical location. I visited well over a hundred churches in my time there, and learned much by just from the art and architecture and praying in them. Some of the most important sites for my learning were the sites of the first house churches (in Trastevere - outside the then city of Rome), the tombs of St Peter and St Paul and the sites of their imprisonments and martyrdoms, the development of churches being built over Roman houses etc. There are also a huge number of religious orders in Rome, and getting to know some of the people from these gave me greater understanding of different Christian communities and their charisms.

Attending various papal events and just being in the presence of the current Pope taught me much about both the Roman Catholic Church and the common Christian life. The environment of Pontifical Universities was also a cultural education in itself: in most of my classes ninety-percent of the class were in a habit or dog collar and the teachers were usually in a habit. Seminarians and religious congregated in large groups from their respective orders and houses, but they were very welcoming to me and I had some very good conversations in the breaks between classes. It was also fascinating to experience Christians from all over the world on a daily basis, and learn about the cultural differences and how they relate to their common faith.

The two Muslim students set up a scriptural reasoning group at the Lay Centre, and I learned much from this. My visits to the VEC and forming close friendships with the seminarians helped me get much more acculturated to the practices of the RC Church - witnessing things first hand and being able to discuss things in depth is very different from just reading about them!

4. Creative issues, events, and any particular difficulties

A particular creative highlight for me was the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity – in Rome this really is quite a significant event because nearly all of the major denominations has a base in Rome. There were several services on every day of the week which culminated with Vespers with the Pope. I was asked to create a service for the Lay Centre and the Centro Pro Unione with Bishop N.T Wright as a guest speaker. For this I managed to form an ecumenical choir to sing Anglican chant. An excerpt of the event can be seen here: <https://vimeo.com/152731617?ref=tw-share>

Being in Rome for the synod on the family and the start of the Jubilee of Mercy was a particularly highlight as there was extra papal activity for these: I attended several papal masses, including a Canonisation Mass, and also a seminar marking the 50th Anniversary of the Synod from Vatican II.

One of the personal challenges I faced was having to deeply examine my Anglican identity when those around me were not Anglican. I found it hard to be in an environment where ordination of women was not the norm (though some people at the Lay Centre were evidently in favour of it). Difficulties often arose in the community purely because of language and cultural barriers and this was very eye opening, particularly where dialogue us concerned. However, one of my inter-cultural and ecumenical highlights was playing football weekly with the Lay Centre and the Passionist Fathers – we couldn't all understand each other, but we could play together!

Being in Rome gave me some very valuable perspective on my Ecumenical awareness, and my training at Westcott, and the nature of Anglican training (realising we perhaps attempt to cram in to two years what seminarians do in seven!).

5. Practical and financial issues

My main practical consideration is that I would have got much more out of the experience if I had been better organised and learned Italian language by doing a decent course before arriving in Rome (this was something I should have planned that into the summer vacation). The Lay Centre offers a month long language and cultural programme in September called *Bongiourno Roma* which I would recommend. I would also recommend having Italian lesson while in Rome - I did look for weekly courses but these clashed with lectures or the Anglican Centre Eucharist, and the cost of private tuition was prohibitively high.

Everything was in order financially and I was grateful to have the money to make the most of the sites and museums in Rome. Most things are relatively reasonably priced - food and drink is not cheap, but is by no means expensive and I rarely had to eat out. The food and the accommodation at the Lay Centre are excellent. Train travel outside of Rome is cheap if booked in advance, very expensive if not!

Registering for anything in Rome can be a long and laborious task, and I found this the case at the Pontifical Universities where the administration is chaotic. Communication tended to be done by putting notices on a notice board or by word of mouth and I kept being told given contradicting by different people (sometimes the same people!). It is important to be aware of the deadline for registration and payment at the start of the semester and for the exams, but there should be people at the colleges who can help. One needs to be aware of how one registers as a student: either as an auditing student (where you can only take four courses and they will not count for credit) or as guest student (where you can take as many courses as you want and can opt whether they will count for credit), but is it worth checking this information as mine here may not be accurate.

6. Conclusions and comments to aid successors

My greatest regret was not doing any volunteering with local communities in Rome, though this was not for want of trying. The Joe Nafuma refugee centre at St Paul's within the Walls is an excellent centre but it was oversubscribed for volunteers, and other communities such as St Egidio, were better set up for people with a good command of Italian. But there are many others, such as the Sisters of Charity, and I'd really recommend getting involved. As a Jesuit said to me, there are two sides of Rome and we should see both: the pomp of the Vatican and the nitty-gritty of the religious groups who serve the poor.

I would thoroughly recommend the Lay Centre as a community but I realise that is not to everyone would enjoy it as much as I did - it is perhaps more informal and relaxed than the VEC. The centre could easily accommodate a married couple (possibly plus a child!). One needs to be aware that it does not have the rhythm of prayer of a seminary and the days can thus be quite unstructured compared with theological college. The Centre is a very open and progressive place regarding theology and ecumenism, but could well be just as conservative as many communities within the Roman Catholic Church concerning sexual orientation. It might not be easy to be openly gay because of some of the 'traditional' attitudes of some of the fellow students.

I was very glad to spend a full semester in Rome, but if ordinands could only stay until Christmas (or even shorter), then that would still be a very worth-while placement. Should there be a need to fit in with the Common Awards, I would like to think that there is a sufficient range of courses at the Pontifical Universities to cover teaching on the Common Awards, and that the being registered for a Common Award course should not prevent people from going.

Overall, the placement has given me a greater knowledge of our faith, a real sense of pain at Christian division, and I have become much more realistic and better informed about the current ecumenical climate. I left Rome feeling very hopeful and with a huge desire to work for Christian unity. Thank you to all those who gave me this opportunity.