Two questions lie at the heart of our pilgrimage in 2011. Is the Holy One visible to the human eye? And if so, are mortals allowed to depict something of that vision, in drawing, carving or sculpture, or some other form that communicates this appearance of the divine?

First, is it possible for mortals to see the Divine? Within the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, God is always the initiator. And certainly, the Holy One can choose to communicate with human beings in speech. The ancient Hebrews believed that thunder was the voice of God. Psalm 29 is a celebration of the impact of God’s voice, thunder, upon the created world; the impact of such a violent thunderstorm was to cause worshippers in the Temple to cry out: “Glory”. God’s presence is “The Glory”. But God also chooses to communicate in human speech. God walks and talks with the first humans in the garden (Genesis chapters 2 and 3). God calls Abram and Sarai (Genesis 12), God speaks to Moses out of a bush that seems on fire but is not consumed (Exodus 3), and gives long instructions on the content of the covenant with Israel, while Moses is atop Mount Sinai. God speaks to people like Isaiah and Jeremiah, and they become speakers of God’s word to the people.

But is God ever visible to mortals? Here the Jewish tradition is ambiguous. There are places where God is said “to appear” to individuals or even groups: so God appears to Abraham in Genesis 17 and 18, although in what form the author does not say. Later in Exodus 24, we are told that Moses, his brother Aaron and seventy elders of the people of Israel “saw” God at a feast on the slopes of Mount Sinai. But these are unusual statements. Much more typical of the Old Testament is the story in Exodus 33. There Moses, about to take up again the leadership of the Israelites, in order to bring them through the desert, asks as a sign of the certainty of God’s presence, that he be permitted
to see “your Glory”. Moses is told firmly that this is impossible; “You cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live”.

This belief in the invisibility of the Holy One to the human eye lies behind the complete prohibition in the Jewish faith of any attempt to portray God. The commandment against the making of graven images for worship is absolute (Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5). The book of Isaiah ridicules the makers of forged metal, carved wood or sculpted stone images that attempt to portray the Divine (Isaiah 44).

But are the decorative arts – painting, drawing, sculpting, engraving and the others – permissible in the decoration of the house of God? This second question has deeply divided the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions. At first glance it would seem to us natural that all the human arts and skills should be brought to the praise of God. If poets and musicians can contribute to honouring the divine glory, surely visual artists have an equally honourable and essential role to play. Not so, others have replied with equal fervour! In such portrayals the artist intrudes upon the absolute sanctity of the invisible God, and distracts from, rather than enhances, true worship.

Our journey in May 2011 will bring us to engage a number of different communities that have held passionately to each side of this last question. We begin in Nice at the Musée National Marc Chagall. Here, Chagall, a 20th Century Russian Jew, sets out in canvass and in stone to depict with vigorous colour and lively forms, various aspects of the Biblical story. A kilometre away sits the Russian Orthodox Cathedral of Saint Nicholas. There, standing or seated before the iconostasis, the icon screen, we shall attempt to explore through a myriad of richly gilded and ornamented images, the mystery of the Eastern Orthodox icon as passageway into the divine presence.

Our next centre will be the ancient and charming Roman city of Arles. This city, sitting astride the two-thousand year old Roman highway from Italy to Spain, was a gathering point on the Camino, the road to the shrine of St. James (Santiago) of Compostella. We shall gather at the ruins of the Abbey of Alyscamps (the Elysian fields), and walk a few kilometres along the Camino. We will pause, as pilgrims did, to visit the Church of Saint-Trophime, the Greek assistant to Saint Paul (see Acts 21: 29 and 2
Timothy 4:20) who was, according to legend, the first bringer of the Christian faith to Arles. The front of the church is adorned with a spectacular sculpted portrayal of the Last Judgement. Two days trips out of Arles will both take us south into the Camargue, the salt marsh delta of the Rhone River. At Saintes-Marie-de-la-Mer we will pray in an ancient church whose fortress shape reflects a history of defence of the village against the regular raids of North African pirates. This church contains the shrine, honoured by Gypsies (or Travellers or “Roma”, as they prefer to be called) from across Europe, as the burial site of the women who discovered the empty tomb of the resurrected Christ, and their dark-skinned servant Sarah. Our second trip out of Arles will take us to Aigues-Mortes, a completely walled city of the 13th century. There we shall visit both the prison where French Protestants were incarcerated, sometimes for decades, and a museum that tells something of the story, including their attempts to remove all images from Christian churches.

From Arles we will spend a day travelling north to a plateau in the Massif Central and the village of Le-Chambon-sur-Lignon. Enroute on what we are calling our travel-and-play day, we shall enjoy stops at the Pont du Gard (the 50 km long aquaduct that brought water to the Roman city of Nimes), and at Avignon with an opportunity to dance on the mediaeval bridge of Saint-Bénézet. We will also pause in Chateauneuf du Pape for optional wine-tasting. We shall spend two nights in Le Chambon, with a day given to encountering the remarkable Protestant communities of the plateau who saved the lives of several thousand Jewish children and adults during the period of Nazi attempts at their extermination in the Second World War.

We descend then to Lyon, third metropolis of France (after Paris and Bordeaux). The centre of Lyon is a World Heritage Site, which we will have opportunity to explore on the free day included in our stay here. Two churches are part of our pilgrimage. At Saint Bruno, a 17th century Baroque church, we will experience the confidence that our church interiors may indeed display the glory of the divine presence on earth. In contrast, in the simple crypt of Saint Irenaeus, we will be in the presence of second-century

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1 As is the other women would not, of course, had olive-coloured skin.
2 Did you learn in French class the children’s song: “Sur le pont d’Avignon, on y danse, on y danse…”
Christianity, and the shrine of the great Greek theologian, who proclaimed that “God’s glory is the human being fully alive”.

North from Lyon we will halt in Autun, a town in the old Celtic heartland of France, founded in the era of the emperor Augustus as a new capital for the region. Here our meditation will focus on the astounding work of Gislebert, the 12th-century sculptor whose images decorate the Cathedral of Saint Lazarus – yet another church claiming links to the earliest Christians. We shall also drive into the forested countryside and up to the remains of the great Celtic hilltop fortress of Bibracte, where some of the final confrontations took place between the Celtic peoples of France and the invading Roman armies under Julius Caesar.

Our final stage will take us through Fontenay, the monastery founded by St. Bernard of Clairvaux and the earliest Cistercians. A ruin miraculously preserved across the centuries, Fontenay illustrates beautifully the Cistercian determination to purge the mediaeval Catholic Church of all visual art as distraction from the true worship of God. We then drive on to Geneva. From our lodging there in the John Knox Centre, the last excursion will take us to the contemporary Chapel of Notre Dame in Passy, where some of France’s greatest artists – among them Matisse, Rouault, Braque, Chagall, Lipchitz, Lurçat - contributed to the adornment of a sanatorium chapel seventy years ago.

Our journey will bring us into six UNESCO World Heritage sites. In addition to Lyon, these include the ancient centre of Arles (including its intact Roman amphitheatre where bull-fighting events are still held each year); a portion of the Camino (the roads crossing France for pilgrims to Santiago di Compostella); the three-tiered Roman aqueduct, the Pont du Gard; the historic centre of Avignon where in the 14th century the Popes built an alternative capital to Rome (the palace finally abandoned in 1409 after the reunion of Christendom); and lastly, the virtually intact remains of the Cistercian monastery of Fontenay.

We will be lodged and fed in modest, but comfortable two-star hotels in Nice, Arles, Le Chambon, Lyon and Autun, while for our final three days in Geneva we will be guests of the John Knox Centre near the World Council of Churches. In our different locations we will enjoy the hospitality of Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholic and
Reformed Churches. As always worship will punctuate our days. There will also be time for exploring our neighborhoods, for enjoying walking the Mediterranean beaches, and a free day in Lyon for museum-going and shopping.

In this our fifteenth year of organizing and leading pilgrimages, we look forward to new encounters with the people of God of other eras as well as our own. It will be good to greet again those who have travelled with us before, and to meet the pilgrims who join us for the first time. We think with fondness of those who shared past journeys, and can no longer travel, but still accompany us in spirit. We are as ever deeply grateful to our registrar – friend and companion – Linda Lee Henriksen, who handles with such cheerful efficiency the process of communication with all the pilgrims. Linda Lee will again be our assistant during the actual pilgrimage. More than any of you will know, she is also a strong and steady partner with us as we move both through the year of preparation, and the journey itself.

One of our spiritual ancestors with whom we shall spend time this pilgrimage, bishop Irenaeus of Lyon, left for all future generations, our own included, the profound insight that “the glory of God is a human being fully alive”. May this journey be for us all such an expanding of our capacity for living!

The Eve of Lent, March 8th, 2011 Lynne E. McNaughton & R. Gerald Hobbs