Voices of Sisters
Horizons
Spirituality

Pilgrims pray before a statue of Mary on Apparition Hill in Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina, in a photo from August 2022. (Kathryn Press)



by Sr. Kathryn Press

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I'm not sure how much the word "pilgrimage" appears in the American lexicon but it's common enough in Irish conversation. Americans may do "service trips" but the idea of "taking up" and "traveling to" doesn't come to us as naturally. Perhaps it helps if you live on an island and a plane trip always means arriving in a new country.

At the invitation of our bishop, I had the opportunity to serve on the planning team that organized our first diocesan youth and young adult pilgrimage to Medjugorje. It was an entirely new experience!

Going on pilgrimage implies a journey with a holy destination. Thousands of Irish, of all ages, make pilgrimage every year. There are local options. For example, our diocese has its own pilgrim path, St. Declan's Way. Bishop Barron's "Catholicism" series drew attention to Lough Derg. My favorite Irish pilgrimage site is the shrine of Our Lady of Knock.

And there are options abroad. The start of the Camino de Santiago is a quick Ryan Air flight away. It's not uncommon to see advertisements for annual diocesan pilgrimages to Lourdes in parish newsletters.

I don't normally go on vacation with strangers. Going on pilgrimage is not a vacation. We were a motley crew of 60 in total. Most were between the ages of 18-28, with a few outliers on both sides of the age brackets. Vocations represented included: married life, dedicated single life, seminarians, religious, priests and bishop. Half of us had been to Medjugorje previously, and half had not. Spending a week together praying, hiking up mountains and sharing our faith journey created a special bond among us.

Sr. Kathryn Press stands outside St. James Church, the parish church for the village of Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina, in an August photo. (Courtesy of Kathryn Press)

When we arrived in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it was hot. Over 100 F (nearly 40 C) in the shade! The village was crawling with 50,000 young people attending the annual youth festival. Mass and the accompanying catechesis were translated into nearly 20 languages. Priests, outfitted with cabana umbrellas to shade them from the sun, scattered the pavilion outside the church hearing confessions for hours on end. At any time, day or night, there was a group with a guitar singing praise and worship hymns.

As a teenager, I took weeklong mission trips to Central America. We visited an orphanage and helped dig building foundations. My experience going on pilgrimage was different. Our pilgrims saved up a good bit of money to go away for a week. OK, I'm with you there. But when they arrived in Medjugorje, they spent the entire week — not relaxing by the pool like vacation, not providing some service or manual assistance — but praying.

Prayer gave the focus to every day in Medjugorje. Our alarm clocks went off when the first number read "5" so we could be dressed and ready to walk through the vineyards to Apparition Hill before the sun got too high in the sky. We prayed the rosary on the way there and on the way back as well. (And prayed the third rosary of the day later in the afternoon.)

Prayer and penance are different on pilgrimage. It's in different languages. It's in song. It’s in our bodies. (Some of us climbed the hills barefoot as a sign of penance.)

We carried people with us in prayer. Our group was especially thankful to the residents of the Cenacolo Community who carried one of our pilgrims with limited mobility up Apparition Hill in a litter. We all brought prayer intentions with us and entrusted them to Our Lady and to her Son with total trust.



Pilgrims pray before a statue of Mary on Apparition Hill in Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina, in an August photo. (Kathryn Press)

On one of our last nights, our spiritual director shared this piece of wisdom with us: "Everything you do in Medjugorje you can do at home." Here I've just highlighted all the differences that a pilgrimage brings: making a journey, meeting strangers, prayer at the center of our day. His point, however, was for us to bring our experience back with us and integrate it instead of leaving it as a "once off."

Returning from pilgrimage I was overwhelmed with gratitude. It was a totally new experience — I don't usually climb mountains while praying the Stations of the Cross. I've never had "going to confession" at the top of my to-do list when I pack my suitcase! And I kept chewing on how I was going to live that experience out at

home, in the "real world."

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Our Catholic faith is rich. It's universal. It's alive and active! The young families in Medjugorje gave witness to this. The elderly pilgrim climbing a mountain barefoot gave witness to this. The hundreds of priests at the closing Mass of the youth festival gave witness to this.

We're all on a journey with a holy destination — to be united with Jesus in his heavenly kingdom. We have a foretaste of this at every Mass. Maybe the next time you go to Mass, you might consider yourself as going on pilgrimage. It's an ideal way of bringing that pilgrim experience closer to home.

You might try Mass at a new parish or a local shrine. Perhaps there is a monastic or contemplative religious community you've yet to visit. And when you set out on this journey, go with a friend. After Mass, start a conversation with someone you don't know. Ask what brought them there that day and perhaps offer to pray for them.

Try bringing up "pilgrimage" in a conversation in the coming days. See what kind of response you receive. Google "pilgrimages near me." It might be time to renew our practice of this Christian tradition.