

Reflecting on Pilgrimage

March 21, 2019 - The first-year novices of the Jesuits USA Central and Southern Province were on pilgrimage February 23 – March 6, 2019. Now getting apostolic experience, they have also had a chance to reflect back on the graces received. These reflections are shared here.

Reynaldo Belfort, nSJ Accepting God's Unconditional Love



Reynaldo Belfort, nSJ, encounters fellow UCS Jesuits Mario Alberto Torres and Juan Ruiz while on pilgrimage.

When I heard about the idea of the pilgrimage experience as part of my formation process, even though I definitely felt some anxiety and nervousness about it, I also was quite excited about the sense of adventure and the idea on relying purely on God's Providence alone to get through it. However, by the end of the pilgrimage I felt thunderstruck after realizing how deep the experience was for me spiritually. In particular, the biggest grace of my pilgrimage was to feel that I am loved by God through concrete, unexpected ways during my pilgrimage journey, and also God helped me break that barrier within me called resistance I've been having for a long time so that I can receive His unconditional Love for me, despite this feeling of "unworthiness" that I noticed I've been carrying



for a long time. As much as my mind was "hard-wired" to give, without receiving in return, God clearly wanted me to experience the opposite. Receiving was certainly the most difficult thing for me, but also the most rewarding.

Timothy Bishop, nSJ My First Day in Boston

After five days in New York, I made my way on the bus to Boston. The first thing I did in Boston was think about how much different it was without a novice brother. For about 30 minutes, I lingered in front of the bus station. In my mind I was debating: "Do I wander around until I find a church? Do I ask someone for help?" I was asking Jesus, my patron saints and my guardian angel to guide my heart. Eventually I was given the confidence to ask someone for help. The man and his family took me to lunch and bought me pastries. When we were done eating, they pointed me in the direction of a church (which I never found) and headed off to their hotel. I headed off to find a place to sleep.



UCS Novices prepare to depart for Pilgrimage

I wandered around downtown Boston for the rest of the afternoon, never finding a place to stay. Finally, I decided that rather than take a bed in the shelter on that snowy night, I would go and find



the Jesuits at Boston College. On my way through downtown, I met a man named Louie. He was begging on the side of the road and I just stopped to talk to him. He said that he was hungry, so I gave him the pastries the family had bought me earlier. After a little small talk, Louie said he had to get back to work. However, he left me with words close to these: “You can always stay in the shelter with me. I’ll be here most of the night. Just know you have a friend right here.”

When I go back to these words in prayer and when I look at Louie’s face in my mind, I hear the voice of Jesus and see His face. Here is a poor man, a man who is so infrequently offered hospitality, offering hospitality to me. Louie’s gift of friendship may have been the greatest gift of charity I received on my pilgrimage. He did not offer me money, or food, but a simple act of love. How sweet these words are to a pilgrim’s heart: Just know you have a friend right here.

Travis Crowe, nSJ

God Turns Roadblocks into Opportunities



Travis Crowe, nSJ, found moments to celebrate on his Novice Pilgrimage.



Pilgrimage was an experience that allowed me to realize the generosity of God and the people of God I was traveling with on Greyhound. However, pilgrimage was not without its challenges of trusting in that generous God – knowing that Jesus is journeying with me the entire time. I struggled with anxiety along the way – irrational fears of something tragic on the horizon – and wondering if I might get “stuck” in pilgrimage for the rest of my life. In my reflection of pilgrimage, maybe there is something to the idea of being “stuck” in pilgrimage. Both to the aspect of being a pilgrim, as a Jesuit, for the rest of my life. But also the plight of others who are unable to have the resources or support networks to rise above their pilgrim journey here on earth. Especially those who are economically or socially on the margins of society already.

To give you a short example: on my journey from Kansas City to San Francisco I wanted to give up a number of times! Nothing seemed to be going our way – and so many different roadblocks seemed to present themselves along the way. Missing our connection in Salt Lake City, traveling the longer route through Las Vegas and Los Angeles, and getting to Los Angeles to find out our bus driver did not come to work to drive the bus. The number of perceived roadblocks seemed to mount at each turn. And yet there were some beautiful moments in that journey! Going through Wyoming (and the mountains) during a beautiful sunset – which we were supposed to travel through during the night on our original schedule. And then again, the next morning, coming out of Salt Lake City with a stunning sunrise. Finally getting to San Francisco was a very rewarding experience as well. In a way, through hardships, God helped me focus less on myself and more on my journey as a pilgrim.

Brent Gordon, nSJ

Experiencing Prayer as Connection

While in Philadelphia, I went to visit the Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul in search of spiritual conversation and a donation. When I rang the doorbell of the rectory, a young Benedictine priest answered the door. Fr. Isaac was living at the Cathedral rectory while completing his studies at Drexel University. After sharing his vocation story with me, he mentioned that the coming Sunday the Cathedral would celebrate the feast of St. Katharine Drexel, a native of Philadelphia whose remains were housed near a rear altar here.



Brent Gordon, nSJ, buys his ticket to embark on his novice pilgrimage.

I returned on Sunday for the Mass. I was only aware of the broad strokes of her life and work (such as founding Xavier University in New Orleans and founding schools for Native Americans), and the homily went into greater detail and inspired in me a greater interest in the saint. However, given the amount of people around after Mass, I decided not to go to her tomb to pray. Instead I went down the park across from the Cathedral and made my way to the Free Library of Philadelphia; there I found a copy of Gerard Manley Hopkins poetry and copied down *While Kingfishers Catch Fire* into my journal. This particular poem, with its line “Christ plays in ten-thousand places/ lovely in eyes and lovely in limbs not his,” was an overarching refrain for my pilgrimage.

Returning to the Cathedral, I noticed the crowds had mostly dissipated. I went over to St. Katherine’s tomb and knelt there for a while in prayer. After a while, I opened my journal and read “While kingfishers catch fire” aloud. When I reached “the just man justifies,” I realized that I was reading the poem to St. Katharine Drexel. It was as if it was an expression of thanks for her work and life.

Later that day, I reflected on the moment in a colloquy with the Lord. It felt to me as the most pure of my prayers up to that point in the pilgrimage, and I asked Jesus why this was. His response was “Play with me.” The movement was one of recognizing myself in relation to God and to the community of saints (in the person of St. Katherine). Moreover, I then recalled one of St. Teresa of



Avila's poems which I was given during the Exercises. In it, St. Teresa recounts how the Lord told her "Enjoy me." Prayer, then, was an action of connection, of relationship, in which I offered myself, through the communion of saints, to the Lord.

Joe Nolla, nSJ **In God's Hands**



One grace I received is trust. On the first night of the Pilgrimage, I was in the Dallas Greyhound station stressing and planning how I would manage to provide for myself. How would I stretch my \$5? How would I manage to raise more money? I was concerned about how and when I would beg. Then a recently released prisoner came to me. He was talking about how difficult it was to adjust to life on the outside and how he had little to rely on but his faith. He asked for help and I gave him the \$5. For the first time in my life I had no money at all. I was flat broke.

I think the stress I had felt before I gave the money away was the burden to be in control. Those \$5 were the last bit of "power" I felt I had. It vanished once I gave the money away. I was completely vulnerable. I had nothing of my own on which to rely and was entirely in God's hands; there was no better place to be. As I realized this, I knew a greater freedom. I wasn't stressed anymore. It was a wonderful feeling to completely relinquish my control and let God take over.

The rest of the Pilgrimage was fairly stress-free. I saw myself as having one simple choice to make repeatedly: the choice to say "yes" to what God had in store for me.

Sonny Vo, nSJ **Life as Pilgrimage**

Trust was the grace I was seeking as I embarked on my pilgrimage journey. I needed to trust in order to have freedom in my discernment. Trust in Jesus that he wants the best for me no matter what I am called to. Trust in myself that in spite of how much I want to be a Jesuit that I have freedom in that choice. Even though trust and freedom was the grace I was seeking on my pilgrimage, other graces I received from the long retreat manifested as my journey progressed.



Starting off my pilgrimage the thought of scarcity was trying to dominate my thoughts. Scarcity in the form of how to acquire money for food, finding a safe place to rest at night, money for transportation, and limited options to deal with unexpected situations that may occur that may cause obstacles to the pilgrimage.

All of these dilemmas did manifest into reality during the trip but it did not worry me. In the past I had relied heavily on my hustle to survive but this time it was different. Different in that I was not going alone spiritually and physically. Spiritually, I was more intentional to check in with Jesus to see what the Holy Spirit wanted me to do. Physically, I had a companion with me in my

fellow Jesuit novice brother Travis Crowe to start off the journey before parting ways.

Having someone physically there that was in similar circumstances and supporting one another was uncharted territory for me compared to my lone ranger days. The spiritual and physical companionship triggered one of the graces I received during the fourth week of the spiritual exercises. The grace was the knowledge that Jesus and I will always go together and do things together. God is always there for me whether I realize it or not. The journey is more fruitful if I go with God and be open to his companionship in other people.

In conclusion, although my pilgrimage trip has ended, it is a paradigm on how I should continue to proceed forward. My life on earth is a pilgrimage. The graces of freedom and trust, along with my other experiences that Jesus gifted me on my pilgrimage, is to be lived out every day. The twelve days of my pilgrimage journey was a small sample of how God is calling me to be his companion in this lifetime.