

Special places that deepen discipleship

Many of us take holidays away from daily life to join others on pilgrimages and at festivals. These trips can be life-changing

IT was one of the most intense experiences of the presence of God that Jane Gates has ever had – and it happened in a place with a 1,000-year-old history of such things.

Jane was on a pilgrimage to **the Shrine of Our Lady, Walsingham**, with a group from the Church of the Holy Spirit, Southsea. A simple conversation with a priest helped her to realise that she met God most fully in the Eucharist. It suddenly helped to clarify her faith, and gave her a gift she'd not previously had – to sit still for hours in silent contemplation.

Jane has visited Walsingham many times since then, sometimes with parish trips and sometimes by herself. Like many of us, her faith has deepened when she has been away from the day-to-day, and devoted time to focus on the spiritual as part of a community of believers.

That's why places with a spiritual heritage, such as the Iona Community in Scotland or the Taizé Community in France, are important. That's why people choose to walk the Camino de Santiago in Spain or visit the Holy Land. And it's why we spend our holidays at Christian festivals such as New Wine United, Greenbelt, the Big Church Day Out (now the Big Church Festival), Keswick Convention or Spring Harvest.

"I believe that the Shrine is one of



Pilgrims from Church of the Holy Spirit, Southsea, Church of the Ascension, North End, St Saviour's, Stamshaw, and St Saviour's, Shanklin, on last year's pilgrimage to Walsingham in Norfolk

those 'thin places', where the line between heaven and earth is quite blurred," said Jane. "Wonderful things happen to people while they are there, and you can observe God at work in a way you don't so obviously when you're at home."

'It dawned on me that I find God in the Eucharist - in the bread and wine'

Jane was a fairly new Christian in her 30s when she first visited Walsingham, in Norfolk, with a previous parish. She was keen to experience new ways of prayer and worship, and was blown away by its beauty and spirituality. She moved closer to this area and now visits

annually with a group from the Church of the Holy Spirit.

The village of Walsingham in Norfolk became a place of pilgrimage in 1061, when the widow of the lord of the manor had a vision of the Virgin Mary. The Shrine was destroyed by Henry VIII in 1538, but restored in 1922 by the then Anglican vicar of Walsingham, who created a beautiful image of Our Lady in his church. A century later, thousands of pilgrims still flock there throughout the year.

The Anglican Shrine includes residential accommodation, a refectory, meeting rooms, an open-air Stations of the Cross, beautiful gardens and the Holy House itself, where the image of Our Lady is surrounded by a gold and coloured reredos. There is also a Roman

Bishop launches annual trip to Taizé

BISHOP Jonathan's faith and discipleship has been shaped by regular pilgrimages to the Taizé Community – so it's no surprise he wants others to visit too.

He's preparing to take a group of 18-30 year olds there this summer for a life-changing encounter with the Holy Spirit.

They'll experience its unique worship style, an authentic sense of community with others from across the world, and intensive Bible study on the Diocesan Pilgrimage from July 15-23.

The Taizé Community was founded as an ecumenical monastic community in southern France in 1940. It includes more than 100 Protestant and Catholic brothers from countries across the globe. Tens of thousands of pilgrims of all denominations, many of them young people, visit each year.

Bishop Jonathan said: "I see a pilgrimage to Taizé as one strand of a multi-faceted approach to enabling discipleship of our young people. Over the years, I've taken groups of young people there, usually on an annual basis.

"I've found the combination of community with people from across Europe, shared space to explore faith, a regular pattern of worship, small group Bible



Young people flock to the ecumenical Taizé Community in France

studies and an opportunity for practical service has provided an experience in which Jesus is heard and encountered.

"I believe the Holy Spirit called me to this diocese, and Taizé is part of my spirituality, part of how I've been shaped as a disciple of Christ. It has been a gift from God for my life, and my hope is to make that gift available for a new generation.

"I've seen so many other young people transformed by this

experience. I asked one of the Brothers to describe Taizé and he said their calling is to stay there and through prayer create a space for the Holy Spirit to work."

He hopes the trip becomes an annual event. This July, there's spaces for 48 young people, who would travel by ferry and coach. Each would contribute £100, which would cover all travel, food and accommodation. Find out more on www.portsmouth.anglican.org/taize

Catholic Shrine a mile away, and pilgrims often walk the 'holy mile' between the two.

"One of the important things is the journey to Walsingham," said Jane. "If you go with a parish group, such as Church of the Holy Spirit, you travel together on a minibus and you get to know others on the journey. You'll be living in community with them, and you may be sharing quite personal spiritual experiences with them.

"There are various set liturgies and services during the few days you are there, and your parish will decide which to take part in. For instance, there is a sprinkling well which is said to have healing properties, a candlelit procession at night, and also the Holy House, where you might go and say prayers. And

there are set mealtimes when you meet others and their stories of faith might shine a light on yours.

"I had an intense experience back in 2006 which changed my life and established my faith. There was a Eucharist with the laying on of hands and prayer afterwards and I took up the offer of confession. It was actually with Fr Philip North, who was then the Shrine priest and will be the next Bishop of Blackburn. He just asked me: "Where do you most find God?" It dawned on me that I find God mostly in the Eucharist, in the bread and wine.

"When I woke up the next morning, ideas and beliefs I'd struggled with before became so much clearer. I was reading the Bible non-stop, desperate to have religious music,

and the colours of the world just seemed more intense. It led me to an ability that I hadn't had before, which is to sit still in silent contemplation for hours. I'd always been a 'do-er', so to just 'be' in God's presence was something different for me.

"I did speak to an archdeacon, as I wasn't sure if this was a genuine experience, but I was reassured that this was normal! I was also told that I wouldn't feel this kind of intense experience all the time, which is true. But this kind of experience does give you strength to get through difficult times."

Jane was one of around 40 people who went to Walsingham last July as part of the annual pilgrimage from Church of the Holy Spirit. Last summer, they joined up with others