

A meeting with the Pope and Presentation to The Pontifical Academy for Life!

By Theresa Burke, Founder of Rachel's Vineyard Ministries

Last week I had the great privilege of personally meeting the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI during a private audience with the Pontifical Academy of Life. I was one of twenty people who received a "golden ticket" to go up to speak with the Holy Father and receive a personal blessing. I had the opportunity to tell him about the work of Rachel's Vineyard. But most important, I asked him to pray for all those who attend Rachel's Vineyard and the 100 thousand plus volunteers who labor in the Vineyard offering their gifts to the church as we help to rebuild the broken and suffering body of Christ. I asked for a special blessing on everyone connected to our ministries.



The Pope looked directly into my eyes. He held my hand and spoke with such a gentle and loving voice. I felt the presence of Jesus Christ and remembered the description of Peter in Acts 5: 15-16 -

Thus they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and mats so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on one or another of them.

A large number of people from the towns in the vicinity of Jerusalem also gathered, bringing the sick and those disturbed by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.

Mindful of all your intentions, I placed myself in the Pope's shadow, the successor of Peter, as he walked right in front of me exiting the papal chambers inside the Vatican. Catching my eye, I felt he was staring right at me as he walked by. Again I thought of the scriptures:

And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

Amazing mysteries that somehow render me quite speechless! But it's a good thing my speech was earlier that week! During this moment, I would have had a hard time putting any thoughts into words!

The previous day, Friday, February 25, I was invited to give an address the **Pontifical Academy for Life** on Post Abortion Trauma. My particular assignment was to give a world Literature Review entitled The Aftermath of Abortion -- The Data from Scientific Literature. The two other presenters included Sister Marie-Luc, from the Clinique Saint Vincent de Paul, from Bourgoin-Jallieu, France who addressed the Theories and Realities of Post Abortion Trauma and Dr. Angelo, a psychiatrist from Boston who spoke about the Prevention and Treatment of Post Abortion Trauma.

Following the lecture, I was invited to do an interview with Vatican Television and a number of Italian Newspapers .



In the days leading up to the conference, I had the pleasure to do an interview with Vatican Radio with Father Frank Pavone and Janet Morana. [Click here](#) to listen to the Interview.

I also met with Monika Rodman while in Italy, whom many of you know from her work with Rachel's Vineyard which dates back to 1994, when she first ran the Rachel's Vineyard 15 week support groups and Retreats while she served as the Respect Life Director for the Diocese of Oakland, California. While on a trip to Italy she met and fell in love with Domenico Montanaro and her marriage swept her away to Southern Italy where they currently live. Monika devoted extraordinary efforts to translate the Rachel's Vineyard Retreat Manual into Italian and got the ministry going in Italy. They just completed their third retreat which attracted men and women

from throughout Italy. I had the great joy to share a hotel room with her while I was doing my work for the Academy while Monika spent the days networking with clergy and searching for a new retreat house so they can conduct their next retreat in Rome! We had a fabulous reunion and were able to discuss many issues related to starting the retreats in countries where abortion is still not spoken of. Monika also helped to mentor the new retreat site in Germany, which is now flourishing.

An article about the work of Rachel's Vineyard in Italy just ran in the February Edition of "Noi Genitori e Figli" the monthly family life magazine inserted into the Italian Catholic Bishops daily newspaper, "Avvenire."

Clarissa and Joe Cincotta were also in Rome the same week with Father Peter Cipriani, Together, they form the leadership of the Rachel's Vineyard Retreat team in the Diocese of Bridgeport, Connecticut. We had a wonderful visit just outside the Pantheon. It was such a pleasure to see familiar beloved faces from our ministry while in Rome, especially because they provided reassurance and prayers before the Academy assembly. I have to admit, I was nervous!

We spent our last night in Rome with Father Frank Pavone, Janet Morana having a dinner with Fr. Victor Ghio and Monsignor Carlos Simon Vazquez, both from the Pontifical Council for the Family. Monika Rodman joined us along with the indomitable and energetic Joan Lewis. Joan has served as the Bureau Chief Correspondent for the last 30 years for EWTN in Rome. She delighted us with stories and unique insights into life in the Eternal City.

All in all, the trip was a remarkable experience. I never dreamed I would ever get the opportunity to meet the Pope, let alone speak to him! I am grateful to Priests for Life for all their tremendous support in helping to promote the work of Rachel's Vineyard – and I am thankful to all of you, who make this ministry happen throughout the world. It's hard to believe that this year Rachel's Vineyard will have grown to 35 countries and is offered in ten languages! It's an incredible movement of God's spirit because he wants to heal the culture of death. He restores and raises up those willing to serve him and accompanies his presence with undeniable signs and wonders. Those of us who have the privilege of working in Rachel's Vineyard have witnessed the tremendous anointing of God upon this work.

As I whispered "Arrivederci Roma" gazing out the window of the plane as we moved up into the clouds above this ancient city. I wondered if I will ever return. I remembered spending our 25th wedding anniversary in this extraordinary capital of romance with Kevin back in August, as we joined the study group of experts invited by the Academy to prepare for this meeting. Then I reflected upon the words of St. Augustine: "To fall in love with God is the greatest of all romances; To seek him is the greatest adventure; and to find him is the greatest human achievement!" To the Lord I say, "grazie di tutto!"