

Homily

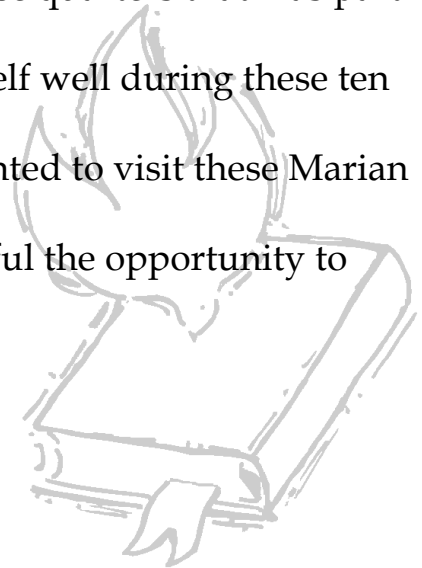
26th Sunday OT – A

Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
Sep 30 – Oct 1, 2023

Ez 18: 25-28
Ps 125: 4-5, 6-7, 8-9
Phil 2: 1-11
Mt 21: 28-32

Throughout my priesthood, throughout my life, I never had the opportunity to visit the Marion shrines in Europe until this year, and I have not been a good traveler over the last few years. It just seems that every time I go traveling, especially on cruise ships, I would get sick with the norovirus or whatever else virus the ship was carrying.

During my six-country journey to visit the Marian Shrines of Europe in September, we flew to Austria, Bosnia/Croatia, Spain, Portugal, France and Belgium. At the beginning of the trip, I contracted a virus that was common in Bosnia and contracted COVID at the end of the journey as well. I guess all the craziness and close quarters that was part of our pilgrimage, my health did not sustain itself well during these ten days. However, pilgrims in our community wanted to visit these Marian Shrines and far be it for me to deprive our faithful the opportunity to encounter God in the many places we visited.



We had six individuals that went with me and *Proximal Travel* was really nice in letting us go with such a small group. Two of our sojourners came from Morris, IL named Dot & Dave Wolverton; they came to our parish a lot when people on that end of the diocese were denied sacraments during COVID but we figured out a way to take care of the needy. Two of our Anglo community accompanied us – Susan Maki her daughter Marissa. Marissa just received her sacraments at the Easter Vigil and her teacher (David Surprenant) thought this trip would be really beneficial to her. Mother Susan had been out of the country before but Marissa had never been on an airplane, so this was a new experience for her.

Two choir members from our Hispanic community also joined us on the trip (Ana Rivas bought a special guitar and speaker from Amazon.com for the trip). Ana and her daughter Eileen were instrumental in helping us build a community in Momence that, in four years, has surpassed in number any other weekend Mass we celebrate at the Border Town Parishes.

So there we have it – two members of our Hispanic community, a married couple from the other side of the diocese and a mother-daughter from our Sunday morning liturgy in English travelled with me. We were all set for a ten-day adventure to Medjugorje, Fatima and Lourdes from September 6-15.

For me, visiting these Marion Shrines was really important for my faith. When I mentioned this trip to some in the community, I was dismissed by them; some in the community did not see this trip as important. For me, though, when you are a person of faith and experience how hundreds and thousands of good souls throughout the world come to these shrines because God and His Blessed Mother are that important to them as well, then I realize how faith should be just as important to me. I keep reminding myself that faith never should be dismissed or taken for granted. In order to get to heaven, each one of us needs to remember how God's presence can affect our lives and how that presence can guide us to our ultimate destination in our lives.

When I pay attention, I have noticed God's presence in all the places that our Blessed Mother appeared. In my experience, I noticed how God

most often communicated with *children*, the ones who are the most innocent, the ones who have not been tarnished by the world or who have yet learned about all kinds of “adult issues” of life, whatever they might be. Innocent children have not been conditioned about the ways of politics, do not care about wars or famines; all kids want to do is play in the sandbox with other kids, living a wonderful, simple life.

Our tour guide leaders repeated this message over and over again in the places we visited. When we travelled to Medjugorje, we learned that the investigators from the Vatican have not yet documented this apparition as authentic; tell that to the six children who encountered the Blessed Mother. In Medjugorje, we climbed Apparition Hill, where going up we encountered the fourteen stations of the cross and going down, the decades of the rosary. The tradition in Medjugorje is that soon to be brides ascend and descend the hill barefoot, in their wedding dresses, before getting married. The cobblestone paths going up and down are uneven; I have no idea how people do not fall and break their ankles on this journey.

While climbing “Apparition Hill,” we prayed the sorrowful mystery of the rosary. We prayed the rosary for the faithful of St. Anne’s Church, those at St. Patrick’s and those attending the Camino y Esperanza Retreat House. I prayed for the students and staff from the University of St. Francis. I prayed for the Poor Claire’s in Minooka and those I serve at the parishes of Morris and Seneca, IL in addition to those whom I served at former parishes.

During my first night in Medjugorje, I was told about the stories of these six children. One of them was named Ivan Dragicevic, who travels between Boston and Bosnia every year to tell the story of his encounter with the Blessed Mother. As the story goes, Ivan told his story to a group of pilgrims from Boston, MA, one of whom (Laureen Murphy) falling in love with Ivan and eventually marrying him in 1994. Today, Ivan and Laureen travel back and forth each year between Boston and Medjugorje.

The first night I stayed in Medjugorje, I decided to pray at St. James Church, which holds jurisdiction over the place the attested apparitions took place. The church was situated four blocks away from the hotel

where I was staying. When I entered the church, the faithful were engaged in adoring the Blessed Sacrament. Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament was taking place during the time I spent in church; the people that were praying joined with others around the world who shared this faith. I certainly need to be around people with faith to realize what it takes to get to the kingdom of heaven. We read and hear so much negativity about the Catholic Church or about people of other faith traditions; to see people who are so positive that they build up my own faith life and stirs my heart as does theirs... and hopefully yours!

So the first night I was visiting St. James Church, I was returning to the hotel when I ended up stopping at a grocery store to get a bottle of water. In Europe, there are two types of water you can get – with gas or without (natural water). I picked up the one with gas – the wrong bottle, as it turned out. After taking two swigs of the water, I became horribly sick and could not keep anything down, I found out. The entire night was a total misery for me.

The next morning I told our tour guide (a 26-year-old named Nina) that I could not travel with them that day – I was not feeling well. Nina

decided to drive me to Bosnia's version of a Quick Care center where the doctor in charge of Quick Care had the same problem I had; I found out that a similar virus passed around Bosnia that time of year. So the doctor who was sick prescribed biotics and antibiotics for me (the doctor suggested me taking the with a banana; the banana did not stay down, but the antibiotics did). By the end of the next day, I was fine.

That said, as I was waiting to get medicine from the drug store next door, the person standing in front of me was Ivan Dragicevic, the same man-child who claims to have encountered the vision of the Blessed Mother in 1981. At the drug store, we started talking about the apparition and how the Blessed Mother had affected his life. Had I not been sick, had I not been keeping anything down, I would have never met that man. That was my experience in Bosnia.

On the plane from Bosnia to Lisbon, Portugal, by the way of Barcelona, the transfer plan encountered mechanical failure, so we were stuck in Barcelona overnight. The airline company put us up in a hotel, with the most beautiful "hotel rain shower" I had ever experienced. Never in my life had I encountered a "rain shower" before. If any of you

would like to install a rain shower in the rectory, please feel free to do so.

So there we were, in Barcelona with no place to go. I decided to walk down the street four blocks, per the desk clerk's advice. The hotel desk clerk told me of a nearby church that might let us celebrate Mass there,. Peter and Paul Church in Barcelona. On that particular day, the area was celebrating what they called their "Independence Day" (every city, every distinct group of people have their own story to tell). I guess since that day was a holiday in that part of Spain, the airport staff would not let us celebrate a Mass at the airport chapel, so four blocks down the street, I encountered a woman named Maria, who was involved with what they called their "life teen" youth group in that parish over in Barcelona. Maria also happened to teach English as a second language in the area.

With Maria's help, we found the pastor of the church who allowed us entry into the basement chapel to celebrate Mass. We recorded that Mass (as well as three others) and put them all on our Border Town Channel from YouTube with highlights from our journeys. At this Mass,

various faithful parishioners of the were sneaking into the chapel to figure out what we were doing down there. At this Mass, I wore the chasuble of our Blessed Mother that I purchased in Medjugorje.

(https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g911483-d13996970-Reviews-Parroquia_de_Sant_Pere_i_Sant_Pau-El_Prat_de_Llobregat_Catalonia.html) (<https://elprat.parroquia.cat>)

After our unexpected stay in Spain, our group finally was able to reach Lisbon, Portugal, where our new tour guide took us to the city of Fatima. At this second major stop visiting Marian shrines, we were told the story he three children who encountered the blessed mother around the year 1917. One of the children lived long enough to encounter St. Pope John Paul II in the early 2000s.

In Fatima, we were introduced to the story of how these three children, very poor, very sick and very much in need of God's help were specifically chosen by the Blessed Mother to hold three secrets of the world that eventually came true; since then, the secrets have been revealed about the wars, about Russia and about the assassination of the Pope.

We were told how two of these three children died early in their lives. The third one, Lucia lived until the early 2000s. To tour their houses and to realize how simply these children lived the holy lives they lived made me reflect on how, if I or you possessed just a scintilla of that kind of innocence, we would be so much better off in this world.

The youngest pilgrim in our group, the newly confirmed Marissa Facko, was probably the best symbol of faith that expressed that type of childlike innocence we encountered that September in Europe. At our Sunday Masses in Momence, Marissa and her mother Susan usually sit in a corner of St. Patrick's church, without recognition, and would not be recognized for their faith, as were these children. Very unassumingly in Fatima with her mother, just like in church, Marissa was having a picture taken with her mother near a farm where a baby lamb approached her, a creature just as innocent as Marissa was.

When I took that picture of mom, daughter and baby lamb, I that Marissa had that kind of sentimentality of that baby lamb, a lamb that symbolizes such an important role in our faith – the innocent lamb slaughtered during the time of Passover in the Old Testament, a

different “lamb of God” in the New Testament who took away the sins of the world.

Inspired by this image, I went to a local store in Fatima and bought Marissa a lamb, one that Marissa held closely throughout her trip through Europe. I realized that sharing this faith with a mother and daughter who just finished the RCIA process, a mother-daughter so deeply invested in the faith who was experience this type of innocence in Europe for the first time like a kid at Christmas... to encounter something like that really stirred my heart and made me realize that this faith is just as evident “at home” as it is abroad.

At the end of our ten-day journey, we finally made our last flight to Toulouse, France with a three-and-a-half-hour bus ride to the city of Lourdes. Arriving to the city, we ended up visiting three basilicas in Lourdes - the large basilica where we celebrated two Masses above in their crypt church, on the other side of the courtyard to tour the small basilica and then taking a walkway down to the underground basilica (the last basilica was very small - it only holds 25,000 people!).

During our visits to the three Basilicas, we prayed for those we all serve in the various locations throughout the diocese, praying rosaries and singing hymns such. On the second day, Ana and Eileen wanted to attend the Mass celebrated in English, while a few of us prayed at the grotto where the BVM appeared to Bernadette, the grotto where Mass was being celebrated in French. This is the location from which the grotto in Momence is inspired and whose stone was stolen from the grotto after being dedicated in 1938.



By the way, our pilgrimage group was able to “acquire” two replacement stones from Fatima during our journey – how we acquired them is the subject of another homily (and maybe a confession?).

After we participated in the Mass celebrated in French, we were praying with the faithful who stood in line to venerate the spot where Bernadette encountered the Blessed Mother. While we were praying, an Indian gentleman decided to show me a spot two rows behind where I was sitting you. On that spot, we

viewed mosaic artwork that signified the precise location where St. Bernadette knelt during the 16th of the 18 apparitions she experience, the location where the Blessed Mother said to her, “I am the Immaculate Conception.” To pray at that spot, to experience that moment was an absolutely spectacular moment for me in the life of faith.



Before I prayed with the faithful at the French Mass, I went to one of the numerous religious goods stores in the area to purchase a large empty bottle to fill with the Blessed Water from Lourdes. It seemed like every one of those hundred or so stores surrounding the sells these bottles, from a little baby bottle to the monster I had to fill up with the water from Lourdes.

The taps for this water were in the form of little spigots which produced little trickles to fill the bottles. Marissa, Susan and I were trying to fill up our bottles, big and small - I purchased the big one and they did not (the cost for these empty plastic containers was two whole euros!). So there I stood after we acquired the rocks for our grotto, I wanted to bring the water from Lourdes back home to all of you.

As I was filling up this two-gallon jug with water from the rock (trickle-trickle-trickle), pilgrims from around the world realized I was a priest and asked me to bless their religious objects. In return, these pilgrims from Japan, the Philippines, France, Italy, Germany etc. started taking their bottles of water to fill mine so I could bring the water from Lourdes back to the faithful in the parishes I serve in Illinois and beyond. I received an education about the Blessed Mother at the shrines but I received far more blessings in service from good souls who understood the value of love.

After the bottle was filled, I wrapped that bottle in my own special way so if it exploded in my luggage, at least there would be no water coming out of the tape.

During the on-site Masses, I distributed those bottles of blessed water from Lourdes to the faithful of the parish and mailed a few to some of our nice benefactors as well. For me, distributing this water and sharing this experience is always about grace. The example of others taking their grace and pouring into my bottle was a metaphor of what I have to do

for all of you under my care. Grace is not something you are supposed to hoard; grace is something you are supposed to give away.

From our second reading from the second chapter of Philippians, we learn about this example of faith from a Lord who emptied himself for our sake to reveal himself as the least of us, and thus the greatest of us. This is kind of the reason why I am supposed to be a priest – to empty this bottle, to empty my life and to give it back to you. I do what I do all because of you – because God called me to empty myself for your benefit, always in God's name.

Keep doing what you are doing. Build the faith. Let us empty ourselves by sharing and emptying that love that God offered us with the people that we meet. This is our prayer.