

# A PILGRIM Road IN 1987

Padre Pio, ARCHANGEL MICHAEL & Medjugorje



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## From Rome to Bari, but plans thwarted.

It is June 1987 and I was close to the end of my seven years of priestly studies in Rome, I dallied with the thought of popping over to the former Yugoslavia, to the pilgrimage village of Medjugorje (pronounced Med-you-gor-jah) in Bosnia-Hertzgovnia, which was at that time part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Mary, the Mary the mother of Jesus, known as Our Lady by Catholics, was said to be appearing daily in Medjugorje to a group of local young people. Another student from my college had made a trip there a few summers previously and I realised that the same option was open to me. Pope John Paul II had just opened the Marian Year to honour Mary the mother Jesus, so it seemed appropriate to seize the opportunity. Two factors prevented other students from coming with me: 1 - Too many exams, 2 - Not enough cash. I had the time. Did I have the money? Yah, maybe.

I left Rome on June 8 on board the Monday overnight train towards Bari on Italy's east coast, sharing an overnight couchette with a middle-aged French couple. After politely acknowledging each other's existence we settled down to a comfortable night's sleep. Arriving at Bari on Tuesday June 9 on the Adriatic sea the next morning I dashed from the train to find the bus stop to the ferry port, I caught the bus with relief and rushed to the ferry booking office.

Funny how quiet and deserted it was. Why? A kindly cleaning lady explained that I seemed to have misread the timetable. Anyway, she added, there was a cancellation.

"Don't worry dear, come back tomorrow night. There's sure to be a crossing then".

Great. The best part of two days to play with, and no particular place to go.

I learned over many years in Italy: 'If in doubt, have a cappuccino and visit the local Duomo', the Cathedral. I headed off towards but as soon as I put my best foot forward I was hit by a toilet roll from an apartment high above. Not everybody loves clergy. Less intimidating than boiling oil, yes, but in my jaded frame of mind, my ears filled with incomprehensible Bari dialect abuse, things were not looking too optimistic.

Feeling disconsolate, my mood changed when I entered the Basilica of Saint Nicholas. I made my way down to the crypt weary and unshaven with my rucksack, and I settled down in front of the original Santa Claus' tomb to say my morning prayers. The solitude was broken by the sound of an aged religious brother pottering to and fro around the crypt, setting up for Mass. I followed him into the sacristy and asked him if I could concelebrate. Without hesitation he concurred. It was such a gift to be able to celebrate Mass at this beautiful shrine, and I soon felt much better.

Before leaving I learnt from another brother that Prince Charles of the UK and his wife Diana had visited the Basilica the year before. The Dominican Community proudly celebrated them in a booklet produced to mark the occasion.

Back at the railway station I bought a local map and noticed that Foggia was only two hours away by train, and it was very close to San Giovanni Rotondo and Monte Saint' Angelo, two very popular places of pilgrimage for devotees of the revered Padre Pio and the Archangel St Michael. I could think of no better way of passing the remaining time before tomorrow's ferry, and I had wanted to visit both locations before leaving Italy. I bought a ticket, caught the train, and soon found myself waiting in Foggia for a connecting bus to San Giovanni Rotondo.

## **Off to San Giovanni Rotondo, and the friends of Padre Pio.**

As I stood there in the sunshine at the bus stop I noticed a youngish, thin-faced and intense young man was also bound towards San Giovanni. Presuming he was a seminarian I kept my distance, after 7 years you can have enough of seminaries - strange but true! The bus came, I got on and dozed off, and when I awoke Mr Seminarista introduced himself. He soon gleaned that I was a priest, and offered to recommend a reasonably priced 'religious hotel' in San Giovanni. What could I say? Little, as I was half-asleep but I was quickly awakened at the mention of cash. It sent a shiver through my wallet, my funds were designed for Medjugorgian fasting, not good times in Rotondo! As it turned out my companion's first choice of lodging had no vacancies, but his second choice welcomed us with open arms, even providing mid-afternoon lunch.

During lunch I realised that my earlier guess about Mr Seminarista was unfounded. Vito was in fact a married man, a nurse from Brindisi who combined his love for his wife and daughter with devotion for Padre Pio of Pietralcina, a Capuchin monk who had spent most of his life here at San Giovanni up to his death in 1968. Padre Pio died world famous as a confessor and mystic who shared physically in the passion and death of Jesus Christ by his mysterious possession of the 'stigmata', the marks of the Passion and death of Jesus, on his hands, feet, and side. He is also remembered in San Giovanni as the foremost fundraiser for the magnificent hospital built there, a hospital run to the highest of professional standards and of Christian ideals, specializing in palliative care, the relief of suffering.

Vito and I spent the afternoon exploring San Giovanni. He kindly told me all he knew about the various points of interest: the original small church, Padre Pio's confessional, and the gallery above the church where he used to meditate on the crucifix which hung over the body of the Church. Here it was that, as a sign of his closeness to the suffering Jesus, the saint received his five wounds, or 'stigmata'." We then went to visit the holy man's bedroom, or cell, and finally stopped for a moment of prayer at his tomb.

Having left the church buildings as the light was fading we walked together up the Stations of the Cross built into a wide paved pathway up a nearby hill, commanding an impressive view to and from the church buildings. Finally we made our way over to the

hospital and as we strolled around the grounds Vito explained how it came to be built. He added that his primary reason for this visit was a post-operative check-up at the hospital tomorrow morning. With this in mind I offered to give him an early good start with Mass in Padre Pio's original Church at the unearthly hour of 6am. He readily accepted my offer and it was soon squared with the Capuchin authorities.

Bright and early next morning on Wednesday June 10 we celebrated an emotional Mass at Padre Pio's altar, praying with an elderly lady for Vito's health, for his wife, and for their troubled young daughter. After Mass and a souvenir photo or two we parted, he for the hospital queue and myself for Monte Sant'Angelo.

### **Michael the Archangel's ancient site and present pilgrims.**

Monte Sant'Angelo is a town high up in the mountains, like San Giovanni. Pilgrims have flocked there for over a thousand years to see a cave where two shepherd boys had a vision of Saint Michael the Archangel. For centuries the most ardent of visitors were pilgrims en route to the Holy Land, stopping off at Monte Sant' Angelo before Adriatic crossings to Greece and beyond.

The whitewashed walls of the buildings of the town, like elsewhere on this Gargano peninsula, stood out in sharp contrast to the darkness of the cave of Saint Michael. As I made the long and winding descent down into the gloom the journey was enlightened by conversation with a retired school teacher whom I recognised from the hotel dining-room back in San Giovanni.

As we made our way down flight after winding flight of stone steps the professoressa spoke of her brief but significant personal contacts with Padre Pio, particularly an episode involving a business offer to sell her house and invest in a lucrative newly-opened hotel. Not knowing what to do she asked the priest's advice. He dismissed the offer and told her to stay put. Subsequently her prospective business partners were exposed as cynical frauds. From that day to this she had remained alone in her house in the north of Italy near Lake Garda, grateful for having side-stepped bankruptcy through the help of a friend.

The main burden of her life, however, was that her parish priest would not see fit to let her use her teaching talents for the benefit of religious instruction of the local children. Together we shared the sadness of the situation and committed ourselves to prayers for endurance and for the discernment to know how and when the time was right to better the situation. To cement our resolve we shared some moments of silent prayer together at our journey's end, the cave itself.

The long descent had been more like climbing down the side of a hill than (say) going down a mining shaft. The presence of daylight outside held back any feeling of claustrophobia in the Grotto of the Apparition of the Archangel. The air was fresh and pleasantly cool, not at all damp and musty like an average cave. Another surprise was that the original cave seemed not to have been tampered with or 'improved' to any great degree, apart from the addition of statues of Michael and the two shepherd boys. The

remainder of the artificially extended cave area provided space for an altar, benches to accommodate a large congregation, and a number of side altars. Little surplus ornamentation had been added so the grotto remained what it had always been: a cave on the side of a hill. I tasted an atmosphere of simplicity and genuine prayerfulness on that quiet wednesday morning in June. Doubtless things get frenetic in the height of the summer pilgrimage season but what cannot be denied is that God is worshipped here with great devotion as the one who sent St Michael the Archangel to visit this isolated spot, a loving and local God, giving memories that endure from one century to another. After a few moments of prayer for all Michaels, Michelles, Michaelas, etc, we set off to climb back up to the town centre. Back in the hurly burly I savoured the uniqueness of the town before joining the other hal-day trippers on the lunchtime bus to San Giovanni.

Back in our hotel Vito was waiting for me, and for his lunch. My appetite wavered as my money was running out fast but Vito brushed this aside and soon we were fighting our way through two huge EPSs, English College slang for 'enormous plates of spaghetti'.

My financial situation took the edge off my appetite. I had just enough money to get to Medjugorje and back. That was it. How I was going to pay the San Giovanni hotel bill or for lodgings in Medjugorje? This 'had not yet been revealed' (the 11th secret?). What was I to do: To carry on and to trust in Providence? Or to reason that to carry on would involve too much anxiety, embarrassment and cadging (begging my way), and turn back? What would you have done?

Quickly I was led to a decision. Just as I was objecting to Vito paying my hotel bill the professoressa approached us to say goodbye and pressed into my hand the equivalent of £6 in Italian and Yugoslavian banknotes. Faced with this gesture and Vito's insistence he should help me I gave way. I came round to the opinion that if God and his Blessed Mother wanted me to go to Medjugorje I would just have to buckle down and get on with it. That sentiment remained.

Vito and I caught the early afternoon bus from the heights of San Giovanni and back down into the valley towards Foggia. We then took the train in the direction of Bari, though Vito was only going as far as Brindisi. Along the way we haggled about how much cash he was going to "lend" me. I held out for £10 but he insisted on £25, insisting he had no change. I sent his family a Papal Blessing when I got back to Rome, 'Say Thanks with Interblessing', you could say. We said farewell at Brindisi, I remember him as a kind young man seeking God's advice on how to do the best for his family and to thank the Lord for what he had already been given.

## **Back to Bari, cross the Adriatic, and hitchhike to Medjugorje.**

On arrival at Bari an hour later, I was able to demonstrate expert knowledge to the Medjugorje-bound! I offered precise instructions on how to get from the station to the ferry-port. How? Because it was the same journey as I had made - without success - the previous morning. I chatted at the bus stop with Elga from Gallipoli (Italy) and her parish priest from Foggia, also first-timers heading for Medjugorje.

The meeting proved very fruitful. After the night crossing to Dubrovnik next morning, Thursday 11 June, Elga and her friend offered me a lift on their coach towards Medjugorje. I gratefully accepted. By then I was very weary after 8 hours sailing and little to eat. Providence was smiling on me, however, as I stood hitch-hiking outside the Stolac Hotel where the coach had come to its journey's end. A thoughtful young restaurant worker called Spassen gave me a lift from there all the way to Medjugorje, deliberately going beyond his restaurant at Citluk to give me in broken English his whole story about the iniquities of the Yugoslavian government and his desire to get work in the tourist industry.

The line I remembered best to summarize his thoughts on the attitude of the communist state to Medjugorje was this. In the old days you would be locked up for a year if you said that Mary was appearing to the children. These days, with foreign currency tourism in full swing, anyone who said Mary was not appearing would be locked up for 2 years! All I could offer in return for Spassen's kindness were numerous expressions of firm agreement and a packet of Italian biscuits. He welcomed the biscuits with interest and smiled as I mimed a prayer for his intentions.

### **Medjugorje, first impressions.**

And so I arrived at noon in Medjugorje, on a straggling country lane packed with parked cars and coaches, a small village on a plain bordered by mountain ranges and observed with monotonous interest by an encircling army helicopter. As Spassen drove away down that lane packed with parked cars, taxis and coaches, I found myself on the outskirts of the rapidly-expanding village of Medjugorje, a small hamlet whose name means 'between two mountains'. The peaceful landscape made me think of the west of Ireland. It was noon on a blazing hot day and the drone of the army helicopter overhead added to my growing feelings of discomfort.

The discomfort was partly physical, the result of the uncertainties of the journey thus far, a lack of sleep and the prospect of little to eat but a tired two-days old packed lunch. But there was also a sense of unease. I was not in the mood for meeting starry-eyed Medjugorje enthusiasts fired with the mission of drawing me into the fold. I wanted to be free to make of this experience what I would, without coercion. As a few-months ordained priest I was still finding my way in the rich variety of Catholic spiritualities, and felt a little exposed in my clerical collar. I did meet one such enthusiast after I had eaten my last tired sandwich and two exhausted peaches. I politely declined the opportunity to join her London Medjugorje group just yet, perhaps I would give her a different answer tomorrow, I thought.

Before I began my sad excuse for lunch/breakfast, I had popped into the Church for a prayer of thanksgiving for my safe arrival, the Church of St James. It was a wide and fairly recently-built concrete structure, an architecture of common sense, low budget and few frills. A bearded Franciscan called Fr Philip was giving a talk on Our Lady to some English speakers. Never one to let an opportunity slip, as he exited I asked him if there was any chance of me finding accommodation in the village. With the tired look of a man who

seemed to be handling the cares, worries and spiritual edification of ten thousand pilgrims at the one time, he said he would see what he could do if I came back here in an hour or so. Also, he asked, would I like to be present in the room with the Medjugorje visionaries during the apparition of Our Lady? I readily accepted. This privilege was extended to as many priests as possible he told me, for one occasion each, while the apparitions were taking place in the parish office.

After lunch I returned to wait for news of accommodation. After a long while in the sunshine Fr Nicola, a young Yugoslavian confrère of Fr Philip's introduced himself to answer my enquiry. A few minutes later he came back with a car and drove me a half mile from the church and left me in the care of a very elderly but spry resident octogenarian called Doma. She spoke not a word of any language but her own but managed to communicate that she had two sons in Florida and Toronto in America, and that she had an overwhelming devotion to her religious faith, evidenced by the most religiously decorated kitchen I have ever seen.

A young man called Dragon was staying upstairs. He had travelled far to come on retreat to the village and seemed to have acquired semi-permanent status. Dragon was a friendly fellow eager to speak English to whoever would listen. Like many others he wore a rosary around his neck. This sign of his religious devotion was both devout and cool to local young people but strange to my eye. An elderly pilgrim from England dressed like that in Rome and was regarded as a little odd. In Medjugorje he was as normal.

## **The Apparition I attended.**

After a quick shave and brush-up I hurried back to join a huge crowd increasing by the minute outside the Parish Office. All were waiting for the coming of the visionaries and many were hoping against hope that they would be able to join them in the parish office when they saw the apparition. To prepare for the event a group from Louisiana USA, of which there were several, started to pray the Rosary. As I stood squashed against the outside stairway the leader of the group gleaned that I was from England and welcomed me to take my turn in leading a decade of the prayer. By the time the Rosary was coming to a close the time was getting on for 6pm. With an attempt to organise the chaos of disappointed expectations priests, three video-cameramen were ushered up into the Parish Office so the crowd could benefit from a video of the occasion.

As a priest I was privileged to be eased by a press of bodies into the compact Office. An Italian priest began five more Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary and the twenty or so inhabitants of the tiny room joined him in prayer in their own languages. As the prayer was coming to a close the frailer members of the company, including myself, were feeling distinctly ill-at-ease on our feet in this steamy and confined space. It was at that point that two of the children in question arrived, Marija, dressed in a turquoise woollen jumper and a buff-coloured skirt, and Jacov, clad from shoulder to ankle in Western denim.



Marija, in her late teens, smiled at the assembled company and seemed composed and intent on her prayer. Iacov was at the other end of the teen spectrum and much shyer, he sniffed a great deal and wiped his eyes. To be the centre of such attention seemed to upset and embarrass him. As the pair stood in the doorway to the office Fr Slavko opened the proceedings with a short prayer. After that it was down on our knees once again for five more mysteries of the Rosary, and five more again, the crowd outside matching us in prayer and ever-growing expectancy.

When the rosary prayers were over Marija and Iacov stood up, came over to the far side of the room and stood just in front of me. They were facing a simple statue of Our Lady on top of a bookcase, a statue marked with the phrase Rosa Mistica, one of the honorary titles of Mary, Mystical Rose. After blessing themselves they began a prayer in Croat, their eyes downcast, but then discontinued the prayer and fell to their knees.

As Marija was directly in front of me her face was out of my vision, but I could quite clearly see Iacov's lips moving and pausing in their movement, indicating an inaudible but very animated conversation. This went on for about a minute with no suggestion of collusion between the two young people. Their conversations seemed to run parallel to each other and not as a threesome with Mary. Next, I was assured by those who spoke Croat, they concluded the prayer which they had broken off, and continued with another two minutes conversational prayer.

By craning my neck I was able to verify that Marija's facial features were the same as Iacov during the event, but, as I say, the subject matter of the two conversations seemed to differ, judging by the emotions expressed and the lengths and breaks of speaking and listening in the conversation. Finally the apparition came to an end. The pair stood up, said a short prayer, blessed themselves and left the room, Marije smiling peacefully and Iacov still shy.

Within moments, stopping only for a photograph or two in the book and video-lined office, everybody left the Parish Office. I went for a short walk to get some oxygen and attempt to stave off an oncoming headache. It was not easy to be a young priest trying to make sense of other peoples' unique supernatural experience.

## **Unpacking the Apparition, and the rest of the day.**

What conclusion did I reach? I told myself that the truth was that I did not have to give or withhold any seal of approval for the apparition, I was just another observer. But still, like the others, I wanted to know what had happened. Instead, I came to understand that as was the case back in San Giovanni, I was experiencing what it was like to be on the outside of another person's faith experience. Vito's and the professoressa's there, and here in Medjugorje the spirituality of Marija and Iacov, and the thousands who were heartily convinced of the presence of Our Lady at Medjugorje.

My respect and affection for Our Lady and Padre Pio made me a fellow-pilgrim with the faithful around me, yes, but still I felt a definite sense of being on the outside of things and a conviction that that was the way it had to be, for now at least. It seemed that God was giving me the experience of what it is like to be a non-believer amongst believers.

The good that this short breather did for my headache was short-lived. It came back with a vengeance during the lengthy mass that followed. The church was so packed that people stood throughout the service in the side and centre aisles. The congregation was a mixture of visitors and local people (including Doma) though the devotion of the local folk was challenged by their being edged out of pew-space by foreign pilgrims. Their feelings might have been complicated by their newly-acquired profession as hoteliers. It's not all supernatural consolation for the parish of Medjugorje, the same choice to put God before money and comfort has to be made there as it does everywhere else.

My own piety was just about exhausted by the end of the Mass. It was a beautiful celebration in many ways, but the heat, the sheer number of priests and people, my state of health, a rather long sermon, a number of post communion prayers and the prospect of a healing service to follow - all this led me to beat a hasty retreat from the sacristy once the final blessing had been given. I was too fragile for the healing service? Ironic but true.

It was 8pm. In the absence of anywhere I could get anything substantial to eat, I relied on a glass of beer to provide the carbohydrates necessary to perk up my dwindling energy resources. I also ate a cherry or two from the carton I had bought for Doma my host. The combined effects of the last 24 hours lead me to the decision to call it a day.

I went back to Doma's home and after a cup of her incredibly thick coffee (before sleep?) I settled down for the night in a generously proportioned double-bed. Unfortunately the pillows were filled with feathers, to which I am allergic, so they had to go. Whether their presence lingered or some malevolent pollen invaded its way into my breathing-space the result was a broken night's sleep and a good deal of wheezing as the following day progressed.

## **Departing Medjugorje.**

Next morning I said my morning prayers and, shaved, then had a light breakfast chatting to Tragon and smiling at Doma. After I took a few photographs, I packed my bags and said goodbye. I then headed for the church and was delighted to hear that an English language Mass organised by the St Louis contingent was about to take place. I was warmly welcomed to concelebrate and did so with gratitude. What impressed me about the homilies and instructions that I heard at Medjugorje was their sense of moderation. Mary was not presented as non-Catholics feared as the fourth person of the Trinity but rather as New Testament prophet much like Isaiah and the prophets of old. So, she was there in Medjugorje to call the slumbering people of God back to an active faith and hope in Jesus their Saviour. She was calling them with a simple and "unsensational" message,

but a message which has rocked the world since her Son had first proclaimed it: "Turn away from sin and believe the Good News!"

In essence that is all Medjugorje has to say; that is all there is to say. The way that Christians are invited to repent and to accept the Gospel is just a commentary to this message. The Medjugorje Way is only really that followed by Catholic the Christians Church throughout its many centuries: Confess your sins regularly, fast, pray, and pray the Rosary.

The most intriguing thing I heard said about fasting at Medjugorje was that it was not so much a question of how much you eat, as what you eat. Fr Philip pointed to the great variety of foods on offer in Western society and suggested that it was easy for food to become an idol in its own right, something that attained a pre-eminence far beyond its worth, something that distracted us from higher concerns and from God himself. The way to counter this, say the messages of Medjugorje, is to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays, eating only bread and soup, as I understood Fr Philip's sermon. H, however, so long as you simplified your diet, witnessing to yourself and others that food was very much secondary to faith, just exactly what you ate was not so important. What the Franciscan did make very clear was that the point of fasting was much less a business of "punishing the body" (as traditionally held) than we have previously thought than it is a matter of eating plain food, enough plain food, as a sign of personal commitment and family commitment to God. Like it or not, I seemed to be following the "Medjugorje Diet", though whether I would have if I was given an alternative (!) is open to discussion, Come to think of it, I didn't even get any soup, just that breakfast with Doma.

## **Back on the Road, the ups and downs of Yugo travel.**

Friday Mass having finished, I made some enquiries about transport out of Medjugorje. I felt I had done all I wanted to and I had no pressing desire to climb the hill I where the villagers had seen the first apparitions. I had already been away days longer than I had intended.

As it happened a bus was leaving soon for Mostar. This lifted my spirits as I hoped that I could get from there to Dubrovnik fairly easily and catch the ferry from there to Italy the following morning. With this schedule in mind I bade farewell to Medjugorje precisely twenty-four hours after I had arrived, catching the midday bus to Mostar, the provincial capital.

The countryside of Herzegovina seen from the bus window was harsh and barren, just about as barren as the possibility of gathering transport information at Mostar bus station. When I eventually managed to find the ticket office I was told that they would only sell tickets for the bus once it had arrived from Sarajevo, and even then my chances of a ride were very slim as the bus would almost certainly be full. Disconsolate, I inquired for details about the railway network from a local man who had suddenly become very eloquent in the presence of two pretty blonde American backpackers. "Few and far, few and far are

the routes where the Yugotrains go" was about the sum total of his counsel. I waited for the bus and it arrived. I went to the ticket office: "I'm very sorry". Back to the bus, on the point of departure. "Can I buy a ticket", I said, standing just inside, on the bottom step. The driver waved his arm, burred something fierce at me, closed the door against me and set off for Mostar, leaving me to join the dozens lurching in the aisle.

Suffice to say it was a long and tiring journey, made bearable only by an interesting conversation with a lady travelling from Belgrade back to her native town in the hills, and on to her friend in Dubrovnik. She had much to say about the need for reconciliation between the country people and German tourists when bad memories linger:

"They take their money but they still blame them for what their fathers or grandfathers did over forty years ago".

I myself spent most of the journey wondering if I would succeed in catching the early evening ferry over to Bari. A dreary and extended mid-afternoon halt along the way added to my anxiety. Eventually we got back on the road and reached Dubrovnik only five minutes before the boat was due to sail.

I dashed out of the coach and into a waiting taxi. It got me to the ferry in minutes. Dashing round to the ticket office I suddenly became aware of a familiar sense of.... stillness.

"So sorry sir, there has been a cancellation. Come back tomorrow or cross from Split in 5 hours time".

Marvellous. Yesterday once more? No, it's Bari last Tuesday all over again! What is it about deja Bari?

## **Hiking hitches, Balkan blues to bliss.**

I retraced my steps to the bus station and asked about buses to Split. It was 4 hours away and the next bus was leaving in 90 minutes. The only alternative was to hitchhike. With resignation I tramped all the way back past the ferry-port and out of town in the direction of Split, and put my thumb out. Within moments I was bumping along at about forty-five miles an hour in a vegetable van!

My driver was a young man who had soon established that I was a Catholic Priest from England with Irish ancestry. This combination seemed to perplex him. He stuttered at my challenge to his political and social stereotypes:

"Croat Catholic - Good!" (pointing to himself)

"You Irish - Irish Catholic, Good! (pointing to me). Solidarity! "

"But English? English Protestant Imperialismus? No good!" (pointing to me again).

"But you Catholic from England ... Good!"

After twenty miles or so of further expanding our cultural identities my genial host had to drop me off, at the site of a new sports centre, and so we bid each adieu. There I stood by the side of the road for a good hour, an object of wonderment to the building site workers as they sat on the other side of the road waiting for the bus that would take them back home to Dubrovnik. I had barely covered a quarter of my journey and time was running out. Eventually a driving school instructor in a light foreign car picked me up and took me perhaps another twenty miles before he too turned off the road to Split. The last thing he said to me as I got out of the car was "hotel". I was still hoping against hope that I would reach Split but I wondered if I might have to resort to a night's stay somewhere local. But where?

As I stood once again by the side of the road with my thumb up the daylight flickered out and night fell. There was no chance of getting the Split ferry now, I was barely a quarter of the way to the port. What was I to do? Thoughts of Dracula began to creep into the recesses of my mind, even though the Adriatic Coast is quite some miles from Bohemia and the Carpathian Mountains. I wondered up and down the road looking for some sign of life. Lo and behold! Up on a terrace above road level was a neon hotel sign. Now I had to push to the back of my mind thoughts of the "Psycho" hotel. Better in there than out here with the wolves, I concluded. In fact I need not have bothered. The front gate was bolted up and the proprietors insisted from within that they were closed - ferme - geschlossen - chiuso. Thanks a bundle.

So, back to the side of the road. The nearby garage seemed to assume a friendly aspect as a light in the darkness. As I had been standing outside with my thumb out for so long I felt that the attendant might take pity on me so I went in and asked if I could use the telephone so that I could contact a lodging house somewhere in the locality. After much huffing and puffing he agreed and left me to make the call. No directory.

"Excuse me, is there a directory? Telephone number: Hotel?"

Blank incomprehension (him). Sigh of resignation (me).

"Goodbye, have a nice evening" (my parting words).

Back to the side of the road, this time standing on the back-to-Dubrovnik side. Anxiety: the rustling sound of Balkan Baskerville Hounds in the bushes? But lo! A camper van draws up bulging with German tourists looking for a hotel in Ston. Ston, Ston?... Where have I seen that word before? On a sign at the side of this road, before I came to a dead stop. In five minutes we were there.

However, tourism was not at the top of my list of priorities. Number one was budgeting with my few remaining dinar and lire. I calculated with relief that I could just about afford the very reasonable hotel price. Ah! what a beautiful shower, and pillows made of foam not feathers, bliss! Supper? No money so I was thrown back onto the absolute dregs of the 5 days old packed lunch the college nuns had made for me back in Rome. Grimsville! But I was almost too tired to care. And so to bed. Set my alarm and gave myself a stern warning to get up when it went off.

Exhausted by my Balkan dread I dropped off to sleep in minutes. Hours passed by like minutes and I leapt out of bed at the first squeak of the alarm. Downstairs in the lobby I discovered to my relief that included in the cost of the room was a bread, jam and coffee breakfast! Rarely have I eaten with such single-minded ferocity! All fasting and no food makes John a wild boy!

Holiday Tip: I can recommend Ston (pity about the grim name, to my ears). It is a quiet little modern resort within access of the islands that run parallel to the Croatian coast.

The reward for all my labours of the day before was that things now began to work out. The bank opened almost immediately after I squeezed the last drop out of the coffee pot. My medley of foreign notes was exchanged for the local currency, the bill for the room was paid in no time, and my first request for a lift to Dubrovnik was welcomed by a local family heading right into the city! What a relief. If Neil Desperandum is not my middle name then I don't know what is! (try: Gerard).

Arriving in Dubrovnik my ticket was bought and my place was assured on board the afternoon ferry "Tintoretto". In fact my beleaguered finances were looking a couple of pounds better than I had dared hope, since it turned out to be cheaper to go back to Italy than it had to come away from it.

## **All Aboard for Italy!**

Soon the passengers were allowed to board the ship - at last! - and I was saying goodbye to the very beautiful harbour of Dubrovnik and those long and languorous islands that approach it. Perhaps they looked languorous because there was little else for us passengers to do on board for 8 hours but langour too. I settled down to chatting to my fellow passengers and writing notes of reminiscence of these fun-filled days! Happily I was able to reconnect with my fellow Medjugorje pilgrim Elga, returning with her group. I concelebrated in their pre-festive Sunday mass for the feast of the Holy Trinity.

The environment for this Mass was a first for me. Firstly, it was in the duty free area of the retail area (how many sermons could you write on that?), the shop closed for business during mass-time, I add. Secondly, this impromptu worship area area was adjacent to the ship's leisure pool, whose deep end could be seen by us through a row of portholes. As

Mass progressed we were joined from time to time by divers squinting through the glass. With bemusement, or incredulity? More than zany, it was great to celebrate this one-off Mass with returning pilgrims like myself.

Afterward a fascinating message came over the public address system:

"We remember to passengers that it is compulsory to withdraw the ticket for any consummation at the bar".

A communication only equalled by the old favourite seen at Italian motorway service-stations: "Please discourage abusive retailers of various articles".

A feast for the imagination, no?

Two onboard conversations linger in my memory. One with a Croatian-Italian mother of two, and the other with a Sicilian fisherman on his way back from Romania. The Croatian-Italian lady turned out to be another in the succession of "guardian angels" sent to cross my palm with silver when the going got rough. Quite against my will and to my embarrassment and edification, she made me tell the tale of my wanderings and the generosity of all those who had helped me, then she literally emptied her pockets and handed over the little cash she had.

"Your need is greater than mine" said she, smiling from ear to ear, "Buy yourself something. I'm not hungry. My husband's picking me up at Bari".

That kind of generosity has to restore your faith in human nature, and in the Christianity of Mr and Mrs Joe Public. Thank you, wherever you are. The Sicilian seaman was a different kettle of fish. We got talking when a friendly school of dolphins took a liking to the ferry and spent some minutes chasing us through the open sea. By the time the dolphins lost interest our conversation had moved into other areas, principally to do with the huge efforts my acquaintance had to make to marry his Romanian fiancée and to arrange for her emigration to Italy. Not a chat I ever had on the 137 bus.

## Finally...

The end of the journey fitted well with the whole tale. As we disembarked from the ferry I made the acquaintance of an American mother and daughter who like me were returning from Medjugorje to Rome by train. Naturally I showed them the way from the ferry port to the railway station, they were good company. When it came to sharing provisions for our evening platform "picnic" the generosity of the mid-West met my ship biscuits and a six-day old bruised tomato.

Next morning, as we staggered off the overnight train at Stazioni Termini in Rome, I took the liberty of inviting these my final fellow pilgrims to breakfast at the English College. We took the bus to Via di Monserrato in the historic centre of Rome and I lead them into the early morning refectory, where bleary-eyed community members were tucking into their coffee and rosetta bread rolls after morning prayer. It felt good to be generous, after so many people had been so generous to me, especially in this ancient Hospice, which had welcomed pilgrims from England since the 1300s.

Students and staff were hospitable but bemused.

"It's a long story", I said, answering their raised eyebrows with a smile, "I'll write it down for you some time".

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