

Biblical, Theological & Ecclesiological Foundations for Pilgrimage

Thomas Rosica, Nov 15, 2013

[Talk given by Fr. Rosica to the National Association of Shrine and Pilgrimage Apostolate (NAPSA) in Buffalo, NY.]

Let me begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to Msgr. Vito Buonanno for the invitation to address this convention of the National Shrine and Pilgrimage Apostolate. I have visited many of your holy places over the years and have not have had the privilege of meeting the people behind the scenes. It is good to be with you. You have invited me to address the topic: “The Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiological Foundations for Pilgrimage.”

Allow me to begin by taking the wide-angle view of your important ministries as custodians of holy places. I would like to reflect first of all on the reality of pilgrimage in the bible, then speak about the nature of shrines or holy places. Finally, I would like to consider the mind and heart of Pope Francis and his experience of Aparecida, both the shrine and pastoral document. For it is from this important place in central Brazil and from that historic meeting in 2007 that he is drawing his inspiration, vision and energy for the brilliant Petrine ministry unfolding before us.

God’s People on Pilgrimage

A pilgrimage is a journey of one or more persons to holy places of devotion and tradition, perhaps to fulfill a promise and/or to obtain a grace. At the origin of this decision there is a desire for change, which can gradually lead to rearranging or reorienting one’s choices in life from a faith perspective. To go on pilgrimage means to go out of one’s self and away from the routine of one’s habits in order to set out towards the horizon indicated by the Lord, as Abraham did, our Father in faith.

What is the biblical story of our salvation if not the passage from the Paradise Lost in Genesis to the Paradise found, and symbolized beautifully, in the New Jerusalem of John’s wild dream in Revelation? At the beginning of the ‘History of Salvation’ appears the symbolic person of Abraham, a ‘wandering Aramean’ (Dt 26:5), called to set out for an unknown land (Gen 12:1; 15:7; 17:1). His calling came from God, who unlike all other divinities of that time, was not bound to any territorial dimension but ‘walked’ along with his servant (Gen 17:1). Despite the call and the promise, he remained a wanderer all his days. The way of Abraham, “our father in faith”, represents a life model for every believer, but especially for itinerants and pilgrims on a way aimed at hope in the future, the heavenly homeland and salvation.

Jacob had sought to plan his course but had to flee into exile when his cunning had recoiled on him. He met God, fleetingly, on the way and as an old man had to journey yet: to Joseph and to

the land of Goshen. Moses, too, had to flee for his life. He found himself leading a rag-tag group out of slavery to the mountain of God.

The Exodus in many of its features resembles an immense pilgrimage, a journey of faith. It is the singular most important event and paradigm for the Jewish people. Jesus' exodus in Jerusalem would be patterned after the exodus of his own people thousands of years before.

David, too, journeyed from sin and honest repentance and through the maze of family strife. Amos the Judean carried out his mission in the land of Israel, fearlessly challenging corruption in high places, and the oppression of the poor, and exposed the emptiness behind an elaborate cultic facade. He walked the path of righteousness and summoned others to follow.

Hosea's painful journey through love gave him a startling glimpse into the heart of his loving God. Jeremiah's life vividly illustrated the price of faithful service. His contemporary, Ezekiel, had been exiled to Babylon where he would experience a spiritual journey to a new heart and a new spirit to a new House of the Living God.

Isaiah's epic pilgrimage spans three or more centuries, He urged a return, a new exodus (Isaiah 35:1-10). The harrowing journey of Job was from faith to faith. His quest for an answer to the perennial problem of innocent suffering is as pressing in our day as it ever was in his. The story of Esther tells how a Jewish orphan girl became queen of Persia – a journey from rags to riches. Judith's journey was from widow to heroine.

John the Baptist's journey took him through the Jordan where he confronted "all Israel" and led to Herod's dungeon where his life was taken from him. A pregnant Mary journeyed from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where her child was born. She learned in the Temple of the destiny of the child – a sign of contradiction. She shared his exile and witnessed his death. Her deeper journey was one through the darkness of raw faith.

Mary Magdalene was with Jesus on his travels, among his little group of disciples. She, too, was with him at his death. This courageous woman, called since the early church 'Apostola Apostolorum' was first to meet the Risen One. "Go to my brothers and sisters..." a short distance – but what an incredible journey!

Paul himself was the first, and the greatest pilgrim for Christ. He would readily acknowledge that his greater journey was from the Torah to the Cross. The evangelist Mark saw that the Christian journey is not only a carrying of the cross; the Christian journey finds meaning in the cross. The second half of Luke's Gospel is one great pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the city of destiny.

Christians from St. John's community had begun their journey from within the synagogue. Their Christological pilgrimage led them far beyond the comprehension of Judaism. For Jesus, the Risen Lord, was the new Temple, the goal of their journey, the paschal lamb that was slain, the real Passover.

Jesus is the pre-eminent pilgrim of the Scriptures. He journeyed throughout the land of Israel: an itinerant prophet, with no home of his own. His last journey to Jerusalem marked him as "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Heb 12:2). That journey to the cross stands as a challenge to his disciples. The cross was not the end of Jesus' story nor is it the end of the Christian story.

The mysterious author of the Letter to the Hebrews talks about our great pilgrimage towards the City of the future. "Therefore let us go forth to him... bearing abuse for him" (Heb 13:13). We must be tried and tested as he was; we must run our race.

The biblical story is one long pilgrimage, and a model of pilgrimage for believers. You who are entrusted with the custody of holy places and leading pilgrims to the heart of God must help others to prepare themselves to make the journey "as pilgrims". Tourists pass quickly through places, but the places pass slowly through pilgrims, leaving them forever changed.

A pilgrim spirituality for the church can only bring us to understand more deeply one of the rich themes of the Second Vatican Council: we are a pilgrim church. We are no longer a fixed society perched on a hilltop overlooking the world below, but a pilgrim people painfully journeying through the valley, journeying in solidarity with God's people, sharing their joys and hopes, griefs and sorrows. And the journey itself binds us together and heals us of our loneliness. So often, the destination remains a dream that constantly outdistances us. Pilgrim spirituality teaches us that the meaning of life is not found at the end of the journey, but in the very journey itself. Rugged individualism, which only leads to loneliness and despair, decreases along the pilgrim journey, and a new, common spirit begins to grow among pilgrims.

Shrines and Holy Places

The shrine was the innermost and most sacred part of the Jerusalem temple where the Ark of the Covenant stood, the urn in which the tables of the law were also kept. It had accompanied the Hebrew people as they crossed the desert and it was the sign of the Lord's abiding presence among humanity. Moreover, it is significant that after the great trials of the Exile, the Chosen People felt the need to express a sign of their hope by rebuilding the Temple, the shrine of adoration and praise.

Here I call your attention to a very beautiful document from the Vatican "Pilgrimages and Shrines, Places of Hope" published by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants

and Itinerant People” on the eve of the Great Jubilee in 1999. In this program-matic text that prepared the way for Blessed John Paul II’s historic pilgrimage to the Holy Land in March 2000, 3 important aspects of shrines are presented with the words: Memory, Presence and Prophecy of the Living God. These words invite us to consider the relationship between the notion of pilgrimage and that of the shrine, which is usually the visible goal of the pilgrim’s journey: “The term ‘shrine’ designates a church or other sacred place to which the faithful make pilgrimages for a particular religious reason. In shrines, a meeting with the living God can take place through the life-giving experience of the Mystery which is proclaimed, celebrated and lived: At shrines, the means of salvation are to be provided more abundantly to the faithful; the word of God is to be carefully proclaimed; liturgical life is to be appropriately fostered, especially through the celebration of the Eucharist and penance; and approved forms of popular devotion are to be cultivated.”

For Christians, the word “shrine” means a place or church, where particularly venerated relics or sacred images are kept. A shrine is the destination of pilgrimages. We know that many shrines have been dedicated to the Mother of God, others to the Saints, to the martyrs for the faith, following supernatural events, such as apparitions, miracles and/or mysterious happenings. These shrines can be considered intermediary stations on our earthly path, places where we get new enthusiasm and vigour to reach in fullness the Kingdom promised by God, even though it is present in the Church, the first fruit and seed of the Kingdom (LG 5).

There are shrines everywhere: some are of very ancient origin, others are more recent; some are known worldwide, others are known more locally, but all of them are places of what is essential where one goes to obtain “Grace” above all.

In the shrine, all the pilgrims, including those who administer them and those who work there, are urged to approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation in order to be reunited with God, with themselves and with creation, and to become available and open to others in charity and solidarity, the roots of hope. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is followed by the celebration of the Eucharist, the centre and heart of the shrine, just as it is in Christian life. This culminating moment of the pilgrimage, which generally brings together groups of pilgrims, is an occasion for true community and for overcoming ethnic, political and social divisions, and it should be celebrated with the due propriety and solemnity.

Contemporary challenges to shrines

As a memory of our origin, the shrine calls to mind God’s initiative and helps pilgrims to recognize it with a sense of awe, gratitude and commitment. As a place of the divine presence, it bears witness to God’s faithfulness and his constant activity in the midst of His people, through his Word and the sacraments. As a prophecy, or a reminder of our heavenly homeland, it makes

us remember that everything is not finished, but must yet be accomplished fully in accordance with God's promise which is our goal.

One modern obstacle to an authentic pilgrim experience is Facebook or other social networks and the general ease of communicating with others anywhere in the world. It is the phenomenon we call "being present but absent." I can be here with you, but all that I'm doing is geared toward telling people elsewhere what I'm doing right now. That's a kind of absenteeism that's becoming very pronounced on pilgrimages and visits to shrines.

A second contemporary challenge is the question of speed! As soon as the plane lands, the bus arrives, or we enter the gates of the shrine, people need to call home and send a text message saying that one has arrived. It is as though one never left home! The key difference between leisure travel and a pilgrimage is the search for a spiritual encounter and throughout history certain shrines and sites have become known as places with a density of God's presence. There is nothing we can do but pray in such holy places.

A pilgrimage and visit to a shrine is putting order into your life, going back to put real order in your life — order in terms of your relationships with other persons, order in terms of your relationship with God. Sin is disorder, and a pilgrimage is an opportunity to recover that harmony that has been lost through everyday life. That's why it's a deeply religious experience.

The Lesson of the Shrine of Aparecida in Brazil

"Aparecida" evokes first of all a major Marian shrine in Central Brazil, dedicated to Our Lady. In 2007 a very significant gathering of the bishops of CELAM (Episcopal Conferences of Latin American and the Caribbean Region) took place at the shrine and was crowned with the visit of Pope Benedict XVI. The document that emanated from this continental meeting, now known as the Aparecida Document, was prepared by a team of bishops led by then-Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires in Argentina, Jorge Mario Bergoglio.

During their stay in Aparecida, the bishops had regular contact with huge numbers of the faithful that were present at the shrine on pilgrimage. The shepherds had the opportunity to "take on the odor of the sheep." This important gathering was not held in a downtown convention centre or major hotel complex, nor in the quiet confines of a monastery or abbey. The meeting took place in the midst of a continuous pilgrimage of God's people. Such a pilgrimage becomes a privileged opportunity to witness popular piety and devotion and experience new missionary endeavors that are all part of this reality called the New Evangelization. The same phenomenon takes place during every World Youth Day, in the midst of the noise, the chaos, the music, the dancing, the crowds and the prayers of millions of young people.

As the bishops voted on propositions, paragraphs and amendments to the final document, the Latin American and Caribbean Churches were singing and praying around them and for them. At Aparecida and in the document that now bears the name of that hallowed shrine, bishops promised to defend the poor and excluded, including children, people who are ill or have disabilities, at-risk youths, the elderly, prisoners and migrants. They also pledged to promote formation for Christian politicians and legislators so they contribute to the building of a just and fraternal society.

History of the Aparecida Shrine

Allow me to draw heavily from Pope Francis' address to the bishops of CELAM in Rio this past summer. Do not all of our shrines and holy places have histories and powerful stories or parables like this one to share with the world?

Pope Francis retold the story of the Madonna of Aparecida as a parable of the Latin American church. At the beginning of the Aparecida story, there were poor fishermen looking for food. These tired fishermen, who had experienced failure in a dilapidated boat with old, torn nets, find a broken statue that must be mended. It is a small statue of the Immaculate Conception. God always enters clothed in poverty, weakness and brokenness. Our Lady of Aparecida appears with a black face, first separated, and then united in the hands of the fishermen. "In Aparecida, from the beginning, God's message was one of restoring what was broken, reuniting what had been divided."

Pope Francis described what the fishermen did with that small, broken statute of the Immaculate Conception. They bring the mystery home. The fishermen "bundle up" the mystery, clothing the Virgin drawn from the waters as if she were cold and needed to be warmed. God asks for shelter in the warmest part of ourselves: our heart. They call their neighbors to see its rediscovered beauty; they all gather around and relate their troubles in its presence and they entrust their causes to it. Only the beauty of God can attract. God's way is through enticement, allure. God lets himself be brought home. He awakens in us a desire to keep him and his life in our homes, in our hearts. He reawakens in us a desire to call our neighbors in order to make known his beauty.

"The Church needs constantly to relearn the lesson of Aparecida; she must not lose sight of it. The Church's nets are weak, perhaps patched; the Church's barque is not as powerful as the great transatlantic liners which cross the ocean. And yet God wants to be seen precisely through our resources, scanty resources, because he is always the one who acts."

"Dear brothers, the results of our pastoral work do not depend on a wealth of resources, but on the creativity of love. To be sure, perseverance, effort, hard work, planning and organization all

have their place, but first and foremost we need to realize that the Church's power does not reside in herself; it is hidden in the deep waters of God, into which she is called to cast her nets."

But perhaps the most visible fruit of the Aparecida document was made known to the world on the night of March 13, 2013, when one of the protagonists of the 2007 Aparecida Conference, an architect of its enduring message and document appeared on the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and was presented to the world with a new name: "Francis." If you wish to understand what Aparecida is all about, listen to Francis and watch his profound simple gestures. But more than simply listening and watching, imitate them. For in the person of Pope Francis, we see the message of Aparecida come alive and we experience in him one of the most vivid, powerful, credible expressions of the New Evangelization.