

Travel & Pilgrimages

Modern pilgrims find spiritual fruit in travels

By Nancy Hartnagel
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Pilgrimage is as old as Abraham and Isaac going to the mountain and as new as today's Christians, Jews and Muslims visiting their holy places, according to the new pilgrimage director at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington.

"The whole concept of pilgrimage stems from biblical times and reminds us that we have no permanent place on earth," said Father Walter Rossi, a priest of the Diocese of Scranton, Pa.

And for Christians, "a pilgrimage reminds us that we are always on a journey ... back to God and our final destiny is that heavenly city," he added.

The personable priest, 35, spoke with Catholic News Service in late January after a few weeks on the job.

Father Rossi earned an accounting degree at the University of Scranton and a master of divinity degree at St. Joseph's Seminary, Yonkers, N.Y. In May, he will complete a canon law degree at The Catholic University of America in Washington.

Following his 1987 ordination, Father Rossi was assistant pastor at two Scranton parishes. For three years, he also was diocesan pilgrimage director, attending two of the shrine's annual pilgrimage workshops and leading a pilgrimage to the shrine. More personal experiences include pilgrimages to the Holy Land after college and to World Youth Day



CNS/Nancy Weichec
Father Walter Rossi serves as director of pilgrimages at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington. The shrine hosts a half-million visitors each year; about 40,000 are pilgrims.

in Denver in 1993.

"It's not too often you have the opportunity to serve the entire church in the United States," he said of his appointment. "And that's what the people at the shrine do. ... I thought it was a great opportunity to be able to do that."

Father Rossi succeeds Msgr. Roger Roensch, who now directs the U.S. bishops' Rome office for U.S. visitors to the Vatican. In his 15 years at the shrine, "Msgr. Roensch really built up the pilgrimage program," the new director said.

Last year, more than 40,000 of the shrine's estimated half-mil-

lion visitors came on pilgrimage, chiefly from 10 dioceses, 10 religious orders and two ethnic groups, he said.

In addition to encouraging bishops around the country to lead pilgrimages to the shrine, Father Rossi said it's his job to promote pilgrimages among religious "in conjunction with some major occasion in their order's life," and among ethnic groups, senior citizens, high school and college students, parishes and other organizations.

"Once we get the pilgrimage," he added, "my job is to work with whomever to organize it, to orchestrate it."

The shrine's major pilgrimages — most are one day — are held on Saturdays during April, May, September and October, he said. They are planned well in advance, with 1997 already filled, and 1998 and 1999 filling up.

Typically, a diocesan pilgrimage features an opening prayer service, shrine tours, time for reconciliation and a concluding Mass celebrated by the bishop. Sometimes the rosary or a spiritual talk is added.

"In diocesan and parish pilgrimages you have every type of person," the priest said. This "nice mix" is a reminder that "we're all the same when it comes

to our relationship to God and our need to become closer to God."

Father Rossi said a pilgrimage site should be a place worthy of devotion, one that helps people pray. The U.S. bishops' decision to build a national place of honor for Mary came after she was named U.S. patroness under the title of the Immaculate Conception, he explained.

The shrine is the largest Catholic church in the Western Hemisphere, and was built by American Catholics, he said. "There are over 60 chapels in this shrine built by religious orders, ethnic groups and people. It has a central part in their lives."

Shrine staff are just now beginning preparations for the jubilee year 2000 and the third millennium. Father Rossi said they will adopt Pope John Paul II's three-year plan of preparation.

"We're hoping that people will respond to the Holy Father's call and come on pilgrimage," he said. "We hope to be a central place for some millennium events."

Whether a pilgrim is beginning a one-day local trip or a three-week trip to Rome or the Holy Land, said Father Rossi, "the important part is to remember that it's meant to be a spiritual time, a time of prayer."

Pilgrims who leave their normal place to go somewhere else show a willingness to detach from temporal things, like comfort, he said. "Even if it's only for a while, that little self-denial shows our need for something greater and our willingness to repent to help ourselves grow in the future."

"To me, that's the challenge of everybody who goes on pilgrimage or everybody who prays: to take the fruit of that prayer or that pilgrimage and make it your own," he said.

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