



**BUMPING  
INTO GOD  
IN THE  
KITCHEN**

*Savory Stories of Food, Family, and Faith*

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## REFLECTIONS FROM THE ETERNAL CITY

*E*ach of us faces times when we are alone. The kitchen is dark. The table is empty. But even these moments can provide us with the opportunity to remember the good times, the wonderful stories, and the bountiful tables. Those memories can help us through the dark times and support us until we come up on the other side again.

Eighteen years after my first trip to Rome, I returned for a fifth visit to the Eternal City. Every time I have visited the city, the pope has been away from the Vatican. There is a standing joke among my friends and family members that he must have known I was coming. Except for my first visit, when my family and I did what tourists do in Rome—saw the sights, ate fabulous food, and were nearly run over in the busy streets—Rome has just been a transfer point on my travels to the family hometown in

the south of Italy. On this latest trip, though, I would be spending some time in Rome before moving on to Venice and ultimately to Tuscany.

My fifth trip to Rome was different in a lot of ways from the trip eighteen years earlier. My knees had a harder time with the cobbled walkways of the piazzas. I needed to join in the afternoon siestas rather than pushing on with the sightseeing. I had a much harder time getting in the smaller cabs. My understanding and knowledge of Italian words had faded more than some of the medieval tapestries we saw in the Vatican museums. And I was truly grateful that the hotel was more American in style and attitude than some pensione; I preferred the comfortable to the quaint. Even so, I wished that the air conditioner would crank out a cooler breeze. And the nine-hour flight there, despite the business-class seating, was uncomfortable. I realize that a lot of the differences were, of course, in me and not in Italy.

Some things, however, had not changed—in me or in Italy. During my first trip to Rome, I had walked through St. Peter's Basilica (joking that I was finally visiting the home office) eighteen years ago and had stumbled upon a small altar at the front right side of the church. It was surrounded by wooden confessionals in which the sacrament of reconciliation was offered in many languages. Beneath

the altar and behind glass lay the remains of St. Josaphat, bishop and martyr. Right before that trip I had been appointed pastor of St. Josaphat Parish in Chicago. While I was standing at the altar, as I have related in a previous story, I was approached by an old monk who told me the life story of the saint and urged me to bring the people home to the parish. Even today, I remain convinced that I encountered the ghost of St. Josaphat that day. So on this latest trip back to Rome and St. Peter's, I was eager to say a prayer at the altar and thank St. Josaphat for the good advice he'd given me.

The altar was exactly where I remembered it to be, but for some reason it was roped off. So I contented myself with standing about thirty feet away and saying a brief prayer. My brother, however, told a sympathetic guard that I was a priest, and he immediately let us past the ropes so that I could kneel in front of St. Josaphat for a while. Unfortunately, the old monk was nowhere to be found.

As I knelt there thanking him for my eighteen blessed years at the parish, I realized that, with a lot of help and God's grace, the parishioners and I had made it truly a church to come home to. I knew that my faith had been weak too many times, that at times I had tried to do everything myself, once ending up exhausted and hospitalized.

At other times my faith was tested by those in authority who wanted me to be more concerned about the rules and regulations and less with the needs of the people. I didn't always make the right choices. But in those times I would remember that St. Josaphat had died trying to bring the people together. And that kept me going.

Now, eighteen years after my first visit to the altar honoring St. Josaphat, I had resigned from that parish and was waiting to be assigned to the next. I took these moments before the altar to think about how my pastorate at St. Josaphat Parish had become the benchmark of my life and my ministry. Over those years so much had happened. Mom had died and been buried from St. Josaphat, the church filled with sympathetic parishioners and friends. My three friends in the priesthood—Jim, Jack, and John—who had been with me at my installation as pastor, had also died, each too soon. I felt their presence at my farewell liturgy. Ruby and John—each a spiritual director and friend—also were gone. Like St. Josaphat, all of these loved ones would travel with me wherever my life's journey would lead. I needed to be confident of that.

So, kneeling there in St. Peter's, I had so much to place in prayer. Just as the church had changed dramatically, even as it remained forever the church, I had experienced so much change over the past eighteen years—an ironic

realization in the Eternal City. Now I needed the strength and the vision to move on not only to a new assignment but also to a deeper understanding of my priesthood. I left St. Peter's both troubled and at peace, if that is possible.

Later that day, as I sat on the balcony of my hotel room, a small storm passed over the beautiful fall sky. The bright sun on the distant horizon promised that the rain would quickly pass. And so it did. The rainbow that appeared stretched across the sky, touching down at both ends of the horizon. It was perfect. The memory of it still brings me the amazing comfort I experienced at that moment. But as if to give me further assurance, a second rainbow appeared directly over the first, something this city boy had never seen before: a mystical double rainbow. Suddenly I felt at home with myself, and hungry for a great Roman feast. I had been given a sign that brought me a sense of accomplishment and needed closure, a sign that would sustain me and that I carry with me now. This could happen only in the Eternal City.