

## A MORNING OF CONTRASTS

Last September I was fortunate enough to be invited to Rome to be photographer at the four-yearly symposium of the ‘Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum’, CIB for short, a gathering of Benedictine women religious from all over the world. Our schedule included an audience with the Pope. Being a half-converted Baptist, I wasn’t sure what I thought about it.

The day for the audience came, and the one hundred and ten of us were off to the Vatican in two coaches. After queuing for a while, we were through the general security check for everyone wishing to enter St Peter’s—they didn’t really seem to be expecting any terrorists that morning. Another short wait, and, after showing our ID, we were ascending the first flight of steps to the audience room. There were several Swiss Guards around in their colourful uniforms—I was amused to discover that the Guard visible from St Peter’s Square was actually a very life-like model. We crossed a courtyard, then started our ascent. There were a lot of steps up to the audience room on the top floor, but everyone managed it, much to the credit of the less-able members of our party.

We were early, but eventually it was time, and, amid enthusiastic applause, Pope Francis arrived with an entourage of not particularly friendly-looking people, and took his seat. We were introduced as a group to Pope Francis, then the Pope addressed us, in Italian. Translations into English had been provided.

I was sitting near the back. Somewhat to my surprise I discovered that after the address we were all being invited to meet the Pope, I had assumed it would be the front row only. He seemed to have all the time in the world for each person, eventually it was my turn. I found myself thinking: I seem to be talking to the Pope. I went away with the impression that I had met a very holy man.

Private photography was not allowed in the audience room, but there were official Vatican photographers busy photographing and videoing every minute—we could buy the photos afterwards. This meant that the Pope was bombarded by flash photography for the entire audience—how does he cope?

There was tumultuous applause as the Pope left at the end of the audience, including traditional ululation by some of the African sisters, you could see that the Pope enjoyed it.

The coaches were leaving at 1 pm, or so I thought, so I joined the swirling crowds of tourists and went into St Peter’s. Having just met a man like Pope Francis, it was a bit mind-blowing to be standing in the middle of all that triumphal imagery from previous centuries. Someone was celebrating the Mass at a side altar, and being totally ignored by the majority of people in the Basilica.

I headed back to the coach park, and behold, no coaches. There was only a couple of miles between me and lunch, so I walked back as fast as I could, and arrived before lunch had finished. No one had noticed that I had been left behind! I didn’t regret my walk in the noonday sun, my visit to St Peter’s had certainly provided me with food for thought.

To see my photos etc. take a look at the CIB website, there’s a link to it from the Turvey Abbey website.

