

Work and Pilgrimage

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Working Out Resentment



The construction site on our arrival was simply a foundation and we with some additional professional help were going to build the structure. As the structure took shape and grew so did our confidence. While working together we drew encouragement from each other and became increasingly aware of a growing personal satisfaction that comes from a sense of accomplishment.

Daily, the level of cooperation grew despite difficulties with language and vast cultural and religious differences. For many women, this was the first opportunity to use a variety of tools and do manual work for an extended period of time. Some struggled and just did what they could but others took on all challengers to see who could do the job the best.

Some of our young men initially looked at manual labor as something only the poor in their country did. It was confronting to have to step ‘down’ and do such lowly work. Yet, after investing their own sweat and seeing the result they begin to understand the importance of manual labor. Our eyes were beginning to see through new glasses and recognize the sacrifice laborers make on a daily basis to provide food for their family.

I remember asking Bilial what he thought about the work he was doing and he gave a very deep and interesting response. “Work is like worshiping God, when I hammer this wood and fix this building I am worshiping God with my actions.”

Developing Trust

During our time together we found plenty of time to laugh and gently poke fun at each other. Each of us understood that as volunteers we left behind family, friends and opportunities in order to take on this intensive work. Mutual respect and trust grew with each level of bricks we laid, qualities essential in developing friendship, lasting marriage and true peace.

Moving through our weeks of work, our team had expanded to include a number of Ethiopian refugees and some local Catholic priests. When the construction of the trade center for our Ethiopian friends was concluded an inauguration ceremony was held to celebrate the occasion. The mayor offered each participant a beautiful plaque and several members of the Ethiopian community shared their thoughts and feelings. If you looked at us gathered together it was as if representatives from all over the world had been brought to this place to share the joy and satisfaction of the moment.

Embodying the Dream of St. Francis



Following the conclusion of our work we set aside a time for reflection in Assisi, the city of St. Francis. We arrived at the time of the annual pilgrimage and asked a local Franciscan Priest if it was appropriate for our inter-religious group to participate. The kindly priest offered us some insights about St. Francis that made us feel at home.

“St. Francis is remembered for the beautiful simplicity of his faith. His spirit and example has moved many to seek God while encouraging the church to go back to its roots. Francis saw God in all people and this motivated him to reach out and promote understanding between people of different religions. He journeyed to the Holy Land and met with the Sultan, who was a Muslim. He respectfully shared his faith with the Sultan and listened to the Sultan as he shared his. His exceptional concern was aimed at helping bring about a better relationship between Muslims and Christians.”

The priest continued with some final comments that showed we were coming to the right place at the right time. “Francis longed for the day when all humanity would live together as one family, God’s family. Your group represents the fruit of St. Francis’s prayers as he so much wanted to see this beautiful respect between those that love God. Please join the pilgrimage.”

The Pilgrimage and a Special Conversation



While devout Catholics from far and near gathered to start the pilgrimage they were joined by our young ambassadors from each of the world's religions. Muslim, Sikh, Jain, Jew, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, Unificationists, Parsi, Copt and Roman Catholic reverently joined the pilgrimage. Candle in hand we walked the narrow, hilly streets of the medieval city. It was a deeply moving experience for all those that took part.

On concluding the pilgrimage we meandered to the village plaza. Feeling the spirit, Rev. Alan Celestine an African American minister started singing the upbeat hymn, "We are the Children of the Living God". We started dancing and singing along and the excitement pulled in local on-lookers. When the song concluded we began to jump up and down, clapping and smiling at an exhausting peace. This was clearly a scene that would move the heart of St. Francis. Perhaps his spirit was there dancing and singing with us.

Not Just Friends, We are Brothers

After things quieted down that evening, Ezra pulled me aside to have a conversation. "You must know that Bilial and I have gone through a lot on this project. We both came because we wanted to serve people that needed help. By joining on this special work to help the refugees we managed to see and appreciate something good in each other. We went through challenges, hardships and fun together and that brought us closer. Recently we were able to have some really deep conversations that have helped us both."

Ezra after pausing a few moments continued. "Back home we live and interact with our own kind. We see others but it is almost like they exist in a parallel universe. During this program and on the pilgrimage we walked, worked, shared and prayed together. We now share some of the same friends. With all our differences, we recognize that we share what is most important. We love our family, we worship God and we work to make the world a little better. We became friends, better yet, we became brothers."

All I could do was nod and smile. Ezra and Bilial recognized they were united as brothers, members of God's great family. This is the essence from which peace can grow.