

Diary: The Vatican is surprisingly good at cricket

Stephen Withnell 4 July, 2019

I have spent the past several days in Rome at the head of a rather wonderful cricket team, the Stonyhurst Gentlemen's XI. The team is comprised of current and recent pupils, with eight of our 11 players being schoolboys between the ages of 13 and 15. A young but mighty side.

It was a glorious few days – a whirlwind of experiences which will stay with the boys for a lifetime.

Our tour got underway with a reception hosted by Sally Axworthy, the British Ambassador to the Holy See. The boys looked very sharp in their new blue blazers and new tour ties. All very Brideshead.

Two cracking Twenty20 cricket fixtures followed, one on Thursday against the Roma Capannelle Cricket Club, Rome's senior local team, and our main match on Friday against the Vatican (St Peter's) XI.

In the dizzying temperatures of heat-wave Rome, the first laurels of victory were awarded to Stonyhurst. Our young Corinthians restricted their Roman hosts to 136-4, with admirable seam bowling from Alex, Year 10, the third member of his family to board at Stonyhurst from Zimbabwe. With the match finally poised at two overs remaining, in came James, year nine, formerly head boy of our prep school, who faced just six balls but smote a mighty six over mid-wicket among other lusty blows to ease the nerves and set up a two-wicket victory with three balls to spare. His innings was magnificent.

Against the Vatican (St Peter's) XI, the laurels were won by our hosts. Stonyhurst batted first, sending in Henri, a Year Nine pupil who also plays for Lancashire. Former 1st XI captain

Rhys scored a pugnacious 49 which saw Stonyhurst to 133-4. The Vatican side fielded a very strong team of seminarians, and their skill with bat and ball carried the day. They were deserving of victory, a wonderful partnership between Fr Kiran and Fr Shehan saw the St Peter's side reach 134-2 with several overs to spare. They have now beaten us at home and abroad.

On Saturday we were lucky enough to attend the papal Mass for the feast of Ss Peter and Paul, mercifully moved out of the Roman sun and into St Peter's Basilica itself. During the liturgy the Pope blessed the pallia to be distributed to 31 newly named metropolitan archbishops.

We were treated to a private tour of St Peter's by Fr Sameer Advani. Seeing the boys' sense of awe and wonder as they contemplated the Basilica was a privilege. Seeing Michelangelo's Pietà, carved and polished by the artist at the age of 21, was one of many highpoints. As one of our party wryly observed, it is a fair copy of the Victorian plaster Pietà we have back home in Lancashire.

Another joyful experience was attending Sung Vespers and Benediction at the International Pontifical College Maria Mater Ecclesiae, with Fr Eamonn O'Higgins and the seminarians and priests of the College. The beautiful service and crisp modern chapel was like a cool drink of water after the heat, heavy fare, damask and silks of papal Rome.

But perhaps the real highlight of the trip for me was something very simple. We had given the boys permission to wear casual clothes to Vespers on account of the searing heat.



Instead they got together among themselves and agreed to wear their jackets and ties. When we met these young men in the reception of our hotel, they told us they chose smart turnout so that we would be proud of them. Suitably humbled, the staff went upstairs to put on jackets and ties.

Changing gears somewhat, this week also marks the end of my family's first year of living at Stonyhurst. The year can be judged a success, I think: I have been made a deputy head and my wife, Victoria, has been made a partner at her GP practice.

Our sons Henry and George are very happy. They spend weekends walk-

ing along the River Hodder, crossing when it is low enough and ascending the hill they have named Snack Mountain to have their picnic lunch. Both boys have their first tweed suits. Aged four and six, this feels about right; one wouldn't want to wait any longer.

The boys still have a healthy respect for the "Ducks of War" which live along the ponds which flank the College Avenue. Perhaps most importantly, they still like to drive down the Avenue in the morning listening to Eye of the Tiger at maximum volume. There is no better way to prepare for the day.

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