



When in **Rome**

by Robert Mickens
photos by Tom Rochford, SJ

A unique place to worship in English in the Eternal City

A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY baroque oratory, a prayer hall, in the heart of old Rome where Mozart once played the organ might seem an odd sort of place to find a paradigm of post-Vatican II liturgy. But the Jesuit oratory of San Francesco del Caravita is exactly where English-speaking Catholics can experience good preaching, excellent music, full lay participation, and a place to call their spiritual home in the Eternal City.

For almost a decade this little architectural jewel has drawn together an international group of people for Mass each Sunday at 11:00 A.M. On any given week one can find folks from as many as twenty different countries from the majority of continents. They are journalists, diplomats, international businesspeople, professors, and students. There are also a few Italians to keep things native.

The Caravita oratory is in an ideal location for attracting visitors, as well. It stands just a few doors down from the Jesuits' famous Church of Sant'Ignazio. That's the one where the body of Jesuit Robert Bellarmine—fully cloaked in his red cardinal's robes—is on display under a side altar.

But if you are looking for dead bodies, don't come to Caravita, because the worshipping community here is very much alive.

When Fr. Keith Pecklers, SJ, started offering these liturgies back in October 2000, he and the three other priests he invited to help with the pastoral ministry decided to focus its mission specifically on the baptismal commitment of all believers. To this day it includes a special emphasis on the role of women in the Church. There are good historic reasons for that. "The oratory was built in 1632 to house nine different lay confraternities in

Mozart once played beautiful music in San Francesco del Caravita, a Jesuit oratory in Rome. Today it's a liturgical "home" for a mostly English-speaking congregation who enjoy each other's fellowship at 11 A.M. Masses on Sundays, such as this one celebrated by Fr. Mark Francis, CSV.

the building, including the first to admit women,” says Pecklers. Confraternities were the precursors of other religious groups of primarily lay people, such as sodalities and today’s Christian Life Communities, that were founded to promote special works of Christian charity, such as caring for the sick, the homeless, and those in prison.

“We began with a special mission of trying to reach those who had not been to church in years or were somehow on the fringe,” says Pecklers, a New Jersey native whose day job is teaching liturgy at the Gregorian University and the Pontifical Liturgical Institute of Sant’Anselmo.

Caravita’s current interior layout was especially designed to help draw people around the table of the Lord. “When I began envisioning what it would look like, I chose the monastic choir style of chairs on the left and right, presidential chair at one end and ambo at the other,” says Pecklers. When Italians poke their noses through the oratory’s massive green doors, they are often baffled. “Is this a Catholic church?” some ask. The answer is implicit in the handsome wooden furniture made by monks and nuns at the Ecumenical Monastery of Bose, a well-known spiritual oasis in northern Italy.

The “ecumenical” aspect has been an essential part of the Caravita community from the beginning of its twenty-first century revival. This Catholic

community has built strong bonds of friendship and joint cooperation with the nearby Anglican Centre, an office headed by the Archbishop of Canterbury’s personal representative in Rome. There is a monthly ecumenical evening prayer that includes members of the Eternal City’s Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Lutheran communities. And each year, worshippers from the Caravita Catholic community and All Saints Anglican parish begin Holy Week with the communal blessing of palms and olive branches before processing to their separate churches on Palm Sunday.

Non-Catholic Christians, including the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord George Carey, have also been featured at the regular lecture series, *Conversazioni* at Caravita. There have been a number of prominent Catholic speakers as well, including bishops from missionary territories and officials from the Vatican. Msgr. Donald Bolen, who recently returned to his native Canada after a number of years at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, was a member of Caravita’s pastoral staff. Today, others serving on the pastoral staff are Fr. Mark Francis, CSV, superior general of the Clerics of St. Viator; Fr. James Hentges, OSC, assistant general of the Crosier Fathers; and Fr. Don LaSalle, SMM, vicar general of the Montfort Missionaries.

The Sunday celebration is enhanced by the vol-

Fr. Keith Pecklers, SJ, (on left) takes part in a blessing of palms and olive branches on Palm Sunday. Caravita’s congregation and parishioners from All Saints Anglican join for this tradition and then process (next page) to their own churches.





Near the Jesuits' Roman College and the Church of Saint Ignatius, the Jesuit oratory of San Francesco del Caravita (between the two buildings to the left of the church) was headquarters for laypeople who served Rome's poor in the seventeenth century. The congregations these men and women formed were precursors of sodalities and Christian Life Communities.

untary work of a core group of musicians, liturgical planners, and other helpers. One of the most inviting features at Caravita is the after-Mass fellowship that includes snacks and beverages in the atrium. Often it is a chance to forge new friendships or meet visitors from far-flung parts of the world who are passing through the Eternal City.

Caravita is coming of age as it approaches its tenth anniversary next year. After the purchase of the new chairs and altar, there is also a long-term goal of acquiring a quality organ. But even without these luxuries, the community thrives.

When in Rome, make Caravita part of your Sunday plans. 📍



Robert Mickens is Vatican correspondent for the international Catholic weekly *The Tablet*. He studied at the Jesuits' Gregorian University in Rome and worked at Vatican Radio.

Photographer Tom Rochford, SJ, is the director of communications for the Society of Jesus, based at the Jesuit Curia in Rome.