

# Pilgrimage Impossible



by Susie Lloyd

Young Pilgrims on the Pilgrimage for Restoration

A tiny slip of a nun takes the stage, clears her throat, and puts on her best “man” voice. “Dear Reuben, we have a problem...” She wears a roomy men’s blue oxford shirt with tie over her full black habit. Jammed on top of her veil is a red St. Louis Cardinals hat. It is skit night at the 25th Annual Pilgrimage for Restoration. Sister is playing Greg, who is the director of the Pilgrimage and my husband. Sister-Greg is texting Reuben, Greg’s stalwart fellow organizer and partner in pain.

One by one, people run up on stage and announce some issue, some problem, some insurmountable obstacle that surely, this time, definitely would make it impossible to hold the Pilgrimage. One by one, Sister-Greg shoos them away.

Some of the obstacles are based on real events, like Covid penalties in New York State. Indeed, one month before the Pilgrimage is scheduled to happen, administrators at the National Shrine of the North American Martyrs in Auriesville, where the Pilgrimage is always held, warn Greg off. Had he not received their earlier letter,

saying that just stepping foot on shrine grounds would bring down fines of \$2600 per person per incident? He had not.

One by one people run up on stage – including a nun playing our daughter Melanie, with pony-tails on top of her veil. One by one, they announce bigger and bigger obstacles.

Finally, it’s the end of the world and the Prophets Enoch and Elias have returned to earth!

“Not yet!” cries Sister-Greg. “Tell them to wait until after the Pilgrimage!”

In spite of a few slight exaggerations, the Sisters get the main thing right. The problems that come with this 25th annual Pilgrimage for Restoration are Legion. Recall 2020, when everyone’s sacred duty is to stay in their homes lest they breathe on their neighbors. In New York, the only groups allowed to gather outside are the ones chucking bricks through

store windows. Meanwhile, my father’s quiet suburban neighborhood playground is roped off with yellow caution tape. Clearly, the Pilgrimage can not go on in New York. But that doesn’t mean it can not go on at all.

Destination: Pennsylvania. In the first place, the PA State Constitution prohibits the wolves in government from suppressing religious rights. In the second place, public outdoor spaces are open. In the third place, most of the Pilgrimage organizers live in PA and already know the lay of the land. Relocating the Pilgrimage should be easy, right? If only.

Greg, Reuben, and a team of volunteers whose names are written in the Book of Life, have to start almost from scratch. In one month’s time, they have to scout new routes through city, town, and countryside; they have to find new campgrounds or sometimes farms to camp at; they have to get new permissions and new permits from Church and state authorities; they have to find new vendors to

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supply portable toilets, tents, and U-hauls. Most importantly, they have to find a fitting shrine as a new final destination. Then they have to obtain

permission to use it.

Over three hundred registered pilgrims wait for word. One by one people call Greg or send messages. Are you going to cancel? One by one, he shoos them away. If God wants the Pilgrimage to go on, it will. To Greg, the bigger the obstacle, the more obvious it is that God wants it. And there is always, “Dear Reuben.”

Contrast this to the long months of shutdown when many Catholics stay home and wait for the Church and state authorities to let them worship or even receive the Sacraments. During this time, one bishop even denies his

priests permission to visit the dying in need of Anointing. What would Jesus do? Tell the lepers to call Him on zoom?

No, He will be glorified publicly, not hidden behind closed doors, a virtual reality. The Pilgrimage will not stop because of Covid. It will go forward because of Covid.

The Pilgrimage has always been about making reparation for sin, praying for our nation, and giving public honor and glory to God. It is never easy. Each year brings its share of work-filled nights, emergency meetings, and dry toast on the run. But when your inspiration is St. Isaac Jogues, who sailed home to France to ask his superiors if he could still offer Mass after his little flock chewed off his fingers, who then sailed back to Auriesville knowing he would be martyred, you figure God can send someone to cover the porta-potty bill.

The patronage of Jogues and his glorious companions and the previous twenty-four years of hard work are the perfect preparation for this particularly impossible year.

Along with all of the above, preparations are not over once the Pilgrimage begins. Organizers are still mapping out the final twists and turns of the routes one day ahead. No, the night before. These they deliver to the safety team. During the Pilgrimage, the lead safety runs ahead and warns the others, via walkie talkie, of blind turns, busy intersections, and narrow shoulders.

But you can't plan for everything in hostile times such as these. Melanie and the girls handing out bottled water stop on a dirt road adjacent to a farmer's field. The owner reacts to rumors of a BLM march in the neighborhood (us) and comes out guns ablazing. He fires a warning shot into the air. The girls scramble back into the truck, catching their long skirts in the door.

The evening of that same day, the

column of weary pilgrims files down the long steep winding drive of its improvised campground, a Mennonite farm. The family brigade, which our daughter Kate wrote about in these pages last year, is already there. Her husband John and a few helpers set up huge tents and rows of tables and chairs on the newly mowed field and then commence building temporary showers with tarps, scaffolds, and hoses. Family tents line the perimeter.

Small kids enjoy catechism and cow gazing. Moms and dads chat. The sun shines. The choir practices. The food team makes soup. If time is ever

inclined to stand still, I would ask it to pick the hours spent on that farm. The next morning, in the blackness before a misty dawn, priests of the Fraternity of St. Peter offer a solemn high mass. Then the Pilgrims press on toward the city.

The next destination is Reuben's farm. Not long before, he has come into possession of an adjacent property which includes a large, airy two-story barn. That night, his wife tells of the boom in their organic farm business during Covid when everyone fears empty shelves at the grocery store, and how it has led to this, a perfect resting place for hundreds of pilgrims.

After the skits, another Sister gets up and tells the real story of Greg's twenty-five years of hard labor to bring the Pilgrimage into being. She has seen it herself, and tells of an early Pilgrimage when she first discerned her calling.

The final day, the Pilgrimage goes home, quite literally. The final destination turns out to be a mile from headquarters, at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The Allentown parish in which it lies, Immaculate Conception, is the parish of Greg's childhood. A jewel in the

rough, it was founded by Saint John Neumann. In 1857, he traveled the 63 miles from Philadelphia to what was then an outpost of that Archdiocese. The cornerstone he laid is now embedded in the sidewalk out front, having been cracked during renovations. Greg remembers that time. He often tells of sitting in a front pew preparing for his First Holy Communion as a Sister shouted over the din of jackhammers. Men were dismantling

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the high marble altar, once lovingly wrought from the offerings of the Irish and German immigrants in the neighborhood. Later, one of their sons, a family

friend named Sam McGovern, will procure a life size replica of Saint Juan Diego's miraculous tilma and get the parish dedicated as the National Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe. He will also bring this devotion into Greg's childhood home.

Hundreds of pilgrims ascend the steps, and file past the miraculous image, singing. Mass is sung outside in the church yard, in the heart of the city, on ground consecrated by a saint, just steps from Sam's grave. Surrounded by this cloud of witnesses, you realize that this final day of Pilgrimage is not just three days in the making but decades and centuries.

Standing there, it becomes clear that this year's pilgrimage is not just a quick and dirty substitute for the "real one." Impossible? Yes. That is why God meant it to be exactly where it is as it is. ✠

Interested in coming next time? Visit [pilgrimage-for-restoration.org](http://pilgrimage-for-restoration.org).



*Susie Lloyd is writer, speaker, and homeschool mentor. Contact her at [susiellloyd.com](http://susiellloyd.com).*