

Saint Mary's students grow in faith while studying in Rome

BY ADRIENNE LARSON

ROME — Some Catholics describe a moment in their lives when their beliefs are reaffirmed and they emerge from the experience with a deeper appreciation for their faith. It might come from a retreat weekend or, perhaps, a health scare. From that point on, they may enjoy an amplified spiritual connection to God and to Catholicism that informs their life's path.

For three Saint Mary's College students studying with the school's Rome Program, that moment coincided with the election of Pope Francis.

In Rome since January, the students have experienced many life-altering events. They're surrounded by another language, another culture, another perspective. All of that is part of the learning experience that is studying abroad, shared by many of the 31 Saint Mary's students in Rome for the spring semester.

"I've experienced so many different cultures within the Italian culture. I have loved trying to get a sense of each of these 'mini cultures' by talking with the Italian people and participating in their way of life," explains sophomore Anna Ulliman, from Cincinnati. What the students hadn't expected was the profound growth in



PHOTO PROVIDED BY SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE

Saint Mary's College sophomores (from left) Lauren Osmanski, Nikki Charter and Victoria Wilbraham pose with flags in Saint Peter's Square awaiting the election of the new pope. There are 31 Saint Mary's College students studying in Rome for the spring semester. The Saint Mary's Rome Program was established in 1970 and is the college's oldest study abroad offering.

their faith and spirituality during their semester overseas.

Vatican City, within the city of Rome, is walking distance from the students' hotel. During Lent, there are Lenten Station Masses every day at a different church.

"Where else can one go to 40 different churches all within walking distance? Many have simple exteriors and when you walk in you realize that you have found a hidden gem," said Nikki Charter, a sophomore from South Bend.

Charter attended St. Anthony de Padua Catholic School and graduated from Adams High School.

Nora Clougherty, a sophomore from Westerville, Ohio, hadn't expected to be drawn so much closer to her faith.

"Before coming here I knew that I would be traveling a lot and seeing places all over Europe and especially Italy, but I had no idea that I would be having such a faith-filled journey," said Clougherty.

As the conclave began, Catholics from around the world descended on Vatican City, gathering in front of Saint Peter's Basilica to pray and await the white smoke signaling that the cardinals had elected a new pope. When the Saint Mary's students weren't in class or studying, they too gathered in Saint Peter's Square.

Being surrounded by so many others of the same faith, all with the same joy in their hearts, affected the students more than they thought possible.

"We were standing in the crowd after the white smoke had emerged from the chimney. Hundreds of thousands of people were sharing the same experience there, feeling everything you were feeling. There is truly nothing like it," said Charter. "There is absolutely no doubt in your mind as to how powerful faith and prayer can be."

Ulliman's faith was magnified during that moment as well.

"I have never felt more proud to be a Catholic. I have never felt more connected to God and the Catholic Church. There was so much love and so much excitement in that square!"

Clougherty stood beneath the balcony, just a few hundred feet from the man named the new leader of the universal Catholic Church. Pope Francis asked those in the square, and the millions of people listening and watching, for a moment of silence to offer prayers for him.

"Chills ran down my spine and tears filled my eyes as the city of Rome fell silent," she recalled.

The entire experience was so powerful that Clougherty's deeper appreciation for her faith will stay with her for years to come.

"If I am ever to lose my faith or begin to doubt it, I know that I can always look back at that day, and remember that exquisite moment of realizing how strong faith, and faith in God, truly is."

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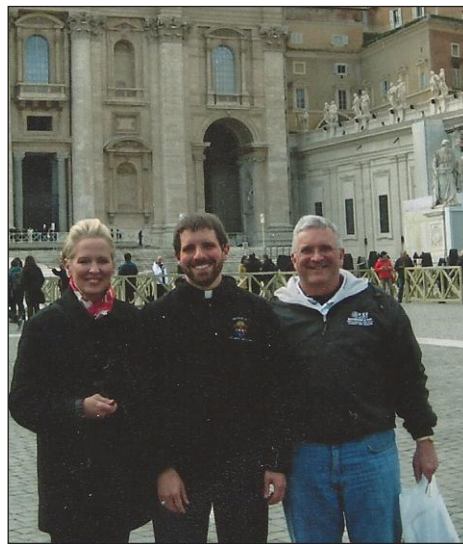
A dream fulfilled amid white smoke!

BY VINCE LABARBERA

"All roads (can) lead to Rome" — even when they begin in the remote rural area of northeastern Wells County in Indiana where Phil and Sue Davis bought a 100-year-old home in 1987. A weeklong visit to the "eternal city," however, usually doesn't include witnessing the election of a new pope, especially during one of the shortest conclaves in history.

The Davises remarkable journey in mid-March actually began in 2009 when their oldest son, Dan, started studying for the priesthood at Immaculate Heart of Mary Seminary, Winona, Minn. Last July, Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades sent young Davis to Rome to continue his theological studies at the Pontifical North American College. Dan's parents, with three other siblings to support, only could dream of ever visiting him.

But a telephone call last fall helped make the dream come true. When Phil answered, friends asked several questions relative to Dan studying for the priesthood. In short, Davis had to agree there was no need in the immediate future for bridal, wedding or baby showers, saving the friends a lot of money since they didn't have to buy gifts for those occasions. Davis was told he and Sue were to be at a particular home on Nov. 23 at 7 p.m. so the couple could be presented the money saved to send them Rome — enough money,



Sue and Phil Davis with their son, Dan, on St. Peter's Square at the Vatican in Rome early in the morning (after the conclave) before the Italian people got going around 9:30 a.m.

in fact, to pay for more than half the expense.

The Davises made arrangements for the trip in December. On Feb. 11, Phil was at work when Dan called from Rome to report Pope Benedict announced he was resigning. "What'd you do?" Dad quipped. "You're only over there six months and the pope resigns!"

"We kept watching for when the conclave might start," Davis said. He told Sue there was a slim chance they could be in Rome when it happened.

Their flight left Atlanta on Monday morning, March 11, and arrived at 8:30 a.m. Tuesday, Rome time, shortly after the papal conclave began; time enough to witness black smoke appearing around noon in the chilling rain following the first vote.

"But I was warmer than I've ever been because of the close proximity

of more than 300,000 people standing in St. Peter's Square," Sue said.

Dan's fellow seminarian in Minnesota, Peter Keefer, stands about 6 feet 3 inches tall, Phil reported, and could see over the relatively short, Italian crowd. He weaved the Davis family through the people until they were about 10 yards from the front for the inconclusive black-smoke results of the evening vote.

The third and fourth votes came the next day, March 13, before noon and the Davises were there. Throughout the event they were interviewed by TV reporters several times because the media was looking for people who spoke English. After multiple interview requests, Sue, who is blond, quipped, "If we ever do this again I'm going to dye my hair dark!"

When it was reported there would

be another vote around 5 p.m. (noon in the U.S.), the crowd swelled throughout the afternoon to 350,000, still standing in the wind and heavy rain, Phil reported. He said he used an umbrella that week more than he's ever used one his entire life.

"We might have had a better view with binoculars from atop our hotel, just a 20-minute walk from the Vatican," joked Sue. "At least we would have had coffee and a dry room."

When they saw the white smoke rising on the fifth vote, they thought they would just stay in the square, Phil said.

"All the bells in the city started ringing," Sue related. "The people were cheering and the rain was coming down. The whole thing was just so overwhelming for us!"

"An hour later, all the lights came on," continued Phil. "But it was another hour after that before the new pope emerged on the balcony. The crowd was filled with a buzz and energy like none other, and you had to struggle to hold your spot," he continued.

"People were talking, praying and singing in small groups," Sue added. The couple first learned the pope's name when someone behind them shouted, "Francesco!"

"It was absolutely electrifying in that square that night, but when Pope Francis came out and asked everyone to pray for him — silence! It was incredible! You didn't hear a thing," exclaimed Phil.

"We got back to the hotel later that evening and we just sat and

cried," Phil expressed. "Because, one, our son had been called to be a priest and our daughter, Kim, to be a sister. Two, if it wasn't for our friends we wouldn't have been in Rome. And three, we were there when a new pope was elected!"

"The only thing that would have made the trip better would have been to be able to take the rest of the family (Allison, Kim and Joe)," said Phil. The Davises also didn't get to attend Pope Francis' Inaugural Mass on Mar. 19 in which Dan served because they left the previous day.

"But we got to see so many things we never would have seen had Dan not been there for six months," he added. They toured St. Peter's Basilica, the crypt and took the scavi tour below the crypt. On Saturday they enjoyed a two-hour train ride to Assisi and on their last day walked two-and-a-half hours in Rome to the Church of Santa Croce, which houses a number of relics from the Passion of Christ.

Upon returning home, their friends were all so happy for them, they related. One of Phil's fellow workers said, "Let me get this straight: friends helped pay for the trip, you scheduled it in December and landed there when the pope was elected! Why haven't you bought a lottery ticket?"

"It's still so unbelievable and hard to comprehend," said Sue. "Dan's ordination to the diaconate is expected to be in Rome," she added, "and we hope to return."

Maybe it's time to begin another dream.