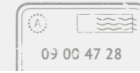


PILGRIM'S TRAVEL COMPANION

August 27 - September 9, 2025

A JOURNEY OF HEART, HEALING, & HOPE
WITH FR. JC MERINO



Hopes in Chains - Freedom of the Cross

Early on, the third day of my journey here with Papa, the Lord wrote His promise across the skies. As I drove toward the hospital, rainbows stretched from every side, and my heart heard His assurance:

"My love and mercy is from East to West."

It was a word I desperately needed. For in my heart was both conviction and doubt. Conviction — that I must be with Papa, walking with him in this fragile valley of healing. But also doubt — guilt even — whispering: *"You are supposed to be with the people, with the faithful whom the Lord has entrusted to your care."*

And yet, in that moment, the rainbow preached the Gospel more loudly than my fears: *"I am with you. I am with them. My love is everywhere. You are where you are supposed to be."*

The Psalmist sings:

"As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us"
(Psalm 103:12).

God's mercy is not measured by proximity. His love is not divided by location. His presence fills the hospital room where Papa rests, the hearts of friends who are making their pilgrimage in Europe as we speak, and the parish pews where my

people gather. This is not just a nice thing to say or think, it is hope that we can trust and from which all are saved: His mercy flows across distances, binding us together in Him.

Papa will now try to recuperate his strength at the home of his sister in Folsom, California. The doctors have judged that any form of surgery on his heart remains too risky for now. Instead, he will continue to depend on medication while his body rebuilds its strength. This is a season of waiting and watching, of leaning into hope, and of listening for what the Lord desires for the immediate future.

St. Paul reminds us: *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us”* (Romans 8:35, 37). Not sickness, not weakness, not absence can divide us from the embrace of His love.

Even when life feels like chains — chains of uncertainty, chains of duty, chains of illness — the Cross itself teaches us that hope is never bound. For *“it is for freedom that Christ has set us free”* (Galatians 5:1). In surrendering to His will, in embracing the cross laid upon us, we discover a freedom the world cannot give: the freedom of trust, of mercy; the freedom *of being exactly where Love wants us to be*.

So I learn again what Jesus promised: *“And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:20). His love is not partial, but whole. Not local, but universal. Not fleeting, but eternal.

And this is the hope I hold: whether we walk the hospital corridors, make our pilgrim way in prayer in Rome, kneel in the pews of our parish, or wander the uncertainties of our own journeys, God’s love reaches far beyond our imagination. His mercy stretches endlessly — from East to West.

Here, in these chains of waiting, I discover the freedom of the Cross.

Here, in my doubts, I rediscover the hope that is Christ.

Here, in my weakness, I feel the strength of His mercy.

And so, I walk on. Papa by my side. God before me. His love behind me, beneath me, above me, around me — *from East to West, forevermore*.

Beneath & Beyond: Eternal Rome



September 4, 2025

Day 9: Hopes in Chains - Freedom of the Cross

"All roads indeed lead to Rome, but each pilgrim carries a different longing". (Anonymous)

We begin today at the BASILICA OF ST PAUL OUTSIDE THE WALLS, where the very bones of the Apostle rest beneath the altar, surrounded by golden mosaics that shimmer like the fire of Pentecost. Here, HOPE LIVED IN CHAINS. St. Paul, the tireless pilgrim of the Gospel, once bound and broken, speaks from the grave with undiminished courage: "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith". The basilica's quiet grandeur reminds us: faith is not always neat, nor safe - it is often cast "outside the walls," where comfort ends and mission begins. Here, we kneel. Here, we ask: What walls still hem me in? What chains am I called to break - for Christ, and for love?

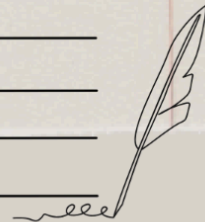
From there, we descend - into the Catacombs, where early Christians buried their dead in secret, where prayers echoed in carved silence, and where faith hid only to grow stronger. In the damp hush of stone corridors, we walk among the bones of those who died believing in resurrection. These tunnels are sacred arteries, pulsing with the memory of hidden hope, of a Church forged in suffering but never without a song. Their symbols - fish, anchors, doves - whisper gently: "Do not be afraid. The grave is not the end. Love is stronger".

We emerge into sunlight and history, where Ancient Rome rises in shadow and stone. THE COLOSSEUM, once an arena of spectacle and suffering, reminds us that healing often follows truth-telling. Here, martyrs gave their lives - not to be defeated, but in the sure hope in, and radical fidelity to, Jesus Christ. On CAPITOL HILL, we imagine Rome's emperors surveying their world, never suspecting that it would be a crucified carpenter who would reshape history. The VITTORIO EMMANUEL MONUMENT, white-washed and yet commanding, stands like a wedding cake of nationalism - but today we search not for earthly glory, but for the invisible kingdom rising quietly in hearts. The ROMAN FORUM and CIRCUS MAXIMUS, now ruins once ruled the world. And yet, it is mercy, not might, that has endured. We stand among broken columns, but our spirits are lifted. For in the Crumbling of empires, Christ remains - victorious!

Our pilgrim steps now carry us to the MAJOR BASILICAS, where the Church beats with timeless rhythm...

The Church, in all her mystery, welcomes us still. And we are reminded by Pope Francis: "The Church is not a museum for saints, but a hospital for sinners". For this Jubilee, Pope Francis has added a FIFTH HOLY DOOR in a most unexpected place: RREBIBBIA PRISON, a correctional facility on the outskirts of Rome. Though not open to the general public, its designation speaks volumes. In the spirit of a Church that seeks the lost and heals the broken, this Holy Door reminds us that no one is beyond the reach of grace, and that hope can open even behind locked gates.

This afternoon, you are free to wander - Rome offers you her winding alleys, her fountains, her piazzas like poems written in cobblestones. Perhaps a gelato near the Pantheon, a quiet moment in a side chapel, or a conversation with a stranger who reminds you of Christ. Let your heart lead you.

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Transforma
TUS HERIDAS
EN Sabiduría

The Catacombs in Rome

The Catacombs of Rome are ancient underground burial places dating back to the 2nd century AD. Built by early Christians, they stretch for miles beneath the outskirts of the city.

These tunnels served not only as cemeteries, but also as places of prayer and secret worship during times of persecution. Decorated with symbols of faith - like the fish, the anchor, and the Good Shepherd - the catacombs preserve the memory of martyrs, saints, (like St. Cecilia, St. Sebastian, and St. Agnes) and countless unnamed faithful who help fast to their belief in the Resurrection.

Walking through the catacombs, one is struck not by macabre darkness, but by loving witness. The early Christians buried their dead not in fear, but in hope. Their love for Christ - and His love for them - gave them courage to face death with faith. The catacombs proclaim a quiet but powerful message to the world, even today: death does not have the final word. In these silent tombs, the Gospel echoes still - that love, especially God's love, is indeed stronger than death. The martyrs believed it; we are invited to believe it too.

JUBILEE 2025
THE HOLY DOORS



ST. PETER'S BASILICA, where the heart of the Church beats beneath Michelangelo's dome. Build over the tomb of the first Pope, it is both sanctuary and symbol – rising from martyrdom into magnificence. The altar above Peter's bones whispers to every soul: "Feed my sheep. Follow me". Here, faith is not a memory – it is alive, immense, and tender.

ST. PAUL OUTSIDE THE WALLS, standing solemn and strong beyond the ancient city gates. Here lies the Apostle of the Gentiles – his mission unfinished, his voice still calling. The vast basilica, ringed with portraits of popes, becomes a sanctuary of boldness. Beneath its solemn hush, we remember: "I have run the race, I have kept the faith". And we are invited to do the same.

ST. MARY MAJOR, where the Virgin Mother's presence is felt in every soft ray of gold and every curve of mosaic. It is Rome's oldest church dedicated to Our Lady, where hope is cradled like an infant in her arms. Beneath its coffered ceiling, gilded with the first gold from the New World, heaven feels close enough to touch – and Mary, a mother close enough to hear.

THE ARCHBASILICA OF ST. JOHN LATERAN, the mother church of all churches, where Popes once reigned and pilgrims have bowed in prayer for centuries. Its colossal statues and towering nave echo with authority – but also with invitation. Here, the Church speaks in marble and majesty, yet opens its arms to the broken and the brave.

As the Roman sky softens into dusk, we gather again for dinner. The laughter around the table tastes like joy. The wine, like memory. The bread, like blessing. We are travelers - but more than that, we are becoming pilgrims. Carriers of hope, seekers of healing, and hearts set on things eternal.

"All the way to heaven is heaven,
because Jesus said, 'I am the Way'"
~ St. Catherine of Siena

Today we walked through the rise
and fall of kingdoms, through tombs
and triumphs, basilicas and blood.
And yet, in every place, we found
Christ waiting. In every silence, a
prayer for healing, In every step, a
call to the heart.



Pilgrim Tip:

Tonight, write down one ruin you saw
today - and one truth you carry from it.
Ask yourself: What in me is falling away -
and what in me is rising in Jesus Christ?

Tomorrow, we continue the journey.
But tonight, we sleep in the shadow of
eternity.

