

## **God-Finds in the Pilgrimage** **July 2, 2023**

This past week, 7 of our high school youth and 4 chaperones, including myself, went on a pilgrimage to eastern Canada. We spent one or two days in a given city, and then we moved on. We traveled for a total of 8 days.

The hope for the pilgrimage, which the youth articulated over a year ago when they began planning, was to experience God in sacred spaces and in nature.

So we visited churches. We saw cathedrals; we saw basilicas (which are cathedrals that have been bestowed with a special status in the Catholic church); we saw oratories (which are spaces for worship at the site dedicated to saint or martyr); and we saw shrines. I'd say there were about 18 different churches named "Notre Dame," which I learned simply means "Our Lady." We saw a lot of churches this week.

And they were magnificent. Most of the buildings were massive, so big that if you tilted your head to look straight up at the ceiling, you'd get a sense of vertigo and have to look down again. These buildings took decades to build, and the altars were covered in gold. Everyone spoke in whispers out of awe and respect.

At two of the basilicas, there were stories of healing. People had come to seek miraculous cures, and they left as new people. This happened so often that there were collections of canes, walkers, and crutches that had been left behind by those who were healed.

And the detail. One basilica had mosaics, pictures in tiny tiles, everywhere you looked, even on the floor, on the ceiling, where you could barely see it. Artists has spent so much time and effort making every inch of these spaces beautiful.

You could not help feeling a sense of awe. And so a practice that the pilgrims and chaperones did is to take 10 minutes to be in silence in each of those spaces. To sit, kneel, stand, and to pray. To soak in the wonder and grandness of the space.

We visited churches this past week, and they were stunning. It was evident that God was in the majestic and beauty of the buildings.

But it wasn't just buildings we came to see. We also saw God in nature. We went to Niagara Falls and to Montmorency Falls in Quebec (which is taller than Niagara Falls). You couldn't help but be stunned by the power of the water. It roared and sprayed you with mist; the falls were unstoppable. Some of us even ran up the stairs next to Montmorency Falls to get a better look.

God was in the beauty and power of those falls.

And then, God showed up in places where we weren't even looking.

Every morning, we prayed together the service of Morning Prayer. Our pilgrims took turns leading the short service (even those who were a little shy). Then we ended our day with Compline, another prayer service.

We held these short services not in the grand basilicas or oratories, but on the hotel patios or outside in a park, or in a hotel room. We prayed, and we sang, and we talked about where we had seen God that day.

God was just as present in those moments at the picnic tables as God was in those grand structures. There was as much a sense of Divine in our (admittedly) off-key acapella singing (I was leading; what do you expect) as there was in the sound of booming organs.

As part of our trip, we also ate together a lot. We planned out where we'd eat dinner together every night, and breakfast and lunches were often eaten with the group as well, as it happened. Sometimes there was steak or hearty pasta for dinner; other times pizza and chicken fingers. Regardless of how rich or nice the food was, those meals were sacred times together too.

In the midst of all that, there were some shenanigans. Some goofiness. Some (dare I say) obnoxiousness.

The best display of this arose in the middle of our week together. On some of our tours, our guides pointed out the roofs of many buildings in Canada. Most roofs aren't made out of shingles, but of metal. The poor (long ago) built houses with roofs of tin, which they painted bright colors like red or yellow or sky blue. Some say they painted their roofs to prevent rust; others say it was so that they could find their house in the 12 feet of snow that they're known to get.

So the houses of the poor had roofs of tin. The roofs of the rich or of public buildings had roofs made out of copper, if you can believe it.

So some of our pilgrims made a game to see who could find the most copper roofs. Every time they saw a roof or gutter or statue made out of copper, they would yell out, "Copper!" at the top of their lungs.

You can imagine how fun that it is to hear several hundred times.

It got so bad, that these pilgrims drove their priest to threaten, "From this point on, whoever says 'Copper' gets smacked in the head!"

(Side note: I take no responsibility for this. Any sane person would've done the same. Abraham himself traveled with his son for 3 days and was ready to tie him up and call it a day.)

Now let me ask you: Do you think that threat deterred them from saying "Copper?" No. Many a head was bopped that day and for the rest of the trip (and it was a very light bop). In fact, it turned them all into a bunch of snitches who ratted out their best friends just so they could watch

them get slapped. So if you hear any of our youth yelling “Copper,” don’t be surprised if they receive a light smack on the back of their head.

So I lost that battle. The youth got their way.

The other moment of humility came towards the end of our trip. One night at dinner, a pilgrim asked how old I was. It came out that I am 36 years old. A couple of the youth were surprised to learn that I was “so old.” But overall, I took that as a compliment, that I look younger than my years.

But then we came to St. Joseph’s Oratory. The tradition at St. Joseph’s is that pilgrims crawl up the steps on their knees in an act of humility to come into the sanctuary. The normal wooden steps were closed for renovation, so 2 of the pilgrims and I decided to crawl up the granite steps on our knees.

In my defense, I was wearing shorts and the pilgrims were wearing long pants. We got one-third of the way up the steps and I was lagging behind slightly. One of the pilgrims with me turned around, saw me struggling, and asked, “Are you okay? Your face is tomato red.”

We continued up those stairs, some of us with more grunting than others. I finally reached the top last, sweating profusely, grimacing, and muttering prayers about humility and words of self-encouragement. The two other pilgrims, who had finished long ago, watched this spectacle. One of them asked me disbelievingly if I was acting. The other pilgrim said, “Yeah, now I can believe that you’re 36.”

There were many other moments of goofiness and hilarity. There was lots of obnoxious singing in the van; pillow fights; quirky riddles told and solved. One day, our bus driver on the tour was an Italian man named Angelo who was so goofy that we were chanting his name by the time we left.

In short, we had some fun. And God was just as much in the fun, the laughter, the shenanigans as much as God was in the moments of worship and wonder and awe.

If you would like to know more, you can talk with our youth. If you want to see pictures, you can look at the church newsletter or Facebook page, or talk to me and I can send you the link. Our youth will also offer a presentation of their pilgrimage this fall to share their stories with you all. If you want to experience this firsthand, come as a chaperone the next time the youth go, in a couple years.

This week, I’d encourage you, in honor of our pilgrims, to look for God in laughter and goofiness.

In a few minutes, we’re going to baptize Keegan. And whether it’s serious and smooth or whether it’s wonky and full of shouting, God is there.

We are told that we made us in God's image, and God made us with a sense of humor. That can only mean that God himself has a sense of humor. It is good for us to use it.

Amen.

Copyright © 2023 Rev. Andrew VanBuren. All rights reserved.