



**Lanie LeBlanc and Father Carlos at Santa Sabina**

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## **Our Dominican Family across the Ocean**

by Lanie LeBlanc OP

This past summer my husband, younger daughter, and I had the opportunity to travel to Italy and England in conjunction with my husband's teaching assignment in Spain. No, I don't intend to bore you with "what I did on my summer vacation", but I would like to share some personal insights into some of the Dominican Family members we met and how they helped me better understand what "Dominican Family" means, even across the ocean.

It all started when I asked several Dominican friars and sisters who live in our geographical Southern Province "Do you think I should....?" The question arose because I was wanting to connect with some of the more well-known friars in Europe since they resided in the places I planned to visit. I wasn't sure if, well, honestly, if I was "out of my league". I am

talking here of such folks as the Master of the Order, the past Master of the Order, the Order's most prominent living historian, and the friars who serve in the positions of Socius to the Master. You already know them, those whose names appear on all of the official writings! Should I? Absolutely every one encouraged me to go ahead and contact them. It is clear to me now that those Dominicans knew far more about genuine Dominican Family than I.

My first act of boldness came when I e-mailed Fr. Timothy Radcliffe OP to ask if he needed any assistance on his brief visit in April 2004 to Atlanta where I live. To my surprise, he e-mailed me back and asked if I might drive him from the airport to his hotel, a small detail that the convention folks overlooked. It took me all of one second to clear my oh-too-busy calendar. I still beam at the thought, let alone the experience!

Those of you who have met Fr. Timothy on his trip through the South when he was the Master of the Order already personally know his graciousness and authenticity. I did not; I just knew him from his writings because I missed his visit most regrettably. Although it was extraordinarily tempting to get lost indefinitely on the interstate, I dutifully acted as chauffeurette. Our causal chatting led to my attending his sessions at that conference of priests (we were the only two Dominicans there and I was the only female) and what I thought was his casual "come and visit me if you ever get to Oxford."

Our good fortune was that Fr. Timothy was to be in town when we planned to visit a family friend studying in Oxford. My seventeen year old daughter and I arrived like camels over-laden with goods, but we were still enthusiastically treated to a VIP tour of Blackfriars Priory and the College where Fr. Timothy teaches, introduced to everyone to whom he spoke, and a delightful conversation that far surpassed a private coffee with Oprah anyday! When we returned home to Georgia, I showed my daughter the pile of books he had written. I'm not sure what her "Oh" meant, (she is a teenager) but she took the picture of the two of them and put it up in her locker. It is next to our family pictures, she said. I know why.

I am getting ahead of my story though because we visited Rome before we came home. I had e-mailed Fr. Mike O'Rourke OP, a former parishioner of my parish who now lives in Rome, for suggestions on where to stay. He offered Santa Sabina if we wouldn't mind the simplicity or lack of air-conditioning in our room. It was hard to notice the temperature being either hot or cold when my husband opened our window and the three of us gasped at

the view of St. Peter's in the nighttime lights! That was only the beginning of our time with family, and I mean family.

Absolutely every friar, English-speaking or not, was incredibly hospitable. There were other guests as well and we chatted in makeshift gestures and languages. We were served by one Socius or another, whoever's turn it was for that meal. We were given tickets for a general audience with the Pope and even driven there... a true blessing if you have heard anything about the traffic in Rome. We were part of the screaming and yelling during the football/soccer matches in the TV room ... thankfully, everyone was rooting for Italy at the time. We sat around after lunch and witnessed the real friendship of the friars who had come from all over the world to be a part of the governance at Dominican Headquarters and who were obviously brothers in any language. I was even the brunt of Fr. Carlos's teasing in Italian (which I understand a little but do not speak) as he accepted the plaque with the Dominican Blessing that I brought from our Lay Province and the gracious recipient of a his hearty hug when I "got back at him" in English by handing a duplicate plaque to Fr. Jerry Stookey O.P.! My husband and I later sat for hours with Fr. Jerry talking about the laity and the Church, both Dominican and otherwise.

Fr. Jerry kindly arranged for me and my husband to meet Fr. Simon Tugwell OP at his office. The Angelicum is just steeped in tradition. I was definitely the tourist looking around as we climbed the stairs with Fr. Tugwell. It was an incredible experience to be ushered into his workplace, the place where he has written so many of the articles and books I have read in formation. Was this ever a place of my own school

ing!

Fr. Tugwell was just plain cordial! He listened to talkative me ask questions and responded with clarity. His obvious wisdom was quite apparent to me and my husband, but so was his humor. I was struck by his calmness. We realized after we left that he had genuinely engaged us in conversation in a way that made us feel that we were speaking freely in open dialogue, not like novices with a master. We had definitely been with a master. We also talked briefly about "The Charism of Preaching" document. His encouragement to all Dominicans was not to limit our opportunities to only one form of preaching. Wise words from a wise man.

What I witnessed but didn't realize until we were talking with our daughter later on was that Fr. Tugwell lives this Dominican equality thing! It was a wonderful feeling to have been in his presence and to know that he, too, enjoyed the experience. I feel that was not because some woman from America made him laugh, but because a family member visited with him.

My last recollection is perhaps the most telling of all about this Dominican Family thing. Shortly before we left Rome, I again spoke briefly with Fr. Carlos... in English! He apologized for not having more time to spend with us. Whew, I'm not sure whether he would have REALLY liked to traipse all over Rome with us, but I did feel that he genuinely wished he could have talked with us more. He must have sensed a bit of the residue of my living as a five foot nothing woman among six foot something males in a hierarchal Church. I clearly admire these Dominican men that I had met in Oxford and Rome and I am the first to share that with anyone who will lis

ten. I told him sincerely that I was truly grateful to have my family stay at Santa Sabina. His genuine reply was "This is your home as much as it is mine." I believe him.

As I reflect on his words and my experiences, I realize that being Dominican Family is all about St. Dominic and the Lord whom he served. All Dominicans, friars, nuns, sister, laity, share in the same heritage Dominic gave us whether or not we taste an orange from the tree he brought to Santa Sabina or ever see it, whether we kneel in the church where Dominic did or view pictures of it on the Internet, or whether or not we meet the leadership of the Order or just read their words. It is about the reflection of the Word. It is about the preaching with lives or with words or other forms, the preaching that comes from the heart. It is about the Lord of our hearts Who enriches us with this Dominican Family, even across the ocean. The "what I did on my summer vacation" revealed the warmth of family, something I will remember when the warts show, too.