

Intro to mass: Golly, it is good to see you all again! I just got back from my sabbatical Thursday night. I left the parish on July 26 when the weather was hotter and gas prices were lower. Today as we celebrate Christ the King, and as our community prepares for Thanksgiving Day, let us thank God for all the blessings we have received in spite of our poverty, weakness and sin.

For the past few months I've been living at the Casa Santa Maria, a residence for about 70 American diocesan priests studying in Rome. I lived there 20 years ago when I was a full-time student. A lot has remained the same, and a lot has changed, but that is true of me, too. I had a small private room with a desk, a bookshelf, a bed and a sink - restrooms and showers down the hall. I prayed and ate meals with the other priests every day.

I also did some research and writing, and worked on a few foreign languages. It was nice to have time to focus on those things, and to take advantage of the history, art and food of Rome. I also met a number of priests and other people doing advanced study or working in Rome.

The pope makes at least two public appearances every week - he holds a general audience every Wednesday, and he recites the Angelus on Sundays. I saw Pope Benedict at some of those public events. He never did invite me over for a beer. But one evening the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra and 2 choirs from Germany performed a concert in honor of the pope and 100 bishops. I got to go, along with a few thousand other people. Pope Benedict plays classical piano, and one of the choirs performed a piece composed by his brother.

Last Wednesday I attended the general audience in St. Peter's Square, where the pope gave a reflection on one of the psalms. He said he hoped that all of us who were pilgrims in Rome would have our faith strengthened by our visit. And he assured us of his prayers for our families and friends at home, especially those who are sick, and children. At the end of the audience Pope Benedict blessed all of us there together with any religious articles we had brought along. So I have a gift for you at the end of mass today. You can each pick up a medal of the Holy Family, freshly blessed by Pope Benedict XVI.

While I was away, I also attended a conference in Dresden, Germany, made a retreat in Engelberg, Switzerland, and toured places such as Leipzig, where Johann Sebastian Bach is buried; Wittenberg, where Martin Luther is buried; Florence, where Michelangelo is buried; and Pisa, where the whole town will be buried if that tower ever falls.

As exciting as all that was, the best part of any trip is coming home. It is great to be back in the rectory here, to see all of you again - and to cheer for the Cameron High School Football Dragons. I look forward to meeting with the staff, the pastoral council, the building renovation committee, the stewardship council and the cemetery board in the weeks ahead. Thank you all for your continued service to our parish.

I have to thank the elves who snuck into the rectory kitchen and bathroom while I was gone, and painted, papered and hung new curtains and lighting. It really looks great.

I also owe a great deal of thanks to Tammy Mallen, our office manager, for steering the business end of parish life while I was gone - but also to other staff members Nancy Hanrahan, Pat Maier and Maureen Foster, for all their

work. Sandy Martin, who cleans the rectory every week - I nearly called to see if she'd mind flying over there to spruce up my room every so often.

I'm grateful to Father Aloysius Kasoma, who spent 2 months here, to the monks of Conception Abbey, who have filled in the other weekends, to other priests in the area, especially Father Bob Kerr, who was on call for emergencies, and two of our former pastors - Father Bill Caldwell and Father Pat Tobin, who helped us with funerals.

It breaks my heart that several people I knew here are no longer with us upon my return. I'd like to extend my sincerest condolences to the families of Dale Harter, Esther Hanrahan, Bob Bestgen, Richard Kirkendoll, Keith Griffin and Jerry Hockersmith. I never dreamed when I left that I would not see those people again. They have been much in my thoughts and prayers during my time in Rome, and in faith, God willing we will all see them again when Jesus comes again in glory.

That is what we celebrate today: Christ the King - the promise that Jesus will come again. Today we hear God speak through the prophet Ezekiel, "The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, and the sick I will heal." Let us thank God for being our companion during these past several months, for holding us together in love while we were apart. And let us see this reunion as a foreshadowing of the great one Christ has in mind when he will come to rule as our king forever.