

Angelo and the Pope

Donia's fortuitous trip to the Vatican

The only way to celebrate a birthday is to choose a major city in which you hope to wake up alive on your day. For my 73rd year, I chose the Eternal City of Rome. There would be ten of us traveling, and our departure date was April 6. Along with the entire world, we were glued to the TV with the announcement of the eminent death of beloved Pope John Paul II. Aware of a possible no-fly day, we were terribly unsure whether or not the trip would be cancelled or routed to another city. Our group of intrepid travelers kept suitcases packed.

Ten years ago on a couple's trip to Rome, Bob and Paula Snyder gave me the name of guide service, Eurolimosine, owned by Angelo Amorico. He is reputed to be the best guide in all of Italy... *and he is!* Angelo had given our group a private tour of the Vatican, including the treasury, sacristy, Pauline Chapel and other rooms that could well be the basis of Dan Brown's next book. We shall never forget it.

For this trip, I had engaged Angelo again. I realized that with the imminent death of the Pope, we would need Angelo's assistance from the moment we touched down at the Leonardo Di Vinci Airport. His assistants greeted us as we left Customs. We felt safe amid the chaos the minute we settled into their black Mercedes vans. We headed straight for the Pantheon. I asked the driver, an art historian, to take us to Raphael's tomb. Legend has it that Fonarina, his beloved and the subject of many of his Madonnas, is buried beside him.

From the Pantheon, we visited the Piazza Novanna and then to the San Luigi del Francesi to view the three incredible Caravaggios. Angelo joined our party around 2:00 p.m. We had tickets to the Borghese Gallery that afternoon, but Angelo suggested that we visit the Vatican Museum instead, since it would be closed the following day for the Pope's funeral. The Vatican Museum appeared to have been closed that day, so we were thrilled to be allowed in. You know that the long corridor—which I'm told is over a mile long—is one of the most artistic and aesthetic experiences that only one with good legs can endure. The light at the end is the Raphael Room, in which is painted Raphael's masterpiece, "The School of

Athens." The room itself is worth the price of a plane ticket.

The next thing we knew, Angelo announced that his colleague, Luigi, was coming to escort us to pay our respects to the Pope. I should note that Luigi happened to be Signore Luigi Venditti, Direzione Generale Musei Vatican. We were led to the left side of St. Peter's, past smiling Swiss guards, and then through the Head of State door until we found ourselves behind the baldacchino of St. Peter's. We were taken directly to the rail to pay our respects and not rushed in the slightest. After that incredible moment, we were seated for a special Mass. Cardinals in red and Bishops in purple were everywhere. The



music would have made a tone deaf atheist cry. My tears flowed and a nun approached and embraced me, kissing me on the cheek. A beautiful brown-eyed girl who appeared to be about eight years old wiped the tears from my eyes. I can safely tell you that this was the most historic and most emotional day of my life. As we left, Brett whispered to me, "To your left is Victor Yushcheko, surrounded by his bodyguards and being interviewed."

After leaving St. Peter's, we stood among the multitudes along the street. I have never seen as many people in my life, the majority of whom were surprisingly young. The most thrilling thing was when a group would stand under their flag and burst into singing their national anthem. Water and blankets were given freely to these pilgrims. We left Vatican City absolutely silent. The moment was beyond words.

The story has not ended—and will never end. The memory of that remarkable trip will be etched on all of our hearts forever. Grazie, Angelo.

—Donia Dickerson

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