

With the eyes of faith

Father Julián Díez-Antoñanzas is a member of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross and is parish priest in Saragossa (Spain). Last summer, he accompanied some blind people on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He tells us some of his experiences.

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Father Julián, can a blind person benefit from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land when it seems vital to be able

to “see” the places where Jesus lived his life?

The blind also like to travel, and to “watch” movies, as they themselves say. Through sound, they can form a pretty real idea of things. They are used to bypass places that have no special significance, which is why I believe that it is easier for the blind to “connect” with the land of Jesus than for those who see, since they are not distracted by modern buildings, the cars, lampposts...

The blind feel the geography, experience the climate, and associate the natural sounds with those that our Lord heard... They know that they are in a holy place. The guides and companions describe the things to them and this helps them a lot. They touch, they feel the stones; for them the sense of touch is essential. With their imagination, they complete the picture.

Did you have problems entering the country?

The attention of the Israeli authorities was excellent from the moment we got onto the Israeli airline up to the airport. They facilitated many things and amiably accelerated the paperwork.

Christ cured several blind persons throughout his life. Did any such miracle happen during the trip?

When we reached Jerusalem, they started to joke, "Take us to the pool of Siloe, so that we can see..." The place where our Lord cured the man blind from birth was not accessible, but it shows that the blind have a great sense of humour and that they can joke about their limitation.

What is certain is that they see with the eyes of faith, and I think they have fully fulfilled their hearts desire. They returned very moved

and they all have the conviction of having “seen” the land of our Lord.

One of the pilgrims had written: In the Cenacle, we could touch the bronze relief showing the Twelve Apostles and the figure of our Lord that was on the door of the Tabernacle. Does faith need the senses?

Yes. The Incarnation and the Sacraments are the Love of God materialized so that we can touch them with our hands. Close to the Cenacle, there was a large altarpiece in bronze with the figures of the Apostles and our Lord in the Last Supper. They could also touch the grotto of the Incarnation, which was not allowed for other pilgrims. It was very impressive to see them feeling the walls of the Basilica in silence, and the star that indicated where the Word was made flesh...

They were moved to be able to wet their hands in the water of the Jordan. And also had the privilege to touch one of the most ancient olive trees in Gethsemane since the Franciscan who looked after the place allowed them into the garden on the condition that they did not break off any branches. They wrapped their arms around the century-old olive tree and were very moved. That night they stayed to adore the Blessed Sacrament for an hour before the Rock of Agony and also went for confession. It was one of the most impressive moments.

How can the spirit of Opus Dei, which is about the ordinary, be lived in a situation as extraordinary as this pilgrimage?

It is very easy to live it on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In reality, the usual is to live the norms of the plan of life and the spirit of

service, and more so with these persons. Keep in mind that the spirit of pilgrimage is also ordinary, because it is a spirit of vigilance, of conversion, of walking towards God... This can be lived in any circumstance.

What have you learnt from these blind persons?

To look at things with greater depth, to contemplate, to capture aspects that the hustle and bustle of life may impede us from seeing with clarity. They perceive with their whole being, because when you do not see with the eyes, you exert the effort with the rest of your being.

Besides, they are very organized: they have to have everything in its place. And they are punctual, which makes the pilgrimage easier. Ten minutes before the appointed time, they are all ready.

They preferred to forego the comforts of a hotel so as to be in the residences offered by the Franciscans, which was closer to the sacred places, so that they could spend their free time (always accompanied) in these places. And their cheerfulness and sense of humour is contagious. They bubble over with joy!

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