

spain-2007-03.txt, Ralph Abraham, March 18, 2007

ROME

*** Friday, February 23, 2007. Arrived from New York mid afternoon at my hotel near the Piazza Navona, after a brief stop at the apartment where Courtney would stay, near the Piazza Campo de' Fiori. Did my daily walk around the Piazza Navona, a fabulous market familiar from my Italian lessons years ago, and between my hotel and the apartment, about a mile round trip. A gigantic statue of Giordano Bruno towers over the Campo de' Fiori, at the spot where he was burned at the stake for heresy on February 17, 1600. His crimes included advocating the infinity of the cosmos. The Vatican preferred the finite model, in which the mundane cosmos is bounded by the celestial sphere, and the rest is the throne of god. It is said that Bruno was offered freedom if he would recant, but he would not, and the faggots were lit in front of a crowd of 100,000. Recently, it seems, he has been forgiven.

*** Saturday, February 24, 2007. The big event this day would be meeting two Roman friends of Courtney, Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo, and Carla Panicali di Montalto. First we drove into the Vatican City, a foreign country, to fetch Marcelo, who is the president of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. This is an offspring of the Lincean Academy of 1603, of which Galileo was a member. Entry to the Vatican City was a keystone cops comedy involving the Swiss Guard, while navigation around the huge complex was managed by cell phone. We found Marcelo in the Academy building, a palace built in 1561. On exit, we passed again through the Swiss Guard, who recognized Marcelo and saluted.

After a longish drive we arrived at Carla's home for a splendid lunch of fresh pasta. Carla, now eighty-two going on sixty, had fled her courtly ancestry for an independent life as art dealer, helped create the Marlboro Gallery in Rome, bought and sold works of Picasso and Cezanne, and met Courtney years ago. She is no fan of The Church but held back her dangerous questions for Marcelo. On returning Marcelo to the Vatican City we had a personal tour of the home of the Pontifical Academy. You could say it has class: Galileo stood here and admired the same view.

*** Monday, March 25. Just enough time this morning for a return to the Vatican City to tour Saint Peter's Basilica with Marcelo, before jumping to Spain, to meet at last the Ross School group in Cordoba.

In 1992 when I was preparing for a performance in the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine in Manhattan, I learned that it was the largest Gothic cathedral in the world. Begun in 1892 and yet unfinished, the nave is more than 600 feet long. And at that time I understood that it was the second largest church in the world, the largest being Saint Peter's in Rome, completed in 1626. With a length of 694 feet, it covers 5.7 acres; the dome alone is 139 feet in diameter.

Actually, my guide book says the largest, since 1989, is the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace of Yamoussoukro, in the Ivory Coast. And Saint Paul's in London, 520 feet long, may be the fourth largest.

At last I stood in Saint Peter's, marveling first at its size. Besides its ornate sculptures and decorations, it contains amazing substructures. But on this day I was overwhelmed by the thought of standing at the very epicenter of all Christendom, the first of our three target cultures to be encountered on this trip. Although Rome had famously fallen, Christendom had not. With more than two billion adherents, it remains the world's largest religion. And after two thousand years, it is still more-or-less unified, with its central authority right here. Awesome.

Christianity has its good side, of course, and not all its crimes emerged from the center. But the Crusades: from here. The condemnation of Bruno, of Galileo: from here. And now, on to Cordoba! And the Ross School group, and my first meeting with Islam.

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