

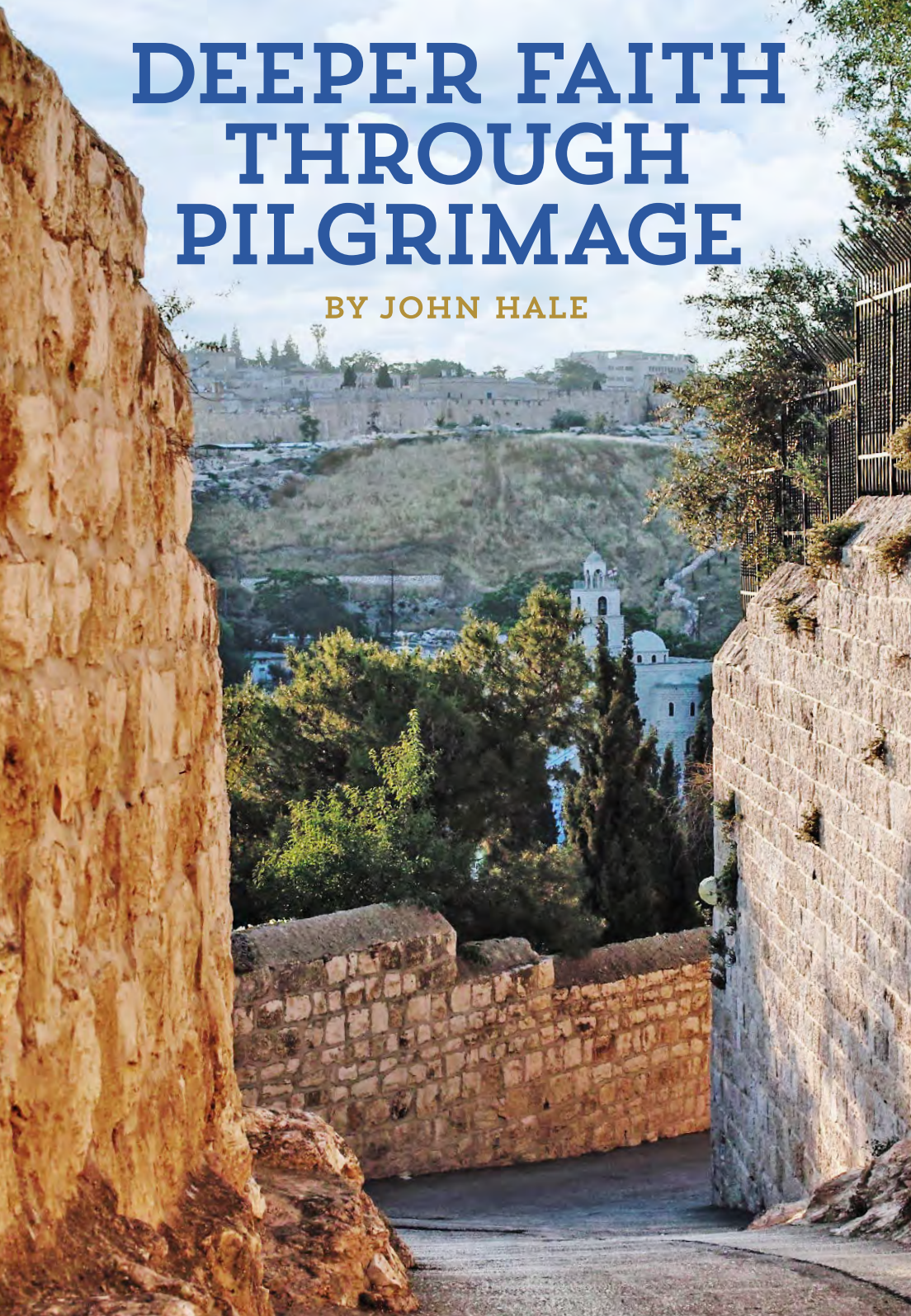
# FAITH MATTERS

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## DEEPER FAITH THROUGH PILGRIMAGE

BY JOHN HALE



Pilgrimage, one of the Church's most effective traditions, enables people to discover and deepen their faith. With its origin in and regular practice by our Jewish forefathers, the tradition of pilgrimage predates Christianity. The ancient Israelites made thrice-annual pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Jesus Himself journeyed on pilgrimage, as we know from scriptures.

We know much about the Church and Her liturgical practices from records of early Christian pilgrims. Egeria, a fourth century European woman (perhaps a nun) who traveled to the Holy Land, Egypt, and beyond, recounts her experiences in a long letter called the *Peregrinatio*, meaning "a journey, especially a long one."

Pilgrimage also serves as a metaphor for the journey of our lives: the ups and downs, the persistence, and the fortitude required to take that very next step in faith, always discerning the will of God. While we could describe how pilgrimage has been effective in the lives of groups as well as individual lives, this article focuses on why pilgrimage is such an effective opportunity for beginning and deepening conversion. Deconstructed, what are the basic elements that make pilgrimage a tradition that the Church has fostered as a means of growing in closer relationship with Christ?

For over 20 years, our company has had the great privilege of serving many clients, organizing pilgrimages around the world. Based on the witness of many pilgrims, four factors consistently emerge which enable pilgrimage to effectively support conversion and conform hearts to the Heart of Christ.

### **EUCCHARIST**

First, and foremost, pilgrimages are fundamentally effective through the daily celebration of the Holy Eucharist. We read in *Lumen Gentium* that the Eucharistic sacrifice is "the fount and apex of the whole Christian life." The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1324-1327) states "The Eucharist is the source and summit of Christian life." Encountering our Lord Jesus in the Eucharist changes those who receive Him, and we become more like Whom we have been given. The very heart of pilgrimage is the daily reception of the sacrament of Holy Eucharist.

### **HOLY GROUND**

Next, a pilgrimage becomes such by virtue of the visits made to sacred places. Each site visited is holy ground, sacred and set apart from other places in which we interact in our daily lives. Here, God Himself walked, healed, and died. In this place, our Blessed Mother walked or appeared to us, her children, sending her maternal love, support, admonishment



and direction. In this place, holy men and women have struggled, even toiled, but by God's grace, been preserved as His most tremendous witnesses. These holy women and men remind us of the hope that is ours in our daily struggles: that by God's grace, we, too, can and will prevail.

Holy and sacred grounds are indeed set apart because when we are there, we know deep inside that scripture and history are true — that what we have been taught and long-believed actually happened. These events transpired in *these* places that we visit. For exactly this reason, the Holy Land is referred to as the fifth gospel. The act of making the sacrifice to go on a journey and visit these very places has the power to transform us. God can and does use places and the witness of those who lived there to change us.

### OFF-BALANCE

A skeptic might argue that Mass can be attended virtually anywhere, any day. Likewise, a visit to a

sacred and holy place, such as a church, can be accomplished closer to home. This leads to the third, practical reality that often ignites the power of the first two elements of pilgrimage.

Because we are removed from our normal routines, we are off-balance. Traveling opens and softens our hearts due to this forced disconnect from our false daily securities and attachments. No longer surrounded by the people, places and schedules that are most familiar, pilgrims are awakened and can experience more fully all that is before them.

At home, we have a rhythm to our lives. While that can be good, often our routines become a crutch and serve to harden our hearts in some ways. We can have the false sense that we are in control, that we're driving the bus that is our life. Yet, when we land in Rome or the Holy Land after an overnight transatlantic flight with little to no sleep, we are tired. We never quite catch up. And no matter how many times

we've been overseas, our routine is disrupted. Everything around us is different: customs, schedules, food, meal times, and even the very language and means of communication. These factors keep us off-balance, providing a more accurate reality of life that has been unmasked by stripping away our usual securities.

It can be just enough to crack the hard exterior that so many of us hide behind. On pilgrimages, we are made more vulnerable and more open to His grace. This allows God's transcendent grace from the daily Eucharist and the sacredness of each site to deeply penetrate our hearts and we become more aware of our relationship with Christ.

### COMMUNITY

Finally, pilgrimage forges community as a balm for all that we have experienced. Community ties the bow on the gift of pilgrimage. After many years of this work, I have repeatedly witnessed that the Holy Spirit is the One who calls each person on any given pilgrimage. Whether we come kicking and dragging our feet, whether we don't even know why we have come or how we managed to get there, we were called to be on this particular pilgrimage. Every one of us is in a different place on our journey.

And yet, the Holy Spirit called those who are together to have a particular

experience. Each person is supposed to be on that pilgrimage. Each person is there to be Christ to one another. As we pilgrimage, we have to think, meditate and pray about these realities. What a blessed opportunity to receive and give, and what a tremendous responsibility! At that moment, when consolation is needed or understanding required, someone will offer just the right words or expression of comfort or perhaps just the right witness.

Archbishop Allen Vigneron of Detroit begins many occasions by saying, "The Holy Spirit has called us together." He's very intentional about that because nobody is in the room or in any place by accident. We may not know why we are there, or why we picked this pilgrimage. Reflect on the witness of others, and how their lives can change you and how they have been an instrument of Christ. In the days, months, and years to come, you will carry with you the tremendous experiences that pilgrimages offer.

I leave you with the four aspects of pilgrimage that have struck me over the years: the Eucharist, Holy Ground, Off-Balance, and Community. Amazing testimonies of people that come back to us touch on one or all of these elements. They say, "What has happened in my life, started here." I have experienced deeper conversion in my own life and seen it in the lives of so many people.



## JOHN P. HALE

John is President and co-owner of Corporate Travel Service, a family owned business of more than 60 professionals founded in 1965. The company organizes full cruise ship music charters, educational tours, corporate events, music festivals on iconic stages worldwide, Catholic pilgrimages and cultural cruises throughout the world. Representative clients include Fortune 500 companies, school districts, archdioceses, dioceses, parishes, universities, and media outlets throughout the United States.

John graduated from the Honor's College of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and obtained his law degree from the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law. Upon graduation from law school, he clerked for Chief Justice Dorothy Comstock Riley on the Michigan Supreme Court. Following his clerkship he was an associate at Bodman, LLP serving, among other clients, the Detroit Lions, the Ford family, and Lear Automotive. John later worked in litigation as in-house counsel at Ford Motor Company. In 2000, he left the practice of law to join the family business, at Corporate Travel Service.

John, and his wife Kristan, have five children; John Jr., David, Elizabeth, Anna and Andrew and reside in Northville, Michigan.



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