

Pastor's 'Trailblazers' learn to become true pilgrims

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Imlay City priest to lead young adult pilgrimage group to Marian shrine this summer

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IMLAY CITY — While many Detroit-area young adults take part in local World Youth Day events this summer, a local priest is taking several young adults on pilgrimage to a new shrine in Wisconsin.

Fr. Paul Ward, pastor of Sacred Heart Parish, Imlay City, will take about 20 young adults to the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Help from July 30 through Aug. 8. They will cross Lake Michigan on the SS Badger ferry, explore the Door Peninsula and visit shrines in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

The coming trip is the latest for Fr. Ward's Trailblazers, a pilgrimage group for teens and young adults. Fr. Ward has been leading the group since 2002, when he was a seminarian. Since then, Trailblazers have attended World Youth Days in Toronto, Germany, Mexico, Australia, Canada and Spain.

This year, instead of an international trip, the group will travel to the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Help, near Green Bay, Wis. In 1859, 28-year-old Adele Brise reported three times seeing a woman in white who said, "I am the Queen of Heaven, who prays for the conversion of sinners, and I wish you to do the same." She directed Brise to "gather the children in this wild country and teach them what they should know for salvation." Brise, who died in 1896, then started a community of Third Order Franciscan sisters. Bishop David Ricken formally approved the apparitions and the shrine in 2010, making them the first approved Marian apparitions in the United States.

Fr. Ward said he hopes this year's trip will be more accessible to those young adults who want to experience a pilgrimage, but on a smaller scale. While World Youth Days are popular, it can be an expensive trip and problematic for those needing passports.

The Wisconsin trip costs \$999 per person, and the Trailblazers have conducted many fundraisers, including rummage sales and bowling tournaments. The next fundraiser is a Father's Day pancake breakfast at Sacred Heart Church. The Trailblazers are also planning a raffle, with a top prize of a supply of organic grass-fed beef, donated by a parishioner.

Fr. Ward describes Trailblazers as a “loose” organization that exists solely to arrange such pilgrimages. There are no monthly meetings, and members gather mainly to plan pilgrimages, arrange fundraisers and to gauge interest in future outings.

And they are true pilgrimages, not merely tourist visits to Catholic locales. The Wisconsin trip, like all the others, is preceded by a mandatory three-day retreat during which attendees pray and get an idea of what to expect. During the trip, the pilgrims will sleep in campgrounds, attend daily Mass and take part in evening discussions. Fr. Ward is accompanied by several adult chaperones.

“This is an opportunity for detachment and for prayer,” Fr. Ward said. “Of course, we don’t go overboard; there are plenty of opportunities for fun. We get to explore Door County and the U.P., where there is a shrine to now Venerable Bishop Baraga.”

Door County is a popular vacation destination, with five state parks as well as a thriving arts community, including galleries and theatres. The pilgrims will mainly stay at campgrounds, but Fr. Ward said a Door County resident has offered the use of his property as a campground for the Trailblazers.

Because the pilgrims spend so much time together, lifelong friendships result, Fr. Ward said. He said many have become pen pals, with each other and with people they’ve met while on pilgrimage.

“The kids are attracted by the adventure,” Fr. Ward said, “but I always appreciate the spiritual fruit from it. There are conversions and the discovery of vocations.” To date, Fr. Ward counts nine women who have entered convents, another who became a consecrated virgin, and 15 men who have entered the seminary.

What does Fr. Ward get out of these pilgrimages? “Exhausted,” he joked. Then, more seriously, he added, “I have enjoyed it. It is demanding on me, but it energizes me to see our youth starting to get involved with their faith.”

Madeleine Long, 17, is a repeat Trailblazer who attended World Youth Day in Spain. She joined because she had been “completely jealous” of her older siblings who had gone on earlier Trailblazers trips. “We had a lot of fun and I wanted to go again, because I’ll be going to college and I hope to take something of that with me.”

Rachel Iannuzzi, 16, is one of the first-time pilgrims this year. “I want to learn more about my faith and get closer to God. It will be pretty challenging and it will take some courage and patience. But God will lead us through it.”

For more information about the Trailblazers, visit www.trailblazerswyd.org or call Diane Humphreys, Sacred Heart Catholic Church, (810) 724-1135.

AOD World Youth Day events

The Archdiocese of Detroit is hosting a World Youth Day Preparation Event on April 28 from 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. at the Cranbrook Institute of Science, 39221 Woodward Ave., Bloomfield Hills. The event includes Mass, reflection, catechesis, community-building and nature walks. Preregistration for the free event is required by visiting www.detroityouthministers.com. For more information, email youthministry@aod.org or call (313) 596-7325.

The archdiocese's Young Adult and Campus Ministry is also hosting a World Youth Day Home Event July 27-28 at the Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament. The event is intended for young adults ages 18-35 and is concurrent with 2013 World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro and Teen World Youth Day in Chicago. For more information, email yacm@aod.org or call (313) 237-4647.