

Shrines of Our Blessed Mother Pilgrimage
August 7-18, 2023

In the fall of 1993, I drove to Saint Paul in my first car: a 1981 Mazda 626. Eventually I put in a stereo system that probably doubled the value of the car. Each time I made the four-hour drive between home and the University of Saint Thomas, you can be sure that I was rocking to the music that made the 80's so memorable. My favorite cassette tape was from the duo Daryl Hall and John Oats: "Big, Bam, Boom." To this day, whenever I hear a song from that album, I am transported back to my last two years in college and all those beautiful drives along the mighty Mississippi. That's a trip that is forever etched in my memory.

But this is the story of a pilgrimage, which is not exactly the same thing as a trip to college. For starters, a pilgrimage introduces a supernatural dimension. Because we were created by God to know, love, and serve Him in this life so as to be happy with Him in the next, nothing in this life will satisfy us for very long. The power of a pilgrimage is to remind us that "*here we have no lasting city,*" (Hebrews 13:14). Because we are just passing through this world on our way home to the Lord, a pilgrimage seeks to set our hearts on a world that will never end. When a pilgrimage is successful, those who participate experience something similar to what the disciples felt on the road to Emmaus: "*Were not our hearts burning within us as He spoke to us along the way?*" (Luke 24:32). What follows is my humble attempt to capture some of the moments that made our pilgrimage a foretaste of the joy and communion that we hope to enjoy someday in Heaven.

We arrived in Paris on August 8th, which happened to be a Tuesday. Travel days are long and tiring, but many of us had been looking forward to this trip for a long time. When our hearts are fully engaged, it's amazing what we can endure. Paris was pleasant both because it was just the right temperature for walking, and it was relatively empty: many of the Parisians were away on their summer holiday. We went first to the Shrine of Saint Vincent de Paul and had the opportunity to pray at his tomb. Because of his towering influence on the life of Saint Catherine Labouré, it made sense to get to know him first. We then walked down the street to the famous Rue de Bac, where we entered the church made famous by the Marian apparition of 1830 and the subsequent creation of the Miraculous Medal. We attended Mass in French, offered by a Bishop who was somehow connected to the Diocese that was once served by the renowned Saint Augustine. The church was full, and it was the first of many experiences of the "catholicity" of our faith: so many different races and languages, all praying to the same God who made us in His image and likeness.



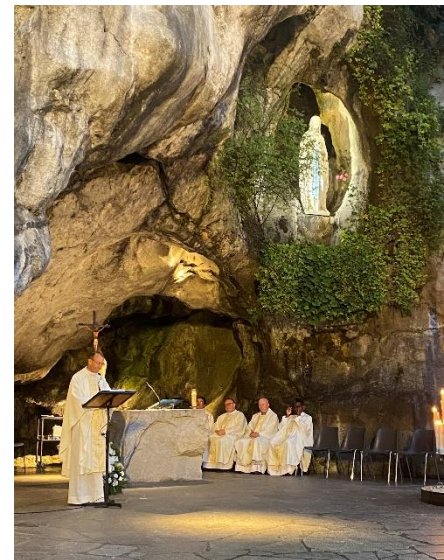
We spent some time praying at the tombs of Saints Catherine Labouré and Louise de Marillac and then hit the gift store to purchase Miraculous Medals for family and friends. Our next stop was at the base of what is probably the tallest hill in Paris. Please keep in mind that we were all feeling the effects of jet lag by this time and many of us temporarily lost consciousness on the bus ride across town. Once we arrived near the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, the fresh air and crowds of people revived us, and we began our ascent by praying the Rosary. We had some time to pray in the massive Basilica and even caught the tail

end of Eucharistic Adoration. From there we headed to a nearby restaurant and had our first dinner together. Between the animated conversation and the owner regaling us with piano tunes, we were wide awake and ready to conquer the world. And while some of the more intrepid among us experienced the beauty of Paris by ascending the Eiffel Tower, most of us gave in to the incessant pounding of Mr. Sandman and called it a night.

Our second full day began early with breakfast and a trip to the TGV train station. The logistics of traveling with 50 of your best friends defies explanation, but somehow Juan kept us cool, calm, and collected. We boarded our train for Lourdes and experienced the luxury of a fast train that practically floated across time and space. Given that it was still early in our time together, many of us were still getting to know each other and sharing the stories of how we ended up on this pilgrimage. But even in those early days, it was clear that the Holy Spirit was fostering a deep sense of communion and camaraderie.

Lourdes is one of the most beautiful places in the world. For many of us, our time there was the highlight of our trip. We arrived midafternoon and had time to get ready for Mass. The chapel was just the right size, and even if it was rather warm, it was a very peaceful beginning to our time with the Blessed Mother and Saint Bernadette. We had a lovely meal at our hotel and then made a quick visit to the Grotto before joining in the daily Marian procession. Already we were experiencing the deep peace that comes when we follow the Lord on pilgrimage.

August 10th began with what will forever be one of my fondest memories: Mass at the Grotto at 6:30 a.m. It was a cool morning with a gentle mist softening the mood. Our group got to provide the readers and the music, not to mention the presiding priest. To be in the very spot where Mary spoke so often to Bernadette was a unique grace that touched each of our hearts in unique ways. And that grace continued to grow and deepen as we got to know Bernadette and her family better. We had a wonderful tour of the places she called home, and we too grew in our desire to sing the song of Bernadette to our family and friends. After some free time for lunch, we prayed the Stations of the Cross on a steep hillside and then joined in the Eucharistic Procession that culminated in Benediction in the 20,000-seat crypt church. By far, this was the most-busy day with lots of walking and it ended once again with a beautiful Marian procession.



Thus ended our time in France. We were up early on Friday and met our Portuguese bus driver, Paolo – he was with us for the rest of our pilgrimage and ranks as one of the kindest, most competent drivers one could ever meet. From crossing the Pyrenees to navigating the traffic of places like Madrid and Lisbon, Paolo was always calm and of good humor. Of all the unsung heroes from our pilgrimage, Paolo was one of the most indispensable.

Entering Spain was an eye-opener: the climate was different (hot, dry, sunny) and the topography was much more rugged than France. The food was different, but the quality didn't drop off one bit. Our first meal in Spain was at the hotel we stayed at in Barbastro (just across from the house where Saint

Josemaría Escrivá was born) and it was amazing. After lunch, we drove to the Marian Shrine of Torreciudad and celebrated Mass. It was definitely a much warmer day than any we'd experienced so far. The views were amazing, and we walked down the hill to the original hermitage, dating back nearly 1,000 years. After dinner at the hotel, we enjoyed a relaxing evening in the town square. After the hustle and bustle of the first few days, we were grateful for a free evening that bore fruit in deepening friendships among our fellow pilgrims.

While we were already nearing the halfway point of our pilgrimage, it was clear that Juan had a very well-planned itinerary that kept us on the move. Our main experience on August 12th was to drive to Zaragoza and worship at the Basilica of Our Lady of the Pillar. On the bus Juan recounted the amazing story of how the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to Saint James in the first century, preparing him to become the first Apostle to die a martyr's death. We were able to touch or kiss the Pillar, and then we had Mass together in one of the nearby chapels. After lunch, it was time to board the bus and find out what the surprise was that Juan had been alluding to over the past couple of days. Insofar as I'd been on this pilgrimage once before (2018), I was trying my best not to let the secret out of the bag. When we pulled up to the castle in Sigüenza and Juan told us we'd be staying there overnight, there was an exuberant shout of joy. And if we weren't already duly impressed by the castle, we just so happened to arrive on the weekend of Sigüenza's annual festival. After Sunday Mass in the castle's chapel, one of my enduring memories is walking past people who had been up all night and were serenading the new day by raucously singing along to the Cranberries song, "Zombie." Somehow it gave perspective to the importance of a pilgrimage that has both purpose and a final destination.



On to Madrid and the sights and sounds of a big city. We visited the Cathedral and heard the story of the Reconquista and the discovery of a statue of Mary buried in a wall during the centuries of Muslim occupation. Madrid was hot and busy, but it was good to visit and recognize how blessed we'd been to always be spending time in smaller towns which were much more navigable for pedestrians. For example, our next stop in Segovia introduced us to one of the prettiest towns in all of Spain. From the unbelievable achievement of the 1st century Roman aqueduct to the formidable castle (Alcázar), we walked enough to see that Segovia has a lot to offer. We ended our tour by praying at the tomb of Saint



John of the Cross. As one of the towering Saints of Spain, John of the Cross taught the world that *"where there is no love, put love, and you will draw out love."* As a group of 50 pilgrims, each with our own stories, our own hopes and hurts, we were learning about the love that comes from friendship shared with Jesus and His people. The prayers of many people had primed our hearts to trust each other and the joy we experienced because of this is a gift that we can still taste and see.

We arrived in Avila on Sunday night and had our first views of one of the most beautiful walled cities in the world. Monday morning we celebrated Mass at the church of Sonsoles, which is home to a local Marian shrine. Saint Teresa of Avila was very familiar with this shrine and would have



visited it often as a girl growing up. We visited Saint Teresa's famous Carmelite monastery, the Encarnación. We were given a lot of information about the life of Saint Teresa and we saw where her heart was pierced by the incomparable love of God (a.k.a. her Transverberation). We also saw lots of the relics of her life as well as where she confessed her sins and received absolution from her spiritual director, Saint John of the Cross. The walking tour of Avila comprised a lot of the afternoon and included the church of Saint Joseph, her first foundation as part of her reform of the Carmelites. The church of her baptism was another stop, and the day ended with a walk around the top of the city walls. With all the fresh air and rather high temperatures, we ate our share of ice cream to make sure we wouldn't overheat.

Our next day began with another of Juan's surprises: Mass at the tomb of Saint Teresa of Avila. My first trip to Avila was in the summer of 2004 and I was disappointed when I realized that Saint Teresa is not buried in Avila. It's a very little-known fact that she is buried in the tiny town of Alba de Tormes, and that's where we stopped for Mass on the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Besides holding up the parish Mass and annoying the pastor, it was a peaceful stop and many were able to learn more about Saint Teresa's life by walking through the museum next to the church. With our time in Spain coming to an end, this was a perfect last memory to cherish in the years to come.

We stopped for lunch and then we slept through most of the Portuguese countryside on our way to Fatima. I was in the front of the bus visiting with a kind pilgrim and when I looked around, I realized that we were the only ones not napping (thankfully Paolo was awake too). We arrived in Fatima and had some time to shop before checking into our hotel and having dinner. It was noticeably cooler and breezy as we walked to the Apparition site and participated in the daily Rosary and procession. The crowds were smaller than Lourdes but the peace of being there was tangible.

Wednesday morning we prayed the Stations of the Cross and were surrounded by the type of land that the shepherd children traversed as they took care of their sheep. We were one of a number of different groups praying the Stations, including one that came from Ukraine. After the Stations we walked to the homes of both Lucia and her cousins, Francisco and Jacinta. It was a sunny, pleasant day and though we were not as energetic as we had been at the beginning of the trip, our hearts were still open and we were receiving many graces.



After a stop at the church where the children were baptized and raised, we had lunch and prepared for afternoon Mass at the Apparition site. It was another remarkable opportunity to pray in a remarkably holy place and we once again provided the reader, the music, and the priest. And while our envelope of petitions was brusquely cast aside, we nevertheless felt the comfort of our Mother's love and the intercessory power of the three Fatima seers.



Dinner, Marian procession (while we had one of our pilgrims help lead the Rosary the first night, the second night we were snubbed by some other pilgrimage company that doesn't hold a candle to Mater Dei), concluded our last night in Fatima. We departed for Mass in Santorem and there we witnessed one of the most impressive Eucharistic miracles ever. After being told that we would not be able to ascend the steps behind the altar to see Jesus up close, the sacristan eventually softened and we were given a very unique privilege of seeing a Consecrated Host that is still intact after nearly 800 years and the Blood of Jesus is obvious to all who visit. As Juan pointed out, our Marian pilgrimage led us to Jesus, and our hearts were more ready than ever to believe in Him and worship Him.

On to Lisbon, the last time we'd all be together. Shopping and having lunch in an incredibly busy mall and then settling into a five-star hotel were both rather overwhelming experiences. If that wasn't entertaining enough, we boarded a pair of amphibious vehicles called Hippos and we were given a PG-13 tour of the beautiful city of Lisbon. Of the various memories that we'll carry from our time together, watching fellow pilgrims get drenched by the intrepid drivers of the hippos is one that continues to stand out. We got back to the hotel a bit late and sat down immediately for our final dinner together. That night the first of our fellow pilgrims caught a separate flight and our fellowship was coming to a close. But not before some of the most poignant moments of the trip: loving hugs from our dear Marty, hypothermic temperatures in Philadelphia, and the blessing of returning to the places we call home.

Our pilgrimage is over, or at least so it seems. But, unlike my many road trips to college all those years ago, a pilgrimage is a trip whose proper end is in Heaven with God. While our time together has come to a close, what we shared in terms of God's blessings, the many sacramental graces, and the friendships that were forged in faith are all permanently stored in a safe place in Heaven. In the years ahead, when we pray, time and space will collapse, and we'll be spiritually united once again. Our pilgrimage began in this world, but it will only end someday when we are called home by God to His Kingdom. So, until we meet again, it was wonderful to travel together, and you were so much fun to be with and to get to know on a deeper level. I miss you already. May God continue to guide, bless, and protect you in the years to come!

Your friend in Christ,
Father Martin

