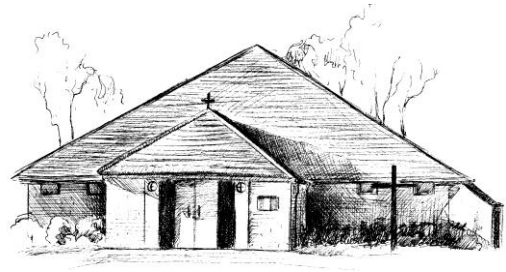


THE CATHOLIC PARISH OF ST. HUGH AND ST. JOHN

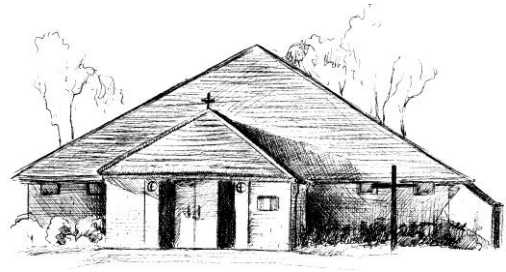


Life is a journey with many different experiences, some we treasure as defining moments, enabling us to pause for a moment and take the time to smell the flowers. We live and work in a culture that often prizes value-added success in one's career or profession and self-fulfilment above all else. Life can become outwardly so busy that we are in danger of neglecting our inner space, where real and true fulfilment can ultimately be found. God has created and designed us in such a fashion that lasting happiness can only be found in Him. It helps to broaden our understanding of life when we see it as a pilgrimage journey.

A pilgrimage is best described as a journey to a sacred place, the journey within ultimately leading us to God. Pope St. Paul II reminds us that *"we are pilgrims on the journey of life, and our final destination is our Heavenly Father's home in heaven."* I feel privileged in that I have been able to visit many sacred places, such as Our Lady's Shrine in Knock, near where I was born, Lourdes, and more recently, Medjugorje. It's Medjugorje that I wish to reflect on a little more.

Medjugorje is in Bosnia Herzegovina, formerly part of Yugoslavia under Communist rule. It literally means *"between the mountains"* It was a small, poor, and backward village until June 25, 1981, when Our Blessed Lady appeared to six children aged 9 to 16. These visions initially took place on what is known as Apparition Hill over a period of seven days. Our Lady's message to the children was to remind the world of God's wish and desire for peace. Such peace is made possible through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This is a message that our world has forgotten. The need for this message to take root in the human heart is what draws people to Medjugorje in increasing numbers. I met many people, including myself, who did not know why they came but were happy they did. The visionaries are now

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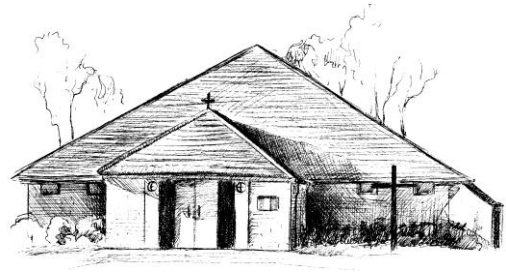


adults, with some living periodically in Medjugorje. They continue to experience visions from Our Lady with messages about the need for peace in our lives and in our world. Listening to the testimonies of many, many people and seeing the fruits of their lives is a good reason for the increasing number of pilgrims every year in Medjugorje. The real miracles in our lives come through having a conversion in mind and heart and living with a new spirit.

The first time I went on a pilgrimage to Medjugorje was in 1985 when I was invited to be the priest spiritual leader with a parish group in my Aunt Bridie's parish in Slough near London. In those early years, pilgrims stayed in people's homes, some of whom were Muslim families. What I remember from then was the friendliness, welcome, hospitality, faith, and fervour of the people and how primitive the place was. Religious ceremonies such as Mass, Eucharistic Adoration, and Confession took place in the Parish Church dedicated to **St. James, the patron saint of pilgrims**, and the spacious, underdeveloped grounds. Fortunately, the weather was dry and warm, conducive to prayer and worship. The parish is in the care of the *Franciscan order*, who were at the time viewed with suspicion by the Bishop of Mostar, whose diocese includes Medjugorje.

Returning 38 years later was a truly wonderful experience for me and the group of 23 I travelled with, many of whom were going for the first time. Fr. Martin, whom some may know as the priest at Holy Angels Church in Hale Barns, was our spiritual leader. Medjugorje as a village has grown tremendously, with many hotels, guesthouses, and places to visit, socialize, and relax. What remains and continues to flourish is the warmth of the people and the prayerful atmosphere, as experienced in people's joy and fervour of faith. There are Masses every morning in various languages, with Mass for English-speaking pilgrims on weekday mornings, with an average of 40 priests

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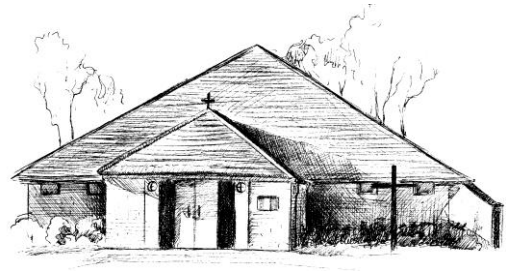


concelebrating and a congregation overflowing into the outdoor grounds. What is particularly impressive is the joyful participation of the people.

The evening program takes place each day between 5 and 8 pm. It consists of the Rosary prayer at the request of Our Blessed Lady, Mass in the Croatian language, followed by Adoration. This takes place outdoors with seating for *7,000 people* who can participate via radios that can be tuned to different languages. The special power of silence in prayer is truly uplifting; someone has wisely said that silence is God's favoured language. Vast numbers respond to Our Lady's request to go to Confession and receive God's mercy and forgiveness. Medjugorje is known as the Confessional of the world. As a penitent and confessor, I experienced double joy. I was one of many priests privileged to celebrate the Sacrament with people in their own language. The priest is an '*Alter Christi*' (another Christ), so this encounter with Jesus becomes very special and beautiful; people keep coming and requesting the Sacrament, one that becomes a life-changing experience for many.

One of several things that made this particular pilgrimage memorable were our guides. These three women lived and breathed the real spirit of Medjugorje. They are people of joyful faith who see it as their vocation in life to enthuse those who come on a pilgrimage and to live and share the message of Our Lady on our return home. As people born in the area, they would have seen and occasionally met the visionaries. Growing up in a Communist regime that sought to destroy and obliterate this divine intervention, they, too, knew the pain that comes with fear and rejection. They were particularly inspired by the Parish Priest who suffered imprisonment at the time of the Apparitions. He was prevented from returning to Medjugorje after being incarcerated. The other priest, with a Doctorate in Psychology

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and Psychotherapy who declared the children were not suffering abnormalities, died suddenly in 2000 at the age of 54. He was very much a people's priest and has written extensively on the spirituality of having a joyful and prayerful heart. He also inspired the building of the Mother's Village, a place of welcome and hospitality for children orphaned and refugees following the Bosnian war in the 1990s. He also helped inspire the building of a centre for young people suffering from addiction. The spirituality of Medjugorje is also about 'turning concern into action.'

The Church's official position is that it neither approves nor disapproves of supernatural happenings. There are a variety of commissions investigating the events over the past 40 years, and like other places where Our Lady is alleged to have appeared, the Church's official stance will be made known. In the early years, through the local Bishop, it was forbidden for organized pilgrimages to take place. Fr. Jozo, the Parish Priest, was suspended by his Bishop. Following his release from prison by the Communist regime, he travelled extensively to promote the message of Our Lady to the visionaries. In later years, official pilgrimages have been approved of and even encouraged. In his message to 70,000 young people who travelled there in August 2023, Pope Francis encouraged them to see it as a more special grace.

A pilgrimage can serve as a special time for forming new friends and bonding people together as a parish. This was certainly the case in our group of 23; many of us had never met before. Following a week together, many friendships have been made, and our faith has deepened and been enriched. We created a WhatsApp group, and we agreed to extend it for a further two weeks. One of many comments and observations sum it up for me: *'It was like walking on a sea of prayer, peace, and joy for a week.'*

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By way of conclusion, this pilgrimage has been one of the most special in my life. I have been going to Lourdes every year since 1984, with the exception of the pandemic. It has been and will always remain special. What made this extra special for me was the warmth throughout, many occasions for adoration, the silence, and the affirmation that comes with being a priest. And Medjugorje is much cheaper than Lourdes! I would feel very privileged to accompany a pilgrimage to Medjugorje in 2024. Let me know if you are interested.

Fr. Pat.