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Rome has plenty of beauty but many contrasts, too

Isabella R. Moyer | Jul. 11, 2012 NCR Today

In today's readings, we are given this image from Hosea: "Israel is a luxuriant vine whose fruit matches its growth. The more abundant his fruit, the more altars he built; The more productive his land, the more sacred pillars he set up." (Hosea 10:1 [1])

This past weekend, I was in the land of abundant altars and sacred pillars. I traveled to Rome to give a presentation on international Marianist Lay Communities to the General Chapter of the Society of Mary [2]. This was my 12th visit to the eternal city.

The awe factor of first visits may be lessened somewhat, but roaming Rome still stirs the mind and heart. And in July, it also stirs the sweat glands. After the noonday *pranzo*, fortified with good food and wine, wise Romans head indoors for a siesta. Mad dogs, Englishmen and enthusiastic but ignorant tourists go out into the midday sun and wonder why all the shop fronts are closed.

I was planning a day of touring with a friend once, and his request was "anything but churches or stones." This is impossible to do in central Rome. The city provides a gluttonous array of ecclesial structures and monuments. It also provides many an opportunity to ponder both our historical past and our present moment as a church. For me, this usually provokes an active dialogue between my mind and heart.

The sheer opulence and grandeur of the art cannot be ignored. Towering statues of life-like marble and stone, celestial ceilings of golden mosaic brilliance, exquisite frescoes, tapestries and paintings witness to the talents of renaissance artists. Yes, they nudge the spirit to soar in heavenly contemplation, but the mind is grounded in earthly thoughts of human costs. How many hands toiled for pennies to produce such magnificence? How many family funds were sacrificed to purchase indulgences that financed these monuments to papal splendor?

Contrasts abound. Passing beggars at church doors, you step into a liturgy replete with rich vestments, golden altars and carefully choreographed processions. Shop windows display the latest in clerical high fashion while street stands hawk tacky souvenirs and religious articles. Church aisles and side chapels are filled with both gaping tourists and pious pilgrims.

I understand the power of beauty's inspiration. I understand the power of art in communicating a message. Sadly, as I walk down the aisles of the great basilicas and churches, it is not the glory of God that stirs me. In the shadow of towering apostles and popes, I sense the insignificance of God's holy people when egos, power and authority are given the place of primacy.

We have a rich cultural and artistic heritage in our church. The average tourist in Rome would be excused in thinking this is the core of who we are as Catholics. After all, it's hard to escape churches and stones in this grand city. Yet, the true treasures of our church are not found around magnificent altars and sacred pillars. The true treasures are found on doorsteps and back alleys, far from the opulence of power. The true treasures are women and men of faith who preach the Gospel by word and action, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, teach the unskilled, protect the vulnerable, and work for peace in the midst of violence. They may not have

towering monuments built in their name, but truly, theirs is the kingdom of God.

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[1] http://usccb.org/bible/hosea/10/
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