

REFLECTIVE NOTES ON A PILGRIMAGE TO MEDJUGORJE AND SAN GIOVANNI ROTONDO

- Alex Grabowski

INTRODUCTION

“This particular pilgrimage (to Medjugorje and San Giovanni), was a third time pilgrimage for my wife and I; it was extraordinarily well organized; the beauty of the countryside vistas, and the Church architectures a visual delight; there were the beautiful exchanges between the pilgrims, and the eager to please, locals and tour guides; and then of course, there were the inspiring spiritual settings, made exemplary by the sacred locations we stood in; often retracing the pathways trodden by the great Saints and visionaries; and reinforced by those unique testimonials given to an always eager listening audience; which allowed for a wonderful spiritual experience. “

Now all of this is true.

BUT THERE IS SO MUCH MORE. “In reality, this is but the mere nicety of the overview until one is drawn to the requisite of individual spiritual needs; and that which motivates the pilgrim for such travel; and which draws consequence, later when back home in Melbourne”.

The Pilgrimage (from my perspective) draws out of you, an awareness that,

is all about the intensity of the religious experience; the truth and humility that you must be willing to embrace; and the commitment to execute spiritual change.

necessitates you create an altered mindset in attitude and for a renewal in spiritual focus.

is not about a trip of convenience, comfort and relaxation. (My wife, Amor, often reminds me, in saying, ‘Remember Alex, you are a pilgrim, not a tourist; so, act accordingly’).

necessitates a constant revision of the integrity of one’s soul, and the darkened stain created through sin. It becomes the canvass of self-critique of the person who you purport to be, and the one you need to become.

tests the depth of conviction that underpins your faith; and

yet can take the vantage point of a pilgrimage into the home, and into the privacy of one’s own thoughts; there is no requisite to travel the world, unless there be a particular spiritual need, that demands otherwise.

(Note: I find that the best time for a pilgrimage, lay in the stillness of the night, when darkness surrounds you, and there are only two people in conversation, and that be you, and the Lord Almighty).

“So, I venture on a pilgrimage not out of curiosity, as a mere adjunct for more travel; but rather because I seek to encounter a deeper, more intense spiritual experience; because my needs gravitate to a specific spiritual problem that demand I be there; and which by implication, allows me to better understand the attributes of my Maker and the intimacy of the relationship I must share with Him”.

The Need for the Pilgrimage (in my case),

was best understood in retrospect, with the lapsing of time; often pre-empted out of spiritual necessity, to quell the ‘cries of the troubled soul’ as it be weighed down by sin.

(Note, this is much in keeping with the St John of the Cross descriptive narrative of the ‘dark night of the soul’).

“During this, my most recent pilgrimage to Medjugorje, the nights have grown ever more troublesome, more restless; the personal moments of spiritual inadequacy ever more intensifying; thankfully, though I be drawn nearer to Christ. For it is the intensity, and unrelenting burden of guilt of sin smeared upon mine fragile conscience, that has so stained the soul, and that so distresses”.

And, this has been a lifetime in the making.

Yet, when one thinks more and more of the Lord Almighty; hour upon hour, day upon day, one surely must draw closer to His life-line, to His Divine Mercy.

Note: The need for a pilgrimage must flow from this. I can not separate the experience of the Divine Mercy from that of the pilgrimage(s).

The Three Pilgrimages (reinforce one another) as a collective in delivering:

first, and foremost, it helped make discoverable the imperative of the 'Divine Mercy;' (1st Pilgrimage)

it drew awareness for the need to revert back to the Catechism of my youth; (2nd Pilgrimage) and along with the 3rd Pilgrimage, it drew focus on the

necessity to intensify the depth in prayer, as espoused by Our Lady, and as further delivered by St Therese (of Avila) by her 'prayers of discipline', and by St Ignatius (of Loyola) with the four-week intensity program of his 'spiritual exercises'. This is a pilgrimage in its own right.

Specifically, the 3rd Pilgrimage delivering on three pre-requisite needs:

- to commit to the message of Our Lady to pray the Rosary (and Chaplet of the Divine Mercy) daily, and to lifting the intensity (and solemnity) of such prayer;

- to commit to greater humility through the quiet 'Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament'; and

- in granting an ease of conscience in allowing to deliver my 'general confession'.

Why is the Revelation of the Divine Mercy of such Enormous Consequence, and how does it intersect with that of the Pilgrimage Experience?

Simply, because it induced spiritual hope.

Simply, because it induced spiritual change.

Simply, because it has eased the pain of my spiritual guilt.

Let me elaborate.

Two major events have taken shape since 2014.

The Passing of My Mother (in 2014) and in the Helping of a Close Acquaintance with Substantial Depression (in 2019).

I describe it as such.

"It is as though, through the passage of each pilgrimage; the Almighty has awoken an awareness within me; placing me on a path of spiritual rediscovery with each pilgrimage. I had carried the burden of great self-disdain, enormous guilt and spiritual inadequacy; with the death of my mother. The Lord only knows how I tortured her incessantly in the early 80s, laying great guilt at her feet for my own perceived inadequacies; and how I was not present at the moment of her passing; and too, on that occasion, offering neither prayer, nor instructing a priest to be at her bedside in 2014.

And yet, I was with her in the last two and a half years of her life, attending to all her daily needs.

I needed a break from the intensity.

But a strange occurrence took shape in early 2019, when called upon to assist another person experiencing substantial depression; and as best as I could, I obliged. And yet, it was through that very same person (in early 2020) that drew my awareness to the Marian ministry of Fr Chris Alar and the Divine Mercy; by which the Almighty was destined to extend a life-line to me. I remain convinced that my embracing the news of the Lord's messenger, St Faustina and of the need to pray the Chaplet of the Divine Mercy; had ignited the path to my spiritual recovery.

I had expressed fear and a great emptiness, when calling my mother on the morning of her death, only to be greeted by incoherency, and by the continuity of her sinister bellowing; that my heart sank, as I feared for the soul of my mother.

It was as though Satan was about to clutch her soul; and it felt as though I had betrayed her. It is a horrendous thought, to visualize a loved one in hell.

There was prayer, but the onset of prayer in the form of the Divine Mercy chaplet, would not ensue for at least, another five or six years."

Imagine each day living with the burden of guilt; and out of desperation, my thoughts began to turn increasingly to Jesus Christ.

Thank God I say, that I was never far from my faith, and from the privilege of having had a Catholic and scholastic upbringing in my youth.

The Pilgrimage, and it All Began with the Church of St Peter and St Paul.

One day in early 2018, a strange feeling came over me, as I sat on one of the rear pews in this very Church, when my attention was drawn to a newsletter inviting those interested on a pilgrimage to Poland and Medjugorje; and turning to my wife, telling her that we must go. So, I was 'nudged' on the path of a pilgrimage to Krakow in Poland in 2018 with Fr Jerald as our pastoral leader; for I sensed an imperative to develop awareness to the influences of the greater holiness that lay within St Faustina; and though I hadn't realized this; in the critical pursuance of truth and humility that underpins the Divine Mercy; and to be given the warning of an insight into the 'greater vision, that is, Hell,' as given to the Lord's messenger in faith, St Fausti-na."

I needed an awareness of the Divine Mercy; a trust in Jesus; but as yet, I wasn't to realize this.

I returned from Medjugorje, spiritually still very troubled, and would remain so, until early 2020, when finally I began viewing Fr Chris Alar's message on 'Suicide and the Divine Mercy'; when the greatest of revelations struck a chord within me; now knowing that there is hope; hope for me, and hope for my mother; and even though mother had passed away six years earlier; that the Almighty who exists outside of time, visits each soul on three occasions at the moment of death, whatever the nature of death be; to grant mercy, if it be requested.

My daily chaplet prayers were meant for my mother, (and for all in purgatory) as a means by which to create an awareness to Jesus's coming at the moment of death.

I was overjoyed; so relieved, dragging my wife out of her sleep much to her alarm; and was now determined to commit more to my spirituality. Some further months lapsed, before my prayers mustered the courage to inquisitively enquire of the Almighty, as to the effectiveness of such prayers.

'Is my mother okay'.

And then it happened, the almost inexplicable. The vision of, and the embrace of my mother; as though I'd been caught in another world; and it all lay within the moment of being caught between that vacuum of sleep and of being fully awake.

There is still doubt, still daily concern over the state of my soul, but I can live with that now. I now live with a spiritual awareness; a re-awakening.

And that re-awakening also necessitates a reacquaintance with the Catechism of your youth.

Be 'Child-like in Your Spiritual Thinking.

When Our Lady addresses all by her expression, 'Dear Children'; it should not surprise that Our Lady weaves the potent message of Her Son's spirituality through the eyes of youth, whether it be Medjugorje, Fatima, Lourdes, or in Garabandal. And yet, when She mentions youth; She, refers to all.

Recently in Medjugorje, Father Jure (George) Barisic in addressing our group, had this to say.

"Let us try to understand, profoundly Our Lady's expression, when She says, 'Dear Children'.

"You know we can learn a lot from children. The first thing, to be learned lies in their honesty and sincerity; another thing we can learn from them is to be dependent on somebody.... Our Lady teaches us, in the same way you should become dependent on My Son; and thirdly, maybe the most important of all, is in their willingness to forgive. As for us older ones; it is perhaps easier to die, than to say, I'm sorry."

From my own observations,

"As important as Our Lady's message is, and continues to be at Medjugorje, Fatima and Lourdes; my spiritual senses required diversion to the small township of Caleruega in Spain; on an earlier pilgrimage. It being the birthplace and shrine dedicated to Santos Domingo de Guzman, he being Saint Dominic and the founder of the Dominican Order. Everywhere I glanced, there were the 'spiritual message boards'; and the emblematic symbolism of its Dominican Order; which too, was the emblem of my primary school, a reflection back to the years I spent learning the Catholic faith, in Blackfriars Priory School. It opened the gate to a host of childhood, and spiritual memories that I needed to reacquaint with."

It was obvious, for I needed to retrace my mindset back to the 'Catechism of my youth'.

It was as though, I was being gently coerced into becoming child-like once more; in my trust of, and belief in an innocent attitude to God's Word; yet always mastering as an adult, the proclivity to conduct my moral and spiritual being, by placement onto that of a higher plane."

The Win-able Spiritual Battle.

I recently said to Fr Jerald, after an outing to the small Italian township of Pietrelcina; the birthplace of Padre Pio; 'Father, I had a wonderful day today, exhilarating, simply on account of having purchased a mere book; a collection of personal letters exchanged primarily between Padre Pio, with that of Padres Agostino and Benedetto, entitled 'Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, Letters I.

The passion contained within his troubled words, told me this.

Despite being a man of great conviction, of great spiritual and moral conviction; here too, was a man of vulnerability, plagued with the conscience of spiritual uncertainty, as Satan continued to emotionally and physically abuse him; Padre Pio believing at times, that his prized companion, Our Lord, had forsaken him; yet always destined to fall back into the comfort of the Lord's open arms.

What Padre Pio teaches us all, is to confront the great spiritual fight, for goodness will be challenged; do not concede an inch of spiritual territory to Satan. Man, with Divine Mercy draped over him, and as he turns to Our Lady clutching at his Rosary in prayer; becomes the immovable object of his faith; and has spiritual victory within his grasp.

A Conclusion.

"The pilgrimage teaches me this; that there is always hope; spiritual hope for the individual, as there be hope for the spiritual collectiveness of the world.

And, it comes in the form of the pilgrim, and is to be discovered often in those distant, remote and unknown places, in our lives. And yet, we know, we have an almighty, global spiritual battle on our hands."

In Medjugorje, there stands a man with an imposing figure, and an equally incredible story to tell by way of his testimonial.

When I stare into his piercing eyes, and experience the firm grip of Ivo Juricic, a huge frame of a man, I witness a man dealt immense trauma in youth; first, on the verge of imminent death with an inoperable terminal illness, and then needing to grapple with a limb amputation; his aspirations for a career in basketball, and any meaningful career to speak of, were shot to pieces. One could have excused him for harbouring anger and bitterness; but no, only a calmness, a spirit of enormous love and an almighty devotion to Our Lady pervades his spiritual senses now. For here, stands a man marked as miraculously blessed by Our Lady, through the devotion of prayer, by the medium of the visionary young children of Medjugorje during the nineties.

"In the face of the great cities of the world verging on spiritual wilt and collapse; it is the likes of Medjugorje, and those little Bosnian villages like Surmanci (and the Church of the Merciful Jesus), and Tihaljina (and the Church of St Elijah), that hold firm, true to their trust and belief in Jesus; that remain, as though time had stood still; the beacons of all hope to all those of Catholic belief; despite there being a world that wallows in the mire of great mis-guided belief and unrelenting deception. The great irony is that our spiritual strength lies not in the materialist inspired might of the great Western cities, but rather in the purity (and incorruptibility) of the hearts and minds, of those little villages (and in its children) not yet beset upon by the moral waywardness and decay, of an outside world.

Our blessed Mother has chosen her places well, of Medjugorje and of these little, and remote Bosnian villages."

"After all, a pilgrimage, is for those who seek spiritual incorruptibility, and begins with the untainted prescripts of the hearts, often found in the poorer, and in the children, and in the simplicity of the living. It serves to awaken us all.

As simple as it may sound, we are brought into this world, and through the Divine Mercy, to bring out the very best in one another; and the spirit of the pilgrimage serves to do just that".

Alexander and Amor Grabkowski