Our Recent Parish Pilgrimage to Portugal, Spain and France

Hello Parishioners! Father Benny asked me to provide the Parish with a summary of last month's Pilgrimage to Fatima, Portugal, and to Lourdes, France and Burgos and Barcelona, Spain, which was organized by Collette Tours. The summary will be in 3 parts. Today's summary relates to the first leg of our Pilgrimage, our journey to Fatima, Portugal.

On Sunday, 9/20/26, nine Pilgrims from our Parish and one Pilgrim from Sr. Francis Xavier Parish set out with Father Benny to Dulles Airport. Collette Tours provided us with limo service from our Church parking lot, taking us directly to the Airport. After an overnight flight to Lisbon, Portugal with dinner and breakfast served on the plane, Collette provided a new Mercedes luxury bus that we used during our entire time in Europe.

On Monday, 9/21, after gathering our luggage at the Airport, we met with 32 other Pilgrims from the Branson, Missouri area, along with their Pastor, Father John Friedel (known as "Father J"). The bus took all 44 of us to Fatima, where we checked into the beautiful "Hotel Estrela de Fatima," located directly across from the Sanctuary of Fatima. Wow! So close! We were given free time to attend a Mass in English at the "Apparition Chapel" that is built on the exact spot where Our Heavenly Mother appeared five times on the 13th of each month to 3 shepherd children in 1917 (the "Cova da Iria" area), visit the tombs of the 3 children in the Basilica, or visit the cafes, museums and many shops that are filled with religious articles and gorgeous handbags and wallets made from local cork trees. In the evening we enjoyed a delicious Portuguese buffet and local wines at our hotel. After dinner, we participated in a rosary and candlelight procession that began around the Apparition Chapel. There were thousands of Pilgrims from all over the world carrying candles and saying the rosary together in many different languages. We said the rosary to ourselves, until the prayer leader spoke in English, at which time we prayed out loud. As we prayed, Pilgrims passed by us on their knees. They were following the very long path that starts at the top of Sanctuary Hill and ends at the base of the Hill at the Apparition Chapel. Pilgrims walk on their knees as a form of penitence (similar to climbing the very rugged stone mountain at Medjugorje with bare feet). After we said the rosary, thousands of Pilgrims processed through the area following an enormous, electrified cross that led the way, as well as a large, crowned statue of Our Lady that was surrounded by roses and was carried on a stretcher on the shoulders of 4 local clergy. We walked behind the lit-up cross and Our Mother's statue and sang the Ave Maria and other Marian songs. We will never forget the feeling of seeing and walking with the thousands of Pilgrims from all over the world as they carried candles in the darkness, processing behind Our Lord's Cross, followed by Our Lady's statue.

On Tuesday, 9/22, Father Benny concelebrated Mass with Father J at a beautiful Chapel located directly behind the Apparitions Chapel. Father Benny and Father J alternated taking the lead during Mass each day. The lead Priest was responsible for delivering the Homily. After Mass, we shared a buffet breakfast at our hotel and then boarded the bus for the few minute ride to

Aljustrel, the quaint village that is the birthplace of the three shepherd children. We learned that the children were just age 10 (Lucia), 9 (Francisco) and 7 (Jacinta) at the time of the Apparitions. Francisco and Jacinta were siblings, and Lucia was their cousin. Prior to Our Lady's first appearance, the "Angel of Peace" appeared to the 3 children a few times in 1916 in an area known as Valinhos, to prepare them for Our Lady's Apparitions the following year. The Angel taught the children special prayers and even gave them the Holy Eucharist! We visited the areas where the Angel had appeared to the children, and we also toured the simple homes of the children. We learned that the authorities were very disturbed that the 3 children claimed to have met Our Lady, so they threw the children in jail in the nearby town of Ourem on August 13, 2017, and threatened to boil the children alive in oil if they didn't say that they had not seen Our Lady. All 3 children refused to lie, even though they believed that they were about to be submerged into a large pot of boiling oil. Because the children were jailed on August 13, 2017, Our Lady appeared to them on August 19, 2017, in Valinhos, after they were released. After our visit to Valinhos, we had free time. Most of us visited the Chapel of the Apparitions, then we went to see the tombs of the 3 children in the Basilica, followed by a tour of the Fatima Museum. At the Museum, we saw the bullet that struck Pope St. John Paul II on May 13, 1981 in St. Peter's Square in Rome. After recovering from the incident, the Pope took the bullet to Fatima, and had it placed in the Crown that is worn on the Apparitions Chapel statue of Our Lady on the dates of the first and last apparitions (May 13th and October 13th). The crown is on display the rest of the year at the Fatima Basilica Museum. We could clearly see the 9 mm bullet that is now placed at the top of Our Lady's crown. Incredibly, when the crown was made, there was a 9 mm open space at the top of the crown that fit the bullet perfectly, even though the shooting hadn't yet taken place!

At the Museum, there were photographs and films with actual footage of the events of the final Apparition by Our Lady on October 13th, 1917. On that date, Our Lady gave the children a sign, so that everyone would believe them. The Sun started spinning in the sky, releasing multiple rays of colors and appeared to fall from the sky heading directly to the area where the 3 children had gathered with approximately 70,000 spectators. On October 17th the crowd came to observe, most of them not believing the children. It was raining hard when Our Lady appeared that day, and then the sun came out, and everyone was instantly dry. The ground was also instantly completely dry, and everyone's umbrellas were dry. When the sun started spinning out of control and plunging towards the earth, the crowd fell to their knees. Many people were screaming and confessing their sins out loud and begging God to forgive them. It appeared to the crowd that the world was ending. The sun then stopped spinning and went back up into the sky. Tens of thousands of people converted to Christianity that day.

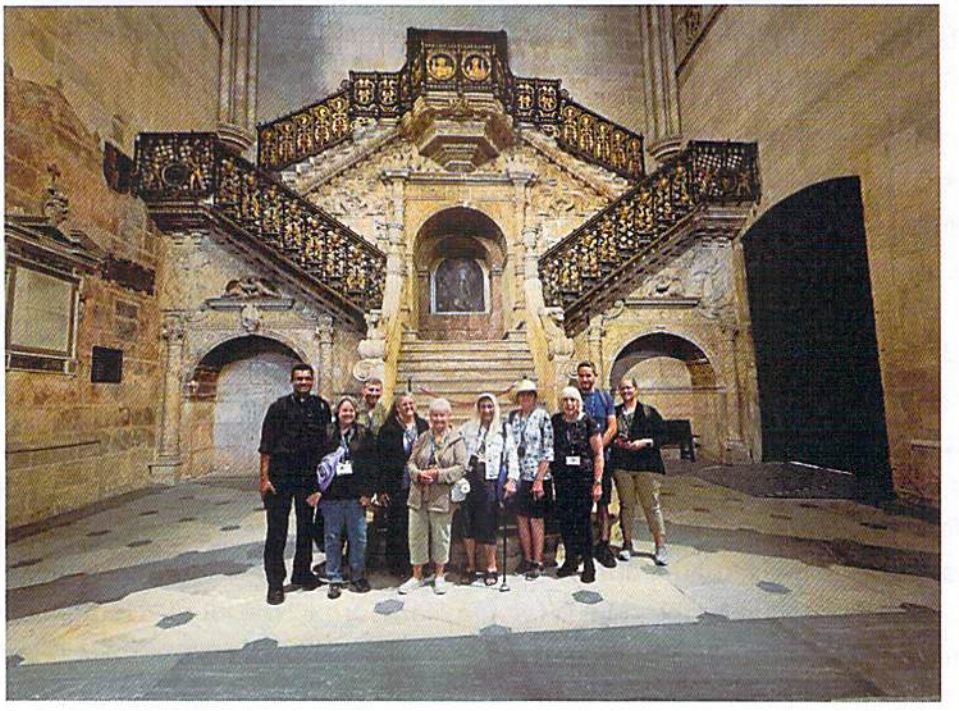
In the evening, we gathered with our fellow Pilgrims back at the Hotel for a delicious Portuguese meal and local wines. After a good night's rest, we attended Mass in one of the Chapels in the enormous underground area of the Sanctuary, before having breakfast and then heading by bus to Burgos, Spain. (Part 2 will cover our visit to Burgos, Spain and to Barcelona, Spain. Part 3 will cover our visit to Lourdes, France, including seeing Pope Leo 14th during our visit).

Our Parish Pilgrimage to Portugal, Spain and France – Part 2 of 3 Parts

Hello Parishioners! Here is Part 2 of the 3-part summary of last month's Pilgrimage to Europe by Father Benny and 9 members of our Parish and one member of St. Francis Xavier Parish. This summary relates to our time in Burgos, Spain and Barcelona, Spain. Next week's summary will discuss our time in Lourdes, France.

On Wednesday, 9/23, we boarded our private bus and traveled from Fatima, Portugal (Southern coast of Portugal) to Burgos, Spain (northern Spain). We prayed a "Scripture Rosary" along the way (a line from Scripture is said before each rosary bead). We arrived at the beautiful Abba Burgos Hotel, where each lower room had a private outdoor lawn area and each upper room had a private balcony overlooking the gardens. Some of the group immediately walked into the historic area of Burgos to enjoy a meal at a restaurant or outdoor café, and some of us opted to dine in the beautiful hotel restaurant. We stayed at this hotel for 2 nights.

On Thursday, 9/24, we met with a local guide and took a walking tour of Burgos' medieval town center, before heading into the absolutely magnificent Burgos Cathedral, a masterpiece of Spanish Gothic architecture and a UNESCO World Heritage Site (a site legally protected under and international treaty, because it has outstanding universal value to humanity). Construction of the Burgos Cathedral, which is dedicated to the Virgin Mary, began in 1221. The Spires were added in the 15th century. The interior houses world-class sculptures, ornate altarpieces and the famous tomb of the legendary Spanish hero, "El Cid" and his wife Dona Jimena. Many works of art were added to the Cathedral from the 13t to the 18th centuries. The Cathedral is known for its magnificent "Golden Staircase," which is a masterpiece of sculpture and architecture created by Diego de Siloe between 1519 and 1523, and is known for its painted and gilded features.



Here are the Gettysburg Pilgrims standing in front of the famous Golden Staircase at the Burgos, Cathedral (minus the Gettysburg Pilgrim taking the photo).

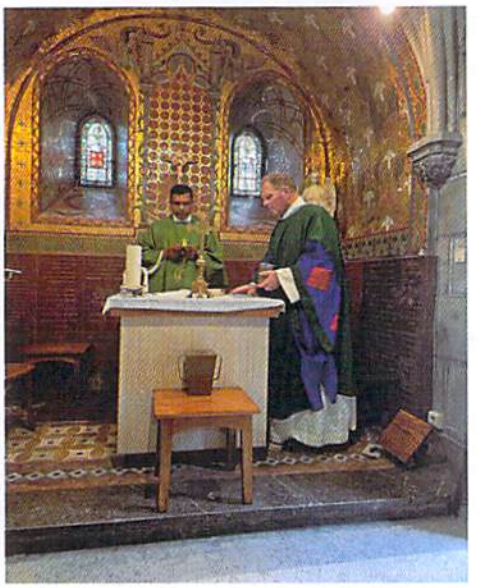
After touring the Burgos Cathedral, we headed to "Cartuja de Miraflores," a 15th-century Carthusian Monastery located on a scenic hill about 2 miles east of central Burgos, Spain. This Monastery is the only Monastery in the region this is still inhabited and maintained by a community of Carthusian Monks. As we entered the glorious structure, the sound of the Monks chanting was very loud and sent chills down our spines. Although we could not see the Monks, their haunting chants and deep rich voices let us know that they are very present at the Monastery. Strict silence had to be maintained in the main Church and the Chapel of St. Bruno, out of respect for the resident Monks who live a life of prayer, solitude and manual labor. The Monastery is famous for its magnificent gilded walnut wood main altarpiece, which was carved by master sculptor Gil de Siloe and painted and gilded by his son Diego between 1486 and 1492. Our group thoroughly enjoyed the shop associated with the Monastery. Some of us purchased highly carved and scented religious candles and rosaries made from rose petals.

After departing Burgos, we headed to Lourdes, France where we spent Friday, 9/25 and Saturday, 9/26, but I will summarize that part of the journey next week. After leaving Lourdes, we headed back into Spain on Sunday, 9/27, where we spent two glorious days in Barcelona, Spain, where the locals speak "Catalan." We had a private Mass each day and enjoyed a panoramic bus tour of Barcelona. We explored the quaint narrow streets of the Gothic Quarter of Barcelona on foot with a local guide, and toured the Cathedral of Barcelona, a Catalan Gothic masterpiece in the heart of the city. Construction on the cathedral began in 1298 and continued through the 15th century. A peaceful 14th century cloister surrounds a lush garden that houses 13 live white geese. We viewed the geese and spent time viewing the soaring stone naves in the Cathedral. In the evenings on both days in Barcelona, we walked to the enormous former bullfighting Arena next to our hotel and enjoyed traditional Catalan dinners at rooftop restaurants. The night views of Barcelona from the rooftop of the former Arena were spectacular! While in Barcelona we stayed at the magnificent "Occidental Barcelona 1929" hotel and enjoyed their sumptuous breakfasts each morning.

On our 2nd day in Barcelona, some of us explored the area on our own, but most of us took an excursion to the quaint mountain village of Montserrat, 30 miles northwest of Barcelona. The bus ride up the mountain terrified some of us, since it appeared that we could veer off a cliff at any moment. When we reached the top, we visited a famous 11th century Benedictine Monastery that is perched high in the rugged cliffs, and we viewed the 12th century Black Madonna wooden statue of the Virgin and Child that is housed in the Monastery Basilica. Legend states that the statue was carved by St. Luke and brought to Spain and was later hidden in the Holy Mountain Cave of Montserrat. It was rediscovered by shepherds guided by a miraculous light. We joined other visitors in a queue and ascended the stairs behind the altar to catch a close-up glimpse of the statue of the Madonna, and to touch the orb that is held in the Virgin's right hand. After touring the sanctuary, we visited the amazing shops at the top of the mountain and purchased the famous Catalan chocolates and "Mel i Mato de Montserrat," the iconic Catalan cheese with honey sold at the Montserrat Monastery (a traditional Catalan fresh curd cheese drizzled with honey). All of the Pilgrims loved beautiful Barcelona! I will end here, but next week Part 3 will cover our visit to Lourdes, France, including seeing Pope Leo 14th during our visit!

Our Parish Pilgrimage to Portugal, Spain and France – Final Summary





Hello Parishioners!! Here is Part 3 of the 3-part summary of last month's Pilgrimage to Europe by Father Benny Jose and 10 Gettysburg area Pilgrims. Two weeks ago, you read about our visit to Fatima, Portugal, and last week you read about our visit to Burgos and Barcelona, Spain. This final summary discusses our visit to Lourdes, France, where we got to see the Pope in his "Popemobile!"

On Friday, 9/25/26, we departed Burgos, Spain and headed by bus to Lourdes, France. Upon arrival in Lourdes, we could feel the excitement in the air. Pope Leo the 14th was scheduled to arrive in Lourdes the very next day! The town was packed with Pilgrims and security was high. Filipa, our amazing Collette tour manager, was able to direct our bus to the "Boly Mill," where Saint Bernarde Soubirous spent the first 13 years of her life. We toured the building and saw the first-floor room of the Mill where Bernadette was born in 1844. Her father had leased this property and worked as a miller milling flour for the town. The mill wheel was still located in the lower level of the building. After a few years, the family of 11 (9 children and 2 parents) faced hardship and extreme poverty and were forced to move to a place called "Le Cachot" when Bernadette was 13 years old.

We next walked to Bernadette's second home and learned that Le Cachot was a former prison cell that had served as Bernadette's one-room family home during the time of the Appearances of our Lady (Apparitions) in 1858. At Le Cachot we viewed some of Bernadette's personal items (shoes & rosary) and learned that Bernadette contracted cholera in the 1854 epidemic and suffered from asthma and other illnesses throughout her lifetime. She died in 1879 at age 35 of tuberculosis. Bernadette's body was exhumed three times (1909, 1919 and 1925) and found to be incorrupt (her body had never decayed and is the most incorrupt Saint's body ever discovered). Bernadette's 147-year-old body is now under glass and can be viewed in Nevers, France, at the Convent where she died.

After touring Le Cachot, we walked to the Lourdes Sanctuary. We visited the enormous underground Basilica of Saint Pius X, which has seating for 25,000 worshipers, and was consecrated by Pope John 23rd. We enjoyed touring it and viewing all the paintings, murals, wall hangings and side altars, including viewing some relics of Saint Pope John Paul II. We then continued to the Grotto Cave of Lourdes, known as the "Grotto of Massabielle," the site of the Apparitions. When we reached the Grotto, we ran our hands along the walls of the Grotto Cave and we touched our rosaries and other sacramentals to the walls of the Cave where the Mother of God had appeared to Bernadette. The visit

to the Grotto was done in absolute silence, since Pilgrims from around the world were gathered nearby in prayer. There is a statue of Our Lady located in the exact spot where she had first appeared, when Bernadette had gone to the area to collect wood to heat her family home. Our Mother Mary stood over a rosebush in the niche of the Grotto and told Bernadette that she leads us to the Lord, but it is the Lord Jesus Christ that we must follow (to Jesus, through Mary).

Our Lady visited Bernadette 18 times at the Grotto and told Bernadette of her wish that a Chapel be built there. The Lourdes Sanctuary complex is now visited by approximately 5 million Pilgrims annually! No one initially believed Bernadette, but when she told a priest that Our Lady referred to herself as "The Immaculate Conception," the priest began to believe her. He knew that the uneducated Bernadette could not have made up such a title. As crowds started to follow Bernadette to the Grotto, she asked Our Lady for a sign. Our Lady told Bernadette to scrape the ground. Bernadette obeyed, and a spring of water appeared! Some people who were present washed in the Spring and were cured of their illnesses. Many more miracles followed. That spring has grown over the years, and the spring water is now channeled into faucets near the Grotto, so Pilgrims can drink and collect the water. Our group was able to bring home some Lourdes water, and we saw the exact spot in the Grotto Cave where the water first appeared. Water is still gushing out between the rocks.

We departed the Grotto and headed up the long ramp to the "Upper Basilica of the Immaculate Conception," the highest point of the complex. Father Benny led a private Mass for us, with "Father J" concelebrating, in a magnificent side Chapel of the Upper Basilica (pic of Chapel Altar at top of summary). Afterwards, we toured the very first Chapel ever built at the Sanctuary. It has room for just 120 people and opened in 1866. It was built by Bernadette's father and other local villagers. A magnificent gold reliquary containing relics of St. Bernadette is located near the first Chapel. We soon headed to our hotel for a delicious dinner. We spent two nights at the "Hotel Mercure Imperial Lourdes," located on the banks of the Gave River at the base of the Pyrenees Mountains. The historic "Chateau Fort de Lourdes Castle" was just a 10-minute walk from the hotel, and 3 from our Gettysburg group climbed the hill to this castle during their free time.

On Saturday, 9/26, we attended Mass at the "Chapel of the Monastery of the Poor Clare Sisters." We spent the day shopping, touring, eating French delicacies and lighting candles at the Sanctuary, and then we headed back to the Sanctuary to reserve a spot to welcome the Pope! Our guide provided us with access codes to re-enter the area. Only 300,000 people were allowed back inside the Sanctuary area that day. Our group could not find a great viewing spot, so we headed back and had an amazing dinner at a local café and then stood along the Gave River waiting for the arrival of the Pope. The atmosphere was electric!!! Thousands upon thousands of people were singing and dancing in place. It was impossible not to become excited and filled with joy. Around 8 pm, the Popemobile appeared with Pope Leo the 14th standing inside and waving to the crowds. He blessed everyone as he slowly passed. We were just a few feet from him! It was exhilarating! Afterwards, we walked to our hotel and sat together in the Lobby as a group and watched the live coverage of the Pope as he entered the Sanctuary area and visited the Grotto. None of us will ever forget the closeness and excitement that we all felt.

The next day, after attending Mass, we departed Lourdes and headed to Barcelona, Spain. We toured the Barcelona Cathedral and area, and then flew back to the States on Tuesday, 9/29. Thank you to Father Benny for organizing this amazing Pilgrimage!!! We can't wait to join you on the Pilgrimage to the "Shrines of Ireland" next November (11/7/27-11/16/27), with a presentation on 2/24/27 at 7:30 pm!