



Pilgrims gather for the praying of the Angelus at St. Peter's Square (Vatican).
Photo: Tom Leclerc (2009);

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EVANGELIZING
THE NEW
GENERATION
OF CATHOLICS

MEETING THEIR PARTNERS IN FAITH
OVER THE MILLENNIA

BY MICHAEL J. HARTWIG

It was one of those glorious early spring days in Rome. The sky was blue and the sun warmed our faces as we scanned the crowd for each other. I had instructed my students to arrive around 11:30 a.m. on the papal palace side of the obelisk in St. Peter's Square for the Angelus at noon. It was a festive crowd of students from around Europe and North America on spring break. Colorful banners waved messages of affection for Pope Benedict XVI as the windows were opened in preparation for his appearance.

My students had bought rosaries, crosses, and other gifts to bring back to their families and friends, blessed by the Pope. They were a serious group but were getting caught up in the chants and cheers of other pilgrims. A large group of medical students from Spain shouted slogans of faith and devotion. Our group began to conspire—what could we do when the Pope began to welcome English-speaking pilgrims? I tried to hide the tears welling up in me. I always found this disconcerting and even more so with Pope Benedict XVI. Why were these gatherings so emotional? I looked out over my group of college students and wondered what they thought—people who disagreed with the Pope's views on birth control, homosexuality, women's rights, and other issues. I wondered about the Spanish medical students, coming from a country that permits gay marriage and subsidizes contraceptives as part of national health care. Was their excitement about seeing the Pope an expression of solidarity with his theological positions or something else?

A month later, back in Boston, my students shared their experiences and insights. The course, "The Religious Traditions of Rome," explored beliefs and practices of ancient Roman, Jewish, and Christian religious traditions in Rome. Before traveling there, most students admitted they were no longer going to church and/or felt deep antipathy for the Church. They were even a bit apprehensive about the planned liturgies

at St. Peter's, the catacombs, and other historical sites that would be celebrated by an accompanying faculty member and priest. But, to my surprise, the majority of students noted upon their return that the high point of the week in Rome was seeing the Pope in St. Peter's Square. It wasn't the cappuccino, the pasta, the wine, or sites like the Colosseum, the Vatican Museums, or even St. Peter's Basilica. It was the Angelus in St. Peter's Square.

When I asked why, the response was surprising. Most admitted that the pedophile scandals in Boston and other northeastern dioceses made them feel embarrassed to be Catholic. They felt angry, disappointed, and disconnected from their maternal faith community. But in St. Peter's Square, they realized they were part of something larger than the local scandals. They were heirs to a 2,000-year-old community that transcends national and ethnic boundaries. They were excited to see Spaniards, Italians, French, and others from around the world express their excitement and devotion. They admitted that they didn't agree with everything the Pope taught, but they suspected that over the centuries people have disagreed, too. They said there was something cool about diverse people and opinions gathering together in a ritual of global faith and unity that inspired them to reclaim their faith heritage.

This simple gathering of the faithful on Sunday to pray with the Bishop of Rome was one of the most powerful moments of evangelization for these twenty-year-olds. Such moments—including the exploration of the history of Christianity in Rome—are an opportunity often overlooked when dioceses and parishes strategize about evangelizing the next generation of Catholics. If you want to evangelize the future generation of Catholics, have them meet their partners in faith from centuries past and from across the ocean. Evangelization—the proclamation of Good News—

must invite us to move out of that which is familiar in order to see ourselves and the world with new eyes.

My students had heard the Gospel countless times before, but it took a journey to a foreign land to create the context where they could hear the Gospel in all of its freshness. It involved meeting their peers from previous generations—in early house churches excavated under medieval churches, on the streets of the Roman Forum, in the corridors of the catacombs, and on the hillsides of Umbria, home to St. Francis and St. Clare. While the Church continues to search for ways to evangelize young adults through World Youth Day events and campus ministry, the connecting of young people to places of great religious history is overlooked.

Who were the earliest Christians? What was it like to live in Rome in the first, second, and third centuries? What happened after the fire of 64 A.D. and the death of Peter and other martyrs? What were the beliefs and practices of Christianity that inspired faith and witness? What happened during the epidemics of 165 A.D. and 251 A.D. when Christians had built the kind of network of care and support that contrasted with the failed response of their pagan neighbors? What made Christianity increasingly appealing? How would the peers of my students—twenty-year-old Christians in ancient Rome—make sense of their lives in an affluent and cosmopolitan world? What challenges did they face? How did their faith provide meaning and purpose? Travel to places where great history took place inspires change in contemporary sojourners. As we walk in the footsteps of visionary men and women of faith, we notice the parallels between their world and our own and are invited to become visionaries ourselves.

Catholic evangelization is unique. While other Christian communities share Creed and Gospel, the Roman Catholic Church includes a history and set of traditions that are unique and form an accompanying

Catholic identity. It is not just Creed and Gospel but also liturgy, music, art, architecture, and traditions that shape Roman Catholic culture and community. The “affective” dimensions of Roman Catholic life are important features of our life together and hold generations together over time. These artistic-cultural-historical treasures of the Roman Catholic Church are places where evangelization takes place, not just as a set of intellectual propositions but as a way of life addressed to the heart and soul.

The Angelus in St. Peter’s Square is a prime example of a custom or tradition that communicates something of this Catholic identity in an emotional rather than cerebral way. The Catholic Church teaches that the Bishop of Rome has a role, a ministry that serves the unity of the Church. One can study the Catholic Church’s beliefs about the papacy, papal primacy, and papal teaching and assent to them intellectually. But to be in St. Peter’s Square with pilgrims from around the world creates a deep emotional connection to the reality of a global Catholic community, a connection that grounds belief in heart and soul. The Pope represents a continuity with previous generations of Christians both as the successor of the Bishops of Rome and as one who seeks to guard the continuity of the Tradition. Even the pomp and tradition of the Angelus help those in St. Peter’s Square connect emotionally with previous generations and with the Tradition.

CATALYSTS OF EVANGELIZATION IN PILGRIMAGE

Religious Art and Architecture

One affective catalyst for evangelization is religious architecture. The Pantheon in Rome, built around 126 A.D., advances a whole new way of thinking about sacred space. The architect designed a building that creates a spiritual experience. The interior of the Pantheon is a perfect sphere—the height and diameter are the same. This creates a unique sensation when one enters the space. It is as if one has stepped into the infinite universe and, at the same time, an infinite depth opens within oneself. It is a perceptible experience of the sacred as immanent and transcendent.

While built as a pagan structure, the Pantheon is now a church. While not explicitly evangelical, the architecture helps those who enter experience the inner spiritual longing of the self, similar to Augustine's famous statement, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."¹ The space reinforces the idea that the longing for God is itself a gift—a presence of the sacred within—and that the infinite horizon of life (on the outside) invites us to transcend our ego and connect with something larger than ourselves: God.

By the fourth century, Christian architects expanded this innovative approach as they created monumental basilicas in Rome and across the empire. Not only did structures evoke a sense of one's own spiritual nature and vocation, but the art that adorned the walls (frescos and mosaics) told the stories of the Gospels and surrounded the faithful with the community of the saints. The churches evangelized the heart and soul by connecting the faithful with the stories of their faith heritage. The images of the saints reinforced the heritage of visionary men and women of faith who inspire and guide the faithful.

Domestic religious architecture evangelizes as well, and some church structures do this better than others. But the artistic and architectural heritage of Europe in general and Rome in particular represents an unsurpassed patrimony of structures that evangelize powerfully and unforgettably.

Birthplaces of Saints

Recently, saints from the Americas have been canonized. However, many of the saints most familiar to Catholics are from Europe. Many of the most inspiring saints were themselves inspired by the lives of other saints. The story of St. Ignatius reading the lives of the saints while convalescing reinforces the evangelical power of these stories. Countless pilgrims have traveled to the birthplaces of the saints such as Loyola, Assisi, Siena, Lisieux, and Ávila in order to connect with their stories and feel the original call of the Gospel.

The most powerful places are those that retain historical charm. They are more evocative of the time and place of the saint and enable modern pilgrims to slow down, listen to God, and be inspired to embrace a life of greater devotion and service. Assisi is a prime example—a hill town in central Umbria. When day tourists leave, the city returns to a contemplative and serene state. Narrow streets and walkways beckon modern pilgrims to wander, to explore, to ponder, and to be attentive to the presence and voice of God. There is a harmonious blend of nature and city that reinforces St. Francis' affirmation of nature as brother and sister.

The life of St. Francis can be explored in the structures of the city: the small church of San Damiano where he

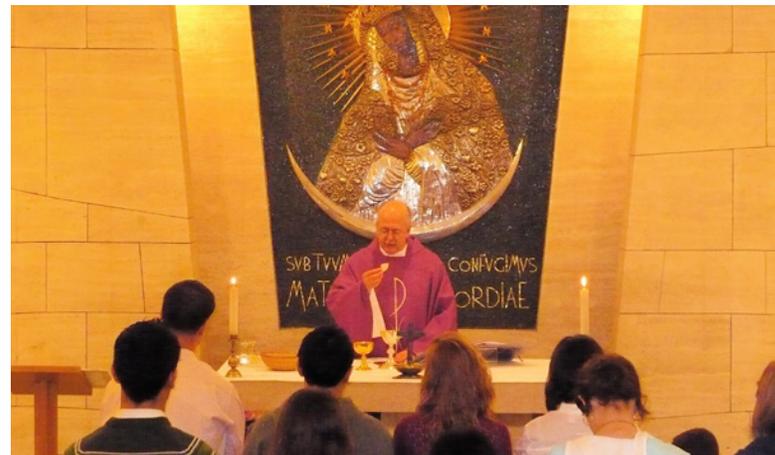
first heard Christ's invitation, the town square where he boldly denounced his worldly possessions, the home where he grew up, the hermitage on the outskirts of town, and the stone houses and chapels scattered throughout the village. Countless pilgrims have sat in prayer before the crucifix that said to St. Francis, "Francis, go repair my house, which, as you see, is falling into ruin." Countless vocations have been born in those simple but powerful moments and places.

Walking in the footsteps of the saints is a tangible way to make their stories come to life and experience how we give creative response to the Gospel in our own time. One of the most influential spiritual writings of the modern age is the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola. Many pilgrim groups now trace his life from Loyola to Montserrat to Manresa and then to Rome. A popular prayer is the "Suscipe" that pre-dated St. Ignatius' time but has been more popularly attributed to him since it is found in extra material included in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Sitting in the conversion chapel of the Castle of Loyola or before the Black Madonna in Montserrat or in the cave in Manresa and reciting Ignatius' prayer channels the will into an evangelical response:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will—all I have and all I possess. You have given it to me; I return it, Lord, to You. Everything is Yours; dispose of all according to Your will. Give me Your love and Your grace; for me, that is enough.²

The prayer can be recited anywhere, but something profound happens when it is recited on pilgrimage, in places where it inspired St. Ignatius and the institutions he founded.

Most world religions include pilgrimage to places where visionary men and women lived, responded to God, and were buried. Physically visiting birthplaces, tombs, or places where saints lived and worked helps pilgrims affirm that the person actually lived and actually did the things attributed to him or her. There is a tangibility to these visits that is difficult to replicate in any other way. With this tangibility comes imagination. The pilgrim is able to imagine himself or herself as that person. The vision and response of the saint is no longer theoretical but personal, and the pilgrim is compelled to embody a similar response. While connections can be made through film and text, standing in the place where a saint lived creates an indelible imprint on the memory of the pilgrim. This memory is a powerful catalyst for handing on the heritage of the saints.



Liturgy

Catholic identity is deeply rooted in the Eucharist. From the earliest experience of the disciples breaking bread and recognizing Christ's presence at Emmaus, the Church has incorporated the Eucharist into its spirituality and life. While this presence is perceptible and affirmed in our home parishes, celebrating the Eucharist in unique and inspiring historical venues is

one of the most powerful features of pilgrimage and deeply transformative for participants.

Pilgrimage groups recount that some of the most moving and inspiring moments are celebrating the Eucharist in places of great historical and religious significance. These are places where generations of Christians have come before to celebrate their faith, to break bread together, to make tangible and present the presence of Christ, and to go forth ready to share their faith and feed others. One such pilgrim described this experience after traveling to Rome in 2012:

I was a trustee of the college and worked with my colleagues on all sorts of committees and projects, but it was sharing Communion with them in a chapel in the catacombs that a whole new level of collegiality and friendship arose. Our identities changed. We were less defined by our professions. We had somehow become one with the first generation of Christians and now shared a common history. We have discovered a new sense of purpose, shared perspectives, and inspiration to support our institution and its mission. It was amazing how a simple liturgy in an historical place so totally transformed our group.

Notable sites for transformative liturgies include the Grotto of the Annunciation in Nazareth, a first century site believed to be the house of Mary. The Grotto sits inside a modern basilica with a large opening that allows light to flood into the space from the main floor of the basilica above. The altar and seats around it create intimacy. The ancient stones connect pilgrims with the first century. The modern church connects them with the present. Nearby, at Tabgha on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, pilgrims celebrate the Eucharist where the first disciples learned from Jesus and where he multiplied the loaves and fishes. There are few places as evocative as these.

Pilgrims repeatedly talk about the moving experience of celebrating the Eucharist in one of the crypt chapels in the lower level of St. Peter's. Masses are held early in the morning. Pilgrims enter the massive church when it is empty, quiet, and invites reflection. Descending to the level around the tomb of Peter is a practice that goes back to the first generations of Christians who, like their pagan neighbors, would visit the tombs of their loved ones and eat commemorative meals. This is evident in exploring the excavations under St. Peter's (the "Scavi") where ancient Roman mausoleums include steps to roofs where family members would eat a meal connecting with their loved ones. The connection with the Roman cemetery helps pilgrims gain an appreciation for why Constantine built St. Peter's and how the practice of celebrating the Eucharist at the tombs of the faithful—such as the catacombs, St. Paul's, and other historical Roman churches—translated into placing of relics in parish altars and naming communities after the saints with whom we share communion. This is a central part of Catholic tradition, and celebrating the Eucharist at these historic venues is a powerful catalyst for fostering a strong Catholic identity.

Catholic theology of the Eucharist emphasizes that our relationship with God cannot bypass our relationships with one another. It is in coming together around the table that Jesus becomes present. Spirituality is deeply rooted in community and connected with basic human activities like eating together or sharing our lives. Catholic pilgrim groups are unique in celebrating the Eucharist at historical venues. The sharing in Communion underscores the union we have with the visionary men and women who hallowed the place, with generations of Christians who have gathered in the same place before us, and with each other as we embody the same Spirit. As St. Paul states: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17).

History

It cannot be underestimated how evangelically powerful it is to visit historical sites—even those with pagan origins such as the Forum in Rome, or those without specifically religious significance like the archaeological parks at Ephesus, Corinth, Ostia, and Pompeii. These places bring to life the people and events of the ancient world and invite pilgrims to imagine themselves and their religious ancestors in the same place. History becomes tangible and real as one walks on the same stones as ancient Roman and early Christians, seeing the places where they exchanged goods and services and discussed beliefs. For pilgrims there is an emotional connecting with the chronology of their faith community: they realize they are part of generations who have gone before them and that they have a responsibility to pass on that faith to future generations. This is particularly underscored in places like Ephesus or Corinth that bring people and events of the Scriptures to life.

The sense of being part of an historical faith community is one of the most important outcomes for those advancing the New Evangelization and Catholic identity. It's not enough to impart beliefs. An affective and soulful connection with the Gospel and the Church is imperative. The young Catholic must come to feel that he or she is part of a history and that he or she continues to give flesh to that history in company with others around the world.

It is no wonder that all of the major religions of the world include pilgrimage as a central practice to sustain faith. Indeed, in Islam, it is an obligation. In world religions, pilgrimage connects modern believers with the formative events of their faith tradition and brings them to life in tangible ways.

Faith is a lived reality that is handed to us in the lived witness of our family, friends, and faith community; thus we should not *have* to travel to Jerusalem, Ephesus, or Rome to inspire faith. But, faith is reinforced when we stand in the very place where our tradition came to life. The concreteness of space and time is powerful.



Global Faith Community

Pilgrimage brings people together around devotions that build community, reinforcing the global or universal scope of their tradition as people from different nations and ethnicities mingle together around a common journey and faith. This common experience can result in great personal change, as in the case of human rights activist Malcolm X, who described in his *Autobiography* the profound impact of going on pilgrimage to Mecca: “In my thirty-nine years on this earth, the Holy City of Mecca had been the first time I had ever stood before the Creator of All and felt like a complete human being.”³ Pilgrims, like Malcolm X, bring the universality and inclusivity of their faith tradition back to communities riddled with tensions around race and class. Pilgrimage transforms perspectives and inspires new ways of thinking about community and social justice.

The same transformation takes place at Catholic shrines around the world. People ordinarily separated at home by socio-economic class sit side-by-side, participate in the same devotions, and share in the same Communion. National identities soften as a deeper common religious identity emerges along the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, or the Camino de Santiago in Spain, or at the healing waters of Lourdes. My students in St. Peter's Square were able to see that celebrating diversity was also a way of affirming something common—a common humanity and spirituality that connects us across our differences.

Pilgrimage as a Way of Life

Pilgrimage takes us out of the familiarity of our day-to-day lives and invites us to see ourselves and our faith tradition with fresh eyes. All travelers know that they return home with new perspectives—seeing familiar things in new ways. We notice things we had overlooked and newly appreciate the texture and fabric of daily life. Thus, the journey outward is always also a journey inward. It is difficult to return from a pilgrimage and slip back into an automatic and mindless routine. Life takes on a new soulfulness and depth. We have been someplace else and we have become different people as a result of our journeys. The Gospel addresses the human longing for God. The journey across time and overseas awakens the experience of personal transcendence and, if thoughtfully organized, can help pilgrims connect with visionary men and women of faith who discovered the power and relevance of the Gospel in their own time. These men and women challenged the assumptions of their day and inspired contemporaries to notice a new depth to life.

This is perhaps one of the most important ways that pilgrimage evangelizes. Modern secular life, however dazzling, is flat and soulless. It is imperative that we help modern men and women see the underlying mystery of life. This can occur through crisis, when a death, an illness, or an accident wrenches us from complacency. It can also occur when we leave that which is familiar and journey to a place that is foreign and invites introspection. Busy tours do not do this, as they often devolve into mere sight-seeing. Well-crafted pilgrimages connect us with history, connect us with other peoples and generations, and provide the context and space to journey out of ourselves into another time and place. It is ironic that as world travel has become easier, we have overlooked the mystagogy of travel—its ability to invite us into deeper mystery.

In reality, all of life is mystagogical if we pay attention, but we often fail to do so. Pilgrimage invites us to look differently, to step out of our familiar world into another world. It invites us to see how we are connected with previous generations of visionary men and women of faith, how we are connected across national and ethnic boundaries in a global faith community, and how place can be evocative of the presence of God. New experiences, even ones as seemingly insignificant as different food, clothing, language, daily customs, invite us to be more mindful, to shuffle inner patterns of thought, meaning, and organization. Pilgrimage is not automatically effective. There are those who journey outward without an accompanying introspection, who long to return to established patterns of life or thought. Pilgrimage does not replace ongoing faith formation, nor does it substitute for the powerful mystagogy that accompanies service or charity. But pilgrimage is one of the most powerful ways to initiate a more intentional journey that advances evangelization and fosters a greater appreciation for our Catholic identity. This is why it remains such a central feature of spirituality and such a powerful resource for revitalizing the Church.

Strategies for Using Pilgrimage as Catalyst for Evangelization and Catholic Identity

The Jewish community has advanced travel to Israel as central to the formation of Jewish identity through the program Birthright Israel. It is a program offered free of charge to Jewish young people ages 18 to 26. This is a time when people are strengthening their identity and assuming more responsibility as young adults. This is also often when young people begin to drift away from their faith tradition. Thus, a formative experience that connects them with their history in tangible and affective ways is imperative.

The Catholic Church has greatest access to young adult Catholics through campus ministry programs and young adult Catholic ministry. College students and young adults typically do not have the resources to travel and would benefit from Catholic benefactors and foundations willing to invest in the retention and strengthening of Catholic identity through pilgrimage events. Diocesan leaders advancing the New Evangelization will need to find creative ways to fund travel events by connecting with visionary Catholic philanthropists and/or encouraging parishes to sponsor several young adults to join diocesan-wide programs.

Strategies for the New Evangelization and promoting Catholic identity through pilgrimage travel are relevant to older Catholics as well. Key moments for evangelization and reinforcement of Catholic identity include marriage preparation, formation of lay ministry candidates and Catholic school teachers, as well as ongoing formation of parish council and parish staff members. Older Catholics return from pilgrimage with renewed enthusiasm and connection to the Church, with eagerness to invest in parishes, schools, and Catholic organizations, and a new ability to talk about and share their perspectives with marginalized Catholics.

While there are many tools for evangelization and fostering of Catholic identity, we have failed to appreciate how effective and essential it can be to travel to places of great historical and religious significance. International pilgrimage is uniquely suited to helping people hear the Gospel in its freshness and to connect affectively or emotionally with the history, traditions and treasures of the Catholic Church. As we look forward to the next generation of Catholics, parishes, schools, and dioceses that offer pilgrimages on a regular basis to complement continuing education and ongoing faith formation will see a more vital living of the Gospel, a stronger connection to the Church, and a generation of young people who discover their connection with previous generations of Christians will bring vision and imagination to the shaping of their faith communities.



NOTES

- 1 Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, I. 1.
- 2 *Ignatius Loyola: Spiritual Exercises*, ed. Joseph A. Tetlow (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), §234.
- 3 Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 372.



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