

Pilgrims to the Caribbean.(DESTINATIONS Catholic shrines)

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El Caimito, Dominican Republic

An informal group of parishioners from the Hispanic Ministry at Blessed Trinity Catholic Church in Ocala, Fla., made a pilgrimage in mid-March to the Dominican Republic and gathered at a popular shrine to Mary.

The group journeyed during Lent, praying at sacred and not-so-sacred places, and witnessing the humility of the poor in the Caribbean nation, located on the Island of Hispaniola, which the country shares with Haiti to the west.

One such sacred location is the Basilica of Our Lady of Altagracia in Higüey. The building, designed to resemble praying hands, serves as an evacuation shelter during hurricanes and is one of the nation's most important pilgrimage locations. According to legend, the image of Our Lady of Altagracia (meaning "high grace" or "full of grace") appeared on an orange tree. At that site an orange tree now grows where a grotto was built, later a church in 1572, and the basilica in 1972.

"The shrine is a pilgrimage to people from all over the world," said Bishop Gregorio Pena of Higüey. The basilica is home to the small portrait of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus, placed high above the altar in a display resembling an orange tree. The lesson, Pena noted; is that "the most important thing is humility and service to the poor and needy people. It is the testimony of service to the humble."

Iris Veguilla, one of the Florida travelers, said, "I learned from the trip to commit yourself to God and he will give you many gift, such as a love for people. Everyone has gifts, some more, but they treat people the same, giving love to each other like Christ."

Rosario Robles of Ocala, originally from the Dominican Republic, was very much at home during her stay at Spiritual Center St. John of the Cross, or Centro de Espiritualidad San Juan de la Cruz, where her cousin Fr. Agustin Fernandez, a Discalced Carmelite, serves as director. The center, located in the village of El Caimito, offers simple rooms for \$15 a night, but boasts a heavenly mountaintop vista of the rural and pastoral region. "There was great peace in that place," she said. "In the chapel I felt an angel was staying there. Maybe St. John of the Cross was with us himself. There was a lot of peace in the sky."

[Jannet Walsh is a photojournalist living in Ocala, Fla.]

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