

What are we doing to preserve our faith?

Written by Mark Pavilons

Living vicariously through my eldest daughter's exploits, I pondered faith and culture recently.

Lexie just returned from a week-long volunteer mission trip to Guatemala. She likes to be fully immersed in the culture of every country she visits.

In Antigua, Guatemala, the cobblestone streets are a reminder of the past, of a culture with very deep roots. Antigua is a small city surrounded by volcanoes and known for its Spanish colonial buildings, many of them restored following a 1773 earthquake that ended Antigua's 200-year reign as Guatemala's colonial capital.

Notable architectural examples include baroque La Merced church, an integral part of the city's famous Semana Santa, a holy week with parades and rituals. Antigua was founded in 1542.

Can you imagine the tales those walls and streets could tell over the past 476 years?

The culture of Guatemala reflects strong Mayan and Spanish influences and continues to be defined as a contrast between poor Mayan villagers in the rural highlands, and the urbanized and relatively wealthy mestizos population that occupies the cities and surrounding agricultural plains.

Can you imagine sharing ancestry with the wonderful and mysterious Mayan civilization? The society developed by the Maya people is filled with historic milestones, including the only known fully developed writing system of the pre-Columbian Americas. The Mayans were also known for their art, architecture, mathematics, calendar, and astronomical system.

My newest passion is collecting ancient religious artifacts, including pendants, rings and crosses, dating back to the Roman, Byzantine and medieval periods. My fascination is that these bronze trinkets represented some fundamental human qualities. Life, 1,000-plus years ago, was hard, often intolerable. All that average people had were their families and their faith. The little crosses that I carry are a testament to that strength of faith, an unshakable ray of hope in an otherwise challenging existence.

Today, the crucifixes and chains we wear are made in China, or stamped out of stainless steel in a cold, faithless factory.

The dictionary defines faith as having "complete trust or confidence in someone or something." We have faith in people; our community; our political system and our health care. Some of this faith is founded in fact and science, and the rest is based on gut feeling or emotion.

When my son and I spent a week in the Dominican Republic, helping the desperate Haitian sugar cane workers, we discovered a lot about faith, this glimmer of hope that makes the next sunrise tolerable.

Displays of Christian and Catholic faith is everywhere in the Dominican.

We visited Higüey, home of the famous Basilica Nuestra Señora de la Altagracia in Higüey. It's the scene of annual pilgrimages that draw thousands of visitors each year.

This place is amazing and you can't help but be impressed by the architecture and the "feeling" of the place.

Christopher Columbus landed on the island on Dec. 5, 1492, which the native Taíno people had inhabited since the 7th century. The colony of Santo Domingo became the site of the first permanent European settlement in the Americas, the oldest continuously inhabited city, and the first seat of the Spanish colonial rule in the New World.

Oh, the richness of such history.

In both Guatemala and the Dominican, 16th century churches beckon. They have alluring qualities that defy time.

The "holy wars" waged during the Crusades actually improved the world in terms of commerce and trade, technology and the sharing of knowledge and culture. This game-changing period, all in the name of God, was integral in human history and our modern evolution.

Here, in the modern, "first world," Christianity is declining and churches are closing. We're more in touch with our self-driving cars than we are in a higher being. We can no longer recite the Lord's Prayer in school.

Our villages and hamlets were once defined by our small community churches. In many cases, these historic landmarks have not been preserved.

King Township is blessed with one amazing, spiritual place - Marylake Monastery and Our Lady of Grace Shrine. This property and facility offer a cornucopia, a veritable feast for your mind, body and soul.

The beautiful 400-seat Shrine echoes with sounds from the 1928 Aeolian Skinner organ, one of only three in the province. It's a melding of two famed instruments, one from the Eaton estate, the other from the Seagram estate. If you get a chance, check it out!

Marylake is home to Augustinian monks and nuns and hosts annual pilgrimages.

Their ranks are thinning, too.

I'm not preaching about the benefits of organized religion. I'm talking about preserving an aspect of our society, one shared by millions of people around the world. Having hope, faith and celebrating a sense of community is what it's all about.

It's also about our history and our forefathers, who forged something out of nothing. While our seeds may have come from our European ancestors, our roots are now here, firmly planted in this part of Ontario.

This is our home and native land. This is a place we have "faith" in.

The past, present and future are all tied together, like veins in a maple leaf. Let's be proud of our faith in our fellow human beings and our faith in what brings us all together.