

## **Cluster Pilgrimage to Avignon, Ars, Taizé and Trosly (L'Arche) 14<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> April 2010**

On the 4<sup>th</sup> August 2009 we commemorated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of one of our Cluster patrons, St John Vianney. Frs. Jock and Mike suggested that we organise a Cluster pilgrimage to Ars, the place St John Vianney spent most of his life as a priest, sometime during the year that followed.

After a number of months of preparation, on Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> April 2010 a group of 22 pilgrims from across the Cluster, and further afield, gathered with Fr Jock at Edinburgh Airport, ready to board a flight to Lyon, in France.

During the preparations it had been agreed that the pilgrimage would also take in Avignon, Taizé and Trosly (the location of the first L'Arche community).

On arrival at Lyon airport we were collected by our coach driver, Guilio, who was to become an integral part of our group as the week evolved. He drove us 140 miles south to the city of Avignon.

Amongst the highlights of our time there were visits to the Palais des Papes and the famous Pont d'Avignon. The Palace of the Popes was the headquarters of a Great Schism of cardinals who came close to toppling the authority of the popes in Rome in the 14th century. In 1309 Avignon became the home of the popes who were fleeing the violent chaos of Rome. The Palais, part fortress, part showplace, was built between 1335 and 1364 on a natural rocky outcrop at the northern edge of Avignon, overlooking the river Rhône. The site was formerly occupied by the old episcopal palace of the bishops of Avignon. The Popes' Palace is the biggest Gothic palace in all of Europe and is the size of 4 Gothic cathedrals. The picture of the Church that emerged in Avignon was in very sharp contrast to the models of Church that we were to experience during the rest of our pilgrimage.

The early spring weather in Avignon was beautiful. It was sunny and warm during the day, but cooled down overnight. Throughout our time in France we were blessed with absolutely fantastic weather.

After lunch on Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> we travelled 160 miles north to the town of Villefranche, which was to be our base for the central part of our pilgrimage – our visit to Ars. On arrival at the hotel we celebrated Mass and enjoyed a meal together.

On Friday 16<sup>th</sup> April we travelled the short distance from Villefranche to Ars (or Ars-sur-Formans, to give it its Sunday name). The first thing that struck you was how small the village of Ars was. We visited the various sites associated with the Cure d'Ars and heard about his life and ministry there. The picture very quickly emerged of a man who lived a very simple, holy life dedicated to the people he was called to serve.

John Marie Vianney was born at Dardilly, near Lyon, on 8 May, 1786, the son of Matthieu Vianney and Marie Beluze. Ordained priest in 1815, he was sent by his bishop to serve the people of Ars in 1818. He died there on 4 August, 1859.

After all the travelling over the previous two days, our day in Ars was, in contrast, very gentle, with lots of time for prayer and reflection. The highlight of the day was undoubtedly the Mass we came together to celebrate in the basilica, directly under the preserved body of John Vianney.

On Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> we were fortunate to be able to return to Ars, take more time to look around, spend time in prayer and celebrate Mass again in the same place.

You came away from Ars thinking about how different the picture of Church that emerged there was in comparison to what we had seen and learnt in Avignon - in many ways, at the opposite ends of the spectrum.

We can't, however, finish the Ars chapter of our pilgrimage without mention of the meal we (eventually) had on the evening of Friday 16<sup>th</sup> April. The restaurant was linked to the hotel but run by different people. Shortly after we sat down for dinner it became apparent that the restaurant was experiencing "staffing problems" - the poor young lad running round on his own at 100 miles an hour was a bit of a give-away! It took over an hour to get any food and just as long between courses. To take our minds off our hunger, we entertained ourselves with dancing, singing, playing games and even having a bit of a snooze! The locals in the adjacent room must have wondered what had hit Villefranche!

We left Ars and travelled 40 miles north to the beautiful village of Cluny. We spent a couple of hours there looking round the town and enjoying lunch. Cluny is famous for its Abbey, founded in 910 AD. It was the centre of a monastic reform movement that spread throughout Europe. It is quite incredible to think that something so big started in this small, rural village. The church there was the largest Christian building in the world until St. Peter's Basilica was rebuilt in Rome in the 16th century.

We then moved to our base for the next leg of our pilgrimage, the town of Macon, 15 miles south of Cluny. This was ideally located for our two visits to Taizé.

The Taizé community was founded by Brother Roger who first came to the area, from his native Switzerland, in 1940. Over the next 9 years others joined him and by Easter 1949 there were seven men who committed themselves to living together for their whole life in great simplicity and in celibacy. Today the Taizé Community is made up of over a hundred brothers, Catholics and from various Protestant backgrounds, coming from around thirty nations. Over the years, young adults have been coming to Taizé in ever greater numbers, from every continent, to take part in prayer and weekly meetings.

We joined the community of brothers and visiting young people for evening prayer on the Saturday and again for the celebration of the Eucharist on the Sunday morning. The Taize chants might be familiar, even to those who haven't visited Taizé - we occasionally use them during our own Saturday and Sunday celebrations of the Eucharist. Together with periods of silence, the chants form a central part of all the liturgies in Taizé.

The next leg of our journey was the most arduous. On leaving Taizé on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> April, we started the 325 mile journey north to the town of Compiègne (35 miles north east of Paris), the base for the final destination of our pilgrimage.

After settling into the hotel we walked the short distance from the hotel to a local restaurant where we had a lovely meal together to celebrate the final evening of our pilgrimage. Like all our meals, it was an evening filled with laughter, fun and vibrant conversation.

The following morning, Monday 19<sup>th</sup> April, we travelled the short distance (7 miles) to Trosly-Breuil. Here we were welcomed by members of the L'Arche community. Shortly after our arrival we were introduced to Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche (The Ark), who spent some time with us. In 1964, Jean took two men with learning difficulties into his home in this little village of Trosly to live with him - an action that sparked a movement that now spans five continents - and 130 communities. Before setting out for the airport, we celebrated our final pilgrimage Mass together in the beautiful church at L'Arche and then shared a fantastic lunch prepared for us by the L'Arche community.

Throughout this travelogue, there have been references to the different "models" of the Church that we came across during our pilgrimage, from the opulence and power of the Palais des Papes in Avignon to the humble, simple ministry of St John Vianney amongst the people of Ars. In Jean Vanier we met a man who for the last 50 years has been living a very simple message that it is at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ - mutual relationships and trust in God are at the heart of our journey together. If you look at the L'Arche website their 'Identity Statement' says that they "celebrate the unique value of every person and recognise our need of one another." Even in the short time we spent with Jean and the community, it was clear that these aren't just words but the way they strive to live their lives.

During the planning stage of the pilgrimage, we had thought about starting the pilgrimage in Trosly and finishing in Avignon. While we didn't plan it for this reason, it was good to finish in Trosly and start our journey back to Edinburgh inspired by the powerful witness of the L'Arche community.

In theory we should then have travelled to Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris, boarded a flight to Edinburgh and arrived back home around tea-time that evening. It didn't quite work out that way!

On Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> April the Icelandic volcano with the unpronounceable name erupted again, this time sending volcanic ash clouds into the sky. Days of travel chaos ensued. Our flight was cancelled and we had to try to find a way to get 23 people back to Edinburgh. We have never been more grateful for modern communication technology. Phone calls were made, text messages were exchanged, internet updates were found and emails were sent. Fr Mike got to work back in Edinburgh. But more important than communication technology, many prayers were offered.

We managed to negotiate for Guilio to take us to Calais (around 170 miles north of Charles de Gaulle airport). Guilio had become such an integral part of the group by that time that we all think he would willingly have taken us all the way to Edinburgh, if his bosses had allowed him! Incredibly the queue at Calais ferry terminal was short. Some of our pilgrims were interviewed for GMTV and photographed for The Times newspaper! We boarded a ferry to Dover at around 8.15 p.m. and were collected there by a coach which took us overnight to Edinburgh. We arrived in Edinburgh around 10.30 a.m. on Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> April, weary but happy to have shared 7 wonderful days together, deepened existing friendships and made new ones.

The pilgrimage was a fantastic experience which will live long in the hearts and memories of every one of the 23 pilgrims who made the journey.