

Send in the crowds



If I had a penny for every time my spiritual director over the years has told me “all things Christ,” I would be a very rich woman indeed. Even after all the years of meeting for spiritual guidance, our sessions inevitably end up with him reminding me to keep my eyes on Christ, who is the “leader and perfecter of faith” (Heb 12:2).

It’s not that he is trying to minimize any particular struggle or question I might be facing. It’s just that he is helping me to grow closer to Christ no matter what my circumstances by helping me to see that, in the end, it’s all about Jesus.

My spiritual director’s regular short but poignant words of wisdom hit me smack between the eyes and in the depths of my heart and soul during a recent pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I’ve had the privilege of walking in the footsteps of Christ many times. But this time it was different, and it had to do directly with the way I was feeling about the abuse crisis in the Church.

Like many Catholics trying to be faithful, I was feeling a bit overwhelmed and somewhat worn out. I knew I needed to go back to Galilee, Bethlehem and Jerusalem to take a step back and look at the big picture. I needed to remind myself of where we came from as a Church founded by Christ in the region of Caesarea Philippi. I needed to once again stand at the foot of what once was a pagan temple to the false god Pan; the area where Jesus brought the apostles and asked the famous “who do you say that I am” question as he proceeded to tell them that he was the true shepherd who came to build the one true Church.

And while the many stops we made on this pilgrimage to the various places where Jesus preached, lived and performed countless miracles were extremely meaningful, I was touched

even more deeply by something that is normally a major turn-off.

At the end of our two weeks of Middle East travel, the throngs of people had the most powerful impact. It seems odd, I know. Who wants to push their way through crowds of people anywhere? Why would the crowds in the Holy Land be viewed positively in the slightest way when one pays a lot of money and travels thousands of miles to get closer to Christ by getting as close as humanly possible to the places he actually touched? It should have just the opposite effect. But for me it was just what I needed with Lent about to begin.

February, after all, is supposed to be the off-season for the Holy Land. It's an ideal time to go, as the weather is very comfortable and the crowds are smaller, or so we thought. More importantly, we were in the Holy Land in the middle of the ongoing abuse crisis. Yet the crowds were just as large as the high seasons of spring and fall.

Despite the fact that the crisis is ongoing in the Catholic Church, and despite the fact that our brothers and sisters in the Baptist faith recently were made aware of similar problems in their own places of worship, many showed up and are showing up in droves to the land of Jesus. Christians from a variety of churches were longing to get as close to Jesus as possible, remembering that no matter what happens in the Body of Christ or in the world, that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb 13:8).

As I watched the long lines develop, I heard not only the words of my spiritual director but the words of St. Teresa of Calcutta who always was able to help us remember that, in the end, it's all about Jesus. She said we shouldn't worry about what other people think or do because it was "never between us and them." In the end, it's between us and God. So, send in the crowds.

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