

CELEBRATIONS OF FAITH

Going to church was always a matter of traveling when I was growing up. First, it was five miles by car. Then we moved into the village when the only driver in the family, my brother, when off to serve in the Second World War. There, it was a five-block walk, whether in the summer or the winter, in the rain or in a snowstorm, in daylight or in the dark. Even when I attended Michigan State University, it was a hike to the student chapel.

I did not know at the time that such an effort to participate at Mass was normal in Slovakia, from where my parents came. Slovaks are accustomed to walking distances to church. In addition to the regular Sunday trek, each year sees a number of pilgrimages in various parts of the nation to which the Faithful flock in droves. Those that drive to the pilgrimage from afar will often leave their car a distance from the site and walk the rest of the way. Sometimes, they will come the day before and sleep outdoors overnight.

Pope John Paul II utilized the notion of a pilgrimage during his World Youth Days. On the next-to-the-last day, hundreds of young people could be seen walking toward the field where the Holy Father would be celebrating Mass the following day. Once at the site, they found a spot to claim as their own for the night. I have experienced this scene several times. (Not that I slept out in the field with the young people.) It was a most moving sight to see the multitude gathered in the field welcome the Pope as he flew in by helicopter for the Mass.

Pilgrimages remind us of our faith journey into the Lord's Reign and Kingdom. Every day, we should be getting a little closer. There are inconveniences in the process and it takes some effort. Nor, do we travel alone. There are all the others in the assembly of believers that we call the Church, traveling with us toward the same destination.

Our Diocesan Church has had the wonderful tradition of asking its Faithful every so many years to travel to the National Shrine Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in our nation's capital. This unique church with its multitude of chapels dedicated to our Blessed Lady is a sight to behold. It is the largest church in the United States and among the 10 largest in the world, being able to accommodate around 3,500 people.

However, seeing this remarkable structure is not the prime reason for making the pilgrimage, such as the one that we have planned for Saturday, October 3. It is an occasion to remind ourselves that, as we travel to the Shrine in different ways and yet together, it will be reflective of our common faith journey as a Diocesan Church. Once at the Shrine, we will begin with prayer at 11:00 a.m. Our visit will culminate with Mass around 3:00 p.m.

This particular diocesan pilgrimage is very special to me. It will most likely be the last that I will lead as a Diocesan Bishop. I expect that I will be retired by the time of the next one. In keeping with my focus on the youth during this last year or so of my shepherding, we are encouraging the youth to participate in the pilgrimage. Please help me ensure that we have a good representation of young people from your family and parish with us for the pilgrimage on October 3. It will be an extraordinary experience not only for them but for us, as well.

I look forward to this singular event in the life of our Diocesan Church and pray that a significant attendance will reflect the Faith that is so essential for that life.