

Pilgrimage for Life

“With Every Woman, For Every Child”

I and four other Michigan Knights and Dames recently returned from the 2024 Malta Pilgrimage for Life, which culminated with the March For Life, the theme of which this year was “With Every Woman, For Every Child”. Forgive me if this sounds like hyperbole, but the experience was mind-blowing. You might be surprised to hear that coming from somebody with the emotional and spiritual depth of a frisbee, but I cannot say enough about the experience and I highly encourage all of our Michigan Dames, Knights, Chaplains, Auxiliary, and Members in Formation to consider participating in this fantastic event next year. You will not be disappointed.

Please indulge me for a moment as I share with you a (not so brief) reflection on this time spent together in prayer, reflection and pilgrimage with our brothers and sisters from the American Association and the Federal Association, and the many, many kindred spirit who joined us physically in Washington and prayerfully from all over the world in support of women and children yearning for LIFE!

As you know, we have three annual pilgrimages in the American Association - Lourdes, France; Champion, Wisconsin; and the Pilgrimage for Life to Washington, DC. As I am a relatively new Knight who was invested during the pandemic period, I had never joined with my fellow Knights and Dames to participate in one of these pilgrimages. But having now participated in the Pilgrimage for Life, I can assure you that it was such an incredible experience that I truly hope that you will all prayerfully consider joining in one of these pilgrimages at your next opportunity.

Before I share with you some specifics, I think it is important to make clear that the Malta Pilgrimage for Life is not the March for Life. While on the Pilgrimage we do participate in the March, and the March is certainly an important part of the Pilgrimage, I think it is important to think of the two as separate events. This is admittedly an oversimplification, but in many ways, the March is really a political event, while the Pilgrimage is essentially a spiritual event. The March takes place in Washington, DC, politicians participate (this year, Speaker of the House Johnson gave a speech at the kickoff rally), celebrities appear (perhaps to the Michigan Area, the most notable this year being Jim Harbaugh), the event is covered by the media, one of its main focuses is to promote public policy change in promotion of Pro-Life causes, etc. And these are all good things, but you can see that the March has a political atmosphere surrounding it.

But the Order of Malta is not a political organization, and our Pilgrimage is not a political event. We are coached by our leaders not to engage politically with journalists or activists that are there to protest this event. Rather, we remember that we are there as pilgrims to pray, to remember those tragically affected by abortion, to Defend the Faith and to Serve our Lords, the poor and the sick through our prayers, thoughts, and actions. As such, the activities before the March, in which in fellowship with Knights and Dames from all over the country we prayerfully center ourselves with our Lord in order to spiritually advocate

for the mothers and babies who are at the forefront of this battle for Life, are arguably more important than the actual March.

Day 1

We started our Pilgrimage by traveling together from downtown Washington to the Washington Retreat House of the Franciscan Sisters of Atonement (washingtonretreathouse.org). There we were led by Katy Feeney (www.katyfeeney.com), an incredibly talented harpist, in a beautiful musical and spiritual reflection on the Seven Sorrows of Mary (www.ncregister.com/blog/what-are-the-seven-sorrows-of-mary), where we would listen to a brief reflection on each of the Seven Sorrows and then meditate on each such sorrow while Katy played her harp and sang hymns related to the sorrows.

This was just the perfect introduction to help remember what a retreat or a pilgrimage is all about. For me personally, I started this Pilgrimage by sitting in the airport having a very difficult board meeting, followed the next morning by my usual need to do my job (though on vacation) via distance “thanks to” the invention of the smart phone, as well as some membership-related meetings for the Order. I don’t have to tell you in 2023 how difficult it can be to disconnect from the world. It wasn’t until I sat down in the chapel of the retreat house, and started to listen to Katy’s words and to hear her fingers pluck the harp strings that I started to leave behind the distractions behind and start to focus and center myself on our Lord, his Blessed Mother, and the women and children who we were dedicating our prayers to during this pilgrimage.

If you think that Katy Feeney’s harp was a tough act to follow, you’d be right, but then Sr. Antoniana Maria, SV of the Sisters of Life stepped forward and took us to the next level with a reflection and rosary related to Our Lady and the issues of Life. Sister Antoniana Maria’s slight figure and bright smile belied her fierce energy and strong words with respect to the evils that we face in society today. But she would not let us get dejected about the electoral setbacks in our country since the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, or our greater society’s embrace of vice, out-of-wedlock conceptions, divorce, abortion, not-properly-ordered relationships, and some of the other cultural issues that plague us. Rather, she reminded us all to “be not afraid,” and that it is the evil one who is afraid of Mary, that she is the general that stands on the head of the serpent, and that we are her army, outfitted with the weapon of the rosary to ward off the attacks against what we know to be good and right and true. She encouraged us to pray the rosary, to pray it every day, to pray it together with our family (as it is much powerful in groups) and then she led us in the rosary herself.

We then shared lunch with the Sisters of Life and learned a little bit about their work in Washington and beyond, and the young women that they are helping. The Michigan Delegation then took the opportunity to visit the Saint John Paul II National Shrine (www.jp2shrine.org/) where we venerated the relics of Saint John Paul II and the Blessed Ulma Family (www.kofc.org/en/news-room/knightline/2024/family-of-martyrs.html). This was a fitting visit during the Pilgrimage for Life because Blessed Wiktoria Ulma, the matriarch of the family, was with child at the time of her martyrdom and eyewitnesses said that she went into labor and began to give birth to her seventh child

just before her death. Saint John Paul the Great, PRAY FOR US. Blessed Ulma Family, PRAY FOR US.

We then made our way to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception (www.nationalshrine.org/) for the Opening Mass for the National Prayer Vigil for Life. From looking at our itinerary, this was a part of the Pilgrimage that I was mistakenly dreading. In order to secure good seats, we were arriving three hours before the mass. I could not imagine what we were going to do for three hours. Well, this turned out to be a blessing in disguise. First of all, it was a blessing to be able to spend this time in such a sacred place. Though I have been to the Basilica many, many times (I lived just down the street from it while I was a Washington intern), there is always something new to discover when you are there. For me, in this case, I discovered a little nook and cranny in the Crypt Church, an oratory with a breathtaking gold mosaic reproduction of *Madonna Ta'Pinu* (www.nationalshrine.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/13-Our-Lady-of-TaPinu-Oratory-674x1024.jpg) from Malta. As beautiful as the picture that I just linked to is, it pales in comparison with the actual mosaic.

While the Basilica and its mosaic tile work is simply stunning, the true beauty in this time of waiting was seeing all of the Catholics, and in particular young Catholics, in this sacred space, receiving the sacrament of reconciliation (there were at least 20 priests hearing confessions, some of whom at times had more than ten pilgrims waiting in line to confess), breaking into spontaneous rosary groups with strangers, praying before the tabernacle in the Crypt Church, and otherwise preparing themselves spiritually for the National Prayer Vigil for Life. Perhaps the most touching to me, as the father of an ROTC cadet, was seeing all of the West Point Cadets and Annapolis Middies in their dress uniforms and on their knees throughout the two floors of the Basilica worship space. It evoked for me the words that I had just heard from Sr. Antoniana Maria – the evil one is afraid of Mary, Mary is our general, we are her army, and prayer is our weapon.

And then there was the mass, with an overflow crowd in the largest church building in the United States. For the past ten years, the USCCB has given the pilgrims of the Order of Malta the privilege and honor of escorting and assisting the disabled at the mass, in furtherance of our charism to care for our Lords, the sick and the poor. Celebrated by Bishop Michael Burbridge, the Chairman of the USCCB Committee on Pro-Life Activities, and con-celebrated by more than a hundred of his brother priests, including Cardinal Gregory from Washington; Cardinal O'Malley from Boston (a Chaplain of the Order of Malta); and Cardinal Pierre, the Apostolic Nuncio to the US. Bishop Burbridge reminded us that we must bring light to the darkest corners to expose the evils of abortion, and that every life is worth saving and every aborted child bears the face of Christ Jesus. Political views change, public opinion shifts, but the truth will not change and thus we must keep Christ and Christ's truth – the truth – at the center of all that we do, as that is how we will win minds and convert hearts.

Dinner that evening also brought a surprise, or a series of surprises, as different priests, brothers, and sisters joined us in fellowship to share a beautiful meal together. Perhaps the

biggest surprise of all was that Jeanne Mancini and Tom Harrington, the President and the Vice Chair, respectively, of the March for Life joined us for dinner. With all of the people and groups at this pilgrimage, what a great honor it was for us that they chose to spend this time with the delegation from the Order of Malta.

The most important part of the meals however was just spending time with our brothers and sisters from other parts of the American Association. I had great conversations with Knights and Dames who I had never met before from Florida, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, and New York, in addition to our brothers and sisters from Michigan – Robert & Barbara Wilson and Jim & Cathy Nowka. We did not speak about everyday trivial matters or our jobs, but about the important things, our families, our friends, and our shared faith. The time spent with these Knights and Dames was truly special and served to remind us that we are not alone, that in this faith journey there are many fellow travelers working their way to Christ alongside us, and in particular, as members of a Catholic lay religious order, these people are praying for us and for our sanctification, just as we are for them.

Day 2

The second day of the pilgrimage started off with an intimate mass at St. Patrick's downtown (www.saintpatrickdc.org/) just for the Members of the Order, celebrated by his Excellency Kevin Sweeney, Bishop of the Diocese of Paterson, New Jersey. Bishop Sweeney has been attending the March almost since its inception fifty years ago, and he regaled us with stories of his younger years and some of his mentor priests (like his Eminence, John Cardinal O'Connor) and their participation in the March in its early days, including seminarian pilgrims sleeping on floors in parishes like St. Patrick's so that they could participate in the March.

He reminded us that as Catholic Americans we have a duty to bring our faith to the public square, not to impose it but to share it – to share the Truth in order to help bring our brothers and sisters to the Lord. Bishop Sweeney shared with us about how uplifting it is to be around today's youth, what he called "the Pro-Life Generation", a term that we would see over and over again throughout the course of the day (usually on signs held by the thousands and thousands of young people who actually make up that generation). He pointed out to us that the *Dobbs* decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade* was handed down on June 24, 2022, the date of the Solemnity of the Birth of Saint John the Baptist (the Patron of the Order!), which due to an anomaly of the 2022 Easter calendar, also happened to be the date of the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Bishop Sweeney said that was so fitting, because it reminds us of the pregnancies and births of John and Jesus. If Mary and Elizabeth would have been pregnant with Jesus and John in our modern day, one a virgin in her teens, the other an older, seemingly barren woman supposedly beyond her child birthing years, we would call these "crisis" pregnancies. So how fitting was it that such an important legal decision for the Right to Life would be handed down on that day.

He ended by telling us the story of another one of his mentors as a young priest, Msgr. Philip Reilly, founder of the Helpers of God's Precious Infants, and the impact that Msgr.

Reilly's movement, including all of the abortion clinics that have closed, not due to violent protest or politics, but because the thousands of volunteers praying peacefully outside of those clinics and offering help to the mothers who would otherwise be going to the clinics. He reminded us to always love and pray for both the mother and the child, reminding us that in some cases, that may be the only love that a unwanted child may experience in his or her tragically short life, and finishing his homily with the end of the Gospel reading from the mass: "Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me" (Matthew 25:45).

Following breakfast at the historic Army and Navy Club (www.armynavyclub.org), we headed to the National Mall to position ourselves for the March. We had a very prominent slot at the beginning of the March... until we didn't. It was amazing the mass of humanity and people were constantly cutting in front and wedging themselves into the throng (albeit in a mostly polite way). Polite or not, we went from being roughly third in line to further back, but still in the beginning. If you look at this video (twitter.com/Michigan_Malta/status/1748737421447958976), the Malta delegation appears in the 17th second of the minute-and-a-half video.

I should mention that it was roughly 30 degrees Fahrenheit and snowing constantly. Luckily there was no wind, but our feet were intimately experiencing the slushy cold of a real march (especially those of us rookies in wingtips – I was not the only one!). We marched together with our red scarves and the Dames' red berets. One of our Knights led our procession with the Order's eight-pointed star flag, followed by a group of Dames that were carrying a banner reading "Our Lady of Philermos, Pray for Us", followed by the guest of honor, our icon of Our Lady. The icon is large and was carried by four of us at a time, with carriers stepping out and being subbed when they needed a break. I had the honor of being one of the carriers, and the sore shoulder, tired arms, and cold, wet feet were small prices to pay for the honor of escorting our patroness in the March.

I mentioned at the outset that my two high school sons were at the March. As we were marching, I ran into one, a freshman who, with a bunch of his classmates, was searching for Coach Harbaugh, who I later learned was marching not very far in front of the Malta delegation with a group of Chaldean marchers. I did not see my other high school son, or my college son, but the three of them were able to rendezvous at the end of the March (twitter.com/Michigan_Malta/status/1748779258749604111). I will have to send this picture to Bishop Sweeney so he can see another example of the Pro-Life Generation.

For a brief period, we were joined on the March by Cardinal O'Malley as we slogged through the cold, wet streets of our nation's capital. As the March approached the Supreme Court, the Malta delegation broke off to sing hymns and pray the rosary, led by Fr. Philip-Michael Tangorra, a Chaplain from the New Jersey Area. I had the pleasure of sitting next to Fr. Phil at one lunch and one dinner, and it was an absolute pleasure learning the intricacies of New Jersey politics from him, along with experiencing his lively sense of humor and thick Joisey accent. He was with us every single step of our pilgrimage, on both Thursday and Friday. We were also joined at dinner Thursday and all-day Friday by Frs. Al and Nick, and Brs. Daniel, Anthony and Zachary, of the Red Bank Oratory of Saint Philip

Neri in Red Bank, New Jersey. These men and their presence, spirit and encouragement were a welcome gift to our community on this Pilgrimage.

According to Jim Knowka's pedometer, the March was roughly 7,500 steps. I marched the entire way with the weight of 1/4 of the icon of the Our Lady of Philermos on my shoulder, and with feet that were cold and wet from the slushy mess that destroyed my wing tips. But honestly, I felt like I had winged feet and was carrying a pillow. The joy in our hearts from our cause, our prayers, and our fellowship (and my personal joy from knowing that I had three sons there sharing this experience with me, even if from a distance) – well, the cold of the snow and the weight of the icon were no match for that euphoria.

We ended with lunch and more fellowship at the Capitol Hill Club. Again, different priests, brothers, and sisters who we had met along the way joined up at different times, including the postulants and their superiors from the Sisters of Life, thirteen of whom were able to break bread (and warm up) with us after the long March. An Auxiliary from the Federal Association who is in formation to become a fully-vested Knight joined us at our table and regaled us with stories, first from his experience as a cowboy growing up in rural East Texas, and then with his current experience as a STEM teacher in an urban public school near RFK Stadium in post-pandemic DC. It was not clear which of these experiences was more like the wild west. Thus ended our last bit of fellowship with our brother and sister Knights and Dames before we all started to peel off and head back to our homes.

I would be remiss if I did not mention Nancy Graebe, DM. Nancy and her husband, Dr. Bob Graebe, KM, are from the New Jersey Area. Nancy put in, and has put in over a number of years, an incredible amount of work to organize the Pilgrimage, get it recognized as an official pilgrimage by the Order leadership in Rome, build relationships with the groups in Washington like March for Life organization and the Sisters for Life, handle all of our logistics, and just generally do all of the little things without which you cannot have an event like our Pilgrimage. So, a huge thank you to Nancy from the Michigan Area and all of the American Association for her work in organizing the Pilgrimage.

As I said at the beginning, the experience was mind-blowing, and I highly encourage all of you to consider participating in this fantastic event next year. And if not this event, then Lourdes or Champion. They are all different, but what they all share in common is a reminder that in this world which is constantly telling us “me, Me, ME!”, that we are instead striving to be “forgetful of myself”, as we work toward a greater mission, specifically defending the faith and serving our Lords, the poor and the sick, and working toward the sanctification of ourselves and our brothers and sisters in the Order.

Blessings,
Andy Smith, KM
Michigan Area Chair