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Recreation vs. Re-Creation

In the summer of 2010, Pope Benedict XVI spoke during an Angelus of the importance of using the summer as a time to connect with the Lord. While all of our other activities slow down, there is even more room for Jesus. He said:

“We are now in the heart of summer, at least in the northern hemisphere. This is the period in which schools are closed and the greater part of the holidays are concentrated. Even the pastoral activities in parishes are reduced and I myself have suspended the Audiences for a while. It is therefore a favorable time to give priority to what is effectively most important in life, that is to say, listening to the word of the Lord.”

One of the ways many people choose to focus on the Lord in their travels is by going on a pilgrimage. Below are some brief reflections on pilgrimages. Will your vacation turn into a pilgrimage this summer?

What is a Pilgrimage?

BY FR. LARRY RICE

Traveling can be nerve-wracking and expensive. But it can also be a source of renewal and healing. Sometimes the difference between the two isn't just in the destination, but in the approach, one takes to travel.

For centuries Catholics have maintained a tradition of pilgrimage. This is travel that serves as a metaphor for the journey of life, or for seeking a new path with God's help and direction. Often pilgrimages are journey to particular shrines or holy places: cathedrals, churches, retreat centers, or monastic communities. A pilgrimage could be a day trip to a nearby shrine, or a lengthy tour of the Holy Land.

I can tell you, based on my own travels, that lots of people visit

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these places as tourists, rather than pilgrims. The tourists are the ones rushing from one sight to the next, snapping photos and looking for the gift shop. Pilgrims, on the other hand, see their journey as an opportunity for prayer, and their visit to various places as a chance to open themselves to new experiences that reveal God's glory. Pilgrims don't hurry, because the journey itself is as important as the destination.

Many people enjoy pilgrimages arranged by travel companies, to destinations like Lourdes, Fatima, Rome, or Jerusalem.

If you're someone who prefers to travel with an experienced professional guide, these can be a perfect way of visiting pilgrimage sites that can be a challenge to arrange on your own. On the other hand, group travel limits your freedom to linger at the places you want, and keep you on someone else's itinerary. However you choose to go, now is a good time to start looking at options, if you're interested in a summer pilgrimage. Think of it as a retreat with a destination.

Father Larry Rice is the former director of vocations for the Paulist Fathers.



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The Power of the Pilgrimage

BY MARCELLINO
D'AMBROSIO

Salvation history is the story of a journey. Abram goes from civilization to the desert, Moses from Pharaoh's palace to a mountain-top. The people of Israel repeat Moses' journey and then are led through the desert to the Promised Land.

All these journeys have a few things in common. God inspired each of them and accompanied the travelers on their way. Through the journey, he changed them. At the destination, he blessed them.

When Israel finally settled in the land, God wanted to constantly remind them that they are perpetual pilgrims in this world and that he, not the land, is their true inheritance. So the Lord made Jerusalem the seat of his special presence on earth and commanded them to journey there three times a year to worship him with feasts of thanksgiving, such as the Passover.

The public ministry of Jesus takes place against the background of these constant pilgrimages. The already holy city became even holier, sanctified forever by Christ's blood.



A statue of St. Anne, mother of Mary, is featured prominently at the Basilica of Ste.-Anne-de-Beaupre in Ste.-Anne-de-Beaupre, Quebec. Initially a shrine to honor St. Anne, the basilica is considered an important Catholic sanctuary and receives about a half-million pilgrims each year. (CNS photo/Chaz Muth)

When Constantine became Roman emperor, the first priority was to decree religious freedom. But the next priority was to send his mother on pilgrimage to the Holy Land where she had churches built that are still visited by pilgrims today. Next, he built churches in Rome over the tombs of Sts. Peter and Paul to welcome the pilgrims from all over the empire who would come to honor these two apostles.

Ever since, Christians have braved all sorts of difficulties and road hazards to visit Jerusalem, Rome and the sites of Marian apparitions. They have come not as tourists but as pilgrims. There is a difference.

Of course, a pilgrimage usually includes fun, learning, shopping and good food. But it is not primarily a vacation. The ultimate

goal is not recreation, but re-creation. It is a journey of devotion, undertaken by the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

What is the purpose of a pilgrimage? It is to worship God, do penance and be transformed. A pilgrimage to a holy place is so spiritually powerful that under the Old Covenant it was commanded. Though not commanded today, it is so highly recommended that the church offers a plenary indulgence to all those who answer the call.

I was a college student when I was first invited to make a pilgrimage to Rome. Initially, I brushed off the suggestion as ridiculous. I was broke, like most college students. Besides, the pilgrimage took place during final exams, but I felt an inner tug that I thought just might be the Holy Spirit. I had been



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struggling with a holier-than-thou attitude that I could not overcome. I had been pleading with God to help me.

Maybe, I thought, this pilgrimage is his answer to my prayer. So I spoke to my professors. They gladly rescheduled my exams. I began cobbling money together. Soon there was enough. I decided to go and make the trip a penitential pilgrimage, seeking the grace to change.

It was an amazing adventure. The experience of Rome bonded me to the Catholic Church, its heritage and its rich tradition in a very profound way. It whetted my appetite for learning. Some friendships were deepened, new friends were made. But the most important thing was a gift of special grace I received when I least expected it.

Very early one morning, before St. Peter's Basilica was filled with tourists, I spent some quiet moments roaming through the crypt. I felt moved to kneel and pray at one of the tombs and there received a touch of God that I will never forget.

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The tomb was that of Blessed John XXIII, who had a remarkable gift of humility and a unique ability to make people feel loved, affirmed and appreciated. These gifts were exactly what I had lacked and had been praying for. Some measure of this spirit was shared with me that day, and I was changed. The following year was among the happiest of my life.

I've since led nearly 800 people on pilgrimage to Rome and the Holy Land. I've seen countless miracles, even physical healing. As pilgrimage leader, I am responsible for numerous practical details. As you can imagine, this is quite a distraction. Nevertheless, there is always a special moment when God touches me in a very deep and

new way, and I go from pilgrimage director to pilgrim.

The Holy Land brings Scripture alive. After going, you never read the Bible the same way again. Rome knits you to the universal church and the heritage of the saints in a way that's hard to describe. The medieval charm of Assisi, the beauty of Lourdes at the foot of the Pyrenees -- these special places impart an atmosphere of serenity and draw one to prayer.

But pilgrimage is about more than the place. It is about grace, a special grace, custom-designed for each pilgrim by the Holy Spirit, imparted in God's perfect time. This is the greatest reason to listen for and respond to God's call.

D'Ambrosio writes from Texas and guides pilgrimages to Rome and the Holy Land.



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