

A regular part of our pilgrimage is a visit to the Roman Catholic shrine based on the Slipper Chapel, a mile south of Walsingham village. The chapel is so called because before the Reformation it was the last stopping place before pilgrims reached the shrine; here they would remove their footwear following the long tradition of worshippers taking off their shoes “because the place where you are standing is holy ground.” (In England today people often think of worshipping barefoot as a distinctively Muslim practice, but for many Christians in the Middle East and Asia it is a tradition they have inherited from the early days of Christianity.)

Although pilgrimage to Walsingham never completely ceased after the destruction of the shrine by Henry VIII, it was really only in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that the restoration of the shrine began to be possible. Unfortunately the division of the Reformation was reflected in the creation of two shrines: in the village itself by the Vicar of Walsingham, Hope Patten, and at the Slipper Chapel which had been given to the Roman Catholic Church in 1896.

Although the existence of two shrines continues to be a painful reminder of continuing conflict between Christians and of past persecution, it also provides a powerful incentive to prayer for unity and an opportunity for pilgrims to commit themselves to it. The recent signing of an ecumenical covenant under the single title of “The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham”<sup>\*</sup> is not only a sign of how interchurch relations have moved from hostility through rivalry to cooperation but also a challenge to overcome the remaining obstacles to reconciliation between divided Christians.

This is why the visit to the Roman Catholic shrine is an integral part of our pilgrimage. Of course not only the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church are present in Walsingham. Those who walk to the Slipper Chapel have a chance to visit the Orthodox church (and there is also an Orthodox chapel in the Shrine Church itself.) For several years now the local Methodist minister has also been a welcome participant in the National Pilgrimage. (In this connection it is worth remembering that a fine introduction to the rosary was written by the Methodist minister the Revd Neville Ward under the title “Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy.”)

That deep bitterness still infects some Christian divisions it is illustrated by the fact that noisy (and many would say joyless) protesters try to disrupt the National Pilgrimage every year. But, as we know, God wastes nothing and even these protests can serve as an encouragement to all pilgrims to recommit themselves to playing their own part in the fulfilment of Christ’s own prayer “*that they may all be one.*”

*\* A copy of the covenant signed by the Administrator of the Anglican Shrine and the Rector of the Roman Catholic Shrine has also been placed on the Our Lady of Faith section of the parish website.*