

Oratorio del Caravita

By John L. Allen Jr.

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Rome is the Catholic city par excellence, so virtually everything that happens here is in some sense exemplary. Yet even against this backdrop, the 11:00 AM Sunday liturgy at the Oratory of St. Francis Xavier “del Caravita” is still, in the eyes of most observers, a cut above.

A four-year-old English-language community, “Caravita,” as everyone calls it, offers one of the most satisfying liturgical experiences in town—and, in so doing, provides a model of how to blend deep fidelity with creativity.

From its never-quite-in-excess use of incense, to the sparkling preaching, to the even more sparkling *prosecco* served after Mass, Caravita has a distinctive signature. Casually and without obvious effort, everything is done with class—with attention to detail, thoughtfulness, and a just-right touch of insouciance. It can be a Dada-esque pastiche of high church liturgical style and the fellowship of a Quaker community center, but somehow it works.

Located in the heart of modern Rome, in a sixteenth-century Jesuit oratory where Mozart once played the organ, Caravita has become a point of reference for English-speaking members of religious communities, diplomats, journalists, and even officials of the Holy See, as well as visitors to Rome from every point of the compass. Anyone wanting to see what *Sacrocsanctum Concilium* had in mind—a liturgical experience fully faithful to the past, but also radically open to the here-and-now—ought to put Caravita on the itinerary.

Caravita was founded by a quartet of Rome-based priests. Three were Jesuits—Americans Keith Pecklers, who taught at Sant’ Anselmo at the time, and today at the Gregorian, and Jerome Hall; plus Australian Dan Madigan, an expert on Islam, also at the Greg. The fourth is the superior of the Viatorian Fathers, also an American, named

Mark Francis. (Hall has since gone back to the States and been replaced by another American Jesuit, Tom Splain).

Pecklers said he came across Caravita in 2000, when some Italian Jesuits pitched the idea of starting up a Mass in the area for English-speaking tourists. As he learned the history of Caravita, he said, he saw the potential for something more than a service for tourists.

“The oratory was constructed in the 1630s to house nine lay ‘congregations’ who met there for prayer and formation,” Pecklers said. “This was where the Sodality began. From the doors of this church, lay women and men went forth to dedicate themselves to the poor and sick of Rome in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

“Interestingly, it was the first place where a women’s ‘congregation’ met. Formerly, such groups met inside of cloistered areas of Jesuit houses, thus ‘men only.’” But since Caravita was now a public space, it offered the possibility of a women’s society as well. Formators were Jesuit professors of the Roman College just across the street who came across the bridge (which still exists) to join these different lay groups on different evenings each week.

“Knowing something of the history of Caravita, I thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be great to return to that early vision of Caravita, with baptism, lay ministry, special appreciation for the role of women in the Church as the focal points for a Sunday eucharistic community?’”

Those guiding impulses are at the heart of Caravita’s appeal, but there’s something else too—Pecklers and Francis are both highly talented liturgists, Splain is an anthropologist attentive to the importance of ritual, and Madigan is an Islamic scholar gifted at understanding the meaning of symbols and rites. These qualities make the preaching, the ritual style, and the celebratory “feel” at Caravita unique—it’s

virtually a “dream team” from a pastoral point of view.

Madigan, for example, once preached on the Final Judgment, using as his point of departure traditional images of condemnation implied, for example, in Michelangelo’s famous Sistine Chapel frescoes. Madigan argued, however, that *judgment* actually means something like “appraisal,” and hence is analogous to a skilled metallurgist who can spot the core of gold beneath the accumulated dust and debris in a chunk of rock. That, Madigan suggested, may be our experience of judgment: God’s infinite capacity to see and lift up the gem within each of us.

Offer that kind of reflection every week, and it’s no surprise people show up.

Moreover, the Mass is always celebrated with terrific reverence, impeccable pacing (Mass is usually an hour and fifteen minutes) and a reasonable, but not slavish, fidelity to the rubrics. The proof of the pudding is in the eating: Caravita draws a mix of self-declared traditionalists and progressives, each equally enchanted by the experience.

Pecklers describes the liturgical philosophy this way: “We try to implement the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council as best as possible, making full use of all the liturgical ministries, good singing (and all the verses of the hymns in the *Worship* hymnal). Everyone is incensed, everyone is offered the chalice at the time of Communion. The goal has been to follow the Roman rite with its many options, but to let that rite come alive in all its fullness. That said, the style is more classical (what some might call ‘high church’) than contemporary—lots of incense, vesture, processions, etc. But it is also very human.”

Attracted by Peckler’s vision and the quality of the liturgical celebration, laity from around the city have made Caravita their own. The priests largely take their cues from the rest of the community regarding group initiatives, such as whether or not to organize a traditional Thanksgiving dinner or a spring picnic, or to put together a

church meeting or a public lecture when a noted speaker is in town.

Caravita thus offers occasional lectures and guest speakers. Fr. Richard P. McBrien of the University of Notre Dame and the former master general of the Dominicans, Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, have both preached at the church.

This past year, at the suggestion of one member, Caravita hosted a six-part ecumenical lecture series called “Conversazione” at Caravita. Speakers included former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey of Clifton, who spoke together with his wife, Eileen; Geoffrey Wainright and Australian Bishop Michael Putney, cochairs of the Methodist–Roman Catholic dialogue; Nathan Mitchell of Notre Dame; Anglican Bishop David Stancliffe of Salisbury, England; and Professor Mary Tanner, a leading figure in the Anglican–Roman Catholic dialogue.

The ecumenical thrust continued this fall, as the Anglican Centre in Rome is organizing a week-long course at Caravita entitled “Equipping Lay Ministers for Liturgy.” Even though it is geared to Anglicans, Pecklers has been asked to lead it. Caravita offers the Anglicans a vantage point to observe what the community does, and to discuss it. The group of 20–30 Anglicans will come to Caravita for Mass on the last Sunday of January 2005 and observe the worship. After Mass, Francis will meet with them to discuss what they observed. During the week, Pecklers will offer lectures on the liturgy but using Caravita as a point of reference.

Moreover, Caravita has acquired a multicultural profile. It’s now also home to Rome’s Mexican community, which gathers twice a month on Sunday afternoons for Eucharist in Spanish and a fiesta afterwards. Pecklers said the hope is to organize a mixer for the two communities, perhaps around the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe or Cinco de Mayo.

Ties among Caravita regulars run deep. Last Lent, for example, a number of members shared an overnight Lenten retreat

outside of Rome in the Castelli lead by two women of the community.

What keeps these busy, high-profile people coming back?

“Because it’s worth it,” Pecklers said. “It serves as an anchor, a place of refuge, for members who live in Rome, and a place of welcome for visitors. It’s also very nourishing and important for the pastoral staff. We all have full-time jobs elsewhere. Personally, as a professor of liturgy, it gives me the opportunity to model what I teach, along with its relationship to Christian service (*diakonia*), justice, and hospitality.

“The guiding principle from the beginning, which appeared on publicity flyers and has remained at the heart of our approach, was also borrowed (like the *prosecco*) from Protestant churches (in this case, from their bulletin boards): ‘All Are Welcome.’”

John L. Allen, Jr., is the Vatican correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter. His most recent book is All the Pope’s Men: The Inside Story of How the Vatican Really Thinks (Doubleday, 2004).