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Dear Fr. Bechard:

This is just a brief note to inform you that I will be staying at St. Joseph's Oratory from July 7-20 (alone) and again July 28-August 2nd (at the same place). For the week of July 21 to 27 I'll be staying with my wife, Carolyn and little Jeremy Winslow at Hotel de L'Arcoat.

Many thanks for your help.  
My very special appreciation to Albert for his kind assistance.

Enclosed is a copy of my talk to the Shrine directors of the U.S.A.

Sincerely,  
Jim Preston

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"PILGRIMAGE IN AMERICA:

AN ADDRESS TO THE CATHOLIC SHRINE DIRECTORS OF THE UNITED STATES"

By

James J. Preston, Ph.D.

In Proceedings of the First National Shrine Directors Meeting, Washington,  
D.C. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986.

As an anthropologist and historian of religions, I have become aware of a great lack of research and understanding about the nature of pilgrimage in the great world religions. Consequently, over the last several years, after having completed ten years of research on Hinduism, I have turned to the more general study of pilgrimage, a topic that yields profound insights into Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and the Catholic branch of Christianity.

Two years ago, I started a study of the Catholic tradition, with an investigation of the canonization and devotion to Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, the Lily of the Mohawks. In the course of that study, which is not yet complete, I became aware of the need for comprehensive research on pilgrimage in North America. As a result, I have launched an ambitious study which will take five to ten years to bring to fruition, depending on funding resources.

When I heard about this landmark meeting we are attending today, I wrote to Sr. Mary Louise Sullivan who cordially invited me to participate by sharing some preliminary findings. After a year of visiting many pilgrimage shrines in the northeast, corresponding with, and interviewing numerous shrine directors, pilgrims and tourists, it has become evident that pilgrimage is very much alive in this great country.

The largest Catholic pilgrimage shrine in North America, and for that matter in the world (outside of Rome and the Holy Land), is Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico City. Next is St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal, with six million pilgrims per year, half of whom I am told are American citizens. Then there is St. Anne de Beaupre, also in the millions, but it is a seasonal shrine.

The stereotype that American Catholics are not pilgrimage oriented is simply untrue. No doubt many do not attend pilgrimages, but pilgrimage is neither entirely new nor a minor event in the American Catholic experience. It would appear that the most widely attended pilgrimage shrine in the United States is Our Lady of the Snows, in Belleville, Illinois with an estimated one million pilgrims per year. Some American



shrines, like Our Lady of the Martyrs in Auriesville, New York, with which I am quite familiar, reach back a hundred years in their history. Many more of our shrines arose in the middle part of this century to accommodate ethnic devotions; others are beginning to expand today, responding to contemporary Catholic needs. And of course, we must remember that the cult of American saints and their relics is a very recent phenomenon.

### On the General Nature of Pilgrimage

How do we define pilgrimage? It is defined most simply as a "journey to a sacred place." But that journey involves both religious and non-religious behaviors among pilgrims. The frequent attempt to distinguish between pilgrimage and tourism is false. Instead of seeing these as two separate categories of behavior, it is more accurate to perceive them as different extremes along a continuum. Of course, not all tourists are pilgrims, even those who visit shrines, since they may not see these places as being sacred. On the other hand, all pilgrims are tourists at certain times during their pilgrimages. This holds true throughout history. It is well illustrated in Medieval Europe when Catholic pilgrimages were at their peak. Many Medieval shrines were heavily commercialized. There can be no question that people traveled at that time to sacred centers for political, economic and social purposes as well as religious ones. The same is true today. Although there are certain styles of pilgrimage that wax and wane in different historical periods, the one common denominator is still a religious one—namely, the journey to a sacred place to encounter the divine presence perceived to be there. Sometimes the style is penitential, at others it is more celebratory; but despite these differences the overreaching motif is always a movement into the sacred center for renewal, for healing or reconciliation.

Why does a certain place become a pilgrimage shrine? The answer is multifarious. The famous places of pilgrimage throughout history have become attractive to



devotees because they are places of exquisite beauty, or places where important religious activities have occurred, or places where saints or mystics have lived—or there may have been a miraculous healing there, the revelation of the Blessed Virgin, or it may be the focus of a particular devotion. In all of these, the one common denominator is that the pilgrimage shrine has a quality of what I have called "spiritual magnetism." The shrine may be a place that inspires peace of mind, offers an encounter with holy relics, or energizes pilgrims who bathe in cleansing waters to heal their wounded and weary souls. There is no formula for developing "spiritual magnetism." Indeed, the task of the shrine director is quite precarious because he may inhibit this enigmatic quality, even when he does not intend to do so. We know that hundreds of Catholic pilgrimage shrines throughout history have had momentary periods of fluorescence and have then declined. Spiritual magnetism may be enduring or quixotic, depending on many variables which make it unpredictable. You are all familiar with changes of pilgrim interest in your own shrines.

#### Types of Pilgrimage Shrines in America

Pilgrimage to American shrines started to grow as a tradition with the great Catholic migrations during the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Also, in the last thirty years a large number of shrines have emerged throughout the country. These are not associated primarily with any single ethnic group.

The shrines I have seen in the northeast fit into eight categories: 1) ethnic shrines, 2) shrines devoted to American saints, 3) shrines that recapitulate European devotions, 4) historical shrines located in places where important events have taken place, 5) Marian shrines linked to Our Lady's revelations, 6) a few shrines associated with miraculous cures, 7) conglomerate shrines that combine several elements already listed, and 8) synthetic shrines that have been constructed deliberately to attract pilgrims,

often using some kind of gimmick. It is noteworthy that we have a full spectrum of pilgrimage shrines within our shores. No longer is it necessary for Americans to travel to Europe or the Holy Land to get an adequate pilgrimage experience.

However, it should be noted that American pilgrimage remains underdeveloped. There are no pilgrimage cycles that I have been able to detect in this country. This is the tradition where pilgrims journey from one shrine to another along a pre-established pilgrim route which makes some sort of theological sense, a tradition that thrives in European countries. Pilgrimage cycles probably never developed in America because this is essentially a Protestant country and pilgrimage arose here in isolated pockets.

The most stunning, in many ways intriguing, if not unique characteristic of American pilgrimage shrines is the emergence of many "synthetic pilgrimages" developed by individuals or ecclesiastical orders as extensions of their devotional lives. These places of pilgrimage may combine an unlikely array of different statues, sanctuaries, grottoes and devotions with little to connect them into a unified focus for pilgrimage experience. The "synthetic pilgrimage" is a quintessential American eclectic phenomenon; it fits into our multiethnic melting pot culture. These shrines are no less legitimate as places of pilgrimage than any others.

#### Problems Common to American Shrine Directors

I have met shrine directors of all types—incompetent, frightened, indifferent at one extreme, or bright, well organized, even visionary at the other. But in every case I have realized that the job of shrine director is extremely difficult, even at seasonal shrines. I have also realized that this occupation is significant for the American church as a whole. The ideal shrine director should combine the following characteristics: He or she should be 1) a good business person who can raise funds and manage complex finances, 2) a public relations person who loves people and conveys that to them, and 3)



an individual of vision who understands the present and future spiritual needs of American Catholics. The absence of any of these qualities may be disastrous for the shrine. Yet, no single person combines them all equally. If a shrine director is weak in some of these areas it is critical that he hire assistants who can compensate.

It is tempting to "sell out" by overcommercializing in our highly commercial world. Yet, if a shrine is to be well known, our contemporary culture demands the use of a complex communication network involving television, radio and newspaper advertising. All these are legitimate avenues for promoting pilgrimage. Yet, too much emphasis on these media, and too little reliance on a local support group is unproductive. And no matter how effective the advertising may be, pilgrims need to be personally greeted, welcomed and treated with respect, if popularity through the powerful effect of word-of-mouth is to take root. We all know that the reputation of a shrine for its warmth and hospitality is worth thousands of advertising dollars.

A significant problem for shrine directors is how to construct a meaningful, yet popular calendar of pilgrimage events. Some shrines stress special feast days. Others specialize in an array of ethnic pilgrimages like Italian, Polish, or Hispanic days. Still others place emphasis on pilgrimages organized around different Catholic sodalities. Then there are pilgrimages related to healing, confession, youth, the charismatics or a number of different current social and religious concerns. Few shrines seem to stress pure contemplation, retreat, or quiet prayer and meditation.

Many shrines combine these different types of pilgrimages, depending on what works. How does a shrine director construct an annual calendar which attracts pilgrims? Gimmicks may work, and "uniqueness" is certainly the "American-way." However, the world's highest cross, most spectacular Easter display or best reproduction of a European shrine, is not enough to sustain a pilgrimage tradition in the long run. For a pilgrimage shrine is not just another tourist attraction. It is a place of spiritual journey, for renewal, and "special devotion." The shrine director is challenged to



construct just such an atmosphere. In many places the old "ethnic pilgrimages" are waning as ethnic enclaves dissolve in our cities. What will replace them? Sometimes older ethnic pilgrimages give way to more contemporary ones, as in the widespread decline of Italian pilgrimages and the corollary rise of Hispanic pilgrimages at many of the shrines in the northeast. The shrine director is challenged to be "up-to-date" so that the needs of the people are met. For instance, it would be helpful to assign some spanish speaking staff, religious or lay people, wherever the Hispanic pilgrimage tradition is on the rise.

Most of the largest pilgrimage shrines transcend specialization of any particular ethnic group. They are truly universal centers of spirituality that help to integrate the American pilgrimage experience in the great spiritual awakening given to us by God in his Son. Unfortunately, the primary focus, with Christ at the center of the pilgrimage experience, may be muddled, lost or take a secondary place, as some shrine directors seek to "please" the general populous.

It is interesting to note that devotions are returning. Pilgrimage shrines report a rise of interest in many of the devotions that waned following Vatican II. This is a healthy development and it challenges shrine directors to appeal to the new devotional needs of American pilgrims. The shrine director must be inventive, resourceful, and clever if he is to take up the challenge of anchoring the faith of a multiplicity of modern peoples in the great and ancient tradition of Catholic pilgrimage.

Now on a more practical level, there are several annoying problems that need to be mentioned. These include a chronic shortage of staff at most shrines, an increasingly tired and aging priesthood, fewer monied patrons, rising expenses, diminishing endowments, either over or underdeveloped facilities and threats, particularly in urban shrines, from theft, vagrants or common lunatics. Some shrines have needed to lock their doors, employ guards and even install surveillance devices. All of this erodes the

very core concept necessary to any shrine—namely, a maintenance of open doors so that all peoples can come to the center for renewal.

Even more insidious than these problems is the lack of communication among shrine directors, and in some cases, unnecessary competition between contiguous shrines. Not only is there not a comprehensive list of shrines in the United States, there is no national level spiritual, economic or professional support group which can act as a source of assistance to floundering shrines and their staffs. Sr. Mary Louise Sullivan is working very hard, with the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration and Tourism, to help correct these conditions. Perhaps our meeting today could result in a shrine director's publication, special regional meetings to help coordinate pilgrimage calendars so that all may benefit, a pool of money and other resources for shrines in trouble; and maybe annual meetings like this one can become a source of revitalization to shrine directors who may be suffering from "burn-out" related to the many pressures they are under.

#### The Significance of Pilgrimage Shrines in the American Catholic Tradition

Perhaps it is no accident that John Paul II is known as the "Pilgrim Pope." In an increasingly international world, and particularly in overdeveloped countries like our own, where people have lost a sense of connectedness to the soil, they are seeking many different avenues to renew their faith. Under such conditions pilgrimage takes on a most significant role and the Holy Father is aware of this.

Unfortunately, tour companies, travel agencies, sodalities and the average American Catholic citizen who is seeking this form of expression for his faith cannot turn to a comprehensive published list of pilgrimage shrines that can help him to fulfill this spiritual need. Many shrines are known only locally or by members of particular devotions. Nor is there much communication between shrines. What a glorious discovery



for a Catholic family that started its pilgrimage at Fonda, New York and traveled to Washington, D.C., along a route with eleven shrines on the way, each offering a unique religious experience. (These would include: 1) the National Shrine of Kateri Tekakwitha at Fonda, New York; 2) Our Lady of the Martyrs Shrine, Auriesville, New York; 3) the beautiful Graymoor Shrine and 4) the Marian Shrine, both of these along the Hudson; then in New York City 5) the Mother Cabrini Shrine; in New Jersey the rapidly growing 6) Blue Army Shrine; 7) Our Lady of Czestochowa Shrine in Doylestown, Pennsylvania; 8) the St. John Neumann Shrine, Philadelphia; 9) the lovely Mother Seton Shrine at Emmitsburg, Maryland and in Washington, D.C. 10) the Franciscan replication of the Holy Land; culminating at 11) the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Besides these there are other shrines along the way that could be visited. Just imagine what an experience something like this could be for a Catholic family.)

The many millions of Americans who attend pilgrimages, whether in the United States, or overseas will be well served by having access to an encyclopedia of American pilgrimages—not just a list—but something that illustrates and elaborates on each shrine. I have started working on that project. I welcome a cooperative partnership with the national Conference of Catholic Bishops and with shrine directors throughout the country to bring this publication to fruition. I have already talked with a publisher who is anxious to produce a book of this kind. But funds are necessary to complete such an extensive project.

One of the most exciting developments that could be aided by an encyclopedia of American Catholic Shrines would be the attraction of pilgrims from different parts of the world to America. The time has come for the American pilgrimage tradition to make its mark in the world. We are a young country with vibrant new ideas—and while our pilgrimage shrines may not be as elaborate as those in other parts of the world, they offer a tremendous variety—ranging from the rustic intimacy and charm of the small, but growing shrine dedicated to Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha in Fonda, New York, to the



magnificent historical mission shrines of California. A shrine is a work of art, each with its own special radiance. People are generally unaware of the many pilgrimage shrines scattered like gems across most regions of this country. One learns about these shrines by word-of-mouth, or by combing the Catholic Directory; I believe they deserve more attention if they are to thrive.