

ON PILGRIMAGE

THOMAS STORCK

A GLIMPSE OF CATHOLIC CULTURE

Every August the small town of Carey in Wyandot County, Ohio, about 50 miles south of Lake Erie, fills with prayer and pageantry as Catholics gather to honor the Mother of God on the feast of her Assumption into Heaven. Latin-rite Catholics from across the Midwest, Chaldean-rite Catholics from the Detroit area, and various ethnic groups with their special songs and rituals and garb — all flock to Carey for several days of activities that center on the veneration of a statue of Our Lady of Consolation that has been here since the church that bears her name was first built around 1870.

When I was an Episcopalian, one of the attractions of the Catholic Church was her frankly populist atmosphere, her capaciously maternal ingathering of diverse nationalities and colors and tongues. For anyone, Catholic or not, with some fondness for that aspect of the Faith, Carey in August is a stirring place to be. Though the shrine is visited throughout the year, the week leading up to the feast of the Assumption each August 15 is the highlight. One can attend the sacred Liturgy in a variety of rites and languages, walk in or watch processions, sing hymns or hear them sung. On the eve of the Assumption the pilgrims gather, several thousand strong, before the basilica of Our Lady of Consolation to pray the Rosary in a candlelight procession. The Bishop of Toledo begins the prayers, and

the crowd follows him, with banners flying and the image of Our Lady held aloft, to the park where he celebrates Mass. On the feast day there are more sacred Liturgies, opportunities for confession, and a grand procession with a relic of the true Cross.

Does the word "pilgrimage" bring up images of dour faces and pious talk? Those who've been to Carey — like those who've read Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* — know that Catholic pilgrims spend no small part of their time hobnobbing and telling merry tales. At Carey one can see teenage pilgrims wandering around in small groups, sometimes carrying radios, and not always looking especially pious. And among the pilgrims who camp out for the nine days of the novena, there is said to be dancing and other festivities. Truth be told, for these pilgrims, as for Chaucer's, a pilgrimage is in part a vacation. But no Catholic should be surprised or shocked by this. Just as the Incarnate God did not spend all of His time on earth praying or preaching, but supplied wine for a wedding feast, so pilgrims rightly mix supernatural and natural joys, knowing that God created both and that both, when used without sin, are ways of honoring our Creator. As St. Paul wrote, "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

I have visited Carey probably a dozen times, mostly during the Assumption festivities. Though I enthusiastically urge others to do likewise, I do not suggest that one should visit as a sociologist or as an observer of quaint religious phenomena. The best way to go is as a pilgrim, a supplicant of the Queen of Heaven, asking her intercession amid the many trials of this life. If

Thomas Storck, who writes from Greenbelt, Maryland, is a Contributing Editor of the NOR and author of *The Catholic Milieu*.

you are (as I am) a product of our dully uniform secular culture, you will probably find yourself staring (as I do) at the exotic richness of the many Catholic cultures around you. But even as we stare we can worship, and we can thank Our Lady of Consolation for what her cult has created.

The shrine's chronicles tell that when the statue of Our Lady was brought here from Europe, it was taken by train to the nearest railroad station. The clergy and people of Carey walked in procession to meet the statue and bring it to its new home. Although there was a tremendous thunderstorm and rain, "as soon as the statue was brought out of the church the sun pierced the clouds and was shining on the whole line of the procession all the way to... Carey, while it was continually thundering and lightning on both sides of us" (from the account written by the pastor at the time).

The memory of that miraculous procession still survives among families in the area. Other miracles have occurred over the years, including many miracles of healing. Crutches, canes, and braces, abandoned in the shrine by people

healed by the intercession of the Mother of God, can be seen in the crypt church of the basilica, as can a number of touching notes and letters. All of this expresses the tender trust of the Catholic faithful in the mercy of God and the power of Mary's prayers, and illustrates the nearly incredible pathos and complexity of human life.

Though a visit to Carey in mid-August is more than worthwhile, there is a certain atmosphere about the village that is always conducive to prayer. I remember a few years ago I came to Carey in early August, before many pilgrims had arrived. I was troubled in mind about a number of things, and at about five o'clock in the afternoon I went into the basilica to pray in front of the sacred image of Our Lady of Consolation. I was alone, or nearly so, in the church. Late afternoon is one of my favorite times of day, and in the church, lighted by dozens of flickering candles, I received a gift of peace that was probably, like so much in this world, a mixture of natural and supernatural consolation. Those moments are probably the most mentally and spiritually peaceful that I have had in the past ten years.

But whether you are alone or in a flock of pilgrims, to visit Carey during the Assumption festivities is definitely to experience the richness of Catholic life, a richness that is too often lacking today. As a writer in *Ohio Magazine* put it, "In front of the basilica, the scene is like a Bruegel painting come alive. In the crowd on the street, one might think himself in Rome or Warsaw or Mexico City, depending on which little whirlpool of people he is momentarily caught up in."

All of us who live in the dreary wasteland of secularized Protestantism that is modern consumerist North America should consider going to Carey. There, for a few days, we can live amid Catholic culture, amid our brethren whose expression of the Faith is likely to be more direct than our own. There is much that I need to learn, and much that they can teach me. That is why I go to Carey.

For information about the shrine of Our Lady of Consolation at Carey, phone the Conventual Franciscans there at 419-396-7107. ■



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