

Postcard



School of the Pilgrim

Chimayo Pilgrimage

On Sunday May 27, 2012, I began my third pilgrimage to El Santuario de Chimayo, set in the stunningly green arroyo of the dry desert hills surrounding the town of Chimayo in northern New Mexico. This is the pilgrimage route that set off the dream of the School of the Pilgrim in 1999, when I left from the sleepy northern New Mexican town of Costilla, not knowing that what I would experience in the coming days was nothing less than a revolution in my way of thinking of the Christian faith in particular, and world religions in general.

Twenty-three pilgrims met in Bernal, NM, just east of Santa Fe. With the blessing and sponsorship of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Santa Fe, there were four other groups (in total, 3 men groups, 2 women groups) meeting at the same time, in Estancia, Costilla,

Chama, and Albuquerque. The first night is simply an evening of meet-and-greet as we got to know each other a little bit better. In our group, roughly half the group is made up of young people in their teens, while the rest of us were over the age of forty. Eight people were new to the way of pilgrimage, and their bodies, minds, and spirits would be challenged in the coming five days and walking over one-hundred miles. We prayed the rosary in the small chapel of St. Rita Catholic Church before feasting on a meal of hamburgers. Strangely enough, the first night is always the worse night for sleep because we are all full of nerves of "what-ifs" for the upcoming pilgrimage.

DAY 2

On May 28, Memorial Day, at 3 a.m. on the dot, the lights came on in the Bernal Community Center, and by 5 a.m., we were on the road to Las Vegas, NM. This first day of

walking would cover 19 miles, with stops along the way at an historic church in Tete-lote, NM, and a small chapel further up the road. I am always amazed at how many churches and small chapels—capillas—there are in New Mexico, each church and chapel with its own saint(s) that are venerated, along with Our Lady of Guadalupe. The theme for this year's pilgrimage is "Blessed is the Fruit of thy Womb," focusing on the visitation of Mary and Elizabeth, and so much of the fo-

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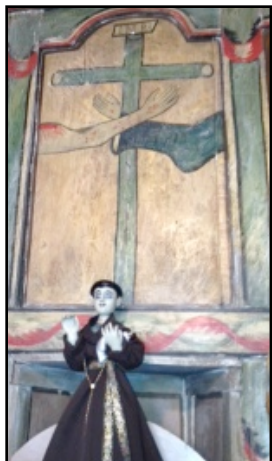
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The mission of the School of the Pilgrim is to educate individuals and faith communities to break out of the "religion of rush" in order to live a pilgrim-life mapped out for us by the Pilgrim God. In following the Pilgrim God we re-discover the meaningfulness 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.

cus this year was on Mary, the Christ bearer. Walking along a frontage road to Las Vegas that day, much of our journey took place along highway, with the dense forest coming in the next few days.

DAY 3

On May 29, our pathway took us deeper into the forested area of New Mexico. The plan was to walk 22 miles today, and the first part of the morning found us walking along the highway until we took an abrupt left onto a fire road. The meandering ridge of the Rocky Mountains was before us, white snow at its top, with nothing but evergreens and spreading pasture land before us. This area was home to cattle ranchers and homesteads, with a truck in every yard. Lo and behold, to the side of the meandering dirt path there was a chapel before us, and off we went for a visitation and lunch of baked chicken.



Church members along the path cook all the food on the pilgrimage, and we are almost always treated as VIP guests. The highlight of this day comes at the end of our walk, when Mass was held at the very church where Fr.

Michael O'Brien is buried outside of Mora, NM. Fr. Michael began this pilgrimage 40 years ago, as a youth retreat to Chimayo. To say the least, it has grown and flourished throughout the years.

DAY 4

On May 30, the chief challenge for me was the altitude change. Today we walked 23 miles, much of it on a winding dirt path up to 11,000 feet above sea level of Holman Pass. Leaving Mora at 5 a.m., we walked the first three miles without breakfast; it was a quiet walk, flat, with only our stomachs making noise. With a bountiful breakfast at a Penitentes' Morada, we were ready to walk up a mountain pass. The scenery was breathtaking, though the altitude took its toll on me as I found myself with labored breathing as we steadily walked up the zigzag path. Once over the pass, we were glad to walk on flatter terrain to Sipapu Ski Resort, picked up that night by the good people of Penasco who took care of us the next two days. This was the last day of such long walks, and my legs and feet were glad.

DAY 5

May 31: we were bussed back to Sipapu to start where we left off the day before. We slept in: 4:30! What relief. The terrain had none of the soaring altitude or long walks in the forest. Today we were treated to various stops along the way, including a stop at a beautiful church in Placita that was built in the 19th century, with the original mud flooring and not a wood floor; a visit to another Penitentes' Morada in Vadito, and ending up at the chapel in Chamisal, NM. It is the fervent belief in Christ of the people who have lovingly cared for these structures that are at the heart of these communities, reminding me of the power of faith and the faithful. Tonight we are joined by another group of men as more groups gather closer to our destination: Chimayo!

DAY 6

On this our sixth day together, we all have Chimayo on the mind! The unexpected occurred (not knowing this route well, everyday was unexpected I guess): one more mountain to climb. We started our climb outside of Chamisal, with the other men's group not far behind us (we started out earlier). We stopped briefly in Las Trampas, home of a church built in 1769. We all said "the top of this road is right around the corner." With so many corners coming before, after awhile it was simply a gag line. I noticed that the camaraderie of the group was growing. There was an ease of walking together as we knew who walked quicker than others, and who took longer strides. Then there was me: the picture-taking gringo! We were delighted to get to the top of the hill, looking down below us at a fantastic view of a valley spread before us. Behind us? The Rocky Mountain chain, with snow at the top crest. We made it



to Cordova that day, tipping our hats off at both the Presbyterian Church and Catholic Church in this quaint town. The Santos in the Catho-

lic church were amazingly beautiful and historic for their age. That evening, we followed the script followed by all other groups: the initiation of the novices into the brother- and sisterhood of pilgrims, a.k.a., Peregrinos (men) and Guadalapanas (women). With music, prayer, and a chance to witness, we welcomed our novice brothers and sisters into this forty-year community of pilgrims.

DAY 7

Saturday morning, bright and early, we were on the road by 6 a.m., making our way to Chimayo. The pilgrimage that only began the other day was drawing to a close. The sun was soon up; churches rang their bells and dogs barked as we made our way closer to



Chimayo. The bittersweet moment arose as we took a picture of the motley crew of us who had walked over one hundred miles in five-and-a-half days. The gathering of everyone in the sanctuary is the best part, as we recognize faces of those we have walked with before. There were 158 people who began this pilgrimage, and only a few left along the way. Lives were transformed, relationships made stronger, and new friendships established as we celebrated the welcome of Mary and Elizabeth who knew that something extraordinary would take place in their lives upon the birth of their children. And the world has never been the same ever since.

Upcoming Pilgrimages

- Pilgrimage Class, Chapel Hill, University Presbyterian, fall 2012;
- Wilderness Pilgrimage, 2012: Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Sinai Peninsula, and St. Catherine's of the Sinai Monastery: November 8-2, 2012.



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