

# Dr. James Dobson values Vatican visit

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**Dr. James Dobson**

He dined with priests in Italian restaurants and gazed on St. Peter's reputed bones. To top it all off, he got to shake hands with the pope.

It sounds like the dream tour of a staunch Catholic, but this visitor to the Eternal City was James C. Dobson, a fourth-generation preacher's kid and founder of Focus on the Family. The group is one of the nation's most influential evangelical Protestant organizations.

The occasion was unique — an invitation to Dobson and other conservative evangelicals to speak Nov. 28 at the Pontifical Council for the Family, founded by Pope John Paul II in 1981.

Despite his Protestant pedigree, **"I felt very comfortable with my new Catholic friends,"** Dobson said in an interview from his Colorado Springs headquarters last week. **"It was hard for me to leave."**

Since Protestants broke with Rome 500 years ago, few have put Vatican City on their list of must-do tours. But many Protestants and Catholics are venturing beyond old checkpoints to ponder a vexing issue: how to keep the traditional family as the culture's most important social unit.

As far as anyone can remember, Dobson and Chuck Colson — once a Nixon point man, now head of international prison ministry — became the first Protestant leaders to enter the Old Synod Room, a meeting place of ancient arches and coves dating back to the Middle Ages.

There, before a cardinal in a red sash, a bank of archbishops and an audience of 200, the two American Protestants and about 30 other speakers addressed the council.

Dobson's message was somber: "Marriage as we've known it is dying and under attack from many directions."

Dobson, 64, is quick to say that theological differences with Catholics remain "a chasm a mile wide." But on the issue of traditional marriage and sexual morality, he said, "I'm in complete harmony with the Vatican."

Later, Dobson and his wife, Shirley, stood in a sunny St. Peter's Square to meet Pope John Paul II.

As pope and Protestant shook hands, "I thanked him for his defense of the family," Dobson recounted.

"I could have said more, but I don't know if he understood me or not. He didn't respond."

Illness, not ideology, silenced an exchange between the leader of 1 billion Catholics and the spokesman for millions of Protestants.

"He is not well," Dobson said. "He is very frail. I was surprised at how frail. His shoulders are bent, and he has difficulty holding his head up. Yet his mind is clear, and the things he said in his prepared remarks were well-crafted. He obviously is still very bright and very much in touch."

Dobson doesn't know yet what the reaction to the visit will be from the 2.5 million households on Focus's mailing list, or from the millions who take in his broadcasts and books. The trip account won't be published until the February issue of the Focus magazine.

The Vatican visit, he said, was not meant to solve ancient differences but to unite against a modern threat: "My evangelical brothers and sisters should recognize we're greatly outnumbered in the defense of our principles, and we need all the help we can get in trying to defend the unborn child and the institution of marriage."

The man behind the Vatican meeting was the Rev. Robert Sirico, a Michigan priest who abandoned Catholicism in the '60s and '70s for left-wing politics.

Calling himself a "re-vert" to the faith, Sirico, 49, founded the Acton Institute, a think tank that presents a religious dimension to economic justice issues. He met Dobson through friends and arranged the Vatican visit.

This was not the Dobsons' first Roman holiday. As a young couple touring Europe on "\$10 a day" in 1969, the Dobsons saw Pope Paul VI carried high through St. Peter's Square on a throne while "people went absolutely crazy."

Fresh from his low-key encounter with John Paul II, Dobson wondered at the style change. As pasta and wine flowed at mealtime (Dobson, a lifelong teetotaler, sipped tea), priests explained that the present pope has toned down the pomp because it appeared to elevate him at the expense of Jesus Christ. Dobson was impressed: "I think that shows the humility of the man."

The Protestant party toured an excavated first century street where they peered at bones and an ancient carved message, "Peter is here."

"The most interesting thing I saw in the Vatican," Dobson said.

While standing in the Sistine Chapel, both Protestants and Catholics chuckled to hear how Michelangelo had painted a snooty cardinal in hell — a tale crackling with Reformation ironies.

Dobson recounted that his father also had stood in the Sistine Chapel as a tourist. The elder Dobson was an artist and a pastor in the Church of the Nazarene, a conservative offshoot of the Methodist Church.

Admiring Italian art is one thing, but what would his father have thought of his namesake addressing a Catholic enclave? Given that the gathering was to "work together to preserve marriage, created by God himself ... I think he would have approved."