

Australia Pilgrimage

The Christus Rex Pilgrimage is a 3 day walk from Ballarat Cathedral to Bendigo Cathedral; it takes place in October each year and registration opens next month

By Michael McVeigh

A YOUNG country like Australia doesn't have a long history to draw from when it comes to its local religious traditions. But while the Christus Rex Pilgrimage might only be 28 years old, it has grown into a special annual event for Catholics from around the country and across the globe.

Paul Brazier says he gets many questions from people wondering why he and around 400 of his fellow Catholics might take part in a 90 kilometre pilgrimage from Ballarat Cathedral to Bendigo Cathedral each year.

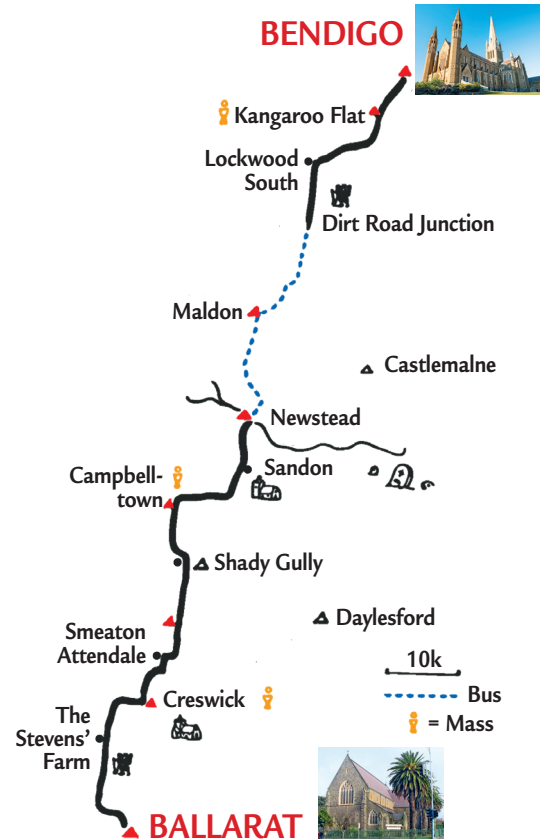
"The most frequent question I get when I tell people that I'm involved in a pilgrimage is, 'Are you raising money for something?'" he says. "There's this idea in modern society that everything we do has to be for some tangible benefit for the community. The idea that we're doing this first of all as a penance for ourselves, and also for the world, and also to proclaim the message that Christ is King of the whole world, that really grabs their attention."

Christ the King

The Christus Rex Pilgrimage first began in 1991. The plan was to put together a pilgrimage much like the one from Paris to Chartres in France, which is held in the lead-up to Pentecost Sunday. Ballarat and Bendigo were the only cathedrals in Australia that would qualify for a similar journey – being 90 km apart.

The Feast of Christ the King in October was chosen firstly because it was a good time of the year for an outdoor event, and because priests were more likely to be available. However, Paul says the feast itself – originally created by Pius XI in 1925 – is an important one to celebrate.

"It came at a time when the world had ob-



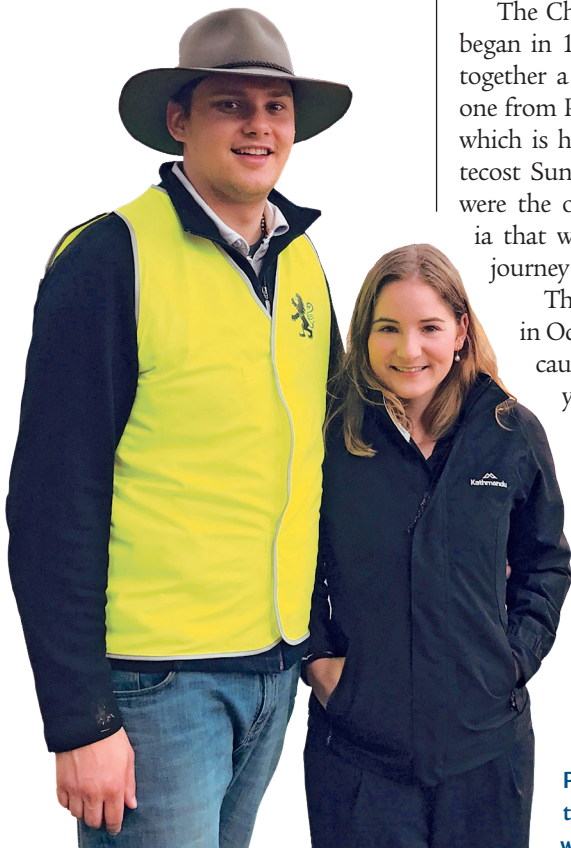
For more information on the Christus Rex Pilgrimage, go to: www.crex.org.

viously been rocked following World War One, and in a time when there was a real need for the proclamation of Christ as the King of the world," Paul Brazier says.

"I think the need for the Feast of Christ the King has grown since then. We need to have Christ not only in our personal and private lives, but also to publicly celebrate him and honor him as king of the entire world as often as we can."

Life changing event

Paul has been doing the pilgrimage for the last five years, and is in his third year as the President of the Christus Rex Society, the group that



Paul Brazier, President of the Christus Rex Society, with wife Jessica



The initial Holy Mass inside the Cathedral of Ballarat at the start of the pilgrimage

organizes the pilgrimage each year. The event has changed his life in at least one significant way – he met his wife Jessica on the pilgrimage, and they were married last August.

The organizing committee is made up of around ten people, from a wide range of places – in fact the vice-president is from New Zealand. Some of the committee members have been taking part in the pilgrimage since 1991. The task of organizing the journey takes up many months of the year, and there are between 25 and 50 volunteers assisting at the event – providing water, meals and bathroom facilities, driving a support bus, and ensuring the safety of the pilgrims.

“I couldn’t perform my role without the assistance of all the volunteers that help out throughout the year and on the day itself,” says Paul.

The number of pilgrims tends to increase over the course of the pilgrimage. Paul says there are generally around 250 people among the group when they leave Ballarat.

“By the time we walk through the doors of Bendigo Cathedral those numbers have usually doubled, so we’d have over 500 at the final Mass itself. One of the things we give particular attention to is safety. We are constantly trying to look at ways of making sure our road safety plans are up to date, and they’re compliant with the various requirements of local councils and also the state government.”

Bishop MacBeth-Green

Pilgrims come from all over Australia and internationally, particularly from New Zealand. While the pilgrimage was first started by lay people, and continues to be the work of lay volunteers, there are always a number of priests along for the journey – to lead the rosary prayers, to preach, to hear confessions and to celebrate Mass.

“One of the purposes of the pilgrimage beyond simply being a pilgrimage is the promotion of the Extraordinary Form of the Mass, and the other rites in the 1962 Missal, and obviously that can’t happen without priests,” says Paul. “So we’re always very grateful for the assistance that we get.”

Bishop Columba MacBeth-Green, from Wilcannia-Forbes Diocese in New South Wales, attended two years ago to celebrate the final Mass.

“We seem to have priests from all different orders, as well as diocesan priests,” says Paul.

The procession is led by a priest, who leads the praying. The prayers are broadcast down the line of the pilgrims walk in silence, while others pray aloud. The pilgrimage takes in country roads, and winds through state forests and passes people on the streets of towns. As well as the long days of walking, and the many hills, there are the usual problems of the Australian outdoors – flies, mosquitoes and other insects.

“It’s actually surprisingly easy to ignore the harder aspects of it – like

tiredness and sore muscles and aching feet – because you tend to get swept up in this wave of euphoria, of a group of pilgrims as we’re walking,” says Paul.

“You’re singing and praying along the way, with some very inspirational sermons from some really great priests to really keep it ticking along and keep it fresh.”

Triple challenge

Joshua Gereis is 19 years old, and a member of the same parish as Paul – Maternal Heart of Mary in Lewisham, Sydney. He went on the pilgrimage for the first time last year, and says it was an amazing experience, although there were some challenges to be faced.

“First off there’s the physical challenge,” Joshua says. “On the first day I wasn’t acclimatized to pacing myself or anything, so I kind of gunned it – I launched the procession carrying the banner. Towards the end of the day I did actually have to jump on the bus for one of the legs – I couldn’t walk up another hill, I was really pushing it.”

“Then there’s the spiritual challenges. There’s times when, as you’re praying, you need to find the motivation within yourself to continue praying and stay in that prayerful state.

By the time the pilgrimage reaches Bendigo Cathedral the numbers have swelled to 500 people for the final Holy Mass

There’s always a tendency to chat – but the fact that everybody else remains prayerful, you get to look at them and see that’s what I should be doing.

“The third challenge is mental. Once I got to the end of the third day, the end of the Pontifical High Mass, I was mentally and physically drained. But it wasn’t like a ‘bad drained’, like I’d gone and killed myself at the gym, it was kind of like a ‘fulfilling drained’ – I knew that what I’d given up would be replenished.” Joshua notes that the pilgrimage attracts people of all ages, from parents pushing their children in prams, to the elderly.



Above and below: The Christus Rex Pilgrimage is attended by people from all over Australia and internationally, particularly from New Zealand



“I remember there was an older fellow and his wife who were on it. They walked the morning stretch, then they caught the bus until morning tea, then they walked the stretch after that, and then they got on the bus till lunch, and did the stretch after that. So they found their own level of walking,” Joshua concludes.

Joshua is studying primary school teaching, and working as a learning support officer at a Catholic school. He says the chance to have deep conversations with people who are really committed to their faith has made him much more confident in answering questions that students have about religion.

“I’ve found that as a teacher, when kids ask me questions about their faith, I’m not drawing on a textbook,” he says. “I’ve had a conversation with somebody who has devoted their life to the Church, to study, so I’m able to give them an answer that’s both emotional and also intellectual.”

Asked if he was going to do the pilgrimage again this year, Joshua’s answer was unequivocal: “A hundred per cent.”

Registration at Pentecost

The number of pilgrims seems to be growing steadily each year. Registrations for the pilgrimage usually open at Pentecost. The pilgrimage’s website has tips for preparing both physically and spiritually for the experience.

With this year being named a Year of Youth in Australia, Joshua believes that experiences like Christus Rex can be important in engaging young people in a life of faith. “People are attracted to the extraordinary forms. Everyone’s drawn to it in that aspect,” he says. “But it’s also that fraternity of walking together, helping your mate get up that extra hill, challenging yourself and your friends. I’d say it’s a perfect fit for the Year of Youth.” ♦