

# Postcard



## School of the Pilgrim

### End of Year Reflections

When I am asked, "What is a pilgrimage?" I usually like to turn the question back to the questioner. It is then that the discussion of what is a pilgrimage starts in earnest. For some, a pilgrimage is an invitation from the Holy to come to a sacred place for deep spiritual reflection. Many understand it for the strenuous physical exercise it can be, with an overlay of the religious and mental challenge it can pose for either an individual or group. Others understand pilgrimage as a spiritual journey by one's self or with others to an icon. In this past year, the School of the Pilgrim has offered all three kinds for various groups of people this past year, with more new opportunities in the coming year.



During Lent of 2012, I met with a small group of members of United Church of Chapel Hill for a School of the Pilgrim event for four weeks. We explored the moments of Jesus' life on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem weeks before his death. By following the Gospel readings for the weeks preceding Easter, we truly got the sense that Jesus was on a journey, the end of which he was only aware of, try as he did to get the disciples to understand his life's purpose. We explored the power of the earth on pilgrimage; the

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The mission of the School of the Pilgrim is to educate individuals and faith communities to break out of the "religion of rush" in order to live a pilgrim-life mapped out for us by the Pilgrim God. In following the Pilgrim God we re-discover the meaningfulness of being called to be on a sacred path, wherever we may live. It is on our sacred path that we come to understand that change and growth occur when we begin to see, hear, and sense that our life together, as members of a faith community, is a life-long pilgrimage. Whether we are on an actual pilgrimage, or practicing the pilgrimage rituals at home, we grow in our understanding that we are but the most recent participants in a long train of pilgrims who practiced this holy art.

meaning of light in the dark challenging times of our lives; and we participated in the final event of the weekly gathering: foot washing. The goal throughout was to unveil the ways our daily life is a pilgrimage.

In June 2012, I undertook the physically strenuous, spiritually uplifting, and intellectually challenging aspect of pilgrimage on the way from Bernal, New Mexico, to Chimayo. As I wrote before in a previous newsletter, this pilgrimage was physically challenging simply because of the change in altitude, from sea level to several thousands of feet above. This distance, as always, was over one hundred and ten miles, walked somewhere around five and a half days. Sponsored by the Catholic Archdiocese of Santa Fe, around 160 pilgrims started at five different departure cities, all coming together at El Santuario de Chimayo on a beautiful blue-sky Saturday morning. Spiritually, the pilgrimage is a feast for the soul and spirit, individually and collectively, traipsing to chapels and churches that are hundreds of years old, with the residue of the Holy Spirit emanating from the very Santos on the wall. In the evenings, when I had walked beyond the point of exhaustion, going one more step was more an act of the will than anything else.



The third event sponsored by the School of the Pilgrim was a six-week adult study session at University Presbyterian Church of Chapel Hill, in Fall of 2012, in which the class focused on living the pilgrim life. Each week we read aloud the Gospel reading for the day, and then focused on the very aspects of an intentional pilgrimage and our pilgrim lives. Using the book *Follow Me*, we applied stories from that book, along with the reading of the Gospel, to help us understand what the journey of the Christian life is about. It didn't hurt that the Gospel readings



were from Mark, in which Jesus is to have said more than once, "Follow me." And with those two words, we unpacked our baggage from life and considered what it means to follow Jesus in our busy middle class existence.

While we were hoping to all go on pilgrimage to Israel and Egypt in November 2012, we were informed by the tour company that we work with, that it was too dangerous for us to go on pilgrimage in the Sinai desert this year. Indeed, we pray for peace in that region of the world...it is, alas, an eternal prayer, or so it seems.

In 2013, there are more pilgrimage opportunities coming soon. Several churches have contacted the School of the Pilgrim for more adult study sessions on the extraordinary life of pilgrimage in our ordinary lives. Along with that, the School of the Pilgrim will be working with the University Presbyterian Church of Chapel Hill on a pilgrimage across England along Hadrian's Wall (May 2013). In the fall of 2013, plans are already afoot on going to Israel and Egypt for our Desert Wilderness trek.



As always, thank you for your prayers, ideas, comments, warm words of encouragement, and financial gifts to the School of the Pilgrim. Without you, dear friends, it simply would not be possible. And as they say to each other on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, Buen Camino, wherever you may be.

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### Upcoming Pilgrimages

- Pilgrimage with University Presbyterian Church of Chapel Hill along Hadrian's Wall, England; May 2013;
- Desert Pilgrimage, 2013: Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Sinai Peninsula, and St. Catherine's of the Sinai Monastery: November 7-19, 2013.

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*Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild  
and precious life?  
Mary Oliver*