



# the road to

RELIGIOUS TRAVEL INDUSTRY BRINGS PILG





by Sabrina Arena Ferrisi

The idea of a pilgrimage has long been ingrained in Catholic culture. Lourdes, Fatima, Santiago de Compostela in Spain, the Holy Land, Mexico's Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Rome and even the birth place of various saints—all are magnets for the faithful when it comes to organized spiritual tours.

And more than ever, Americans are embracing pilgrimage and faith-based travel.

“Slightly more than 90% of the U.S. religious travel markets are Catholics and Christians,” according to Kevin Wright, head of the Religious Travel Association. “Within that 90% figure, half are Catholic travelers.”

The religious travel industry is worth \$18 billion worldwide, according to the World Tourism Organization. Last year, 633,000 Americans traveled overseas for religious or spiritual purposes—up 30% over the past four years.

truth  
BRINGS US CLOSER TO GOD



## Multiple options

According to Wright, the two biggest stories of the last 10 years are the growth in religious travel and the growth in vacation options. Catholic cruises, missionary travel and even Catholic leisure travel are growing in popularity. The variety of cruises available is remarkable. One can book a Catholic cruise exclusively for women, family, singles and even one for converts to the faith.

John Hale, a member of the Detroit Chapter of Legatus, operates Corporate Travel, which specializes in organizing pilgrimages. Because Hale's business is family-run by faithful Catholics, he believes his agency offers pilgrims something unique.

"There are big companies like Globus who do Catholic, Jewish and Muslim tours, but you have to really understand the faith well to do this right," he explained. "We only use practicing Catholic guides. This is unique and difficult to find."

In fact, anyone who has traveled to the Holy Land knows that the Israeli government, by law, gives each Christian group an official tour guide. Often this person is Jewish and may not understand Catholic theology.

Legatus member and biblical scholar Steve Ray recalls his first visit to the Holy Land. The guide brought his group to the spot where the Annunciation took place.

Steve Ray speaks to a group of pilgrims in the Holy Land.



"He told the group that God had asked several women to be the mother of Jesus before Mary finally accepted!" he said.

"You see why the core must be there," said Hale. "You just can't organize a trip and slap Catholicism on it. Many travel companies will organize a public Mass, but if it is in Italian, Americans get less out of the experience." Hale's group goes the extra mile to find English-speaking priests.

## Popular destinations

The most popular destinations for American Catholic travelers (in order of popularity) are: Rome, Israel, Ireland, Poland, Spain, France and Turkey. Pilgrims are also visiting nearby biblical lands like Egypt and Jordan to see other places where Jesus walked.

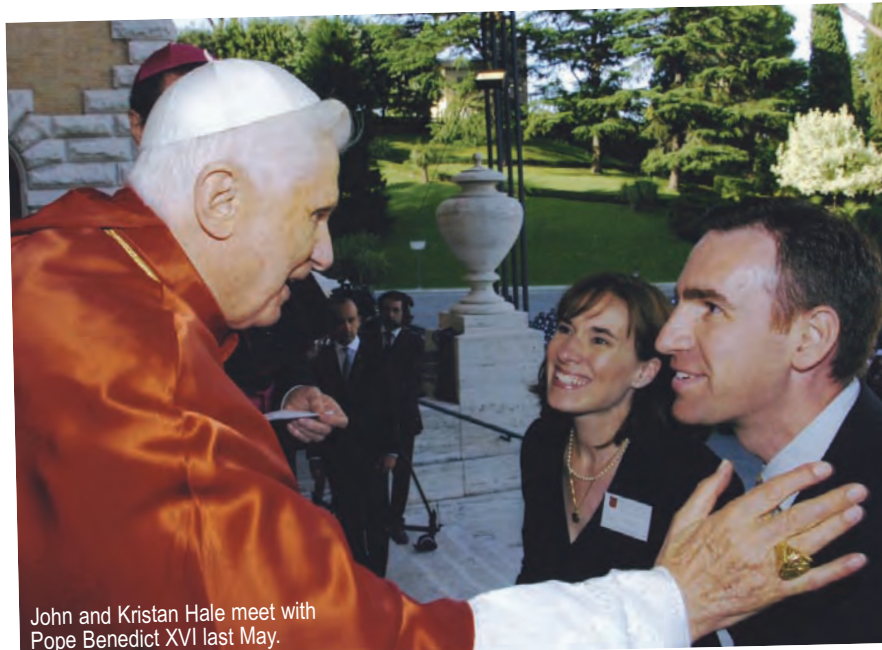
"Last year, 20,000 people passed by the tomb of Pope John Paul II every day," said Wright. "And it is because of John Paul II that

we have seen a lot of growth in travel to Poland. People are also going to Bethany beyond the Jordan to see the place where Jesus was baptized. They also go to Mt. Nebu where Moses saw the Promised Land before he died."

Ray, whose family converted to Catholicism from Evangelical Protestantism in 1994, takes groups to the Holy Land four times a year.

"When we became Catholic, we went on a pilgrimage to Israel with my parish," Ray said. "Two of my children came along. They were teenagers at the time. This trip changed their faith. They said, 'Dad, we knew that this was true before we came here, but once we saw the places where Jesus lived, we knew it was true with a capital T.'"

Ray and his wife Janet are producing a 10-part video series called *The Footprints of God: The Story of Salvation from Abraham to Augustine*. Pilgrims fortunate enough to travel with the Rays experience their passion for the Holy Land.



John and Kristan Hale meet with Pope Benedict XVI last May.

The Rays are registered as official guides with the Christian Commission for Pilgrimages in Israel. When they are in the Holy Land, they take pilgrims to all the sites of the rosary. Forever afterwards, these pilgrims will have a visual image in their minds of the actual places of the rosary, he said.

Ray also uses modern technology to aid his tours. Pilgrims get sets of headphones so they can hear him when he speaks, no matter where they are standing. He also employs a videographer who records the trip. Each pilgrim gets their own customized DVD.





## Graces of pilgrimage

The power and effect of a pilgrimage are hard to quantify. But as Hale explains, faith journeys are not simply visits to historical ruins.

“When you go to a church, it is a living place,” he said. “The art is there to give glory to God. When you celebrate Mass, you are a part of it. What happened centuries ago is still happening. This experience transcends simply looking back into history. It is still a real experience. It still endures.”



Fatima, Portugal

Ray concurs.

“It is good to shake yourself up and out of your cocoon,” he said. “We get out of our comfort zone and realize that this is holy ground. It is the ground that Moses was standing on. It’s the same soil today. God walked there and

sanctified it. There’s a special grace. I have seen priests who can’t get through a Mass because they are so choked up. Confirming the real historicity of the faith has a deep impact on the soul.”

Ray led a group of Legatus members to the Holy Land last October and recalls the effect the trip had on the pilgrims.

“I watched one older businessman cry,” he said. “He told me that he had gotten up for the first time in his life to read the Bible at 2 a.m.”



Lourdes, France

Ray also notes how pilgrimages have the power to make prayer and the Mass come alive.

“You realize that this is the truth. We have the faith because it is true. And we believe in it because it is concretely true.”

Ray recalls another trip when his daughter Emily, then 15, decided to go and pray by herself at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre—the church built on the site where Jesus was crucified and buried.

“She came back in tears. We asked her why she was crying, and she said, ‘Dad, I was praying in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and I realized that He was really there.’” ☩

*Sabrina Arena Ferrisi is a staff writer for Legatus Magazine.*

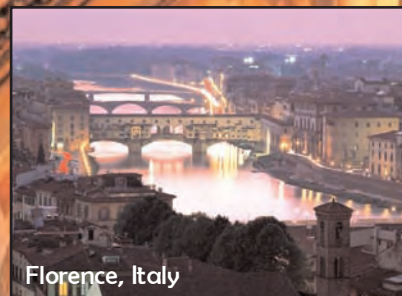
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