

Posted By Julieta Ana Valls Noyes to L'Altro Ieri (*The Other Yesterday*) at 11/07/2010

A few weeks ago, a woman religious who is a friend -- or a former teacher? (I never quite understood) -- of my mom's contacted me to say she was coming to Rome. So, it turned out, were a bunch of other nuns from her order, who were participating in a leadership seminar. While here, the sisters also planned to visit the statue of their founder, Saint Rafaela Maria de Porras, which was recently installed on an exterior wall of St. Peter's.

(Aside: I had always known these nuns as "Las Esclavas" -- or, literally, "the Slaves." Like a lot of things you learn as a kid and take for granted without thinking about it, that name did not bother me. But when Sister contacted me, I started wondering what their name was in English. It turned out, to my great relief, that in English they are known as the "Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.")

Back to my story, Sister Katherine Joy --KayJoy -- wrote me several chatty emails, and I replied. Eventually, we agreed to meet for lunch at the convent for the order in Rome. I learned from our correspondence that Sister KayJoy had recently had hip replacement surgery. Moreover, I found out that as a result of this surgery, she had been limited in how much of Rome she could see. She did not have a car, and public transportation to St. Peter's is limited -- and non-existent within Vatican City. So, to reciprocate her kind invitation to lunch, I offered to show Sister KayJoy and two other sisters -- including Sister Dorothy, who just had knee replacement surgery -- around Vatican City with our embassy car and driver after lunch.



I arrived at the convent and was first given the privilege of visiting the rooms where Sister Rafaela lived and died, and of visiting her uncorrupted body in the convent's chapel. There, I knelt in prayer with the sisters. After prayer, we had lunch with many other sisters -- I believe every single one of them came up to greet and welcome me! They certainly made me, a stranger, feel welcome in their home. It was also fascinating to hear the stories from Sister Ana, a Spanish nun who has served in Cuba for the last three years. After lunch, we all joined together

in singing happy 80th birthday to Sister Dorothy. I had flashbacks of the warmth and sisterhood of my days at Wellesley. There is much to be said for all-women environments, I am convinced.

And then three of the sisters and I went to my car for the visit to Vatican City. It was not a big deal for me. After all, I visit Vatican City -- every part of Vatican City - with great regularity. But it turned out that for Sisters KayJoy, Dorothy, and SAGRARIO, it was a special occasion. I showed them inner courtyards and views they had never seen, despite repeated trips to Rome. Given the difficulty two of them had in walking after their surgeries, it would also have been hard for them to see these areas if not in a private car. We made a few stops for photos, which were lovely. But more meaningful still were the various stops for prayer. At the statue of Saint Rafaela,



Sister Sagrario led a prayer for my three children that had me just about in tears. And inside St.



Peter's, we all recited the Prayer of the Faithful together at the altar of the Seat of St. Peter (while all the tourists who could not get in that far wondered who we were, no doubt).

That evening, the sisters sent me a beautiful thank you message via email. But the truth is that spending those hours with them, witnessing the faith that has sustained them through many decades and to which they have devoted their lives, and benefiting from their prayers, enriched me far more than anything I did for them.



So Sisters KayJoy, Dorothy, and Sagrario, this blog entry is my thanks to YOU.