

Pastoral Letter 9

Dear Friends

Life continues to be irregular and perplexing during this time of lockdown. Places that were once teeming with the hustle and bustle of daily life have become ghost-towns with massive restrictions - from school closures to travel restrictions and bans on mass gatherings. It is an unparalleled global response to a disease. But when will it end and when will we be able to get on with our lives? Prime Minister Boris Johnson has said he believes the UK can "turn the tide" against the outbreak and the country can "send coronavirus packing".

Undoubtedly, we all long for an exit strategy - a way of lifting the restrictions and getting back to normal; perhaps even finding the freedom to go on holiday this summer.

I had considered exploring Andalucia, Southern Spain; a captivating area where the influence of Islam and Christianity are very much apparent. Two cities, in particular, Granada and Córdoba are worthy of mention since they contain two of the most stunning buildings in the world.

In Granada the majestic Alhambra sits on a hill overlooking the city - a large complex of buildings including a fortress, palace and exquisite gardens. These were all constructed for the Muslim princesses and princes who ruled the area. There are sumptuous carvings, spectacular decorations and an ingenious water system conveying tranquillity and loveliness to the setting.

In Córdoba there is one of the largest and most astonishing constructions in the world. Muslims began building their resplendent mosque here in 785CE. Again, the design contains some gorgeous carvings. Significantly memorable here, however, are the hundreds of pillars and arches throughout.

In 1236CE Córdoba was conquered by Christian armies resulting in defeating the Muslims and the conversion of their mosque into a Christian church. For nearly three hundred years only minor alterations were made to the building. However, during the sixteenth century the central area of the mosque was destroyed and a cathedral constructed in its place.

The result is quite breath-taking today. One may explore for some time the original columns of the mosque and then precipitously encounter a Christian cathedral, built in a completely different style,

Undoubtedly there was much controversy when the cathedral was first built inside the mosque. However, most people would now agree that the two sections and these two great authorities - Muslim and Christian - exist in perfect harmony, side by side.

Andalucia is an incredible example of the colossal influence that different cultures can have on an area. The amalgamation of Christian, Muslim and other traditions brings an abundant richness to life in that place. Moreover, within a short distance from the Mosque / Cathedral construction in Córdoba is the Roman Bridge extending over the River Guadalquivir and the charming Jewish quarter.

The period following the Christian re-conquest of Southern Spain was a time of intolerance leading to the exclusion of Jews and Muslims. Today, however, Southern Spain presents a blend of many different influences providing interest, distinctiveness and vitality.

Back home, our own school community continues to embrace this same ethos of inclusivity and diversity resulting in a remarkable richness to life from which we all benefit. Our responsibility during this period of lockdown and beyond, however, is to ensure we continually attempt to build tolerance, curiosity and respect for others into all we are and do. This is a priority for us all.

Once the pandemic restrictions are over try to visit the Alhambra in Granada and the grand mosque in Córdoba. They serve as a parable of how different cultures, styles and influences can convene side by side in harmony and as part of a unified whole.

With my prayers and blessing

Father Andrew Hutchinson