

Are You Walking in God's Great Adventure for Your Life?

As I sipped the golden-brown foam off the top of the most delicious cappuccino I've ever tasted—my wife, Michelle, and I looked out from the crowded coffeehouse, across the cobblestone streets, to the Pantheon, one of the wonders of ancient Rome. Once used for the worship of various gods, the Pantheon eventually became a worship hall for Christians, and now, two thousand years later, it overflows with tourists for it still captivates the imagination with awe and wonder. It is an architectural masterpiece in the heart of Rome, just blocks from the Vatican, and a 20-minute walk from the Colosseum. So much history has unfolded in these streets. My taste buds—as well as my mind—were exploding with sensory overload and bliss.

I'd long wanted to visit the nation of my Italian grandmother Longiotti's roots. The opportunity finally came after Michelle and I had been married a few years, and we decided to visit Milan, Florence and Rome. Milan had the feel of a global city, with a lot of high-end shopping. Florence had the air of old Italy. And Rome, once the epicenter of the earth, is the eternal city, home to not only the Vatican but countless ancient wonders. There you find the modernity of today's world, but you can also get lost in the cobblestone streets and artifacts, not to mention the pizza, spaghetti and coffee of a past world.

Rome was breathtaking. Aside from getting lost on cobblestone walkways, admiring the architecture, and savoring the food, we visited many ancient sites, including the Colosseum. This is where countless gladiators were forced to do battle in front of thousands of onlookers who jeered and cheered the warriors

to their death. It's hard to believe that any culture could be so callous as to make sport out of something like this, but it's part of our human story.

Christians have always been at odds with the culture around them, and the first Christians were no exception. At times, the Roman Empire persecuted Christians for worshipping Jesus rather than the emperor. Christians claimed to be part of a different kingdom, and for that they were perceived as a threat. Much of this persecution happened right there in the Colosseum. We paid to gain entrance and wound down the ancient stairwells and peered into the underground halls and closures that housed both victims and animals.

It was here that ancient Christians knelt and cried out to God for deliverance before being fed to the beasts in front of the mocking crowds. There are no words to express the horror of what took place. The savagery that Christians have endured throughout history, including being persecuted around the world today, reminds us of the mind-boggling value of our faith. Those Christians could have simply denied Jesus and been set free, but they valued what Christ meant to them more than their own lives.

After our tour, we visited a few other ancient buildings and then wound our way back around the Colosseum in search of lunch. After a quick bite, we continued down the street and stumbled upon an old church. Its underground passages seemed to take us further and further back in history until, at the bottom of the site, we entered rooms and halls where some of the very first Christians worshipped and prayed. Most likely, they prayed for some of their own who were being taken to the Colosseum to their deaths. They prayed for their communities and their city and the world that the message of Jesus would be carried far and wide through their witness. They prayed for, and possibly along with, the apostle Paul and the apostle Peter before both of those men were martyred in the city. We were breathing the air of legends!

As we wound down those stairs, deeper and deeper into the roots of our collective Christian faith, we couldn't help but sense the magnitude of what we've inherited today in Christ, in the church. This isn't some newfound faith, where we get to make up the rules as we go. We stand on the shoulders of all those who have gone before us, with their abiding faith and unforgettable impact on the world. Their faith helps us grasp the gravity of our faith today. Jesus, the hope of the world, has worked in countless lives through the centuries, including our own.

But sometimes it can feel as if we're doing pitifully little compared to those Christians who gave their lives in the Colosseum or those on whose shoulders of prayers and sacrifice the first churches were built. The gospel spread at breakneck speed long before internet was ever invented. Those early Christians knew that the message had transformed their lives, and they showed it in everything from their passion to spread the gospel to the very act of martyrdom—giving their lives rather than denying the gospel of Jesus Christ.

God has a place and a purpose for us today as well. He wants to build His beautiful kingdom on our shoulders too. He is working in and through us to help us follow Him. He created us and saved us for good works, which He has prepared in advance for us to do. We are part of this great adventure of representing God to our world. {eoa}

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