

Young Aussies at UNIV 2022

Last month in Rome, university students from around the world gathered to partake in the annual UNIV Conference. Held during Holy Week, this initiative was launched by St Josemaria in 1968 to encourage young people to reflect on, discuss, and address significant world issues facing humanity. This year the topic of the forum was “Rebuilding Together: The Strength of Human Relationships.” Three young attendees from Australia write about their experience - Gerard

Rajakariar, Carina Rodrigues
and Joshua Lay.

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Gerard Rajakariar

I am not sure I want to go to Rome again – I feel that if I were to visit and experience the city without attending UNIV, I might be disappointed.

The adrenaline rush of boarding our 10am flight at 9:57am – that's what the entirety of UNIV felt like. As I got to my seat for the first of two 12-hour flights, I could sense that I was about to embark on something truly special.

But it began with that almost-missed flight. Then Cardinal Pell cancelled his lunch with us. We failed to acquire coveted tickets to the much

anticipated Easter Vigil inside the Basilica.

But one Saint Josemaria prayer card later and we were on our way, Cardinal Pell had rescheduled lunch, and we *very* fortunately obtained tickets to the Vigil Mass through some well-connected UNIV organisers.

The Colosseum was a sight to see, the Trevi Fountain iconic. We licked gelato under the Mediterranean spring sun, consumed as much pasta as we did wine. Alongside Pantheon, Vatican Museums, Galleria Borghese, touring the Vatican Crypts and Tomb of St Peter, the Catacombs, and many other sites, UNIV gave us the perfect chance to be tourists.

Except: we were so much more than just tourists.

UNIV added an extra level of meaning to the trip. Attending the UNIV conference, in *the* Eternal City,

during Holy Week, added a deeper level of purpose and wonder to our everyday activities. Popping into the never-ending supply of chapels and basilicas, or getting to read the gospel or say the rosary in front of the Blessed Sacrament, were seemingly tiny yet meaningful highlights of our day.

Meeting hundreds of young men like me, all with some connection to Opus Dei, made me realise that I am never truly alone. That no matter what continent I set foot on, I am part of a very worldwide family.

I often make the mistake of thinking Opus Dei is just a thing in my local area, associated with the schools that I attended. But this trip opened my eyes to its universality.

Hearing (and relating) to the Prelate talk about his struggles with discerning his vocation as a young adult made my very own

discernment journey that much more meaningful and real.

Touring Villa Tevere (the world headquarters of Opus Dei) and finding a likeness and familiarity with my centre back home made it even more welcoming.

Seeing all the Roman monuments built to glorify God – the faith of the early Christians survives even 2000 years on. Whether being persecuted by ancient Romans or 21st century media, the Church still stands strong.

Meeting young people from every corner of the globe, who experience the same struggles as I, who possess similar dreams and aspirations – how could I ever feel lonely?

Walking through the hollows of St Peters Basilica, our exclusive tour of Scavi brought us face to face with the remains of St Peter. Being in such close proximity with the first pope's

bones was a sombre yet powerful experience. This was the man who laughed with Jesus, cried with Jesus, and probably argued with him too. The future of the Church literally depended on this guy being able to spread its teaching.

It reminded me that even after denying Jesus three times, Peter fell again by trying to abandon spreading the faith in Rome, due to his fear of being persecuted alongside the early Christians. We prayed in the chapel of Domine Quo Vadis, the supposed site where Jesus appeared to and encouraged Peter to return to Rome. Here, Peter got back up and began again. He returned to Rome and continued preaching, even though he knew deep down it would probably lead to his death.

In this way, we too must pick ourselves up after we fall, and begin again.

Just like Saint Josemaria found university students so beneficial to spreading the idea of holiness in daily life, I like to believe that the early Christians converted by St Peter were also young adults. Eager for more meaning in their lives, questioning their current beliefs, and willing to learn and spread the faith, they took on these new and somewhat unconventional beliefs and were able to see them as the truth that they are.

Like the early Christians, we mustn't be selfish – we must mimic their faith and bravery in continuing to spread God's message, as well as the message of Opus Dei that we have been so lucky to be exposed to. As a dear friend once told me, Opus Dei is for the everyday, regular person – in this way, it is truly meant for everyone!

I am unsure I want to go to Rome again – I don't think that the experience of UNIV there will ever be topped. But of one thing I am sure: I think this trip brought me one step closer to God, and for that, I'd go back to Rome in a heartbeat.

Carina Rodrigues

The cathedrals and the churches in Rome are breathtaking. I can finally say that I've seen the Sistine Chapel in person. I was blown away by the attention to detail in all the architectural wonders. I was surrounded by so much history and art in this city; so much beauty – which made me contemplate the beauty of heaven and God, which I'm sure is beyond the scope of my imagination.

My name is Carina and I am a resident of a college with an Opus Dei chaplaincy at UNSW, Sydney. It was my college principal who told

me that UNIV in Rome was going ahead this year. I was so excited as I have been waiting to attend since Covid happened - for two years!

One of my personal highlights was the get-together with the Prelate of Opus Dei, Don Fernando. He is such an inspiration and a very graceful person. His presence brought a lot of peace and joy to the room; and his responses to the questions he was asked hit hard: I felt like it wasn't him but the Holy Spirit speaking directly through him. His words made loving God and practicing our faith sound so simple and beautiful.

Another highlight was attending the Palm Sunday Mass at St Peter's Cathedral with the Pope himself! I never in a million years thought I'd be seated so close to the Pope, attending Mass with my close friends at St Peter's, surrounded by hundreds of Catholics from all over

the world! It was surreal! We also got to be part of an audience with the Pope. Spanish attendees made up the majority of the crowd and were screaming praises for the Pope. They were so energetic and I'm so glad I got to experience that. I got to meet so many of them and practice my Spanish too, which was so exciting!

I was enthusiastic during the trip but in all honesty, I left for UNIV exhausted and stressed - with work, study and life in general. While traveling, I offered up my sufferings to the cross and asked Jesus to help me carry it. What better place to do this than Rome? I got to see the relics of the original cross, the crown of thorns and the nails that pierced our Lord. I couldn't believe how close I was. I remember staring at the cross for ages and did not want to leave.

Later, we visited the Scala Sancta, or Holy Stairs. According to Roman

Catholic tradition, the Holy Stairs were the steps leading up to the praetorium of Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem on which Jesus Christ stepped on his way to trial during his Passion. These stairs were brought to Rome in 326 AD by St Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine. The marble stairs are now covered by wood for protection, and one usually kneels to climb the stairs. Kneeling up the wooden stairs was painful. “How much harder would it have been for Jesus to walk up the mountain after being scourged,” I thought to myself. So many thousands of Catholics have knelt up these stairs over the years that now, you can see dents on the wood. You can see Our Lord’s bloodstains on the stairs through panels of glass on the wood - the blood He shed reminded me of how much He suffered for me. I placed my palm on the glass and overwhelmed by his love, I wept. I knew He was accompanying me on

those stairs, and I felt immense joy afterwards.

On Holy Thursday, we went on the traditional pilgrimage to visit seven churches in Rome. I felt sick with a bad stomachache before we started. I offered up this pain and tried to shift my focus onto the cross at each church, and I am not kidding when I say that the pilgrimage was smooth sailing for me: I was so immersed in Our Lord and I felt like He carried my pain for me. We often feel like God has abandoned us, but I realised that suffering is so much easier when I allow Christ to enter it and share my burdens with me. We turn to things of this world for comfort but this trip taught me to look to the Holy Cross, which is the source of our strength.

Apart from our spiritual activities, we also explored Rome and Florence culturally which was a lot of fun! We

visited the main tourist attractions, went souvenir shopping, took a bunch of photos and ate delicious food! Pizza and pasta for 10 days straight sure is a lot of carbs! Overall, meeting like-minded university students made me feel less alone as a Catholic in this world. The Catholic church is so big and so united, and I feel incredibly lucky to be part of it. If you are a university student wondering if you should go to UNIV, don't even question it! Start packing your bags!

Joshua Lay

UNIV 2022 was an eye-opening trip for me, as it is for everyone. Getting to see Rome for the first time was already special enough, and I believe that every Catholic should make a pilgrimage to the Eternal City at least once in their life. But there were two things that stood out to me that made UNIV extra special:

The magnitude of the Church

Walking around Rome, there is a church on every second street. Each of these churches are huge and beautiful monuments of architecture, filled with astounding artwork and its own special history. You can't help but admire the work and devotion of the first Christians. Even though some of these churches were built more than 1,000 years ago, you can see that each one was designed with the utmost love and attention to detail.

Contextually, Christianity would have been the newest and strangest religion at that point in history, claiming that a carpenter from Nazareth was God. The early Christians faced centuries of persecution, had worse technology, and yet still constructed these beautiful edifices for one reason alone – the glory of God. They had

the same mission that we have today but conducted themselves with so much faith, magnanimity, and trust in God, that they were able to do things that should not have been humanly possible, and these buildings are a testimony to that.

One of my friends commented on our visit to St Andrew's: "If only the early Christians could see what their faith would achieve." I think that statement captures my point perfectly. Every site you visit has a noble and ancient significance to the history and growth of the Christian faith; and point to why Rome is the centre of the Catholic faith. It was extremely helpful to see and understand the roots of my religion, and reignite within me the universal call to holiness and the mission that Jesus gave to everyone.

Witnessing the very designs of Rome's streets and piazzas are

enough to highlight the cultural and structural integrity of the city. You can't help but be entirely convinced that the early Christians fully understood the enormity of the gifts they had received, and that they wanted nothing more than to share these gifts with the infinite generations to come. They didn't know if their constructions would last for almost 2000 years, but they had no fear, complete trust, and worked not for their own recognition, but solely for their love of God.

On the UNIV trip, you are a “spiritual tourist,” as everywhere you visit has a visual and religious beauty and importance. It really brings forth St Thomas Aquinas’ fourth argument for the existence of God, Gradation - in which he says “It follows that if anything is good, there must be something that is most good. Therefore, there must also be

something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.”

It also brings to light the aesthetic argument, in which one questions humans’ ability to perceive beauty, and why humans seek beauty. It’s hard to describe the feeling of entering St Peter’s Basilica or the Sistine Chapel for the first time, but one thing is certain. Beauty is timeless and is universally recognised. Rome is an undeniable pinnacle of human-created beauty, and that beauty will never fade. And the reason for that beauty is God.

The universality of Opus Dei

Secondly, as a university student who attends formation at the local centre of Opus Dei, it’s easy to feel like an outsider in today’s society. Striving to live a Christian lifestyle, one encounters many crosses throughout

the day. However, in UNIV, university students from around the world congregate to spend Holy Week in Rome. There were around 1,400 male participants coming from every continent. We got to meet dozens of similar people - young university students - many who were also attending means of formation in centres of Opus Dei and living the daily battle to fulfil God's will.

It was so reassuring to know that Opus Dei is in so many corners of the world, and that we are not alone in our struggles. Australia has always been a little spatially secluded from the world, with a young and secular history, but there were countries with even less participants than us, like Croatia. It was immensely inspiring to see those countries where Opus Dei was not as developed as in Australia, but to notice their undeterred hope and faith that their apostolate would

grow. At the same time, it was amazing to meet the participants from countries like Spain, where Opus Dei is thriving and who had over 400 UNIV participants. You can't help but get excited and want to do everything possible to help Australia get to that point.

In conclusion

UNIV 2022 was a real blessing, especially after almost three years of COVID restrictions. There were so many highlights and specific moments that I could have talked about, and I didn't even get to mention seeing the Pope or Don Fernando, the Prelate of Opus Dei. I encourage all young people to try to go, as I sincerely believe that you cannot go to UNIV without wanting to get closer to God. It enkindled a certain fire within all of us; a fire that I'm sure we will continually

strive to spread to our respective friends, families, and communities.

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