



Pope Francis greets SJV seminarian Nick Ahrens at the Vatican.

Surrounded by Holiness: An Update from Rome

by Margaret Johnson

A semester in Rome is an opportunity unlike any other for the SJV seminarians. Last fall, nine men took advantage of this extraordinary gift to live and learn in the center of the Catholic Church. In hindsight, they are deeply grateful for the experience as Italy and the world changed so rapidly this spring in response to COVID-19.

Residing at the beautiful Pontifical Irish College, just a stone's throw from the Colosseum, the seminarians flourished under the leadership of Msgr. Aloysius Callaghan, SJV spiritual director and rector emeritus of The Saint Paul Seminary. For four months, they admired the beauty of Rome and strengthened their prayer lives within the heart of the Universal Church.

The SJV seminarians have lived at the Irish College during their semesters abroad since 2016. Seminarians from Ireland and various countries around the world also make up this community of prayer.

“There were seminarians and priests from more than 50 dioceses, including Iran and Russia,” said Chris Yanta, a senior from the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis. “We learned about the Church in their countries, the struggles that it is facing, and the good things that are happening. It gives me a deeper perspective.”

Before the seminarians moved into their temporary residence, they trekked across the Continent for a few weeks. Starting with the

Pilgrimage of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, the “Camino” was a retreat and time to bond before a busy semester. The men then split into smaller groups and traveled throughout Europe.

Once settled in Rome, the seminarians were allowed more freedom than is typical on campus. They still began each day with prayer, attended classes, and ate every meal together. The difference is that they didn’t have a communal holy hour. Instead, they committed to time in front of the Blessed Sacrament by themselves each day. This gave them the chance to be formed by the Rome experience. Each evening, they came together for Mass with the entire Irish College community.

Yanta described this flexible schedule as a blessing. “It cultivated a deeper desire to pray when it came from my own will. It was good to build habits first at SJV then really practice them on my own,” he said.

For Nick Ahrens from the Diocese of Sioux Falls, witnessing the Universal Church made an impact on his formation: “Watching Italians and Irish saying the same Mass, seeing collars and habits everywhere, and being able to pray in different churches around the city was inspiring. It was hard not to have a strict timeline, but it demanded more responsibility and maturity from me.”

The Rome experience also made Ahrens reflective and thankful for what he has at home. “When I saw a beautiful but empty church, I would think about the beauty that we have in America. Youth ministry programs are a great example. When I see a kid meet Jesus for the first time at a summer camp, that’s more beautiful than any church building.”

Yanta took advantage of the Universal Church that surrounded him. “It is really cool being in Rome with so many priests and religious and seeing their joy. I will try to bring it back with me.”

One of the biggest blessings for the seminarians last semester was having Msgr. Callaghan as a spiritual director. With his deep knowledge of Rome, he was an insightful leader. And, with his quick Irish wit, Monsignor fondly referred to the nine men as his “baseball team,” each member with his own nickname. In return, the men called their coach “Don Luigi.”

Together, the nine seminarians served the poor with the Missionaries of Charity, served a Mass of Thanksgiving for the canonization of St. John Henry Newman, and attended Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve at St. Peter’s. Weekend excursions to Luca and Assisi were highlights outside of the city. The semester ended with an experience they will never forget: a meeting with Pope Francis at the Vatican.

Fourteen men who were in Rome for spring semester returned to the United States in early March due to concerns surrounding the outbreak of Coronavirus. We pray they will return to Rome one day to be surrounded by holiness.



SJV seminarians “do what the Romans do” and walk the streets of the ancient city.