

ENCOURAGEMENT ENCOURAGEMENT

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THE HOST APOSTOLATE
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'Pilgrimage'

It seems that every year Christmas seems to come around sooner and quicker as the shops want to claim more and more of our attention or encourage us to purchase things. It never seems to amaze me that some people put up decoration at the start of November let alone December. I fear that it is an attempt to lock out the gloom and perhaps doom of news and weather. Advent therefore slips in and probably unannounced and misunderstood by vast majorities of people.

There are of course cultural differences, and some places have feasts that reflect that period. In Sweden the festival of candles on the feast of St. Lucy (13th) brings warmth and encourages those taking part in thinking of who is 'the light' that should fill out lives. In Europe there is the feast of St. Nicholas (6th) to remember kindness by giving small sugary gifts to children and adults, a foretaste of Christmas itself.

Yet the start of Advent heralds the start of a journey. This journey takes us through all the preparations that led to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. It takes us through the Old Testament to the New. It takes us through the predictions of His birth over thousands of years and finally to a cave, an arbour for animals. It takes us too, through the life of the people intimately involved in the final Christmas scene and beyond. So, we see real characters like Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zachariah, like Herod, the Magi, kings, and the shepherds, not to mention Angels. We learn something of the Roman empire. An interesting journey indeed. Advent is a time of reflection and 'a

coming' to a pivotal point for Mankind in human history. Advent of course means that something is to come about or happen.

Because our journeys these days are often quick and fast relatively, we may have forgotten to journey to absorb travel as a means of arriving at a destination but enjoying the journey itself. Of course, many times it is fraught with obstacles or delays or simply not visible because of the mode of transport i.e. air travel. Maybe because of this we have lost the art of 'journeying'.



Recently I have been on quite a long journey to a place of spiritual refreshment. It is a little village even though much grown, called Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina adjoining Croatia. The village name tells us a little of its whereabouts as its name simply means 'between the hills', and so it is. It is a place of Marian Apparitions since 1981 to date, and now acknowledged formally by the Church as a place of special prayer and encouragement. The fruits of the place in prayer, conversion and steadfastness, to a call for a change of heart are manifest, and so therefore acknowledged. But to the thousands that go on a daily basis it is a journey of Pilgrimage.

So, what is a pilgrimage...is this different or a visit of journey...? One definition is a **trip**, often a **long** one, made to a **holy place** for **religious reasons**. Another definition speaks of a journey to encounter God or deeper realities and reflection on, and of, our lives. There are many reasons that people go on pilgrimage, not excluding sometime the beauty of a place or in remembrance of someone or in thanksgiving.

'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.' *Isaiah 9.6*

There are as many reasons as there are people that go, but in general the essential element is to go deeper and to face spiritual realities. Some go on the invitation of a friend or family member only to be confronted by something that does make them face truths about themselves or the absence of God in their lives. There are certainly many such stories about Medjugorje! There are many pilgrimage places, some ancient including the Holy Land as well. Did not the Jewish people travel, journey to find the promised land and to encounter God?

But pilgrimage doesn't have to involve travel – it can be an inner journey too, a journey of the heart, soul and mind. Very often going on pilgrimage is an invitation, something deep in our heart and being that ask us to reflect on our lives or a call to deeper prayer. It may be a call to do something special that requires discernment and understanding, or indeed a sacrifice. I met a young man trying to do just that and whether he was called to priesthood or religious life. Another young woman wanted to pray about her forthcoming marriage.... Another person discovers the beauty of silent prayer....

But 'Advent' is just such a pilgrimage. It is a journey into who we are, and who it is that we are waiting for in our hearts and minds. It is reflection on the joys and sorrows that we encounter in our lives and the call to be always ready to change. As we pilgrimage though Advent to Christmas we are called to reflect on the Prophets, on the Cardinal virtues of Faith Hope and Charity. We are called to move from entrenched positions to a new openness to God's call to each one of us. Advent is a special time which enables us to step back and ponder, as Mary did on her long journeys. It is to be still and listen to that call from the Lord and to refresh ourselves in His love. It is a never-ending pilgrimage.

When returning from any pilgrimage, actual or spiritual, effects can be felt long after a return home: sometimes unexpected answers to prayer. An adventure is to be had in an Advent Pilgrimage and its effects may bring unexpected fruits much later in our lives. In a way we are always on pilgrimage, always trying to be a better person or to understand what is required of us, always at prayer.

Sometimes we don't notice the changes which take place in ourselves – we may need to talk to a trusted friend to identify the ways in which God has been gently shaping and changing us, ready for whatever lies ahead. Could this be this Advent be such a Pilgrimage? Could you be awaiting Christmas with a new heart and mind or with a sure sense that 'all will be well' no matter what the circumstances you encounter? I wish you a most blessed Advent and a truly wonderful Christmas. Halina Holman ©



Youth Pilgrimage, Festival in Medjugorje

Pope Francis

"Our life should be like this: to worship, to pray, to journey, to be a pilgrim, to do penance." ('22)

"Be pilgrims of hope and builders of peace" ('24)

Wishing everyone a joyful Christmas and thanking everyone for all the various contributions to the work of The Host Apostolate

Feast Days in December

1st First Sunday in Advent (Year C begins...)

3rd St. Francis Xavier

6th St. Nicholas

7th St. Ambrose

8th Second Sunday of Advent

9th The Immaculate Conception of Blessed. Virgin Mary

12th Our Lady of Guadalupe

13th St. Lucy

14th St. John of the Cross

15th Third Sunday of Advent

22nd 4th Sunday of Advent

23rd St. John of Kanty

25th The Nativity of the Lord (Holy Day of Obligation)

26th 2nd Day of Christmas: St. Stephen, First martyr

27th St. John, Apostle & Evangelist

28th The Holy Innocents

29th The Holy Family

30th St. Sylvester

1st Jan. 2025: Mary, Mother of God