

The summer season in Canada is not only a time for vacation travel but also for pilgrimages. Pilgrims travel to shrines out of religious devotion.

Last weekend, the 142nd pilgrimage to the shrines of Our Lady of the Cape in Cap de la Madeleine and to St. Anne-de-Baupré brought together ten busloads of pilgrims. The Archdiocese of Ottawa and neighbouring dioceses in Ontario and Quebec sponsored the journey. The pilgrims enjoyed two days of travel, socializing, prayer, and other spiritual exercises such as Confession and Mass.

Two years ago, I had a delightful time on the bus tour with many joyful Catholics keen to develop their spiritual life. This year, Gatineau Archbishop Paul-André Durocher was the tour leader and spiritual advisor.

Still, many people cannot afford the time or cost to get away on one of these religious excursions. Fortunately, in Ottawa, our own shrine serves the local community. The Grotto of Notre-Dame-de-Lourdes is a little off the beaten track at 435 Montreal Road. It is next to the parish church of the same name, on grounds adjacent to Notre Dame Cemetery. Several times a week, facilitators lead prayers, priests offer Confession, and assemblies celebrate Mass.

The outdoor grotto has a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, an amphitheatre where conferences are given, and an altar where Mass is celebrated. It is a replica of the shrine in Lourdes, France, dedicated to Our Lady and commemorating appearances that she is believed to have made to a young peasant girl in 1858. The Grotto is also adorned with striking and vividly coloured representations of the Way of the Cross—fourteen “stations” that depict incidents in the final journey of Jesus to Calvary and his death on a cross. They each invite reflection on the sacrifice Christ made for our salvation.

In July and August, a triduum (a three-day period) is given over to conferences by an outside resource person. This month, from August 12 to 14, the speaker is René Delorme, a Brother of St. Gabriel. His conferences and the devotions will attract thousands of devotees in what become three days of preparatory prayer culminating in the solemn feast of the Assumption of Mary on Monday night, August 15.

The grounds have benches for several hundred people, but many bring their own folding chairs that they locate on the grassy slopes or under the leafy canopy. The atmosphere is serious but not sombre. Rather, it is joyful and uplifting. We feel this most at the closing Mass and the torchlight procession that follows.

As the procession makes its way around the grounds and up the hill of the crucifixion, the people sing a variation on the song that the Blessed Virgin proclaimed in the gospel of the feast day of her assumption into heaven. They chant “Magnificat anima mea Dominum,” Latin for

“My soul magnifies the Lord.” The assembly recognizes in Mary a model for themselves. Just as God lifts up the lowly and fills the starving with good things, they see their closeness to God as an answer to the burdens of life. They may be immigrants, refugees, the elderly, the forgotten, or just Christian families striving to be faithful to God. Each of us has struggles, but God constantly offers mercy and grace.

This spiritual interplay of the pilgrimage dynamic explains why Pope Francis puts so much emphasis on popular devotions in the life of the Church. He encourages people to come to know God’s mercy in their spiritual life because good pilgrims, when they return home, will want to share mercy, compassion, and joy with their families and neighbours.