



Fr. Thomas Leads Major Rome Pilgrimage

Forty-Eight Students, Missionaries, and Oratorians travel to Rome for 2025 Jubilee



All 48 members of the Rome pilgrimage in front of St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City.

By Hannah Naylor, Campus Minister

In the spring of 2024, I undertook my first pilgrimage to Rome – a band of twenty pilgrims composed of students from Carnegie Mellon, several Newman alumni, Fr. Thomas leading the charge, and us missionaries. Mouth agape, head perpetually tilted skyward, I moved through the city in astonishment as each turn revealed some fresco, some altar, some saint captured in stone, some image of Mary hidden on the outside walls. It was here, amid the ancient Church, that I grew in conviction, sharpened by experience, that Jesus Christ did indeed intend His Church to be one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic. Scripture and tradition took on a coherence so plain yet profound that they required no defense. And in each church – amidst the noise of tourists, the flicker of camera flashes, the beautiful art – I found that the best and highest use of time was always the same: to find the tabernacle and sit quietly in prayer. In my time following Christ, I have been blessed with many opportunities to travel on missions or

pilgrimages – from Lourdes, to Fatima, to Peru and India and beyond. Each place left its mark. But Rome was different. There, amid the domes and relics and saints, it felt like I had come home. And as I departed, as I inevitably had to, I did so with the assurance that I would return.

Sure enough, the next Fall, Fr. Thomas mentioned that we would once again be making our way to the streets of Rome during the Jubilee Year of Hope! I knew right away that I would be going and was all the more delighted when he invited me to help plan and lead the trip. This time, however, with the alignment of all the campus calendars, we would undertake the journey en masse, filling the convents that we call home for the week to whatever capacity could be negotiated with the sisters. The group came together beautifully – a mix of missionaries and students, both undergraduate and graduate, a couple expecting mothers and their spouses – amounting in all to forty-eight

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Newman Center Graduates Largest Class in History

By Fr. Peter Gruber, C.O.

It was Friday, August 27, 2021. The Newman Center was open, COVID restrictions were relaxed, and we did not know how we would build up the campus ministry after a year of social distancing. Incoming students at Pitt, CMU, and Chatham were invited for a Freshman Pizza Night at the Newman Center.

The response was overwhelming. More than fifty new faces, hungry for more than just pizza, filled the downstairs Student Center and Gameroom. They too felt the lack of community from the pandemic, and they felt the need to grow in their faith.

Four years later, after many foosball games and holy hours, on April 30, 2025, the Oratory hosted the largest group of graduating seniors that the Newman Center has ever seen. Forty

two seniors from the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, and Chatham University were able to attend the Baccalaureate Mass and Dinner with their families and Newman Center friends.

This graduating class represents new hope. They revitalized a Newman Center and a campus ministry, staying close to Christ while supporting each other through trials large and small. From my perspective as their chaplain, I have seen tremendous strides in friendship, evangelization, and emotional maturity, through mission trips and pilgrimages, Rednal retreats and work weeks, First Friday Feasts and Newman Nights, and countless hours in the chapel and at the Newman Center. They lived out Pope Benedict XVI's words as their motto:

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The 2025 Seniors after the Baccalaureate Mass on April 30, 2025

Oratory Welcomes Joe Aul as Property Manager

By Becca Mamell, Office Manager

This past June, the Oratory welcomed Joe Aul as our new Property Manager. His responsibilities include taking over the care of the main Oratory building on Bayard Street, our second house on Bigelow Blvd, and Rednal Retreat House, where he inherits Matt Ketcham's responsibilities. Here he introduces himself in his own words:

I was born and raised in the South Hills of Pittsburgh. I am the oldest of eight children. Faith and family have always been our priority as a family and we are a very tight knit group. We all were homeschooled through high school and I am a proud graduate of

St. Vincent College. I have always played baseball at a high level and even won a national championship as an amateur on a semi pro team after college.

For work, I started and own the Aul Bat Company which is an industry leader in small business wood bat manufacturing since 2012. I have also worked for my dad in small construction, doing nearly every trade, since as long as I can remember. I have also done contracting work for the church for the last seven years. I have been a baseball coach for the past fifteen years, working with and running teams of players ages 8 years old through high school, along with college players.

In my free time I enjoy exercising,

traveling and doing tactical training as well as playing baseball, and most importantly spending time with my beautiful wife.

Something most people don't know about me, I had a nomination to the Naval Academy and wanted to become a Navy SEAL, but since God had other ideas, I now spend every day trying to become a "Navy SEAL saint."

My goals for the Oratory are to be able to develop my natural leadership ability and apply the vastly different skills I have acquired over the years towards forwarding the mission of the Oratory and to integrate faith and work while being a strong witness to others.



Joe and his wife, Mathildé, hiking in the hills of Germany.

Oratorians in the Summer

What have the Oratorians been up to?

By Fr. Peter Gruber, C.O.

The Oratory and Newman Center are far from quiet during the summer months. Minus the 9pm daily Mass Monday through Thursday, the offerings of daily Mass, Confession, and Adoration largely remain the same as during the academic terms. However, the summer provides an opportunity for Oratorians to be away to attend to personal retreats, mission trips, weddings, summer vacations, and much needed breaks. Those that are behind in Pittsburgh staff a constantly buzzing Oratory.

In June, Fr. Michael and Br. Matthew led a mission trip to Huntington, WV. with about 40 students from Central Catholic and Oakland Catholic High Schools – many of whom were repeat attendees from the same trip last year! For the second year in a row, they did mission work with the homeless and poor, volunteering at day shelters and food banks, and visiting the homebound and sick. Br. Matthew describes the trip, “Working with the local high school students who sacrificed their first week on summer vacation to go on a mission trip and grow in their faith was very inspiring and moving. I look forward to next year’s trip!” Br. Matthew also benefited from some preaching practice, giving a “ferverino” one evening on corporal and spiritual works of mercy.



Fr. Michael with some of the Oakland Catholic students cleaning a porch in Huntington, WV.

Fr. Thomas made his retreat in July at the Port Antonio Oratory in Jamaica. His five day retreat was bookended by a weekend of intense pastoral work at the three parishes that the Port Antonio Oratory ministers to in northeastern Jamaica. The Pittsburgh Oratory has enjoyed a close relationship with our brothers in Jamaica, often going for mission trips with students and assisting



The view from the back patio of the Port Antonio Oratory overlooking the Errol Flynn Marina.

in pastoral ministry. In particular, Fr. Thomas was blessed to spend time with Fr. Joe Berg, who passed away only a few days after Fr. Thomas returned to Pittsburgh. Fr. Joe lived a long life as a pilot, electrician, harmonica player, priest, and Oratorian. He would have been 91 years old on September 16th, and he just celebrated his 31st anniversary of priesthood on July 10th. May he rest in peace.

Fr. Peter’s summer always begins



The restored landscape around the Mary statue behind Rednal after a summer storm. This past winter was so harsh that the deer ate all of the evergreens, requiring extensive replanting.

with rigorous manual labor at Rednal. Over eighteen students and Oratorians made their way out to Ligonier to work on projects. In those five days, they accomplished extensive clearing of brush, planting of over twenty trees and shrubs, building an outdoor firewood rack, splitting of a years worth of firewood, organizing of the barn, and cleaning the house – all while maintaining a robust Mass and Adoration schedule. The Thursday of Work Week, we gathered in the Rednal Conference Room to watch the white smoke and the arrival on the Loggia of Pope Leo XIV, and immediately afterwards offered Mass in thanksgiving for his election.

Soon after Rednal Work Week, Fr. Peter visited Lima, Peru for his fifth trip there. There he met up with Sean Springer, a recent Newman Center graduate who was volunteering for a month with a group of missionaries called Bridges. This group works on the edges of Lima with the poorest

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Newman Center Graduates

Largest Class in History

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“There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know Him and to speak to others of our friendship with Him.” Manny Basnet of the Class of 2025 said it poignantly, “The Newman Center here has been one of the greatest blessings of my entire life. I am witnessing the formation of saints with my own eyes.”

Fr. Brian Welding, pastor of St. Michael the Archangel Parish, and graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, gave the homily at the Baccalaureate Mass. He recalled fondly his time at the Oratory and expressed his gratitude for the formation he received here. As pastor of a vibrant parish where many of our alumni find themselves after graduation, we are incredibly thankful for his witness and spiritual fatherhood.

It is the nature of campus ministry that those that we serve come and go. We Oratorians stay, the students graduate and move on. However, they take with them the formation, the catechesis, and the relationships with Christ and each other, which were nurtured here. They are sacramentally rooted and ready for the next stage of their life. I find it encouraging to look around the Diocese of Pittsburgh – and around the world – and see as Catholic leaders in parishes the students who came into their faith while at the Oratory.

The students of the class of 2025 are entering into the next stage of their lives. Many are entering the work force, many others are going on to graduate school, some are becoming missionaries, and a few are moving towards their religious or priestly vocation. Please pray for them. The Church needs them to be saints.

The Lost Sheep at CMU

A Student Reflection

By Nelly Hadlaw

Nelly is a recent graduate of Carnegie Mellon University and is now a FOCUS missionary serving at Columbia University.

The Lord has brought me home by leading me to this beautiful community at the Pittsburgh Oratory. For nineteen years, my heart longed for true, authentic friendship – a love that asked for nothing in return, a place where I didn’t have to prove my worth. Looking back, the years of rejection, isolation, and woundedness were not meaningless. God, in His mercy, used those very moments to write a greater story – one of healing, hope, and homecoming.

I was the lost sheep, and the Good Shepherd never stopped pursuing me. I searched desperately for love and belonging – in people, places, and paths that were never meant to satisfy. But God had something better. He was drawing me, step by step, to this community, this Oratory, this family. The Newman Center has become one of the greatest gifts of my life. It is here that I found what I had been missing. My heart belongs here, and I pray every college student gets to experience something so full of life and grace.

It all began by simply showing up. I’d bring my homework to the Newman basement, linger at the edges of conversations, and try to feel like I belonged. One small risk – asking someone to get coffee – led to one friendship, then another, and eventually many. At first, I resisted this community, thinking I knew what I needed better than my Heavenly Father did. But in time, I realized how wrong I was. Every person here reflects a unique and radiant beauty. These are my people. These are the Lord’s people.

I’ll deeply miss the moments after Mass – bumping into familiar faces, quick hellos that turned into long, heartfelt conversations, spontaneous



Nelly with fellow CMU students, Nathan Deyak and Nicholas Marshall, at the Baccalaureate Mass at Heinz Chapel.

games, and late-night hangouts filled with laughter and joy. I’ll miss the shared meals, sweet treats, and fun chats at the gazebo. Each memory is a treasure.

How fitting that our patron is St. Philip Neri, the patron saint of joy. The joy here is tangible. Every time I introduced someone new, they would marvel at the light and love that filled this space. That joy – so real, so rooted in Christ – is a testimony to God’s presence among us.

It’s not just the students who carry this light. The Oratorians reflect fatherly love in such a profound way. They’re not just spiritual guides – they live life alongside us, whether celebrating daily Mass, joining in a volleyball game, running half-marathons with us, or offering a timely word of wisdom. Their presence points us to Christ. And the FOCUS missionaries – what a gift. Their bold “yes” to the Lord is a beacon for us all. Their faith, friendship, and witness inspire us to grow deeper in love with Jesus.

As I step into the next chapter, my heart is full of gratitude. I don’t know what’s ahead, but I do know this: Jesus will be there. He is the constant, the anchor, the gift. This community led me home to Him.

Newman Center Welcomes

New FOCUS Missionaries



Pitt FOCUS Team: Lily Bernero, Maddie Fischahs, Dan Tully, Constance Violet. Not pictured: John Wang, Joseph Heaney



CMU FOCUS Team: Abbie Hedglen, Ian McCarron, Corinne Gorski, Morgan Gillis

Magnify the Lord: One Year In

By Fr. Peter Gruber, C.O.

In the summer of 2023, the idea of a capital campaign for the Oratory was a thought in the mind of Fr. Michael. Seeing the 1994 date on the building at Bayard Street and knowing our capital improvement needs, he brought the idea to the community. With the Oratorians behind it, we reached out to those that know and love the Oratory to gauge if we can make this happen. With their help, we came up with a plan to fund three areas: campus ministry expansion, building renewal, and investment in sacred liturgy. Entrusting the endeavor to Our Lady, we called it the “Magnify the Lord” campaign.

Officially launching last summer, we endeavored to raise \$4.5 million for this capital campaign over a three year pledge period. The response was overwhelming. By October, we reached and exceeded our goal. We are so thankful for everyone’s support!

With the pledges coming in, the work began. Here is an overview of what has been happening and what remains.

Goal: Campus Ministry Expansion

The greatest impact of the Magnify the Lord campaign came with the addition of Hannah Naylor as our Campus Minister. With her on board beginning last summer, we have been more organized and intentional in our outreach and evangelization of college students. In addition, we’ve worked with FOCUS to bring in two Varsity Catholic missionaries. These missionaries



Students in the renovated Newman Center at the annual Lenten Fish Fry.

engage with the sports teams at all three universities we serve. Investment in persons naturally (and supernaturally) results in more “heart to heart” ministry. As soon as FOCUS is able, we hope to add two more missionaries to work specifically at Chatham University, where we have made some headway recently reestablishing a Chatham Catholic Newman Club and starting two Chatham athlete Bible Studies.

Goal: Sacred Liturgy Renewal

If you’ve been around the Oratory the past year, you have surely noticed the construction, especially in the chapel. We had to be flexible with Mass, Adoration, and Confession moving locations to accommodate the work. Most of the construction has been completed: pew refurbishment, painting, sacristy renovation, choir loft, and organ installation. What still remains and will be completed soon is the updating of the lighting. You may have noticed that it has been darker in there - that will change soon!

As mentioned, included in this sacred liturgy renewal section of the capital campaign is the addition of the choir loft to the chapel, housing the new custom built Paul Fritts organ. This organ harmonizes beautifully with the chapel space visually and is acoustically well-suited to the prayerful and recollected nature of the Oratory’s liturgies. A massive improvement over our old electric organ, you likely have heard it aiding our singing at Mass or Solemn Vespers.

The construction of a choir loft was an ordeal! After it was built and the organ was installed, we noticed there was enough of a bounce to the loft floor to make it unsuitable for a mechanical pipe organ. Although plenty safe for the weight of the organ and choir, the problem was in the engineering of the beam – the bounciness makes the organ pipes rattle. And so, this past winter,

the beam was doubly reinforced with steel and concrete at no extra cost to us (minus the inconvenience of ongoing construction). The resulting loft beautifully and functionally integrates into the chapel and allows our talented singers to be heard and support the congregation’s singing.

The investment in the Oratory’s sacred liturgies also includes the expansion of our fellowship programs (in choral, choral conducting, and organ), the addition of professional singers to elevate feasts and solemnities, and the increased presence of the Director of Sacred Music, Nicholas Will, to teach our students and elevate our liturgies.

Reminiscent of St. Philip’s Oratory in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these improvements put the Pittsburgh Oratory at the center of a revitalization of sacred music for generations to come.

Goal: Building Renewal Projects

The Student Center downstairs is almost completed, just a little more lighting and some sound paneling remaining. Right now, after many delays due to permitting, the kitchen should be open for use. Hannah has been busy stocking the kitchen with everything we need, from toasters to ice cream scoops. Since the beginning of this past spring semester, the Student Center has seen a lot of use. It is a very comfortable space conducive to both study and the cultivation of deep friendships. We poured so much intentionality into designing the space, and it has paid off!

Since last year, all the public bathrooms in the building have been renovated, the lighting in the hallways has been replaced, and the front door has been updated to enhance building security. Just this past summer, the windows and roof have been replaced.

For the Oratory’s retreat house, Rednal, the plan is to begin most of



A view of the new choir loft and organ.

the projects next summer. The main projects are replacing the roof and siding, renovating the kitchen, updating the electrical wiring, and adding some air conditioning. This is likely the last year for the clay colored exterior; we have not yet determined the color, but I expect something more rustic, (maybe more red?). Rednal, after a busy summer next year, will continue to be a sanctuary for prayer and deep conversion.

Fundraising Overview

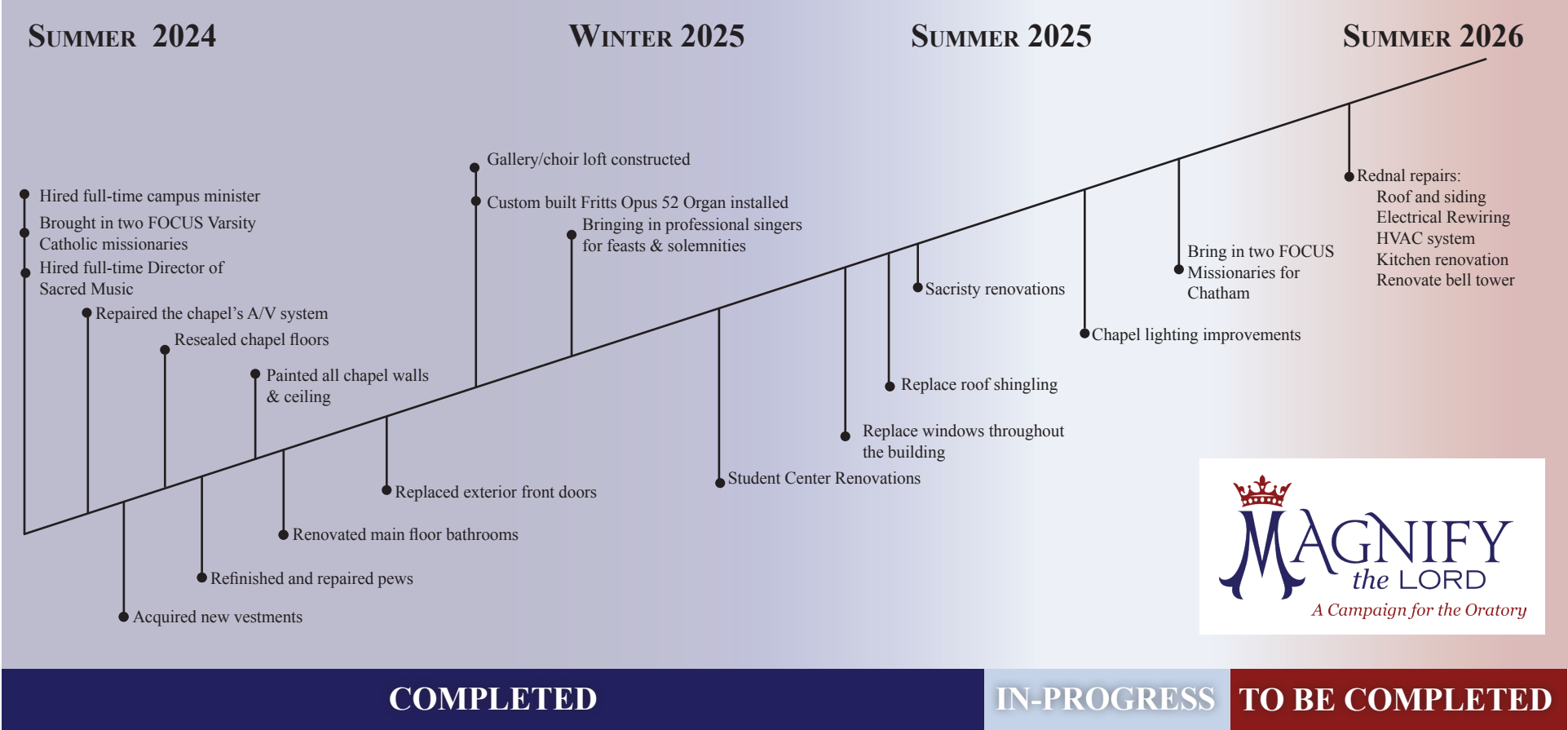
We learned a lot from this campaign, about how to run a campaign, about our own abilities, and about our donors. We began the Magnify the Lord Capital Campaign with a feasibility study and we worked with the Steier Group. Having completed the study and seeing that there was an overwhelming

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When is the construction going to be done?

Short answer: most of it has been completed. We can expect some interruptions to Adoration, but not to Mass, with the installation of the lighting in the chapel. Rednal will be the next to undergo a major renovation. We can safely say that, at the Oratory at Bayard Street, we are mostly out of the woods. Thank you for your patience!

Updated Magnify the Lord Capital Campaign Projects Timeline



Oratorians in the Summer

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of the poor living in Pamplona Alta, a shantytown of improvised housing made of cheap plywood and corrugated metal. Fr. Peter’s first mission trip was in 2017, where in addition to offering the sacraments, they worked on building retaining walls for safer roadways. His next three trips focused on constructing concrete stairs. Retaining walls make it so municipal water trucks can access tanks at the top of the town; stairs are a prerequisite for lighting and electricity. This past trip focused on pouring concrete for courts that will serve as places for communal gatherings, sports, and spaces for prayer, complete with beautiful statues of Mary for communal recitation of the rosary. It is a blessing to see this work unfold over eight years, and Fr. Peter looks forward to returning

in the spring of 2026 with a group of Pitt students and missionaries. In June, Fr. Peter visited our FOCUS missionaries at their summer training in Ave Maria, Florida. Afterwards, he and John Wang, one of our Pitt missionaries, traveled west for FOCUS Summer Projects at Camp Lolek in Southern California. Summer Projects is a program where college students work at a location full time, while being invested in through regular Bible Studies, discipleship, and prayer. At Camp Lolek, Fr. Peter served as chaplain for two weeks, providing Mass, Confession, Adoration, and spiritual direction to thirty college students, FOCUS Missionaries, and camp staff. After an eventful summer, we look forward to a full academic term this fall!



Fr. Peter in Pamplona Alta, after blessing the new retaining wall and statue of Mary.

Magnify the Lord: One Year In

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support for conducting a campaign, Steier Group presented a gift chart outlining the expected number of donors for the various gift amounts (see chart below). An astonishing 469 total donors contributed – well over the projected 251 – highlighting the breadth of support for this campaign. A healthy campaign would have more donations toward the bottom of the gift chart than toward the top. What surprised us is the sheer number of gifts under \$3,000 – 294 compared to the projected number of 70. Many would think that if they could not give a huge amount, that their gift would not be meaningful. But that is not the case. The reality is that every gift regardless of the size made this campaign and this ministry happen.

The Magnify the Lord Capital Campaign was an astonishing grassroots success. As heart to heart collaborators in the Lord – “co-workers in Christ Jesus” (cf. Romans 16:9) – we are thankful to all of our donors that helped us reach and exceed our goal and “magnify the Lord.”

Gift Amount	Donors Projected	Donors Actual
\$500,000 - \$1,000,000	1	1
\$250,000 - \$500,000	1	3
\$100,000 - \$250,000	2	3
\$50,000 - \$100,000	3	5
\$25,000 - \$50,000	8	13
\$15,000 - \$25,000	11	14
\$9,000 - \$15,000	30	20
\$6,000 - \$9,000	50	34
\$3,000 - \$6,000	75	82
\$1 - \$3,000	70	294
Total	251	469

Gift chart comparing the projected number of donors with the actual number of donors for each category.

Please Join Us
for the
Diaconate Ordination
of
Br. Kurt Kessler, C.O.



Saturday, May 16, 2026
More details to follow.

Fr. Thomas leads Rome Pilgrimage

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eager pilgrims. We boarded the plane, made our journey and arrived at our destination, and with jet lagged eyes, began our journey from one church to the next! Our pilgrims came to realize, some sooner than others, that a pilgrimage is very much not a vacation. Fatigue was universal, and a stomach bug swept through nearly half the group, making Lent’s arrival a providential stripping away of comfort, and offering instead the gifts of suffering and sanctity. Abbie, one of the FOCUS missionaries, reflected that “by encountering the saints in an entirely new way and persevering through physical illness, I was drawn to the reality of carrying the cross in daily life and dependence on Jesus to carry it with joy to bring about transformation in my heart.” One sensed that for all the tribulations – or perhaps because of them – something genuine had taken place: an encounter with the crucified Christ who suffered for their salvation and recognition that no suffering is ever wasted when united to Him. Many pilgrims spoke of encountering the saints. Jonathan, a senior at Pitt, remarked that “one of the greatest graces I received on our pilgrimage was the deep sense of peace and clarity that came from walking in the footsteps of so many saints.” Sophie, a recently graduated nursing student, added, “From exploring the streets once walked by many saints, to witnessing the breathtaking hills of Assisi and the extraordinary relics, every moment was truly special.” In entering the world once inhabited by the saints, they ceased to be distant figures – no longer mere icons suspended on the walls or intercessors carrying to the Lord our prayers. Their sanctity, once seemingly unattainable, now felt close – not as remote paragons, but as men and women whose love, virtue, and intimacy with the Lord now appeared not only admirable, but imitable. From what I have heard from those who journeyed with me, it is clear that each pilgrim left Rome bearing something of lasting weight. “This pilgrimage has truly deepened my faith and taught me to slow down, be present, and cherish each moment with others,” remarked Maren, an upcoming junior at Pitt. Adding to the significance of living in the present moment, Katherine, who just finished her freshman year at Pitt, shared “This pilgrimage taught me to live presently and to never see a single moment as an ‘in between.’ God had a plan for every



Group photo at the entrance of the first Oratory, San Giralomo, before a private tour that included St. Philip Neri’s personal quarters and the chance to venerate a relic of his heart.

second.”It is impossible to encounter Christ and keep it to ourselves. As Jonathan shared, he “came home with a renewed desire to live out [his] faith more intentionally and to share it with others.” It was a gift to see the students live this out upon their return to campus, bringing their friends and classmates into the community at the Newman Center.

One does not come to Rome without being confronted by beauty, and one cannot truly encounter beauty without, in some way, encountering God. As Pope Benedict XVI once observed, “Every moment that seizes us in wonder is a moment where we encounter God and enter into deeper communion with Him. That is what beauty is meant to do to us.” And so it was – through holy doors, worn marble steps, and in long pauses beneath frescoed naves – that these students, these pilgrims, came to commune with God.

As for me, it seems worth noting the condition in which I made my rather untimely return to the Eternal City. Two weeks before the departure, I had the misfortune – through a lapse in either judgment or grace on a ski slope – to injure my ACL and fracture my tibia, effectively curtailing the image I had privately constructed of myself striding once more into Rome with purpose and piety. I arrived late to the first church, in some discomfort, leaning heavily on a cane, and traveling much by way of Italian Uber instead of roaming the streets with the students. It became clear almost at once that every expectation I had for the pilgrimage would have to be quietly relinquished. There was a certain penitential aspect to it all and there was ample time for prayer – if only because there was no hurrying anywhere. What might have been a trial turned out instead to be a gift of enforced leisure. I moved, or rather limped, through the basilicas with an attentiveness, and always found my way to the tabernacle. And through it all, that unmistakable feeling that I had come back home. Similar to the feeling of going home to Alabama after a long semester, there was knowledge of the stones that lined the streets, peace and nostalgia in entering churches that I had seen before – and in the familiarity of it all, a kind of quiet, contemplative comfort knowing that one day, I would again return home.



Hannah with students along a hillside while on an outing in Florence, Italy.