Vatican
View from the Vatican
cafe on street near Vatican

Pilgrims and tourists stop at a cafe on Via della Conciliazione near St. Peter's Square and St. Peter's Basilica Aug. 15, 2023. The broad avenue is lined with many Vatican-owned buildings either used for Vatican offices and residences or rented out to earn money. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Rome — May 30, 2025
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Not long after I arrived in town as the National Catholic Reporter's Vatican correspondent, I attended a farewell dinner for a Roman Curia official who had served here for almost a decade.

It was the priest's last night in Rome and I asked him how he had spent his day. There were a few meetups with old colleagues, some final packing and then he noted that on his way to the dinner he walked by the *Penitenzieri* one final time.

"I figured if I didn't see anyone there I knew, my time here could be summarized as a complete failure," he joked.

Il Wine Bar De' Penitenzieri, or the "*Penitenzieri*" — or even "the Jesuit bar" — as everyone calls it for short, is steps from the Vatican and built into the side of the Jesuits' global headquarters. It's a cozy, if sometimes cramped space that offers more seating outside than indoors.

While pilgrims often pop in for a cappuccino after a papal audience or enjoy a spritz after a daylong visit to the Vatican Museums and St. Peter's, it's also an unofficial meeting place for people who work in and around the Vatican. Journalists, diplomats, Curia officials all interacting with one another — planned and unplanned.

It's the sort of place that is both a blessing and a curse: conveniently located steps from Vatican offices, quality food and drink and a place to see and be seen. It's nearly impossible to visit without running into someone you know — welcome and unwelcome encounters.

As I look back on my four years on this beat, I recall many educational experiences: working alongside colleagues from a range of cultures and countries, papal trips to every pocket of the globe and living in a city where every corner offers a history lesson.

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But it's in places like the *Penitenzieri* — or my also often frequented Latteria on the Borgo Pio — where the real learning has taken place. These are the venues where the inner workings of an often arcane institution become more accessible and where people, outside the confines of their sterile offices, become human.

Once, when leaving the *Penitenzieri* with a religious sister who had worked in the Vatican for some time, she stopped a waiter to ask for a recommendation for a bottle of gin.

"It's for a gift," she explained.

He looked up at the many bottles of spirits that lined their walls and offered a few knowledgeable suggestions.

"Thank you, I'll stop back by tomorrow," she said to him. Then, as we exited, she lowered her voice and said to me: "That gift is for me!"

We then agreed that in the future, we could meet for gin and tonics, not just coffee. I had learned something about her that day and consequently, I'd go on to learn a lot

more about the work she did, too.

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Jesuit Fr. James Hanvey, who serves as secretary for the Service of Faith to the General Curia of the Society of Jesus and is a *Penitenzieri* regular, once remarked to me that it's places like these where one encounters the *sensus fidelium*, where the living tradition of the church is experienced through the people of God. Cardinals, bishops, priests, religious sisters, lay women and men and nonbelievers alike, all sit elbow-to-elbow. Some might even say it is synodal.

A couple months ago, I walked past the *Penitenzieri*, accompanied by a cardinal whom I had just met with. This was during the intense days of Pope Francis' hospitalization where the future seemed uncertain. To lighten the mood, I casually recalled Hanvey's observation about the place and said I thought I might write about it as a farewell column.

He agreed wholeheartedly but offered a further insight: "It's also the antithesis of the Curia!" he said. "Despite being in Rome, it's truly an international place and the universality of the church is really felt."

We are now just a few weeks into the papacy of Leo XIV, the first U.S.-born pontiff — but with a biography that bridges three continents. As former Vatican spokesperson Greg Burke recently wrote in the The New York Times, Leo's multicultural background could help turbocharge some long-overdue Vatican reforms.

But these are still early days. There will be much to dissect and decipher, and I'll continue to do so from afar — likely with more mediocre wine and coffee than I enjoyed at these fine cafes that have served as my second offices around the Vatican and where I came to better understand its culture.

But for now, I'll leave with the final words that people shouted warmly on the way out the door: *Arrivederci!* — "until we meet again."

The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.