

## God, Life, and Everything

### The Great Exploding Pilgrimage

Maybe I should've seen it coming. From the moment weeks ago when a colleague e-mailed me that, "This is such a great idea! I wish I could come," I should have known it was going to be a tough road ahead.

It was.

I received several notes of that sort in response to an article I had written about our May Rail Trail Pilgrimage. Lots of interest, but not many takers.

Remember the Rail Trail Pilgrimage? I've written about it before in this column. This was to be our third such two-day walk along the Dutchess Rail Trail, the Walkway Over the Hudson, and the Hudson Valley Rail Trail. Every couple of miles, we would stop and pray together.

The first two pilgrimages were inspiring. The first was a study in disaster becoming grace - bad weather, small numbers, great joy and deep reflection. The second was much larger and finished on a beautiful day with a concluding worship service that included some local teens who were curious about us.

So, there was great anticipation for last weekend's pilgrimage. Just not that many signed up. Worse yet, those who did sign up began to back out. One sprained her ankle. Another ran into a scheduling conflict. One decided their physical condition was not good enough after all.

Due to an arrangement I had made with the church where we were staying (I would conduct their Sunday morning service in exchange for letting the pilgrims spend the night) - and the fact that I had already hired someone to cover our church while I was away - there was no canceling the pilgrimage even though we were down to six pilgrims on the day of the event.

A little subdued, I figured a small group was still good - it worked beautifully the first time with just five.

But as we were getting in the car to head to the rendezvous, my cell phone started buzzing. One of the pilgrims called to say he had to back out because his father had been taken to the hospital. Entirely understandable. We prayed for him. And then, after hanging up, I sank into the car in despair. Just five?

Well, carry on - that's our motto, right?

When we arrived, one of the pilgrims informed me they could only walk the first day due to work issues. That would leave just four of us spending the night and walking on day two.

But almost from the start, we knew something wasn't right with one of the other pilgrims. An experienced and active walker, the nine miles of the first day should have been a breeze for her, but she quickly fell behind. Her sister walked with her, and we knew by mile five that it didn't look promising. By mile six, she said she would not be able to carry on once we reached the church. To her credit, she was determined to finish the first day's walk, and she did.

At that point, it was decision-making time. As the five of us reached the church where we were supposed to spend the night, we realized there would now only be two of us left - my wife and me. It seemed most appropriate to just say our concluding prayers and call it a micro-pilgrimage.

It did not end exactly then. I still was committed to celebrating the mass at that church Sunday morning. Even if I wasn't, we had already committed to our supply priest at St. James', so I couldn't back out. So the two of us returned to the church and worshipped with our hosts before doing other things than walking the way of the pilgrim.

What lessons can be taken from this experience? Believe me, I spent a lot of my time on the trail trying to sort it out. Was it the wrong time of year? Poor advertising? Just not something people really go for?

I don't know if I'll conduct another one of these pilgrimages - it'll take a lot of convincing that there's a market for it. But I can safely say that if I do, it won't be in May.

Despite all that, it was not a complete disaster. I got to try out a new backpack (carrying much more than was necessary just so I could give it a shakedown cruise). More importantly, I got time to pray. And believe me, I prayed a lot!

If, however, this failed pilgrimage reminds me of anything, it's that nothing is certain, that things falling apart does not mean the end of the world, that God's reign does not depend on our clever events or programs. God just is. And so is God's love for us.

So, my pilgrimage flew apart in what might be described as a slow explosion. Whether the pieces come back together into a new thing is anyone's guess. But the purpose, the cause - knowing God better - is always there, and that's enough.