

AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL: A COVID-19 ROAD TRIP

I was hardly surprised when my retreat at **New Mellarey Abbey** in Peosta, Iowa was canceled due to Covid-19. The Trappist monastery is my favorite spot for a retreat. While there, I would have joined the monks while chanting the monastic hours— all of them— commencing at 3:30 a.m. I'm all in! My calendar now freed up, I had an idea. Soon after my niece had flown home for Spring Break, she learned that her final semester of classes had been canceled. Yet her **car remained** in Boston. Admittedly, I had a stake in the action because “her” car was in fact **my old** Ford Escape, purchased in 2004. In the two years since I “gifted it” to my brother as an extra family car, it added about 22,000 miles and...Ahem, a **few scratches**, for which I bear **no ill-will** in my heart. It had spent the 2018-19 academic year with my nephew in Palo Alto, CA and this year in New England. With others at the wheel, it has subsequently traversed from “sea to shining sea,” enjoying its more adventuresome life.

Honestly, the solitude was heavenly. I hardly interacted with anyone, and social distancing was a cinch! If you think we are strict here about masks, think again. Everyone had them on, everywhere! When perusing Patristic titles at the **Harvard Bookstore** (how pretentious does **that** sound?), I had the entire section to myself. But that did not stop someone from approaching me to remind me that my mask, while covering my mouth, was **not quite** covering my **nose**. “When in Cambridge, do as the Crimson do!” Sadly, the famed **Eero Saarinen** designed Chapel at the **Massachusetts Institute of Technology** was locked. I called Campus Ministry, but it went to voice mail. It is a modern chapel, ecumenical in design, bathed in natural light that I had long desired to visit. Bummer—time to hit the road.

The next day I visited **Saint Mary of the Cataract** Church in **Niagara Falls, NY**. Did you know a church by that name existed? Neither did I! But that's not all. Its founding pastor was none other than **St. John Neumann** himself. The Church was surely supposed to be closed, but seeing a door barely cracked open, I decided to **go for it**. Utterly alone, I offered my rosary for the poor custodian who forgot to latch the door properly. I pulled it tight as I exited, in hopes that my **good deed atoned** for my breaking and entering! Virtually everything is **closed** in upstate New York. With the luxury of time, I took two long strolls down to the **American Falls**. It was eerily deserted. Many of my photos have no one in them—not by design. Covid has literally shut down the economy. On a typical summer day, the area would be hopping.

I smiled when seeing a 1969 photo of the American Falls when they were **shut off** (diverted by 28,000 tons of rocky fill upstream), so that steel bolts and cables could be installed to stabilize the rocks. Much to my family's chagrin, that project coincided with our family trip to Cape Cod. Just shy of my 6th birthday, our visit was memorable if for no other reason than we were part of history! My first visit was radically altered due to geologic maintenance issues, while my second was surreal due to a pandemic. My **track record** with Niagara isn't exactly sterling! Even though I carefully plotted a route solely stateside, my iPad's GPS continuously re-routed me to Canada, apparently oblivious to the border closings. I finally pulled over and re-calibrated, plugging in Cleveland just to “fool” the computer. Even technology has its limits. Driving across this vast land, expansive vistas stretch out before our eyes. This is **America the beautiful!**

While I only saw glimpses of Lake Erie when approaching Cleveland, local economies have depended upon the commerce the lake provided. As steamboats became more popular, the demand for coal and iron increased. Ohio was once among the wealthiest states in the nation. The Old West End Victorian mansions near the magnificent Our Lady, Queen of the Most Holy Rosary Cathedral in **Toledo** bear witness to this era. Far too many are deteriorating, victims of urban blight and the construction of I-75. Toledo's story has been repeated in many an urban core; cities continually navigate change. Because of preparations for a priesthood ordination, the secretary told me that the Cathedral was open, and it was absolutely **magnificent** to behold. Truly one of the gems among U.S. Cathedrals, it boasts the same architect who designed Saint Mark's in St. Paul.

To provide a driving reprieve, I boarded the **Lake Express** Ferry (Muskegon, MI to Milwaukee, WI). The ferry ride across Lake Michigan was swift, smooth and serene, with barely 20 people on board this catamaran-style ferry. My car was one of just a half dozen aboard and I wrote this column while gazing out across the **world's**

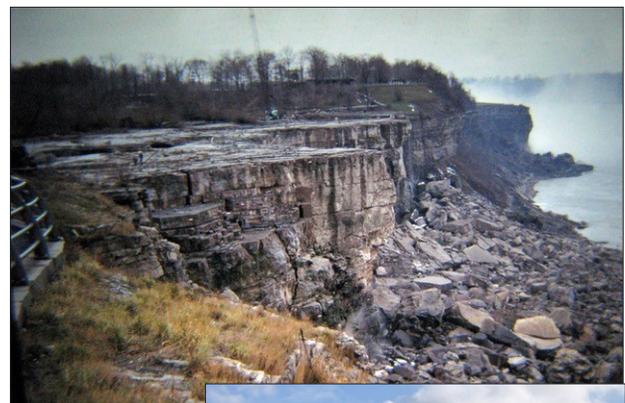
5th largest lake. The journey of 87 nautical miles was worth the price of admission, just to avoid Chicago traffic. That alone would have broken any spirit of recollection. While at times it was a tad windy on the lonely observation deck, it was like having my own private yacht. I could see the Basilica of Saint Josaphat in the distance as we approached the pier, as well as Miller Park, still awaiting the first pitch of the season. The **solitude** of the 1400-mile journey across half our nation was as refreshing as it was necessary. May God shower His abundant blessings upon our nation. We need them now more than ever.

- More food for thought: “America will be great if America is good. If not, her greatness will vanish like a morning cloud.” (Source: **Andrew Reed and James Matheson**, “A Narrative of the Visit to the American Churches” 1835 A.D.) Reed and Matheson were English ministers.
- I was delighted to see that both the I-35W bridge and Target Field were illuminated for two nights in honor of all **2020 graduates**. Missing out on so much, they deserve the kudos for a job well done.
- Sixty years ago, **July 4, 1960**, Old Glory debuted with **50 stars**, reflective of the dual 1959 admissions to the Union of Alaska (January 3) and Hawaii (August 21). As we commemorate our nation’s 244th birthday, despite her flaws, may we strive to remain “one nation under God, with liberty and justice for all.”
- Just as I was heading outside for my early morning exercise last Saturday, the signature 80 dB vroom of a **Harley-Davidson** revving its engine squelched any lingering drowsiness! When I opened the gate on Selby, a man was gazing up towards the rectory and church. He spotted me and shouted, “Hey bro, do you live here?” “Yes, I do,” I dutifully responded. “Wow, you’re a lucky man,” as he revved a few more times. Indeed I am, indeed I am.
- An article published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) indicates that data support the benefit of **wearing face masks** in public. It reports: “Our analysis reveals that the difference with and without mandated face covering represents the determinant in shaping the trends of the pandemic. This protective measure significantly reduces the number of infections.” While not required at the Cathedral, they are certainly strongly encouraged.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector

AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL



Above:
June 1969
American Falls
Water diverted for
maintenance issues

Right:
June 2020
American Falls
176 Feet high
600,000 gallons/sec.

