

Initially when the date for the canonisation ceremony was first proposed early in the year, it never occurred to me to even think of going to it. But then it was during our parish pilgrimage to the Passion Play in Germany in July that the thought suddenly came into my mind. I couldn't wait to get back home to see if I would be able to attend. Firstly I had to arrange for Mass supplies for that weekend. Slowly after contacting about six priests I was able to arrange for three different priests to say the four Masses - one of these was Bishop Oudeman. Once that fell into place I then contacted the (Catholic) Pilgrimage Company based in Sydney, Harvest, who were responsible for organising the actual itineraries. When I went on to their website I found that there was only one trip that was available for me, and that that was showing "almost sold out". I rather quickly rang the company and was left in limbo for three days before anyone got back to me to confirm that there was one place left! I quickly grabbed it, and suddenly the trip was "on" for me.

After that it was October 15<sup>th</sup> rather quickly and before I knew it I was all packed, in one small green Harvest overnight bag, and ready to catch the Emirates plane from Brisbane to Dubai at 9pm that evening. Whilst waiting I met up with a Ghana priest who was on the same plane and travelling home for his holidays, so we spent some nice time chatting together. I had done an on-line check-in through the internet beforehand so I had my boarding pass all arranged, and my usual economy class "window seat not over the wing". It is a rather long 14-hour flight to Dubai, but having been fed a very nice meal and having watched about three movies and having a few hours sleep it is surprising just how quickly the time goes. It was an all-night flight so that made it easier. We arrived into Dubai right on time. It was only a couple of hours wait before we boarded the next flight to Rome. It was here in the airport that I caught up with some of the 42 other folk who were on the same pilgrimage, including Monsignor Bill Mullins from Sydney who was the tour chaplain. It is only about a six hour flight so it wasn't too long before we arrived into Leonardo Da Vinci airport in Rome. Here our guide, Max, was waiting for us and eventually most of us found him and we set off to our hotel in town - four other folk missed us at the airport and had to get a taxi to the hotel. They arrived some time later.

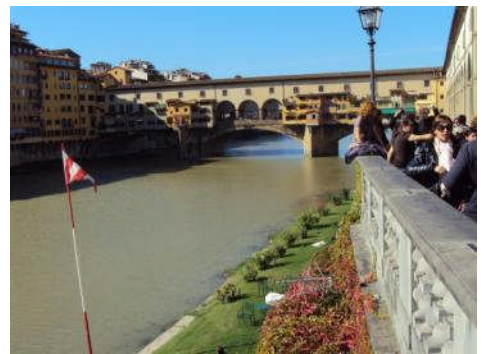
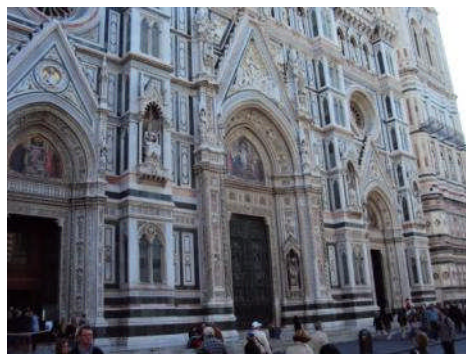


1. The "Liturgical Concert"
2. To prove that I was present!
3. The "prayerful" crowd at the Mass.

We barely had time to arrive and settle into our hotel before we had to board a bus and set off into town for the initial celebratory liturgical concert (**Photo No. 1**) that was to be held that evening. We arrived late, but luckily I happened to bump into Phillip Ryall, the managing director of Harvest, who showed us to some reserved seats right towards the front. I then finished up sitting next to Paul Catchlove, who is almost a deacon and will be ordained for Brisbane next year. He and a blind friend of his actually sang during the evening. This was a most enjoyable night where the life of Mary Mackillop was lived out on the stage, and together with music, song and prayer we all joined in. Before the concert started there was a fair amount of lively "joyfulness" amongst the predominant "Aussie" crowd - so much so that when it started Kevin Rudd, our latest deposed Prime Minister and one of the first speakers, referred to us as a "typically unruly bunch of Aussies" - that comment drew a loud applause. By the time we arrived back to our hotel that evening most of us went straight to bed. But then we had to be up early the next morning to get to St. Peter's Basilica for the Canonisation Mass at 10am. It was about 8:30am when we arrived to find fairly long queues already lining up to get into the designated areas. But despite that we ended up in a rather good position in the top right hand corner of the square (**2**) where we had a large TV screen in front of us which made the ceremony even more personal – and "see-able". The pope arrived in his "Pope-mobile", and was driven right up to the front of the sanctuary. The whole liturgy was well organised and prayerful (**3**), but you would expect that in Rome anyway! Our parish had recently re-introduced the ringing of the bells during our Masses, and I was pleased to see that Rome had done the same!

The actual canonisation ceremony began right after the opening prayer of the Mass where a short life story of each of the six folk to be canonised was read out, in five different languages, and then the official canonisation statement was made by the Pope himself. When the name of “our” saint was read out naturally there were rather loud cheers from amongst the many Australians who were present - it was estimated that there were about 7,000 Aussies present - it certainly sounded like it! About 200 priests gave out Communion, only under one species, and this was very well done in the space of only about ten minutes - I was most impressed! (They had done this obviously before!) After the Mass it took a while to leave the square as there were so many people with the same idea. Our group then met together for lunch in one of the many nearby cafes, - and eventually made our way back home. That evening the Harvest Company sponsored a special celebratory dinner at our hotel for the 650 folk who were part of their organised groups, - it was a most pleasant evening sprinkled with some song, some short speeches, some very nice food, and some very nice wine too! It was well after 11pm before I finally got to bed that night. It had been a long day!

The next day we had to be up early again and then after a rather nice breakfast - with even scrambled eggs on the menu - we had to make our way out to the Basilica of St. Pauls Outside the Walls for a special Mass in honour of our new “Aussie” saint, St. Mary MacKillop. (4) This rather beautiful basilica was packed to the doors, but fortunately as priests we at least had a very good seat up at the rear of the rather large sanctuary. The 25 or so Australian bishops had the best seats around the sanctuary - we were behind them - and the many Josephite nuns who were there in their hundreds, had the front seats in the church, with their very bright blue scarves on they certainly stood out from the crowd. Again the liturgy was well presented and the Mass went well - even Cardinal Pell spoke well - and not for too long. The official group from Brisbane with our Archbishop posed for a group photo after the ceremony, and I managed to join in that. I saw many Australian dignitaries there, including Julie Bishop, Kevin Rudd, and Tim Fischer, to mention just a few. In the afternoon we were meant to have a Josephite nun take us on a walking tour around to some of the places that Mary MacKillop went to when she visited Rome in 1874, but the nun who was to take us was sick, so we had a short bus and walking tour with our own guide instead. We then retired to our hotel for the rest of the afternoon. Our group had a very nice dinner that evening at a nearby restaurant.



4. The Mass for St. Mary MacKillop.

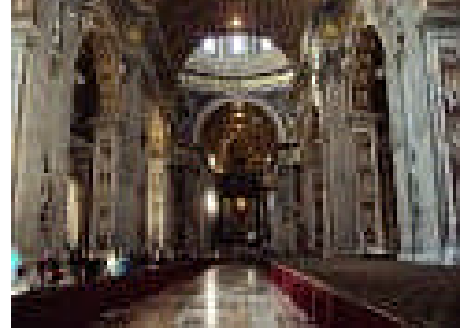
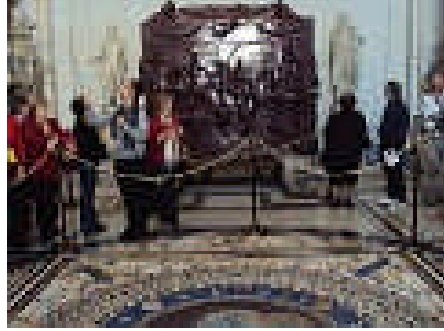
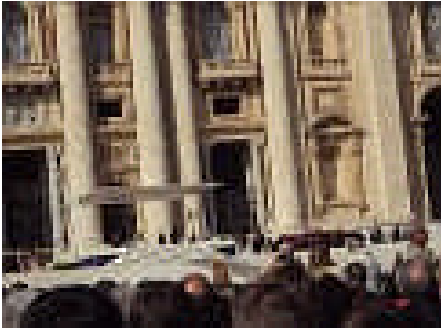
5. The Florence “Duomo” Cathedral

6. The “Ponte Vecchio” bridge.

The next day, Tuesday, after breakfast, the three of us priests concelebrated Mass in the mezzanine area above the bar. That day we then had a choice of four different places to go to - Pompeii and Naples, Assisi, the Tivoli gardens, or Florence - I chose the latter. So that meant another early start to the day as it was a three-hour drive each way in our bus, but it was worth it. We arrived at about 11am and spent most of our time at the famous Gothic Cathedral that was begun in 1296 and finally completed in 1436 - with its beautiful exterior (5), its lovely separate Baptistry, with its gold doors, and its high bell tower. A copy of the famous more-than life-sized statue by Michelangelo of David is there for all to see in all his “glory”! - the original one is in the museum nearby. I knew about the famous leather shops there, but I was surprised to see that gold is also famous here too. We also saw, but did not visit, the ancient “Ponte Vecchio” (6) that crosses the Arno River - the first one being built in 975, whilst the current one was built in 1762. What really ancient and beautiful history they have in these European countries - how we lack that here in Australia! Again for dinner that evening we were taken to yet another nearby restaurant.

Wednesday was to be my last day with the group as I had to get back to Brisbane for the Saturday evening Mass in the parish - the rest of the group were not leaving until the Friday morning. After our concelebrated Mass we made our way back down to St. Peter’s Square for the normal Wednesday papal audience. After going through security, -

which wasn't really all that serious, we found ourselves a rather good position and then waited for the pope to appear - which he did again being driven in his pope-mobile up and down some of the wider paths in the square for the people to be able to see him more closely. After an opening prayer he then spoke very fluently in about five different languages (7) after which the M.C. called out the names of the many and various groups that were present in the square. After each group was named there was much flag-waving and cheering from the folk in that particular group - again here the Australians did very well for ourselves, even causing the MC to wait for the cheering to die down. After this was finished, and the Angelus was said in Latin, we were free to have lunch and to be back on the bus for an afternoon tour of Christian Rome. The tour started at the Basilica of St. John Lateran, which is really the Pope's personal church, much to the surprise of some of our group who presumed it to be St. Peter's. This is one of the four major basilicas in Rome.



#### **7. The papal audience in St. Peter's. 8. Mosaics in the Vatican Museums. 9. The interior of St. Peter's Basilica.**

Some folk then ascended the Holy Stairs, on their knees, as is the custom, in the church across the road. These are reputed to be the stairs that Christ walked up to be judged by Pilate. They were brought back to Rome by Queen Helena, the wife of the Emperor Constantine. We were to have visited the Basilica of Sancta Croce with its many sacred relics of the Holy Cross, and a replica of the Shroud of Turin, but we didn't have time. It was a case of visiting that church or the Catacombs of St Sebastian. As it was we arrived there five minutes before they were due to close! It is always impressive to visit these underground tunnels of the early Christians. My last day in Rome began with the visit to the Vatican Museums. I was surprised to have the same guide as our previous group had when we were here in July - he recognised me though before I recognised him. It is always impressive to wander through the many chambers of statues, mosaics (8), tapestries, and paintings before entering the magnificent Sistine Chapel, with the famous ceiling fresco of the Last Judgment. We then concluded the day with a visit to St. Peter's Basilica, the largest Christian church in the world. Here we saw the tomb of John Paul 11 that is under St. Peter's, the beautiful mosaics that looked like paintings, the exquisite sanctuary, and the famous sculpture of Michelangelo - the "Pieta" - now guarded by a thick glass wall in front of it because some years ago a crazy Australian damaged it with a hammer!

It was now homeward bound for me, so I said my goodbyes to the rest of the group and after downloading my boarding pass at an internet cafe I made ready for my departure. A friend of Max, our guide, drove me out to the airport in double quick time! As I went to check in the agent, without my even asking, upgraded me to business class - I thanked him profusely! The trip again is only about eight hours and it is all night time flying, but the food, and the wine was great! Then after a short stopover in Dubai when I presented my pre-printed boarding pass at the gate I was again upgraded to business class - I was really grateful here as it is a long 14-hour flight. Again the food and wine was great, but I also had my "usual window seat not over the wing"! So I slept well - why not! - and when I awoke I found to my surprise that we were flying over Geraldton, whereas I thought we would have been over Broome, but I trusted the pilot and promptly went back to sleep! We then arrived into Brisbane right on time at 6:30am, even though we had left about an hour late from Dubai. Being in business class we were given an express card through Customs, so in no time at all I was out at the arrivals footpath ready for Alan Williamson to pick me up and whisk me back to St. Rita's where I was just in time to celebrate our usual 9am Mass in the chapel, much to the surprise of those who were there for what they thought would be only a Communion Service. After Mass I unpacked, put the washing on, and downloaded fifteen photos of the pilgrimage from my camera to a memory stick to show the parishioners the main highlights of my journey during our weekend Masses. I then had the usual three Masses the next day, plus three separate baptisms - so it was certainly back to work as usual - but I will always have such wonder-filled memories of a real impressive series of ceremonies that I will never witness again.