
ARC UK

	2024 Summer Projects	
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A letter from the President, 2024

As we bring 2024 to a close, it is a wonderful opportunity to reflect on everything we have accomplished together this year at ARC. First and foremost, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the ARC board and this year's dedicated volunteers. Your enthusiasm and hard work have been instrumental in making 2024 such a successful year, and I am excited to see what we will achieve together in the future.

One of our key goals for this year was to take steps towards establishing a UK project. I am pleased to report that we have made significant progress.

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Throughout the year, we reached out to various cathedrals and churches in the UK, and we are beginning to see the fruits of those efforts. While there is still much work to do, we are optimistic about potentially hosting the first UK ARC project since before COVID in 2025. Thank you to everyone who has contributed to this exciting initiative.

Our volunteers were busy this year, participating in projects across France, Spain, and Germany. Each volunteer brought their unique skills and perspectives to their host communities, continuing ARC's mission of fostering cultural exchange and enriching visitor experiences in historic churches. Their efforts were nothing short of inspiring, and they serve as a testament to the value of our programme. One of the highlights of this year was our project in Paris, organised in collaboration with CASA which happened to coincide with the Olympic and Paralympic Games. This gave ARC volunteers an amazing chance to experience Paris during this historic event, offering tours of Notre-Dame Cathedral to both the general public and Olympic and Paralympic athletes!

To support the establishment of a UK project, we have also made strides in fundraising. We launched a donation page on our website, and we are planning several fundraising events for 2025. Keep an eye on our social media channels to see what is in store – we would love your support!

This year, some of our board members had the privilege of attending the international autumn meeting in Belgium, hosted by ARC Belgium/Netherlands. It was a fantastic opportunity to connect with our European counterparts, reflect on this year's projects, and (of course) enjoy some delicious Belgian waffles! We came away inspired and full of ideas to enhance future projects and plan next year's international meeting.

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We also welcomed a new member to the ARC board this year: Eleanor, who volunteered in Toledo and has stepped into the role of Resource Officer. We are thrilled to have her on board and look forward to seeing her contributions in the years ahead. At the same time, we said goodbye to Anna Beketov, a long-standing board member whose dedication and PR magic have been invaluable to ARC. We wish Anna all the best in her next adventure and thank her for everything she has done to support our organisation.

As always, we are looking to grow our team. If you are an ARC alumnus and are interested in joining the board, we currently have several vacancies, including roles in PR and Recruitment. We would love to hear from you! Please do not hesitate to get in touch at president.arcuk@gmail.com. Joining the board is a wonderful way to stay connected to the ARC community and help shape its future.

Thank you again to everyone who has contributed to ARC's success this year. Whether you volunteered abroad, helped with our UK efforts, or simply followed our journey, your support means the world. We look forward to what 2025 will bring. Until then, keep an eye on our updates and, as always, do not hesitate to reach out if you would like to get involved.

Wishing you all a joyful holiday season and a fantastic start to the new year!

Arielle Jasiewicz-Gill
President 2024

Paris, France

Caroline

I began my volunteer experience at Notre-Dame de Paris with the ARC motto in mind: to make the stones speak. For three weeks this summer, I had the privilege to bring to life the history of a monument that is older than my country (the United States). In addition to being a tour guide at Notre Dame Cathedral, I had the supplementary privilege of being there during the Olympic Games. Our first week was a bit hectic because the city was essentially shut down prior to the Opening Ceremony. As such, for the first week we were placed at St. Germain l'Auxerrois, the royal parish church next to the Louvre Museum and the auxiliary church for Notre Dame while it is still under renovation post the 2019 fire. At first I was disappointed by this change of plans, but in the end one of my favourite memories came from this experiential “detour”! Over the course of the Olympic Games, there were 30,000 police officers in Paris. They came from many different countries and other regions in France. As such, they were “tourists” in Paris too. The night the King of Spain was having dinner with President Macron in the Louvre, the police cordoned off the area near the museum, including St. Germain. Since there were no other visitors because the area was closed off, when a group of French police officers started asking me questions about the church I offered to give them a tour! When I got to the portion of the tour where I talked about how St. Germain was used as a gunpowder factory during the French Revolution, one of the officers pointed out a broken stained glass window. He asked who broke it and I said “Pas moi!” with my hands in the air. He jokingly got out a pair of handcuffs to “arrest” me for the broken window. What a souvenir postcard that would have made for my parents!

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Paris was a city transformed by the Olympic games. Beyond the physical signs of the games, like the iconic Parisian monuments transformed into stadiums and viewing locations, the spirit of the Olympics was all around us. I had fun on my tours arranging good-spirited competitions between visitors from different countries as I quizzed them on fun facts about Notre Dame. “What’s the difference between a gargoyle and a grotesque?”, “Who were the first inhabitants of Paris?”, “How many spires have there been?”. If you want to learn the answers, I guess you just have to become an ARC guide! The true Olympic “cherry on the cake” was giving a tour to Cheri Blauwet, a former three time US Paralympian in wheelchair racing! She even gave us all USA Olympics pins at the end of the tour.



As an ARC volunteer at Notre Dame de Paris, I felt a part of a history ten centuries in the making. There's an indescribable sense of belonging you feel getting to see the sunset paint Notre Dame in a golden light at each day's end. The heartbeat of the cathedral as a place of worship, a cultural icon, and a pillar of history is strong. As an ARC volunteer, you are the bridge between the past and the present of your site and that is an incredibly special experience.

Speyer, Germany

Annabel

I will never forget the time I spent volunteering at Speyer Cathedral this summer. It was a privilege to work in such a magnificent cathedral and to be a resident of such a beautiful city, if only for a few short weeks.

One of my favourite moments was entering the cathedral for the first time. All that I had read about the building and its history did not prepare me for its beauty in the flesh: I was struck by the cathedral's magnitude, but also by its simplicity. The striking red and white sandstone and towering archways are awe-inspiring, and the lack of self-conscious decoration gives the building an effortless magnificence. Perhaps the best part about being a tour guide was the chance to experience this moment of discovery over and over again through the eyes of the visitors I welcomed. I loved to see the unique impression that the cathedral made on each individual who walked through its doors.

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Living and working with three other young people, all from different countries, was a particularly unique and special opportunity. It was fantastic to discuss our different perspectives on religion and social issues, and to learn more about each other's cultures and experiences. We quickly became friends and enjoyed spending our free time exploring the city's museums, monuments, churches, restaurants and shops – mostly by bicycle! It was particularly interesting to visit the St. Magdalena Cloister in Speyer's Old Town (where St. Edith Stein lived as a nun) and to get a glimpse into their way of life. On our days off, we were lucky enough to go to Heidelberg and Am Weiler, discovering more of what the local area had to offer. It was truly a blessing to get to know such lovely people from across Europe whom I would never have otherwise had the pleasure to meet.

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The ARC project immersed us in the local community; we attended various local events including an organ concert at the cathedral and celebrations and processions surrounding the festival of the Assumption. We were very lucky to be in Speyer at this time when the cathedral was garlanded in flowers and filled with local laity, nuns and pilgrims. As a historian myself, I was honoured to play a tiny part in the rich timeline of Speyer Cathedral which was founded so long ago in 1027.

Overall, my experience in Speyer this year embodied ARC's values of welcome, meeting and community. As an ARC tour guide I welcomed people from a multitude of backgrounds into Speyer Cathedral (and even got to look after their pets). I met some special people and I was embraced by the local community. Thank you ARC – Speyer will always have a special place in my heart!

Toledo, Spain

Eleanor

Toledo, Spain, is a city rich in culture and history, and it has been on my bucket list to visit for years. The site has been inhabited since well before the first century BC when the Roman historian Livy described it as “a small city but fortified by location”, and that description holds up today. It overlooks the River Tagus from a rocky knoll, and the horseshoe meander around the old city makes it extremely obvious why anybody with even the vaguest notion of self-preservation would have decided upon it as a position of strategic importance. Originally a settlement of the local Carpetani tribe, it was incorporated into the Roman Empire as “Toletum” in 193 BC and for around 1,400 years had considerable influence as both a cultural and sometimes political capital of the Visigoths, the Moors, the Sephardic Jews, Castille, Spain, and, of course, the Catholic Church.

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According to tradition, Toledo was established as one of Spain's first dioceses in the 1st century AD, and via the Edict of Milan in AD 313, it was established as the first diocese in Spain. Eighteen Church Councils were held there, of which the most eminent was the third in AD 589, which brought the Arian Visigoths into the Church and codified the filioque into the Creed. While Toledo's importance within the Church was eventually superseded by Pope Saint Paul VI's elevation of Madrid to an archdiocese in 1964, the magnificent cathedral remains the primate cathedral of Spain, and the archbishop of Toledo (whom we had the pleasure to meet) still holds the title of Primate of Spain. The diocese is also home to the Mozarabic Rite (which we attended) and a large seminary building on a cliff over the Tagus (where we stayed).



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Staying in the seminary in and of itself was an adventure. This was apparently at the behest of the archbishop, who had first brought NARTEX (ARC's Spanish associate) to the city as a parish priest many years ago and wanted us to be well looked after. And well looked after we were: fans appeared outside our doors mere hours after we mentioned the rooms were a little hot due to the blistering heatwave that engulfed Spain for most of our project; the cooks gave the three of us enough food for at least half a dozen hungry seminarians at every meal; and one of the seminary teachers, described to me by a fellow volunteer as "Spain's Bishop Barron, but still a priest", swept us under his wing and entertained us with stories and the sights of Toledo—including, on his last evening with us, a pizza dinner atop a rock on one of the large hills overlooking the old city. We also have to contend with food poisoning, rogue bat interlopers and a front door determined to lock us out when we wanted to enter and never to lock when we wanted to close up, all of which provide fond memories alongside our midnight doorstep ice cream and theological discussions, touring around the city, and, of course, the church our project was based in.

Toledo, it should be said, has a number of fabulous churches beside the cathedral, each with their own unique charms. Our project church was the Jesuit church of San Ildefonso. Allegedly constructed over the site of the saint's birthplace, the building began in the late 1500s and was finally completed in 1765, two years before Carlos III expelled the Jesuits from Spain. The church is in the baroque style, complete with a magnificent facade with statues of various Jesuit saints and a fantastic trompe d'oeil reredos behind the altar. The two transepts house baroque altarpieces as well, one rescued from a parish that closed and was rehomed in San Ildefonso, and the other donated by the Toledan guild of carpenters. Down each side of the nave are side chapels, each delightful in their own right, and several with interesting accompanying stories.

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The Dolorosa was moved from one side altar to another, the altarpiece and its rococo-style mirrors now housing Saint Ignatius of Loyola and her new home is now accompanied by a cherub facing the wrong way. My favourite side chapel was the one dedicated to St Francis Xavier, done with glorious colour and high relief, and a crucifix cradled in his arms. This, according to old photos, had once been upright on his chest but had unfortunately broken off and resisted being reattached as it had originally been.

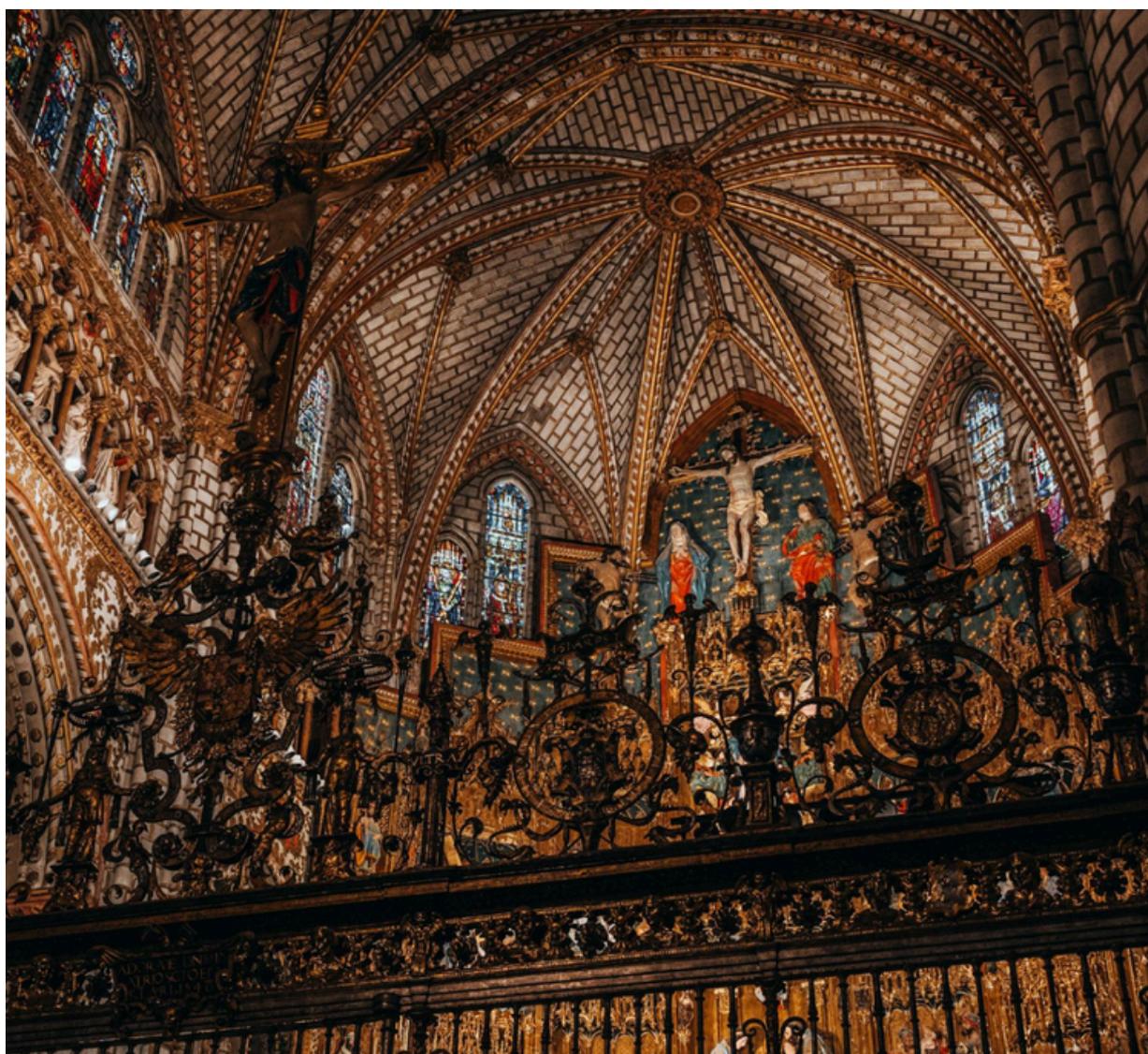
The church also contains snapshots of Jesuit history, which interested the groups I showed around (usually a couple per day). In one of the transepts lies a memorial stone dedicated to the three Jesuit priests administering the parish who were killed during the Spanish Civil War. The reliquary contains a memorial stone for Juan de Mariana, a Jesuit historian responsible for writing a seminal history of Spain.

The church is best known, however, for the two towers, which command fantastic views out over the city. At this height, one is on a level with the imposing cathedral spire, and the compactness of the old city centre is very evident.

It would be impossible to finish without a little note on San Ildefonso himself. As the patron saint of Toledo, references to the most famous episode of his life can be found in many places in the city (and three times in the Jesuit church). Along with St Isidore, he was the last of the Occidental Church Fathers and wrote extensively on our Lady. His most famous work defended the teaching of the perpetual virginity of Mary (and is possibly the reason why Mary is most commonly referred to as “the virgin” in Spain rather than “Our Lady”, as she is in France and England). He is said to have received a vision on December 18th, 665, just over a year before he died, on the spot where the cathedral now stands. Tradition has it that as he prayed with the congregation, a great blaze of light engulfed them, causing all but the deacons and St Ildefonsus to flee.

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Our Lady appeared to him, thanked him for his hard work defending her, and presented him with a special chasuble that she instructed him to wear on Marian feast days. The stone that her foot touched is housed in that same spot inside the cathedral, and it sits next to a beautiful marble carving of the moment of the presentation of the clothing. Spain retains such a devotion to Mary that all its priests have permission to wear blue chasubles on her feast days, and the name Ildefonsus survives today in the Spanish Alfonso.



Madrid, Spain

John

The objective beauty and prominent history of San Isidro drew non-believers and secular people (as well as the faithful) to come inside, to take a look and to open a door in their hearts to learn more about the Catholic faith. I spent equally long explaining the simple wooden confessional booths and the wondrous sacrament that occurs within, as I did with the grand baroque masterpieces that hung beside them. There is something beautiful about the contrast of large and small, ornate and humble, all for the glory of God.



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We volunteers, spent these weeks as a community, journeying alongside and praying for one another - a beautiful gift where friendships grew and spiritual strength was shared.

After completing each tour, I invited visitors to take some time to pray and take in the majesty of the space in their own time. As they exited the temple, we offered them miraculous medals, to invite the grace of Our Lady and to remind them of their time spent in the house of God. These moments are my most cherished from the project.

Thank you for reading!

ARC  UK

making the stones speak
