

ABOUT THE PILGRIMAGE

I am Fr. Charles Becker, a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago. Since my own conversion in Medjugorje in 1989/90, I have been involved with the pilgrimages that the Zovko Family has organized over the past 20 years. Andrija Zovko, who passed away June 26th, 2008 and his wife Maria were born and raised in Medjugorje. Andy escaped from the former communist country along with his wife, a couple years later. First they lived in Germany then moved to Chicago where they raised their sons Zdenko and Bruno. Joanne Ranallo assists in helping with my prayer groups and the pilgrimages. She too had her own conversion in 1989 in Medjugorje and we teamed up back in 1992 combining efforts with the northside and southside teen rosary prayer groups. Today Zdenko and Joanne help to organize the trips from Chicago and Bruno, who lives back in Medjugorje with his wife and children, care for our pilgrimage in their pansion in Medjugorje.

I would like to share some helpful suggestions that can make your pilgrimage more beneficial spiritually. **Pilgrimage** by definition is the journeying to a sacred place or shrine, a search; in this case, to search for God through an encounter with the Blessed Virgin Mary. This definition helps us to continually direct our hearts, minds, souls and bodies to this **Search for God**. In Medjugorje, many have found an experience of grace, attributed to the Blessed Mother's presence and intercession that has led to a reawakening of the love and mercy that God so desires to share with His children. Upon listening to the visionaries' experiences and the parish priests' reflections, if one's heart remains open, then nothing can stop this grace from changing and converting us into the person that God intended us to be. Mary leads us to this fount of grace in Medjugorje to help us to begin anew or even begin for the first time a life of faith in God. In order to know this peace of God and experience His forgiveness, we often need help to know what keeps us from true peace, what it is that needs to be forgiven. The world blinds us slowly and subtly, but Blessed Mother leads us gently yet firmly to conversion, to truth about the world and truth about ourselves, that is, if we say "yes" to Her and if we trust and remain open to Her direction.

Experience has shown that many distractions, while on pilgrimage, seek to pull souls away from this search for God. Many of these distractions are produced and heightened by the work of the Adversary of Blessed Mother, namely Satan, for he certainly would want to frustrate and destroy Our Lady's work in general, as well as the progress of an individual's soul. These antics could include: sight-seeing, shopping for other than religious gift items (and even this can be a distraction), being a courier for people in the States, drinking and partying (this isn't exclusively meant for young people), reading material not pertinent to the pilgrimage (so too CDs, i-pods with non-religious music, computer/techno. stuff etc.) not participating in group endeavors, or by not spending some time in individual reflection-in other words, **distractions to prayer**. Due to these realities working against one's search for God and one's pilgrimage, a strong commitment to the essence of pilgrimage, that of keeping these trips more like a **retreat** than a tour or vacation needs to exist. One final concern regarding this matter is curiosity or involvement with various works or ministries going on around Medjugorje. Certainly there is concern out of charity to help our neighbor in need however; there is a time and place for everything. Experience again has shown that by being involved in these efforts while on pilgrimage is often a distraction and causes individuals not to stay on pilgrimage. Again, the dynamic of a pilgrimage is a search, and once we begin to find an encounter with God, these distractions may keep one from facing or dealing with particular realities that the Holy Spirit may be leading them to look at in themselves, thereby sabotaging their own pilgrimage. There are other ways of assisting these efforts other than a pilgrimage, and we could assist you with suggestions. These above distractions are truly distractions while on pilgrimage, and you are encouraged to avoid them.

Our Lady calls everyone to prayer and conversion. Conversion means to change, to change your whole life to conform to God's Will, not only the parts we are willing to change, but to become willing to change all the parts of ourselves that God knows needs changing! Before, during and after pilgrimage, we begin to see what we need to look at in ourselves in order to get a healthy perspective and answers to what we may be called "to do" to participate in God's Will and Our Lady's work in His world. So, first let us slow down and listen, pray and listen, and pray for courage not to be distracted so that the action of the Holy Spirit may begin to heal and direct our lives and souls.

Regarding interested teenage and child pilgrims, it is strongly recommended that one or both parents be the guardian for the young person's pilgrimage, especially since parents know the specific "shepherding" needs of their own family members (though exceptions have been made). This arrangement also leads to the promotion of family prayer that produces optimum spiritual growth for the individual family members as well as developing family unity and strength as a whole.

May God Bless your desire to meet His Mother!
Fr. Charles Becker (815) 385-1575