

Spirituality of Pilgrimage

One way to celebrate the Jubilee year is to make a pilgrimage to a holy place. A pilgrimage is a source of grace and a means of growing in faith. It is a way of repenting and preparing interiorly for a change of heart. Scripture shows the special significance of setting out to go to sacred places. For example, Israelites would go on pilgrimage to the city where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, or to visit the shrine at Bethel (Jg 20:18). Jesus went with Mary and Joseph as a pilgrim to Jerusalem, in fulfilling the Law (Lk 2:41).

In her book *My Russian Yesterdays* Catherine Doherty tells of going on pilgrimages as a child. “At home in Russia we would begin preparing for a pilgrimage by praying and then reading up on the shrine we would be going to. We let friends and neighbors know that we would be glad to carry their intentions with us on the pilgrimage if they would write them down.

“We arranged for our pilgrim’s garb which, for women, was a simple shift. Men wore plain trousers and shirt. In a linen bag we carried a loaf of rye bread and some salt, and we took a gourd of water. We started out by participating in Mass and receiving the Eucharist and having a light breakfast. Before departing, we all knelt and asked God’s blessing on the pilgrimage, and invoked the angel Raphael (who the Old Testament says was Tobias’ guide). The leader sprinkled us with holy water and we were off. We walked barefoot. On the way we prayed aloud together and sang hymns. In between praying and singing there was a great silence in which each talked with God in his own way.

“At noon the leader would call a halt, either by a clean river or a village where we would refill our gourds,

wash our tired, hot feet, face, and hands. Pray and sit down to a lunch of rye bread, salt, and water. And did it taste good! An hour’s rest, then a prayer and blessing with holy water, and off for the next lap.

“At dusk we planned to be near a village, where we broke ranks. With a reminder to be ready early and on the road, we made our ways to villagers’ homes, knocked on a door, said we were pilgrims, and begged for food and a night’s lodging in the name of God. Invariably we would be asked in, and we would bow low before the

holy images and the crucifix that adorned each home. People shared their food with us, even if it was only bread and tea. We often slept in sweet-smelling haylofts.

“At sunup we rose, washed, ate a piece of bread, and

said a grateful farewell to our hosts who gave us their intentions to bring to the shrine, and were off again. The days passed in walking, praying, begging, resting, and walking and praying again. Then one day came the joy of seeing in the distance the spires of the holy shrine. We knew it would be like this when it came time for us to die in the Lord, after a long, tiresome journey of life.

“We would spend days at the shrine, living in the pilgrim hostels of a monastery. We would go to Mass and other common prayers at the shrine and nearby churches. It was like being in a hallway to heaven. We would bring back a supply of holy oil, holy water, sacred images and medals for those at home.

“Then we returned, the same way we came. We arrived home sunburned, healthy, leaner — and filled to the brim in soul.”

Today this may sound romantic and nostalgic. However one of our staff recently made just such a pil-



A pilgrimage is a
source of grace—
a kind of
'prayer in motion.'

Spirituality of Pilgrimage

Pass It On! #21



Please feel free to make copies
and pass them on!

Additional issues of Pass It On
can be found on the Internet at:
www.madonnahouse.org/publications



MADONNA HOUSE PUBLICATIONS
COMBERMERE • ONTARIO • CANADA • KOJ TLO

Penny a copy — 1¢

Pass It On!

#21

grimage, joining with one of the many rural parish pilgrim groups in Europe, walking for a week to the shrine of Our Lady of Czestachowa. The group even spent one of the nights en route, sleeping in a hayloft! As they passed through small towns, villagers would offer them water or fruit, and call out their intentions to be prayed for at the shrine.

Ordinary families today may need to choose a local shrine. The cathedral of each diocese is one recommended place of pilgrimage for the Jubilee year and in many dioceses there are approved shrines that accommodate limited budgets. Real pilgrims normally walk as much as they are able, but it may be necessary to go by car, bus or plane — if, for example, going to the Holy Land. But in any event a pilgrim is ready to accept discomforts, inconveniences and hardships. Pilgrims pray along the way, both coming and going. They bring with them only the bare necessities.

Fr. Robert Wild, in his audio book, *Waiting for the Presence: Spirituality of Pilgrimage to the Holy Land*, talks about how attitudes of tourism are unfortunately mixed with pilgrimages. "... A tour files in to a sacred place and the guide gives a short history of the site. People look around for a few moments and then leave. The tour guide keeps them 'on schedule.'

"Here you are, in the holiest places on earth, and you have to file in and out within a few minutes! Perhaps a group could petition their guide to let them spend a lit-

tle time at each of the holy places. It may be possible to return to some of the places after the tour, before the pilgrimage moves on to another location. When making arrangements for a group pilgrimage, one can let the agency know that pilgrims want to see fewer places and pray more. We need to linger at the holy places and enter into the spiritual atmosphere of the shrines.

"Preparing personally and spiritually for the pilgrimage can make a big difference. In visiting the Holy Land, it is very meaningful to read a Gospel passage which has to do with the location to be visited, both on the evening before going to each site, and while present there. "When I was praying at the Cave of Bethlehem and tours came through, the first thing so many people did — before prayer or anything else — was to take pictures. *Cameras are a bane for pilgrims!* Often when we encounter the Holy, we look around frantically for some distraction. Cameras provide one such distraction or escape from the Holy. We need to pray for the peace to face the presence of the Holy, in whatever shrine we enter.

"A real pilgrimage originates through an inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is a kind of 'prayer in motion.' Since the Holy Spirit calls or invites us on pilgrimage, he has a plan for us. So we want to be attentive to the Spirit's inspirations as we go along, and to the graces God will have awaiting us along the way."