

## Pilgrimage

So there we sat at lunch when one of the friars mentioned that every religion encourages pilgrimages. Another friar responded quizzically “What about Judaism?”, to which the other answered matter-of-factly: “Jerusalem”. Jerusalem has also been a destination for Christian pilgrims over the centuries; indeed, the desire to go there inspired medieval cathedral builders in Western Europe to install the elaborate labyrinths which, although now admired mainly by camera-happy tourists, once allowed pious people unable to travel to Jerusalem at least to make a spiritual pilgrimage by meditatively walking the labyrinth.

As you read this in September, thousands of our people will already have gone on pilgrimage to holy places around the world – be it to Zarvanycia or Univ or other pilgrimage sites in Ukraine, or perhaps even to the consecration of the brand new cathedral in Kyiv; closer to home, perhaps you were drawn to pilgrimages sponsored by [the Sisters Servants at their motherhouses in Sloatsburg, NY](#), or by [the Basilian Sisters at Uniontown, PA](#); while others of you are still looking forward to the pilgrimage in honor of the Protection of the Mother of God sponsored by the Sisters of St. Basil the Great at their Fox Chase motherhouse. In so doing, you join in the venerable procession of those who have gone out of their way to find God in places where they were convinced he would be found.

Pilgrimages have been much in the news lately, what with the World Youth Day attracting millions to a Eucharistic Celebration at which Pope Francis presided in Rio de Janeiro. Of course, not all the news emanating from such pilgrimages is so happy: headlines in France brought the sad news that a young Parisian girl had been killed in a bus accident while on her way to the WYD; and we were likewise shocked to hear that dozens of pilgrims had been killed on their way to the shrine of the Apostle James in Compostela, Spain. Pilgrimages are definitely not for the faint of heart!

In the years following the Second Vatican Council, we started hearing about a Pilgrim Church; this image of a Church progressing toward God stands in contrast to another – namely, that of the fortress Church, the bulwark of the True Faith, whose ramparts seemed aimed at keeping enemies - that is, unbelievers - out. (Given the emptiness of our Churches, the unbelievers kept out must be very numerous indeed!) Perhaps the advent of the New Evangelization in recent years means that the drawbridges of Fortress Church have been lowered, although I fear that conversion efforts aimed outward neglect the necessary conversion within the *Ecclesia semper reformanda* (i.e., the ever-to-be-reformed Church). Pope Francis, the “pilgrim” who arrived in Rome “from the ends of the earth”, seems willing to join us on the pilgrim’s path as we together seek the Christ Who beckons, offering an invitation written in the Good News of the Gospel and demonstrated in radiantly, joyfully faithful lives.

Much ink has been spilled in an attempt to guide pilgrims on their path – including John Bunyan’s [The Pilgrim’s Progress](#) and the Russian spiritual classic [The Way of a Pilgrim](#); however, methinks that, like all lessons in the art of living, the pilgrim’s path is best learned by experience. Perhaps this is why our Byzantine Baptismal ritual seeks to involve us in a role-play: it forces us to “rehearse” in the liturgical context what we will be required to

“perform” in our lives. You recall – probably not from your own baptism, but instead from your participation in other “Christenings” – that the ceremony begins in the back of the church, advancing from there to the *tetrapod* for the three (yes, three!) “sacraments of initiation” (i.e., Baptism, Chrismation, and Eucharist), and eventually to the sanctuary. The one who started off far from Christ is brought closer and closer to Him, led in this way to ultimate closeness – indeed union. If that isn’t a description of our life pilgrimage, I don’t know what is!

One last image comes to mind – that of a rabbi who went off in search of buried treasure, only to find after a lengthy quest that the treasure chest lay buried within his own house: he had been in possession of it all along, but needed to have his eyes opened by the experiences of his journey. When we come to the celebration of Christmas in a few months, the Great Compline will insistently proclaim “God is with us!” May our pilgrim journey help us to recognize the Incarnate God where He chooses to be hidden in plain sight – in the very midst of our lives!

Fr. Jim Karepin, op