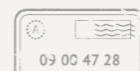


PILGRIM'S TRAVEL COMPANION

August 27 - September 9, 2025

A JOURNEY OF HEART, HEALING, & HOPE
WITH FR. JC MERINO



Walking Sacred Stones

Pilgrimage is never just about reaching a destination—it is about walking the path, stone by stone, step by step. In Medjugorje, on Apparition Hill, pilgrims know the rocky path well. Each stone beneath the foot is uneven, sharp, sometimes slippery, sometimes even painful—but each one is sacred, for it leads to an encounter, every stone leads to grace, every painful stone leads us to Our Lady, who in turn always points us to Christ.

(Perhaps the stones we experience in Dubrovnik are no different: they too bear witness to the weight of history, to the footsteps of saints and sinners, to prayers whispered in the quiet of dawn and the cries of those seeking refuge behind its walls. Polished smooth by centuries, they remind us that even the hardest surfaces can be softened through time, perseverance, and the passing of countless lives poured out in faith).

In a very real and unique way, Papa and I have been walking such a path together. His health journey has been like climbing over sharp stones—hospital stays, uncertainty, waiting on doctors, moments of exhaustion. Yet each sharp stone is also sacred, because each one is carried with faith, supported by your prayers, and softened by God's grace. This pilgrimage of hope, healing, and heart is not just something that is happening abroad—it is also unfolding right here, in my own family, in our daily walk of love.

Walking the painful stones of this pilgrimage path, one quickly learns the lesson of humility. You cannot walk too fast, or you will stumble - and you will leave our companion behind. You cannot walk without care, or you will lose your footing. You

must bow low, steady yourself, and take one step at a time. The stones themselves demand a kind of reverence. We walk every step with the breath of prayer - prayer with our Blessed Mother, a prayer to her Son Jesus.

This is the wisdom Sirach teaches us today: *“Conduct your affairs with humility, and you will be loved more than a giver of gifts... humble yourself and you will find favor with God.”* On this pilgrimage of hope, healing, and heart, I see this truth reflected in Papa’s journey. His illness has humbled us both — stripped away certainties, slowed down our pace, and taught us that we cannot do this on our own. And yet, in this humbling, God draws near.

The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that we are not alone in our climb. We are not just facing hospitals and test results — we are walking toward *Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem*, and with us are angels, saints, and the prayers of all who love us. Every prayer offered for Papa, every quiet word of encouragement, is like a hand stretched out to steady us on the stones.

And in the Gospel, Jesus reminds us of the banquet prepared for the humble — a table where the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame are given the seat of honor. In our weakness, we find that God’s table has already been set for us. It is not about strength or prestige, but about opening the heart to receive mercy.

So as we walk these sacred stones — Papa in his healing, me in my care for him, and all of us in this pilgrimage together — we learn that humility is not defeat, but the privileged posture of grace. Each step may be smaller, gentler, slower... but perhaps that is exactly how God leads us back home.

Walking the Sacred Stones of Dubrovnik

September 1, 2025

Day 6: History and Holiness

"Every city has a soul. And if you walk slowly enough, listening with your heart, the stones begin to speak" (Anonymous)

Dubrovnik, wrapped in the sea-kissed air, this city of shimmering walls and whispered prayers. Today is a day not merely of sightseeing - but of soul-seeing, a walk through centuries of resilience, beauty, and unspoken grace.

We begin where hope has a name: St. Blaise. St. Blasius Church, baroque in style and bright, rising from the stone like a hymn of the old city's gratitude. Dedicated to St. Blaise, the guardian saint of Dubrovnik, this sanctuary was sculpted in 1715 by the Venetian Marino Gropelli. His chisel found not just beauty, but lived faith.

St. Blaise's outstretched hand still blesses the city, and today, he blesses us pilgrims; we place our hearts, intentions, and prayers under that blessing - lives that carry wounds, hearts that have holy longings, and quiet hopes. Confucius once said: "Wherever you go, go with all your heart". Therefore, here we go, with hope as our compass.

Then, we step into the Rector's Palace, where Gothic strength meets Renaissance grace. Once the beating heart of the Republic's governance, it is now a museum that tells the city's story - not just of rulers and revolts, but of values lived in stone and silence. The halls still echo with the wisdom of discernment, where leadership meant service, and justice was a form of love. The past leans gently toward the present here, inviting us to reflect: What walls do we build in our hearts? What truths do we guard? What healing do we still seek? We are reminded of the theme we carry like a candle: HOPE, HEALING, and HEART - the soulwork of our pilgrimage.

We emerge onto the STRANDUN, the city's polished spine, and pass the BELL TOWER CLOCK, where every hour tolls like a reminder: time is sacred, and every step is a prayer. Just nearby stands ORLANDO'S COLUMN - a sentinel of justice and civic pride. To its left, the elegant SPONZA PALACE, once a customs house, now a keeper of memory and poetry, a home to Dubrovnik's archive of voices. These stones remember wars and weddings, festivals and funerals. And as pilgrims today, we walk among them gently, reverently - not to conquer, but to listen.

Our final sacred chapters of the day bring us to two monastic hearts: The Dominican Monastery and the Franciscan Monastery. First: the Dominican Monastery, built against the very edge of Dubrovnik's defensive walls, a physical bulwark. Its arches invite us into stillness. We think of the spiritual battles we each carry, and how faith offers shelter, a wall that guards not to isolate, but to anchor. Then: The Franciscan Monastery, softer in tone, gentler in breath, opens its doors to one of the oldest functioning pharmacies in Europe - a place where herbs met prayer, and medicine was mingled with mercy. Here, monks ground both roots and Scripture, offering balm to body and soul. In this sacred place, healing isn't just clinical - it's compassionate. This is not just history - it is our inheritance. It is the legacy of hope that endured, healing that was offered, and hearts that remained open.

~ The Pearl of the Adriatic ~



...As the Adriatic turns gold and the streets fall quiet, we return for dinner, not just to eat, but to share - the way pilgrims always have. Stories rise like incense. Laughter hums like a hymn. And somewhere between a bite and a blessing, we realize: We are being healed - not suddenly, but slowly. Not in grand gestures, but in these quiet, sacred steps through cities that have already known how to survive.

"Let us remember that love lives through sacrifice and is nourished by giving. Without sacrifice, there is no love."

~ St. Maximilian Kolbe ~

Today, we walked not just through an old city - but through its memory, its mercy, its might. Today, hope felt carved into the arches. Healing echoed in the cloisters. And heart? Heart was in every step we took... together.

Pilgrim Tip:

Before bed, let your prayer be a whisper:

"Lord, make me a living monastery - strong at the edges, tender at the center, and open to healing, and rooted in hope.

Amen."

