



# NAVIGATING BEYOND A TRAVEL-NIGHTMARE PANDEMIC

BY JIM GRAVES



**AS** 2020 began, Corporate Travel of Northville, Michigan was on its way to having its best year ever. Family-owned and -operated since its founding in 1965, the firm was having a banner year organizing and executing a variety of travel activities, including many Catholic pilgrimages and events. But March 2020 brought lockdowns and restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic, closed national borders, and created a fear of illness leading many to stay home.

"It was a very difficult time," recalled Ann Arbor Chapter member John Hale, president and co-owner of the firm. "We had to cancel travel plans for 40,000 people within a couple of months, and had them demanding millions of dollars in refunds."

Much of the money had already been sent to restaurants, hotels, and other travel-related establishments, which had closed and were either unable or unwilling to return deposits. John continued, "When we began the year, we were going ahead 100 miles an hour. Then, suddenly, we hit a brick wall."

## AFTER A PAINFUL 2020

After many painful months, which included extensive layoffs and an adjustment to the company's business model, Corporate Travel is again heading in a positive direction, and John anticipates that many strong years lay in the company's future.

John began his career as an attorney, graduating from the honors college of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and the Detroit Mercy School of Law. He was a clerk for a Michigan Supreme Court justice and a litigator before leaving the practice of law and joining Corporate Travel, founded by his father-in-law.



Corporate Travel's sold-out Good News Marriage Cruise, January 2021.

He and brother-in-law David DiFranco have since become co-owners of the firm.

Pre-pandemic the firm employed 75 full-time and 30 contract employees working in five divisions: educational travel, music travel, pilgrimage travel and events, large group cruise and charter music business, and Exceptional Journeys. About a quarter of the firm's business involves Catholic pilgrimages and events, including some organized for Legatus members.

The most immediate crisis imposed by the pandemic was refunding as much of the deposit money as possible due to cancellations, followed by a "pivot" towards organizing local trips, as overseas travel was prohibited, and service to smaller groups. John noted, "Whereas previously we might have done events for groups of 40 to 100, now these groups might be 20 or 30."

And, unfortunately, nearly half the staff was laid off.

## FAITH INTERWOVEN IN BUSINESS

John's faith is of paramount importance in his life, and it is interwoven into his business. Corporate Travel regularly organizes Catholic conferences and pilgrimages designed not only to be entertaining vacations, but to nourish participants' Catholic faith and help them connect with other like-minded people.

In November, for example, Corporate Travel organized a "tremendously successful" Good News Conference in Orlando, in conjunction with Bishop Robert Barron's Word on Fire. The annual sold-

out conference featured three days of Florida sun along with presentations by such speakers as Bishop Barron, Fr. Mike Schmitz, and Chris Stefanick. More than 600 attended; other spiritual activities included Mass,



Father Mike Schmitz (left) and Abbot Jeremy Driscoll, OSB (right), were among featured speakers at Corporate Travel's Good News Conference held in Orlando in November 2021. At center are John and Kristan Hale.

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Confession, adoration, and rosary.

In January, Corporate Travel organized a Good News Cruise through the Caribbean. Also an annual conference, the seven-day cruise welcomed such speakers as Archbishop Charles Chaput, Scott Hahn, Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers, and Dr. Ray Guarendi. Its focus is on strengthening marriages; over 500 participated.

"Participants of our past marriage cruises not only offered favorable comments, but we were surprised to learn that some marriages were even saved from divorce," John remarked.

John likes to offer the marriage cruise as a Catholic alternative to the "hook-up" cruises offered by some organizations. They include daily Mass, adoration, vespers, rosary, and Confession. And, John noted, "There's always a lot of light-hearted fun and laughter."

Other upcoming annual Catholic events include a



Family Grand Getaway to Mackinac Island, a popular tourist site in northern Michigan, with Fr. Donald Calloway its featured speaker.

Bob Schwartz is a fellow Legatus Ann Arbor Chapter member who participated in a previous Mackinac Island trip as well as another Corporate Travel trip to the historic Greenbrier Resort in West Virginia. Bob described both experiences as “incredible,” and explained, “We traveled with other families and were able to make new friends, have Mass daily, and lots of time to enjoy a fabulous location.”

He praised John and David DiFranco because they “follow the golden rule and treat their customers as they would want to be treated. Their attention to detail and ability to put together wonderful experiences are what set them apart.”

Michael Ritchie, another Ann Arbor Legatus member, said of his trips taken through Corporate Travel: “Every time I come back, I feel closer to God and with a greater awe of the beauty of the world.”

He continued, “John has a special calling, a natural entrepreneurial talent, and a true love of travel. He’s amazing to watch.”

While it is true people can research on the internet and plan and book their own trips, Corporate Travel can add much more, John believes. The firm’s Catholic events offer a spiritual component, such as Catholic speakers, Mass, and devotions as well as the companionship of like-minded Catholics. The firm also boasts extensive knowledge about how best to travel, and has access to special activities. Referencing a trip to Italy, John explained, “The oldest gelato-maker in Rome is a good friend, and he can give us a private gelato-making course. We can take you into the Swiss guards’ barracks or the Sistine Chapel after it has closed, things you could never do on your own.”

While travel is far from being at pre-pandemic levels, John is optimistic about the industry’s future. He believes things will go the way of the industry in the aftermath of 9/11, when many were afraid to fly for a time due to terrorist fears. He explained, “Then people had physical safety fears versus health fears today. New protocols were put in place, like taking off our shoes and belts at security, and they’ve improved, and we’ve become accustomed to them. I think we’ll see new protocols to which people will become accustomed, and over time, more and more people will go back to traveling.”

## LEGATUS HELPED MAKE HIM A BETTER CATHOLIC

John credits Legatus for helping form him as a Catholic. He joined with wife Kristan in 2004, when the couple had three small children (two more were to come). He recalled, “We were sold on Legatus’ mission from the minute we became members. It was



John and Kristan Hale

wonderful to see the witness of its couples, juggling family and business. We’re incredibly grateful for the friendships we’ve had and the support they’ve offered to help us get through the crisis of the past two years.”

John says regular prayer plays a key role in his business. For example, he prayed a 54-day novena for the success of both the Good News Conference and Good News Cruise. The results are evident when he attends the events. He explained, “You can see something transcendent is going on. You know that God is present.”

His faith gives him a broader view of his business than if he held merely a secular view. He opined, “It is like the difference between looking at a black-and-white program versus one in Technicolor. With faith you see things so much more brightly and clearly.”

**JIM GRAVES** is a *Legatus* magazine contributing writer.

Mackinac Island, MI

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