Youth and Young Adult Group Lesson Plan

We are pleased that you are planning to join us for our annual Benedictine Hills Pilgrimage on Saturday, October 18, 2014, beginning at 12 noon CDT. To assist your youth or young adult group in planning for the event, we are offering a lesson plan on the idea of Pilgrimage in our Catholic, Christian tradition. The lesson plan includes an instruction component to be offered by the group leader followed by some suggested activities and discussion questions for follow-up. We hope you find these helpful.

I. Prayer, including a reading of Psalm 121

II. Instruction on Pilgrimages by the group leader (may include, but need not be limited to the following information):

History
The idea of pilgrimage is an ancient one belonging to nearly every faith tradition, including Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and certainly Christianity. Pilgrimages are journeys taken for spiritual purposes to destinations that have special meaning within that faith tradition. Pilgrimage destinations are often the birth or final resting places of important religious figures, places of important spiritual events, or centers of faith. In the Catholic tradition, pilgrimages to the Holy Land and to the Vatican are customary, as are pilgrimages to churches or towns that hold sacred relics. The Middle Ages saw a great rise in the popularity of pilgrimages. Among the most important pilgrimage destinations were: Vezelay (France), where the abbey church holds the relics of St. Mary Magdalene; the Cathedral at Chartres (France) with its relic of the Virgin Mary’s veil; and the Cathedral at Cologne (Germany) with its magnificent reliquary containing the bodies of the three kings. Probably the most famous and important pilgrimage dating from medieval times is the “Camino Santiago de Compostela” or the way of St. James to Compostela in Spain. This pilgrimage, which traditionally begins in France, leads the pilgrim hundreds of miles across France and Spain to the town of Compostela, where St. James reportedly died and...
where his remains are enshrined in the Cathedral. The “Camino” continues to be a popular pilgrimage to this day and thousands of pilgrims walk part or the whole way to Compostela each year. The journey can take several weeks and even months to walk. The scallop shell has become the symbol of the pilgrim, taken from the Compostela tradition. Legend has it that St. James was lost at sea on his way to Spain, only to be washed up on the shore at Compostela, his body covered and adorned with scallop shells.

Meaning of Pilgrimage
The pilgrimage is a metaphor for one’s journey in life and faith. On the road, pilgrims encounter many of life’s and faith’s lessons in a condensed amount of time: the experiences of solitude and community, the feelings of joy, struggle, pleasure and pain. On the road, pilgrims also experience challenges, self-doubts, reliance on God and, above all, the consolations that come with God’s mercy and providence. Pilgrims experience the mystical body of Christ as they learn to trust and rely on fellow pilgrims along the way. Pilgrimages often make their journeys with the hope of solving a particular problem or working through an internal struggle along the way. Many others make their pilgrimage with a special petition or intention in their hearts – the health of a loved one, the healing of a relationship, the need for a special favor from God. The walk becomes an occasion for prayer, but also a prayer itself.

Pilgrimages Long and Short
Some pilgrimages can last weeks or months, in the case of the Camino to Compostela, while others can last hours or even less than an hour. Labyrinths – sort of like mazes, but without dead ends and definite endpoints – were designed to be little pilgrimages of sorts: ways that someone could take a meditative journey in a short amount of time. Perhaps the most famous of these Labyrinths is in the floor of the Cathedral at Chartres, making the cathedral both the destination of a lengthier pilgrimage and the home of a much briefer pilgrim experience.

III. Group Activities to prepare for the Benedictine Hills Youth Pilgrimage

1. Ask individual youth group members to come up with a personal intention they would like to pray for during their pilgrimage walk.
2. Work on a “standard” or banner for the group to carry on the pilgrimage and to be carried in procession into the abbey church at Vespers.
3. While working together on the banner, or in a separate discussion, ask the group to agree on a collective intention they would like to pray for on the pilgrimage, for example: a. a particular family in the parish going through a difficult time b. a member of the youth group who is struggling with an illness c. someone in their communities who has just lost a parent, spouse, or child.
4. Decide on and learn a song/prayer/hymn to be sung or recited together on the way.

IV. Agree to discuss the experience at the first group meeting following the pilgrimage. Some possible questions for group discussions follow:
1. Overall, how did you like the experience of the pilgrimage?
2. What was your experience of sharing the pilgrimage with young people from lots of different places and communities?
3. What was the highlight of the day for you?
4. Did you meet anyone interesting that you hadn’t known before?
5. What was your experience of prayer like during the day?
6. Are there any ways that you are a different person now than before you made the pilgrimage?