

Franciscans find holy ground every step of pilgrimage

Jerry Filteau | Aug. 14, 2009



A group of Franciscan friars who walked 300 miles from Virginia to Mount St. Sepulchre, the Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in Washington, are pictured outside the monastery July 31. From left to right are Fr. Mark Soehner and Brs. Joshua Van Cleef, Roger Lopez, Richard Goodin and Clifford Hennings. (CNS/Rafael Crisostomo, Catholic Standard)

WASHINGTON -- Their pilgrimage destination was Mount St. Sepulchre Franciscan Monastery in Washington -- popularly known to Catholics as the Little Holy Land -- but along the way six Franciscan friars from Chicago found that every step they took from southern Virginia to Washington was holy ground.

"On our way to the Holy Land, we began to discover that the holy land was always under our feet," said Franciscan Fr. Mark Soehner, 51, one of two older mentors in the group that walked 300 miles from Roanoke, Va., to Washington, with no money, food or water and no advance provisions for shelter along the way.

Interviewed by *NCR* a couple of hours after the group's arrival at the Washington monastery July 29, Soehner said their six-week pilgrimage on foot "was not a race. Some days we just stayed with people we met, entered into their lives."

"It was very life-changing," said Br. Roger Lopez, one of three recent Franciscan novices who had taken their first vows in Chicago June 15, just hours before embarking on the pilgrimage. The other two new friars were Brs. Joshua Van Cleef and Clifford Hennings. A fourth young friar, Br. Richard Goodin, took his first vows a year earlier.

Shortly after the three new Franciscans took their vows, the group drove from Chicago to Roanoke in a van, then set out on a walk northward to Washington. Wearing their Franciscan robes and sandals, they planned to rely totally -- in the original spirit of St. Francis of Assisi -- on God and strangers they would meet along the way to provide for their daily needs.

"I set out to experience God in a different way," said Lopez. "Now I see life differently."

Goodin fondly recalled one day when the group climbed what they came to call the "mountain of doom" on their way to Waynesboro, Va., about a third of the way from Roanoke to Washington.

It was a day that started with what seemed like an ordinary mountain trek but ended with them facing serious food, water and shelter issues as evening approached. They were helped by a Mennonite, rescued from dehydration by a Catholic tourist from Kansas, driven down the mountain by a Jew and spent the night in a Hindu home at the feet of the Buddha.

“God just exploded in goodness” through the people of different religions who assisted them that day, Goodin said.

Soehner said the day started with what they thought were good directions to climb the mountain, but at an important juncture they faced a private road with severe warnings against trespassing, and they had to take what turned out to be a three-and-a-half-hour detour to get up the mountain.

Goodin said it was a Mennonite who directed them to the path up the mountain after they were stymied by the no trespassing signs. Then it was a Catholic woman from Kansas named Mary who offered them water and granola bars at dusk at a wayside stop on the mountain and who cajoled a Jewish man named George to take them down the mountain in his Prius to Waynesboro.

At the time, the group of pilgrims had been reduced to five because the other older mentor in the group, Fr. Ed Shea, had briefly left the pilgrimage to officiate at a nephew’s wedding in Spain. So the five crammed themselves into the Prius, four of them in the back seat.

In Waynesboro, Goodin said, George helped them find the town’s only Catholic church, but it was empty and locked. One of the group hailed a passing woman to see if she knew where the pastor lived. The woman, a Hindu, didn’t know, but she offered to put them up for the night in her home.

Goodin said that when they arrived at her home, she went in and told her husband, also Hindu, “Honey, I’m bringing home five monks.” The husband laid out several mats and told them he hoped they wouldn’t mind sleeping at the feet of the Buddha statue.

Lopez said the generosity “time and time again” of people the friars met along their pilgrimage “challenges me from this point on to trust in the Lord ... to respond just as the people responded to us, to take the time to slow down and listen to their stories.”

Soehner -- whose 28 years as a Franciscan have been spent mostly working with the homeless -- also recalled one evening near Charlottesville, Va., when the pilgrims reached a small wayside park in the middle of nowhere and decided to spend the night sleeping on the picnic tables there since there was no town near enough to reach before dark.

A local handyman “probably in his 60s” named Don, who also called himself Healing Bear -- he was not a Native American but had been given the name by an elderly Native American whom he regarded as a mentor and kind of an adoptive grandfather -- stopped and chatted with the friars.

Soehner said Don/Healing Bear left but a while later came back and told them he had gone home and prayed and wondered what he would have wanted someone to do if he were in their situation. The man brought them to his home, a former one-room schoolhouse, to stay the night.

After they ate, Soehner said, Healing Bear played some beautiful, haunting music on a double-sided flute and asked them to sing some chants they knew. They sang some traditional Latin hymns to Mary, including the “Salve Regina” (“Hail Holy Queen”) and the “Ultima” (“In the Last Hour of Death,” a special hymn in the Franciscan tradition).

The mentor priest said that the pilgrimage was the idea of the order's new members, but he was excited to be part of it. "We've been able to live our dream out. These younger friars need to live their dream out. The younger men don't want a soft Franciscanism."

Hennings, 23, who started his vowed life with the pilgrimage, said he was attracted to the Franciscans while he was studying theology in college.

As an adolescent, he said, he found himself "struggling with my Catholicity," but he gradually began to see that the Gospel passages that stirred him the most, like "Sell all you have and come follow me," were also the ones at the heart of St. Francis' life.

Hennings said he learned on their walk from Roanoke to the Franciscan monastery in Washington that the point of a pilgrimage "is not getting to the destination" but the walking itself.

Walking without resources and relying on strangers means you have to "really live from moment to moment," he said. "So often our lives are just about getting from one place to the next. There's a lot of "down time" when you're walking."

As a Bible-belt Southern Catholic born in Florida and raised in Texas, in Hennings' youthful experiences "relations between Baptists and Catholics were not always good, so I came into this experience with a bit of trepidation" since most of the pilgrimage was through parts of Virginia where Catholics have traditionally been a largely misunderstood and distrusted minority.

But he said one of the most profound experiences for him was a night in "the plains," a rural area just east of the Shenandoah National Park, Va., where "a retired Baptist minister offered us his church" to sleep for the night.

The church dated back to colonial times and "was older than our nation," Hennings said, and in those days no Catholic would have been welcome there.

But the pastor "unlocked the doors, opened the refrigerator to us, and said, "Sleep anywhere you wish," and left the friars on their own for the night with total trust, Hennings said. "I'm just overpowered by the goodness of God. We truly were brothers," he said.

Lopez said he began the pilgrimage with "a lot of anxiety" because a big part of his personality is to rely on "structure and stability."

"Day after day that melts away," he said. "One of our principles was that we always stopped to make time with anyone we met. It's the people who are our primary ministry. They witnessed to us time and time again."

"Typically a pilgrimage is about the destination," he said. "It's not the destination that's important. It's the journey, here and now ... letting the Lord work. ... Everything is holy."

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