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Guest Voices



University of Scranton Students practice reflective listening deep within Badwater Basin in Death Valley National Park on A Desert Experience Retreat in December 2017. (Luis Melgar)

by Fred T. Mercadante

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It's a Sunday morning in mid-December on the outskirts of Las Vegas. Thirty-five college students from the University of Scranton, Pennsylvania, arrived the evening before to participate in "A Desert Experience Retreat," five days in Death Valley. Students practice contemplation while exploring the different desert landscapes of the national park.

Arriving in the evening, we camped out at Red Rock Canyon west of the city. We planned to wake up early, go to Mass, and begin our journey to the Valley of Death.

After a cold, windy night, we packed up and got to nearby Bishop Gorman High School. Newly formed Holy Spirit Parish worships there while its new church is being built.

Moving 35 college students early on a Sunday morning is challenging, but we manage to arrive only five minutes late for the 7:30 a.m. Mass. We wait for the Alleluia. We don't want to be a distraction on entering. At the Alleluia, we briskly file in to the empty seats in the back. Dark blue and purple abound — it's Advent. This Catholic church filled the front seats first! Quite the opposite of what we are used to — the first sign of things to come.

The pastor, Fr. Bill Kenny, is presiding, yet sneaks down an aisle while the deacon proclaims the Gospel, and randomly picks one of our students, Steven, to find out who we are. Just out of pure luck, Steven is the director of the student leadership team for the retreat.

Kenny begins the homily by publicly welcoming us and inviting one of our students to come forward and explain to the community what we were doing. I give the nod to Steven again, while thinking, "Wow, I definitely picked the right church!"

This is all impressive enough, but the pastor then invites our whole group to gather around the altar after Communion for a special blessing from the assembly.



University of Scranton students embark on their first hike of A Desert Experience Retreat as they enter Golden Canyon in Death Valley in December 2017. (Luis Melgar)

After Mass, we are warmly invited to join the community for coffee and doughnuts. (Great. We had not had breakfast yet.) Students mingle with parishioners. This is one of the most hospitable parishes I've ever seen. Everyone is obviously happy we are there.

It is still pretty cold outside, so the pastor offers to let us use parish space for our morning activities and discussion. Afterward, we again express our gratitude to the community — many of whom are still lingering — give the pastor a Scranton hat and a retreat journal, and continue on to Death Valley.

A wonderful, graced tone marks the day for us. But the story does not end here.



University of Scranton Students enjoy descending Eureka Dunes at the end of the day in Death Valley National Park on A Desert Experience Retreat. (Fred T. Mercadante)

We have a week of great weather, challenging hikes, and transformational talks, discussions and reflections. We are poised for a smooth ending. There is threat of a sandstorm to arrive in the late afternoon of our last night, so we secure our tents and head off to the Salt Flats for our last hike and reflection.

It is 70 degrees with no clouds — a perfect day. The wind starts to pick up a bit in the afternoon, and in the distance we see dust clouds forming. Still, things don't seem too threatening.

It takes an hour to get back to our campsite. As the sun sets, the wind becomes a real factor. By the time we get to Stovepipe Wells Campground, the winds whip 40 miles per hour. Sand blows everywhere. Power is out at the village. We figure we will have to wait out the storm in our tents.



The wind starts to pick up at Badwater Basin as students conclude their last day of A Desert Experience Retreat in Death Valley. (Luis Melgar)

But on arrival at our campsite, we see tent poles snapped and nylon ripped in multiple places. The tents are down and out. We think fast. Students cut open the tents, get out all of the gear, and throw everything salvageable into the vans. I call a Las Vegas youth minister I know. Although her parish hall is not available, I tell her about our experience at Holy Spirit last Sunday and ask if she could reach out to them.

She knows their youth minister. While we evacuate from Death Valley, she contacts Holy Spirit.

Soon, I get a call from Louie, Holy Spirit's youth minister, whom I met briefly at Mass earlier in the week. (Impressive. A youth minster at 7:30 a.m. Mass! But I digress.) He offers our group a stay in their Youth Ministry Center — a triple wide trailer, since their whole parish campus was still being built.




Students find shelter (and doughnuts!) at Holy Spirit Church in Las Vegas after a sandstorm forced them to cut their time in Death Valley short. (Luis Melgar)

We arrive, and Louie welcomes us. We order pizza and crash on the floor.

The next morning, Louie and his wife show up with bagels and doughnuts. A small group of elderly parishioners are having breakfast after morning Mass. They all but grab our students and pull them into their reception.

The pastor shows up and welcomes us back. He opens up the offices — again, more trailers — so we have additional bathrooms available.

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Every single one of us was blown away like tents in a sandstorm by how this parish welcomed us and how well they took care of us. As we said goodbye to the parish for a second time, I knew something special had happened. We went to the desert to learn and practice contemplation and to help college students journey deeper into an adult faith.

However, one of the greatest teachings of the week was how our students learned what it means to be "church" from their experience with Holy Spirit Parish. We were strangers, and they welcomed us. We needed a place to stay, and they made sure that there was "room in the inn."



University of Scranton Students enjoy a sunset at the end of “mountain day” during A Desert Experience Retreat in Death Valley National Park in December 2017. (Luis Melgar)

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