

Understanding Pilgrimage & Best Practices for NCYC Preparation

What Is a Pilgrimage?

A pilgrimage differs from a tour in several important ways. It is a personal invitation from God—an offer from Him that requires a “yes” from the pilgrim. While God’s call may vary from person to person, the purpose of a pilgrimage remains constant: it is a summons to encounter God more deeply. A true pilgrimage is a spiritual journey to which the pilgrim freely and joyfully responds.

In past centuries, pilgrimages often involved great physical hardship. Today, modern travel makes pilgrimage more accessible, but its purpose has not changed. A pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred place, meant to draw the pilgrim closer into the presence of God. Pilgrims are called to begin this journey with joyful anticipation, willing to step away temporarily from the routines and distractions of daily life. A successful pilgrimage requires openness—leaving behind burdens, expectations, and worries, and instead seeking to grow in understanding, grace, prayer, gratitude, and trust. The hope is that pilgrims return home transformed, renewed, and restored by the blessings they received.

Adapted from “What Is a Pilgrimage Anyway?” at medjugorje.org.

Goals of a Pilgrimage

The goals of a pilgrimage—especially for youth—reflect the three goals of Catholic youth ministry found in *Renewing the Vision*:

1. To draw young people into responsible participation in the life, mission, and work of the faith community.
2. To empower young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in our world today.
3. To foster the total personal and spiritual growth of each young person.

These goals help frame NCYC not simply as an event, but as a spiritual journey.

Helpful Tips for Pilgrimage Planning

Language & Mindset:

- Use the term “pilgrimage to NCYC” rather than “trip to Indy.”
- Reflect pilgrimage language in all communication, formation, and marketing.
- Reinforce the idea that pilgrimage is about spiritual journey, not just travel or programming.
- Remember: It is about the people, not the schedule.

Chaperone Preparation:

- Provide meaningful formation and training for adult chaperones.
- Ensure adults understand their role as guides, mentors, and models of discipleship.

Organization & Flexibility:

- Be organized and prepared but remain open to the movement of the Holy Spirit—especially when plans shift.
- Develop clear expectations and guidelines for the pilgrimage with both pilgrims and chaperones.

Preparing the Pilgrims: Regular Gatherings

Because a pilgrimage is about journey, not simply arrival, schedule regular gatherings before NCYC.

Consider:

- How often will you meet? Will parents be included?
- How will you communicate that NCYC is a pilgrimage, not a field trip?
- Will each gathering include a theme? Themes can reinforce the NCYC theme or deepen the group's understanding of pilgrimage.
- How will you teach the meaning and spirituality of pilgrimage?

Pilgrimage Covenant

Have each pilgrim create a covenant with the parish that outlines:

- What the parish commits to provide (formation, prayer, support), and
- How the pilgrim commits to prepare, participate, and live out expectations as a representative of the parish on pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage Journals

Encourage pilgrims to keep journals before, during, and after NCYC.

These may be:

- Individual journals, or
- A shared group journal.

With permission, journal entries can be shared with the parish to help them experience the pilgrimage through the eyes of the youth.

Pilgrim Prayer Partners

Assign each pilgrim a peer Pilgrim Prayer Partner to pray for throughout the journey.

You may choose to:

- Reveal partners from the beginning, or
- Keep them secret until after NCYC.

Parish Prayer Partners

Invite the parish community to spiritually accompany the pilgrims through:

- A prayer list,
- Adopt-a-pilgrim prayer cards, or
- Assigning each pilgrim to a specific parishioner or family who commits to pray for them.

This reinforces that the pilgrimage belongs to the whole parish, not just the travelers.

Commissioning & Sending

Before departure:

- Have the pastor bless the pilgrims at a Sunday Mass, or
- Hold a dedicated prayer service for the pilgrims and their families.

This formal commissioning highlights the spiritual nature of the journey.

Welcoming Home

After returning:

- Give pilgrims time to reflect together and process the experience.
- Hold a reunion or sharing session so youth can tell their stories and witness to the parish.
- Help them discern how to integrate what they received at NCYC into their daily lives—especially after the emotional “high” of the pilgrimage fades.

This helps reinforce the truth: the pilgrimage doesn’t end when they get home—the transformation continues.