

The Founding and Growth of the Pilgrimage Foundation



It's no small task to start a foundation. But when your objective is to provide opportunities for Malades and Caregivers to make pilgrimages that lift them up, both physically and spiritually, you must have faith that the Holy Spirit will guide you.

Faith, along with tenacity, commitment, and a lot of hard work, are the qualities F.J. McCarthy, KMOB, and Deacon John Powers, KM, brought to the start of The Order of Malta Pilgrimage Foundation in 2014. The Foundation's purpose is to attract financial support so that Malades and their Caregivers can attend, in perpetuity, the annual pilgrimage to Lourdes as well as other pilgrimages through the Order of Malta, American Association, without having to worry about the cost.

Both F.J. and Deacon John have completed two three-year terms on the foundation board, F.J. as President and Deacon John as Secretary, and are required now, by the bylaws to step down. In recognition of their service, this article looks at how the Foundation was started, and the inroads F.J., Deacon John, and other members of the Order of Malta have made toward fulfilling the Foundation's mission of caring for Malades and Caregivers.

THE FOUNDATION

"It was really the brainchild of Deacon John," F.J. said. "He reached out to Jack Pohrer, GCM, then President of the American Association, who asked if I would be willing to serve as the first President of the Foundation." Deacon John, who at that time had already been on 10 Lourdes Pilgrimages, said, "F.J.'s name was the first name that popped up in my head. I knew he had the grit, the experience, and the organization to be the first leader of the Foundation."

Malades and their Caregivers have always made the pilgrimage to Lourdes with no charge to themselves, thanks to the generosity each year from many members of the Order of Malta, and even through gifts from past Malades and Caregivers. The Foundation was created to provide a more formal mechanism that would allow the Order to preserve that tradition, and to ensure its long-term viability. "John and I sat down over many meetings with outside counsel to form the corporation, to establish the bylaws, and then to identify board members to serve with us who shared our love and devotion to the pilgrimage," F.J. said.

They found that devotion with Cissie Ix and Charlotte Williams, the first board members. Cissie, along with other members including Ann Peabody; Hope Carter; and F.J.'s mother, Pat McCarthy, had been instrumental in establishing the American Association's Pilgrimage to Lourdes. When Jack Pohrer finished his term as President of the American Association, he also agreed to serve on the Foundation's board.

With a few leadership gifts to get started, the Foundation worked with a special division of Merrill (formerly Merrill Lynch) that focuses on Catholic investment options. The management of funds conforms to guidelines for socially responsible investments in accordance with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

A LOVE OF THE PILGRIMAGE

Both F.J. and Deacon John have a deep love of the Lourdes Pilgrimage. F.J. said he was hooked after his first trip to Lourdes. "You want to give and give. And the more you give, the more you grow spiritually," he said. Initially, he became a member of the security team, directing traffic, helping return voitures, and checking for any obstacles that could impede the movement of the Malades. "I was there to serve, and to do what I was asked to do."





He describes one instance with a brother and sister on the trip. The brother was deaf, nonverbal, and living with multiple sclerosis. “I had returned from a very early morning run when the elevator opened, and there was the sister. She said, ‘F.J., I need your help. My brother is on the floor, and I cannot get him up.’ We were able to get him back into his electric wheelchair, ready for the day, and in line for the procession in a timely fashion.”

One could say the Order of Malta has always been a part of Deacon John’s life. Ancestors of his had been members of the Order in Bohemia and Austria for a couple of centuries. It was on a visit to Lourdes that John heard the call to become a deacon. “I was praying at the grotto,” he said. “It was late at night, and I was about to turn 50. I was asking our Lord and our Lady to guide me into the later part of my life, and I heard a person behind me say in French, ‘I’m thinking of becoming a deacon.’ I turned around, and there was nobody there. I found my vocation at the grotto.”

A SACRED JOURNEY TO A SACRED SITE

If you’re wondering how to prepare for a pilgrimage yourself, Deacon John has some advice. He outlines three requisites that he believes constitute an authentic pilgrimage:

- A belief that God lovingly responds to our prayers;
- The conviction that Emmanuel, defined as “God is with us”, makes himself present to us through the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints, such as St. Bernadette, at holy sites;
- That every pilgrimage comes out of a desire and a need to make a sacred journey to a sacred site.

TODAY

While F.J. and Deacon John are stepping down from the Foundation’s leadership, they continue to find ways to serve their faith. Deacon John is looking forward to returning to Lourdes after the pandemic has stopped the pilgrimage for three years. “I think a lot of people are very eager to get back to the pilgrimage,” he said. “That one week in Lourdes is very important to our spiritual life.”

F.J. recently prepared for and became a Knight of Obedience. “Some people mistakenly look at the Second Class as a promotion,” he said. “But if one approaches it properly, one demotes oneself to become humbler and more committed to a deeper spiritual life and a greater sense of service.”

With F.J. and Deacon John leaving the board, fellow board members, Craig Gibson, KM, will become President, and Nancy Gibson, DM, Vice President. “The Foundation is on excellent footing. We couldn’t be in a better position to advance the mission further,” Craig said. “Not only did F.J. and Deacon John put in the tremendous effort it took to establish the Foundation, but they also have grown it significantly.” Today, between returns from investments and contributions from the capital campaign, the Foundation has assets of close to four million dollars.

Dr. Peter J. Kelly, GCM, President of the American Association, said F.J.’s and Deacon John’s work establishing the Foundation will bring benefits for many years to come. “Our members have been very generous through the years, making it possible for so many Malades and Caregivers to experience the joy of Lourdes,” he said. “We are eternally grateful. The Order of Malta Pilgrimage Foundation formalizes that support, providing a lasting structure that further facilitates our ability to serve those who are ill, and in need through our pilgrimage.”