

In St. Benedict's Footsteps

Between 4 and 12 October we visited sites associated with St Benedict in central Italy – in the Lazio region around Rome (that name will be familiar to anyone who follows Italian football!) St Benedict was born about A.D. 480; after studying in Rome, he retired to a cave in the mountains above Subiaco, eventually establishing a number of monasteries around there and further south at Monte Cassino. He wrote the Rule which came to be adopted by most of the monasteries which developed in Western Europe. It contained important principles which remain of value – and not just for monks but also for lay folk leading normal lives in the world. They include Listening – to God's word for us; Stability – meaning commitment to, and making the best of, our situation; but also Change, seeing life as a journey that is often unpredictable. Other principles included Balance, exemplified in the monastic life of prayer, study, and manual work; and Hospitality, which the monks showed to those who came to their doors, including the poor and the sick. As a whole the Rule proved practical and sensible, providing indeed a good *'balance'* between sacred and secular concerns; appropriately, he was recently designated the patron saint of Europe.

Our pilgrimage was organised by Pax Travel and led by Canons Bruce Carpenter and Jane Hedges, whom we had come to know when she was at Portsmouth Cathedral in the '90s and is now at Westminster Abbey. The party came mostly from the areas where Jane has ministered, around Portsmouth, Honiton, and Westminster. We actually started at Westminster, which was originally one of the Benedictine foundations in England. We were given a comprehensive tour of the Abbey, ending with a taste of its *'hospitality'* at dinner in the Jerusalem Chamber, in which Henry IV died in 1413 (as anyone who has read or seen Shakespeare's *King Henry IV Part II* might remember). We attended Evensong in the Abbey, and had services of worship in many of the places in Italy which we visited.

In Italy, we were well served by a driver who proved remarkably adept in manoeuvring a sizeable coach through the narrow streets of

towns and villages. We visited Benedict's cave outside Subiaco, which as the Middle Ages went on developed into a monastery with a fascinating series of chambers built into the hillside decorated with beautiful frescoes. We also went to Monte Cassino, where in addition to its St Benedict associations we were also reminded of the Italian campaign in 1943-45. We visited the Commonwealth War Cemetery in the valley below, with its rows of graves of British, Indian, New Zealand, Canadian and South African servicemen who had died. Observing the terrain, it was easy to understand why that campaign had proved so difficult for the Allied army coming up from the south – the Apennine Mountains with their ridges extending towards the coast provided good opportunities for the German defence, and none better than Monte Cassino itself. This resulted in the controversial Allied decision in February 1944 to bomb the monastery: apart from the destruction of the historic building, it did not dislodge the Germans, who simply regrouped in the rubble and held out for several weeks more. So the monastery which we visited was a post-war reconstruction.

On another day we visited two Cistercian monasteries, Casamari and Trisulti – the latter in a remote position high up in the wooded Apennine foothills enjoying magnificent views. The Cistercians were a 12th-century offshoot from the Benedictines, represented in England by Fountains Abbey among others. One sign of our times was that these great buildings inherited from the mediaeval past seem to be inhabited now by relatively few monks - about 20 at Monte Cassino. There's surely a paradox here – apart from their attraction for tourists, monastic spiritual resources are it would seem increasingly valued in our hectic and troubled era, as some recent British TV programmes have indicated.

On our way north from Cassino we stopped at the little town of Anagni, much favoured by 13th-century Popes who wanted to get away from Rome. We saw the palace that they had built – which in 1303 had been the scene of a historic event of enormous importance. The reigning Pope, Boniface VIII, had denounced King Philip IV

of France for taxing the clergy without his approval; and went on to advance a claim to Papal supremacy over not just the Church but over secular rulers as well. So Philip sent his chief adviser to Anagni – who administered what is said to have been a ‘slap’ to the Pope: whether literal or metaphorical, this was a humiliation from which the Papacy never really recovered. Apart from the former Papal palace, we also visited the Cathedral, which has a beautiful Cosmati floor and a crypt embellished with interesting mediaeval frescoes.

We had a day off ecclesiastical sites with a visit to Tivoli, where we saw the fantastic gardens and fountains of the 16th-century Villa D’Este, and then the extensive ruins of the Emperor Hadrian’s palatial villa – in the rain unfortunately. Our final visit was to Greccio, associated with St Francis of Assisi rather than Benedict: It was where he organised the first representation of the Nativity, in 1223. Then we drove to the nearby town of Rieti, where we spent our last evening and morning. One benefit of the trip was getting to such places which, despite being not far from Rome, in the midst of lovely countryside, and containing plenty of interest, are well off the usual tourist trail.

Michael and Sybel Laird



In the year 1223, St Francis staged a re-enactment of the nativity, using the local population and their animals to stage it. It was to show the humanity of Christ. Each year, on Boxing Day there is a festival there, where the locals celebrate this. The sanctuary of the Nativity at Greccio, Italy has various scenes of the Nativity, as well as a museum full of Nativity scenes from around the world. St Francis lived in a cave, situated on a steep cliff, on this site for a while.