If the Book of Genesis was looking for a home on earth, Lalibela, a town in the northern Ethiopian State of Amhara, might have been a good place to consider. Lalibela feels more ancient than its legible history. Everything, even people and their memories, is covered in dust here.

The Coptic Orthodox churches carved out of the subterranean volcanic rocks claim a history nearing a millennium. Lalibela, meaning “the bees recognise his sovereignty”, owes its name and Christian heritage to the Zagwe king and saint, Gebre Mesqel Lalibela. After the fall of Jerusalem in 1187, King Lalibela, a pious Christian, envisaged building a “New Jerusalem” within his own Ethiopian kingdom, complete with a River Jordan and a Golgotha. Legend goes it took 24 years to build the 11 churches, in daylight by King Lalibela’s men and at night by the angels.

Connected by pitch black tunnels, hermit caves and catacombs, the church complexes are recognised by UNESCO as a world heritage site. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, following the Julian calendar, celebrates Christmas, or Genna, on January 7. The advent weeks witness throngs of pilgrims on the streets of Lalibela barefooted and wrapped in their white cotton netelas. They come from all corners of the nation and walk together for days, sleeping on plastic sheets and cooking in makeshift stoves wherever night falls. Strangers turn into friends as the white netelas take on the hues of the hard mountain road. Much of Lalibela’s holiness is unspoken. Like the tradition of Asmat— the secret names of God that the pilgrims carry on their bodies enclosed in talismans. Mystery is everywhere. The blisters on the pilgrim’s feet seem to disappear as you watch and the hum in your ears sounds like a swarm of bees approaching.

Abuna Ammanuel (Father Immanuel) had this to say, standing outside Ben Giorgio’s church: “The long road to faith is always under construction. And full of potholes. But you keep walking.”

Pearl Jenifer is a teacher based in Sydney.