

And Mary rising up in those days, went into the hill country with haste into a city of Juda. And she entered into the house of Zachary, and saluted Elizabeth. Lk. i, 39

“Katie, you don’t mean you thought we were walking to Auriesville!’
They all laughed hard; and I really did not mind.
For it was a pilgrimage, wasn’t it?”

My Russian Yesterdays

by Catherine De Hueck*

“On Pilgrimage”

chapter 8, pp. 47-53

They all laughed hard. Not uncharitably, mind you, but lustily and joyously; and I really did not mind. Though, if the truth be told, I was confused because the cause of their laughter was myself. And yet, so far as I knew, I had done nothing funny, nor did I look unusual to myself.

For it was a pilgrimage, wasn’t it We all were to assemble at a given address, on that particular date, to go to the shrine of the Martyred Jesuits in Auriesville, New York. At least, that is what I had understood the day several weeks before when the little group I belonged to had discussed the last-minute plans.

Well, here I was, with my hobnailed boots, a knapsack, and a precious gourd of water. What was so funny about that? Yet they were laughing, a friendly, joyous, yet loud laughter. Finally one good soul exclaimed – “Katie, you don’t mean you thought we were walking to Auriesville! That’s hundreds of miles away. We are going by bus, you nut. ...”

Well, well. It was, I confess, my turn to look astonished, and finally to laugh. By bus! A pilgrimage by bus! I had never heard of such a thing. And in my lifetime I had made many pilgrimages.

A pilgrimage was a sort of prayer: an act of penance, thanksgiving, or praise. How all this could be accomplished in a short bus ride was more than I could figure out. But then I was in America and not in Russia. When in Rome do as the Romans do. I climbed meekly into the bus.

As we rolled through a beautiful countryside, I was back in the soft pastel-shaded summer of northern Russia.

Soon the Little Lent would come around, the four weeks preceding the feast of Ss. Peter and Paul, a time for fasting and penance. And as sure as not, Mother would begin first to think and to talk about, and then to prepare for, another pilgrimage to some holy place. She loved pilgrimages, especially to one of the many shrines of our Blessed Lady with which Russia abounded.

First, of course, one prays and reads up on the shrine one goes to. Let me see. From a bolt of clean, unbleached linen, made at home out of our own flax, one cuts the pilgrim’s dress. A simple affair for women. Just a sort of kimono pattern. A hole for the head, and sleeves cut on the kimono style. Then one sews it with clean linen thread and a prayer. Now a linen cord, hand woven, and a linen sack, sewn neatly together and just big enough to hold a loaf of freshly baked rye bread, and a goodly pinch of rough salt wrapped in a clean linen rag. Clean and air the water gourd ... and all is ready.

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The morning of the pilgrimage is usually clear and sunny. It always was for us anyhow. Mass and Communion at the little country church. A light breakfast. No one eats much on penitential pilgrimages. Now the dressing, in the neat, clean garments prepared beforehand.

The linen robe. The linen cord. A simple, modest, and easy-to-put-on attire.

Easy to walk in, too. We go barefooted. The bread and the water – . Now we are ready.

The family walks with us to the village green. Here the rest of the pilgrims are assembling, all dressed alike. All are barefooted. They may be, and sometimes are, princesses and dukes or peasants and paupers. But no one can tell which is which. The men wear linen trousers, a clean linen shirt.

The leader carries holy water. Now all kneel and ask God's blessing on the pilgrimage, and invoke the Angel Raphael, St. Joseph, and the Blessed Mother to be at their side through the journey. For they know all about traveling, don't they? Raphael was Tobias' guide, and the others made the journey afoot to Egypt.

Now the leader sprinkles all with holy water, and we are off. Relatives, friends, and onlookers speed us on our way, shouting their last demands for our prayers and intentions.

We have formed ourselves in a long straight line. The village is left behind. We start chanting the litanies – we will keep that up at regular intervals all through the journey. In between the litanies there is a great silence, in which each talks to God in his own way.

The road is soft under our bare feet. The flowers smell sweet. The clouds are white and gay in the blue sky. The forests we pass are cool and gentle, and a wind is on our sunburned faces. At times it seemed to me that all the world re-echoes the song of our litanies:

Hail Mary, Mother of God, Virgin and Mother. Morning Star. Perfect Vessel.

Hail Mary, Mother of God. Holy Temple in which God Himself was conceived.

Hail Mary, Mother of God. Chaste and pure dove.

Hail Mary, Mother of God. Ever effulgent light; from thee proceedeth the Sun of Justice.

Hail Mary, Mother of God. Thou didst enclose in thy sacred womb the One who cannot be encompassed.

Hail Mary, Mother of God. With the shepherds we sing the praise of God, and with the angels the song of thanksgiving. Glory to God in the highest and peace to men of good will.

Hail Mary, Mother of God. Through thee came to us the Conqueror and the triumphant Vanquisher of hell.

Hail Mary, Mother of God. Through thee blossoms the splendor of the Resurrection.

Hail Mary, Mother of God. Thou hast saved every faithful Christian.

Hail Mary, Mother of God. Who can praise thee worthily, O glorious virgin?

We salute thee, Mother of God. ...

Yes, I am sure the earth sang with us ... or maybe it listened.

Noon would come. The leader would call a halt, always by a clear river or stream. We would refill our gourds, wash our tired, hot feet, face, and hands. Pray and sit down to a lunch of rye bread, salt, and water. And did it taste good! Nothing ever tasted quite so good since. An hour's rest. A nap, and again a prayer. Holy water sprinkled on our rested brows ... and off for the next lap.

Slowly we moved. Chanting. Slowly the day moved. Listening. And dusk was around the corner. Now we were near a village again. Thus it was planned. We were meeting people coming back from the fields and a day's work. All greeted us gladly and asked for prayers.

Now we were in the village. We broke ranks, and with a last injunction to be ready early and on the road, we made our ways to the little log houses, *isbas*, we call them in Russia. Now each person, or family representative, was knocking at a door, repeating the age-old formula:

“In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost – we are pilgrims to holy places ... begging for food and a night’s lodging ... in the name of God.” Invariably, the door would open, and hospitably we would be asked in.

“In the name of the Holy Trinity, come in pilgrims. Honor our poor house, and share with us what God in His great mercy has seen fit to send us today.” In we went, bowing low three times before the holy images and the Crucifix that used to adorn each Russian house ... a bow for each Person of the Most Holy Trinity. Then the last and fourth bow to the hosts.

Now we were ready to wash up and eat. Whatever there was on the table was shared equally with us. All one poor family had to give us was bread, salt, and tea. The loaf was justly and accurately divided among the seven members of the family and my mother and me. We dipped the bread in the salt and drank the tea, realizing that we were immensely privileged, for we were seeing charity at its best – real Christ’s charity – the poor feeding pilgrim travelers, because He was once One.

At night we slept in sweet-smelling haylofts. At sunup we rose. Then a wash at the pump. A hastily drunk glass of cool milk. A piece of bread. A grateful farewell to our kindly hosts, with a promise to bring some sacramental from the holy place, and we would not forget. We were off again.

Days passed like the beads of a rosary. Slowly, reverently. In walking . . . close to God and the earth He made. In praying, begging . . . walking . . . resting . . . and praying again. Praying for our sins ... for the world . . . for those we love. Just praying, praising, thanking God.

And then one day we would come to the shrine. Oh the joy of it! We had been walking a long time. We sort of knew that thus it would be when we would at last die in the Lord, after the long, tiresome journey of life. Just like now – standing on some knoll – seeing as yet from afar the spires of the holy shrine. Blessed be God ... and His holy Mother!

Days, perhaps a week at the shrine. Living in the big monastery hostels built for the like of us. Having monks wait on us, silent and kindly. Visiting the shrine and the churches around it. Taking back a supply of holy oil, holy water, pictures, medals for those we promised to bring them to.

Masses, Matins and Lauds, the Little Hours, Vespers, Compline, in big, holy, beautiful churches. Praying and singing with the monks and nuns of near-by convents and monasteries. Several Masses a day – the glory of it! The joy of it! Like heaven or, at least, its hallway.

And then the way back, just as we came. The same hosts – now old friends. The sharing of gifts. The talking about God and the things of God.

And finally home. Sunburned. Healthy. Leaner. Filled to the brim in soul.

Yes ... my yesterdays have great gifts for me The bus lurched. Someone laughed. Someone passed me a sandwich and a Thermos bottle filled with hot coffee. In the back of the bus someone started to sing "Mairzy dotes."

My hobnail boots were heavy on my feet ... my knapsack heavy on my lap. And I could not tell why – or could I? My heart was heavy with a strange sorrow.

Maybe it was just homesickness.

[Please report errata to the webmaster.]

31st annual



Friday – Sunday
September 25 - 27
2026 A.D.

*Come to restore.
The rest will come.*

an all-traditional walking pilgrimage from the Lake of the Blessed Sacrament, at Lake George Village, NY
to the Shrine of Our Lady of the Martyrs of New France, at Auriesville, New York

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