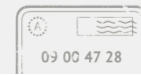


PILGRIM'S TRAVEL COMPANION

August 27 - September 9, 2025

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



My dear Pilgrims,

From Papa's hospital room, I write to you with both humility and gratitude. As I look across the room, I see him sitting (somewhat resting and sleeping now) in his chair. An hour ago, he was active and talking to me about stuff - asking questions, answering the nurses and the doctors' questions, as they make their usual rounds. What may seem small in ordinary days has now become a sign of grace: every time Papa rises from his bed to sit is a win; every step he takes in therapy without shortness of breath is a quiet victory. His progress is slow, but it is steady—like the patient rhythm of a heart learning to beat strong again.

I am now waiting with him - for doctors to do a procedure that will determine whether Papa can undergo surgery to repair his heart valve. I hope that it happens today. This waiting is its own kind of pilgrimage — an in-between moment where hope and uncertainty walk side by side. Yet, for you - my dear pilgrims must realize: just as the Church in Rome stands as the ever-beating heart of our faith, so too does Papa's journey remind me of the resilience of life and the strength of prayer.

I ask you, my dear Pilgrims, to continue to hold Papa in your prayers. May each of his small victories be joined to the great heartbeat of the Church, sustained by Christ Himself, through the intercession of Our Blessed Mother. May the Lord grant him courage for the road ahead, and may our community of faith, walking together in prayer, remind Papa - and everyone else who journeys towards recovery, healing and health, that one is never really alone.

The Ever-Beating Heart of the Church: *Rome*

September 3, 2025

Day 8: The Embrace of Rome

"Let us go to Rome, to the feet of Peter, where the Church speaks most clearly, and grace flows in abundance"

Today is no ordinary day on our pilgrimage - it is a day of encounter, of witness, and of belonging. We make our way to St. Peter's Square, the open arms of Bernini's colonnade embracing pilgrims from every corner of the world.

Here, we await the Papal Audience with Pope Leo XIV - the Bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter, the visible shepherd of the universal Church. It is a moment of grace and unity, transcending borders and languages. As we wait, we pray with the Church, for the Church.

The predecessor of Pope Leo, Francis, we hear a call to mercy, justice, and joyful discipleship. Whether we understand every word, we receive - as pilgrims, as children of God. The invitation of Pope Leo rings true: "The Jubilee we are now celebrating helps us to realize that hope is a constant source of joy, whatever our age. When that hope has also been tempered by fire over the course of a long life, it proves a source of deep happiness."

Following the audience, we enter the majestic St. Peter's Basilica, the largest and most spiritually significant church in Christendom. Built over the tomb of the Apostle Peter, its soaring dome and golden altars remind us of heaven touching earth.

Here, we celebrate Mass, and it is hard not to feel the weight and wonder of the centuries of faith that surround us. Beneath our feet lie saints and popes. Around us, marble and mosaics speak not only of grandeur but stories of sacrifice and devotion. We pause at Michaelangelo's Pieta, where Mary holds the crucified Christ with strength and silent hope.

After lunch, we venture into the Vatican Museums - a treasure trove of human creativity, religious devotion, and sacred art. Hall after hall, we walk not just through history, but through centuries of longing for the holy. We arrive at the Sistine Chapel, where the ceiling lifts our eyes - and our spirits. Michelangelo's CREATION OF ADAM nearly touches the eternal, while THE LAST JUDGMENT confronts us with our own hearts and destiny. This is theology in color and stone, echoing the truths we profess in faith and prayer.

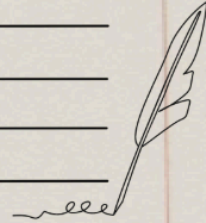


LEO XIV

FIVE INTERESTING FACTS

- 1 He has a degree in BS Mathematics**
He earned an undergraduate degree in BS Mathematics from Villanova University in 1977.
- 2 He is the first Augustinian Pope**
Also in 1977, he entered the novitiate of the Order of Saint Augustine in Saint Louis.
- 3 He can speak 5 languages**
He can speak at least five languages, including English, Spanish, Italian, French, and Portuguese.
- 4 He is a dual citizen of the U.S. and Peru**
He is the first pope from the United States, but holds dual citizenship in Peru, where he was a missionary for decades before becoming a cardinal.
- 5 He oversaw appointment of bishops**
After Pope Francis appointed him to be the Prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, he oversaw the appointment of new bishops.

SHARE YOUR STORY



Tonight, we sleep in the shadow of the Vatican dome, reminded that we are part of something greater than ourselves - one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, alive in the Spirit, rooted in hope.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus,
thank you for the grace of this day—
for the voice of Peter in Pope Leo,
for the beauty of Your Church,
and for the hope that never fails.
Let what we saw, heard, and
touched today root us ever deeper
in Your love, and give us courage to
carry it home.
Amen.

Pilgrim Tip:

Before bed, write down one word from today that captures your heart—whether it was encounter, beauty, hope, or peace.

Carry that word with you tomorrow.

Tomorrow, we continue deeper into the heart of Rome. Tonight, we rest in the heart of the Church.

trust your
JOURNEY