

Shrines to shine

It all happened with a phone call late one evening when I was on vacation. The gentleman said, “We usually have Mass at our shrine during August and we were wondering if you were available to say the Mass for our people at the shrine this Sunday evening at six o’clock?” I asked the whereabouts of the shrine and was informed it was in a remote area, on the side of a mountain about ten miles from where I was staying.

I agreed to his request and we hung up the phone. I realized that this would be a new experience for me. I had celebrated Mass in churches and cemeteries, in the rubble of Hurricane Katrina as well as in campgrounds.

I collected the things needed for the Mass from the local church and headed west on Sunday afternoon. The ten mile journey took me through impoverished lands, grazing mountain sheep and winding narrow roads. Finally, having navigated the twists and turns of the road through the hills, we arrived at a desolate spot where some fifty people were gathered by a roadside grotto that contained a statue from Medjugorje. The shrine was carved into the side of the mountain. The people had set up an altar in front of the statue and covered it with a white linen cloth and perched two candlesticks on it. A young man stood behind the altar with a large black, open umbrella. He was available to shelter me from the unpredictable passing showers of rain. I told him I had come prepared with my own umbrella. He stepped aside and allowed me to get ready for Mass.

As the readings were being read, I looked out beyond the gathering to the valley beyond us with its barren landscape and despoiled of houses. Then, there was a surprise. A rainbow arched across the sky. Maybe it was an omen, a reminder to all of us that we were participating in, celebrating our own special pot of gold in the Eucharist we were experiencing.

Following the Mass, people visited and posed for pictures to celebrate a historical gathering. Gradually, the roadside shrine area returned to its own tranquility, as people got into their cars and headed for home.

On my way home, I pondered my new found experience of having celebrated Mass at a desolate but picturesque mountain site. I began to wonder about the rationale of erecting a shrine in such an out of the way place. Then I realized that since the beginning of time, people have created their own shrines and hermitages away from the maddening crowds. They became a reminder, a way to escape from this world, even for a brief time, to connect with a deeper reality bereft of distractions.

Maybe the people who erected this remote mountainside shrine were not crazy but, instead, wished to surprise anyone who passed, of another deeper and more lasting adventure and reality.

Shrines can be as prominent as Lourdes or Fatima, drawing millions of pilgrims from around the world every year or they can be as simple and yet as profound as a shrine tucked into a bleak mountainside.

Shrines can be a makeshift of flower arrangements, message of consolation and remembrance to remember a human tragedy. Shrines can also be a simple white cross erected on the side of a highway to mark the premature death of a loved one. Shrines can be at sacred place in a home where inhabitants are connected with the eternal through some statue, prayerbook, lighted candle beckoning them to pause and pray as they pass by.

Shrines can be a bedroom, that private space where love is celebrated, life begins again and quiet moments speak volumes to the heart.

I promised the people gathered around that windswept mountain shrine that I would be happy to return again next year to celebrate with them, if they invited me. Why? Because I realized that heaven is often crammed into some out of the way spaces to remind us that as we climb the mountains of life, we can be surprised by the presence of a rainbow of hope that connects earth to heaven and the human to the divine.