

The first week of July 2014 saw the first ever St Mellitus College trip to Rome. The 'ecumenical pilgrimage,' arranged by the College, the Anglican Centre in Rome, and Ministry Division for full-time and part-time Ordinands from our London and Chelmsford sites, was an inspiring and challenging mixture of academic, historical, theological, and spiritual input and insights.

Our accommodation, the monastery of San Gregorio, from where St Mellitus was sent to London as a missionary some fourteen hundred years ago, was not just a great place for our Ordinands to grow in friendship and love, nor was it just a great place to be on the receiving end of wonderful Benedictine hospitality (the food was wonderful, the wine flowed, and the simple Gregorian chant of the Divine Office was sublime), but the monastery of Saint Gregory was much more than just that to us. It felt, almost, like a place of coming home, the completion of a millennium-and-a-half long circle, and in some small way the fruits of St Mellitus' original missionary work.

Reflecting on the trip, one of our full-time ordinands wrote:

The moment I realised the St Mellitus trip to Rome was going to be something special was as we pulled up in our taxis to the imposing white stone steps of San Gregorio monastery. What a privilege to stay somewhere right in the middle of Rome, steeped in so much history. Our week was packed with activities, community and great food. One guide described Rome to us as a 'huge lasagne of history'. This is a good way to think of it - in Rome, you are walking on layers, centuries, millennia of history. The Roman obsession with archaeology and preservation of that history allowed us to walk through the centuries as we descended into the earth below the church of San Clemente. Under the imposing church is another church, and under that is a Roman villa and a temple to Mithras. They have even left the hole where the archaeologist priest discovered the church underneath the church. Later we experienced the rather jarring contrast between the simple grave of St Peter and the opulence of St Peter's basilica. Staff at the Anglican Centre agreed that the scale of tourism in this city can be overwhelming. The task of the Church is to turn those tourists into pilgrims. I had a couple of particular pilgrim moments in Rome. The first was on our walk back from the Catacombs of San Callixtus when we realised that the beautiful, villa lined road we were walking on was the Appian Way mentioned by Paul in Acts 28. And the second was in the underground place in which Paul may have been under house arrest in the Via Lata. In this simple set of rooms adorned only with Paul's comments about being in chains for the gospel, we prayed for freedom for those in chains for their faith. In the charged silence of that place I prayed in a language I didn't understand. I prayed in tongues for the first time in Paul's prison! This study week has left me with much to reflect on. It has also left me feeling closer to my college community, closer to the tangible history of our faith and closer to God.

One of our part-time, Tuesday evening students reflected:

It was an extraordinary trip, rewarding in so many different ways. Getting to know properly fellow ordinands from the various St Mellitus centres. Sharing in the life, worship and fellowship of our host monastery, S Gregorio al Celio. Coming to know, through physical history, the Roman imperial context in which Christianity was born. Being reminded, not least through the tombs of SS Peter and Paul, that our faith is not a disconnected spiritualism but an incarnational faith rooted in particular people in a particular place and time. Standing in the place where Paul, in chains, wrote some of the Epistles we revere as Holy Scripture. Looking in awe around the building whose opulence, expense and funding mechanism was in no small way a trigger for the Reformation. Approaching the Lord's

table with Christians from around the world through liturgy whose words we didn't understand but whose meaning was palpably the same worship of the same Christ. Meeting those working from either side of the divide for reconciliation between the Anglican and Roman communions. And, a highlight for many of us, sitting on the floor with a deeply spiritual woman who, like Mary, answered in obedience when God called her, from her father's Hampshire vicarage to the service of the poorest of the poor. It will take time yet to assimilate the experience fully, but it's already clear that it was transformational.

For myself, as a missiologist who is interested not just in the practical aspects of mission, but also the history of Christian missions, it was a profound moment for me to stand on our last day at the doors of Saint Gregory's monastery, with a monument next to us listing the names of those fourteen monks sent out as missionaries back in 596AD, and to consider our own sent-ness and calling to mission. Had I a marker pen on me, and had been of a more mischievous disposition, perhaps I would have been tempted to write the names of the fourteen Ordinands and three staff members who had taken part in the pilgrimage below those of Augustine, Mellitus, Paulinus, Laurentius, and Justus. Well, perhaps not – but I was tempted. To sense our own place amongst that great cloud of witnesses was enough.

And so, as we settle back in to the 'normal life' of theological education and training for ministry in the Church of England, we carry back from Rome and hold with us a deeper of connectedness with the past, a wider embrace of the universal church, a renewed passion for mission, aching feet, full stomachs, and deep sense of gratitude to all those who sponsored, organised, facilitated, hosted and blessed us on our St Mellitus ecumenical pilgrimage 2014.