

FATIMA CHRONICLES

As trips go, five days did not seem to be enough time to experience Fatima. But at the end, I was amazed at how much our small group of ten was able to accomplish on a Blue Army Pilgrimage to FATIMA this past October 14 - 19, 2004.

From the moment we arrived at the Lisbon Airport at 6:00 A.M. on Sunday morning, Oct. 10, we were off to the races.

First, we took an early morning ride on our comfortable mini-bus through the historical areas of downtown Lisbon. Our tour guide, Manuela, was most knowledgeable about all facets of Portuguese society and culture, both past and present. She pointed out many of the historical, architectural, and geographical features of downtown Lisbon such as the Tagus River running through the heart of Lisbon out to the Atlantic Ocean and the historical monuments depicting many of Portugal's naval and maritime greats. Her expertise made me remember much I had learned about the Age of Discovery (15th & 16th centuries) in school, and the great role played by Prince Henry, the Navigator, and other notables of Portuguese history.

Next on the agenda was a Mass in the Cathedral of St. Anthony, also in Lisbon. The architecture and art work was rich enough to make any student of medieval culture want to "go back to the books." By this time, we were tired, but onward we went, on to Santarem, the home of the church containing the Eucharistic Miracle called "The Bleeding Host."

Finally, at lunchtime, we arrived in Fatima and departed our bus at Domis Pacis - the Blue Army hotel. After registration, a quick meal and a short rest, some of us made our way to the Basilica and Capelinha (little Chapel), or Chapel of Apparitions where Our Blessed Mother appeared to Lucia, Jacinta, and Francisco on the 13th of each month from May thru October of the year 1917 (all except August 13).

What a thrill! I had always wanted to see this holy place ever since my Uncle Bob (d.o.b 10/13/16) taught me about Fatima when I was just a boy. And finally, here I was - right where it all happened. The area is quite large, measuring approximately 500' by 900' and can hold more than 100,000 pilgrims. But for me, the main focus was the chapel and the statue of Our Blessed Mother marking her appearance on the five occasions mentioned above.

Before heading back to the hotel for dinner and a good night's rest, I made a quick visit inside the Basilica, and was able to see the grave markers for Jacinta and Francisco. It was fortunate that I did so, since as it turned out, I did not get another chance for the remainder of the trip.

On the next morning, we went as a group back to the Sanctuary area where Manuela was able to give us detailed information about such things as the art work in the Basilica. It was at this time, we had hoped as a group to visit Jacinta and Francisco, but unfortunately, we were prohibited from

doing so on account of a Mass going on at the same time.

Monday afternoon, we made our way on the bus to Aljustrel and the Loka do Cabeco at Valinhos to see the places where the children grew up and where the Angel of Peace appeared to them on three occasions in 1916, and where Our Blessed Mother appeared to them in August of 1917. While each of us took away many impressions, I was probably most struck by the simplicity of it all. Nothing complicated here. No television, radio or other modern conveniences. These people were of humble origins and yet steeped in religious faith. It helped me get my own life and ambitions in perspective. Who needs the rat race of keeping up with the Jones's, I asked myself. Just keep my focus on the things of God. This is what the children and their families were telling me.

Afterwards, we made our way back to the hotel for the climactic next two days - the 12th and 13th.

On the morning of the 12th, we made our way to Coimbra, just a little more than an hour's ride from Fatima. Along with numerous churches and palaces of artistic merit, Coimbra was and still is a great university town steeped in medieval traditions which until 1911 was the only University in Portugal. But we didn't travel to this town of winding streets, and hills just to see these sites, but to visit the Carmelo de Santa Teresa Monastery, the home of Sister Lucia herself, and to attend Mass. (Now, one must remember that the 12th of October was my birthday, and I was determined to do all I could, within reason to actually meet Sister Lucia, despite the fact that everyone said that it was next to impossible).

The two priests on our trip, Father Charles from Brooklyn, NY and Father Robideau from Lansing, Michigan concelebrated with two priests from Ireland, and together with the group from Ireland, we attended Mass right in the same building where Sister Lucia, the little shepherd girl, now a nun, was just yards away. The chapel was beautiful. It was decorated with beautiful religious paintings along side of two statues depicting Jacinta and Francisco. What I did not notice at the time was the enclosure high in the back where a choir loft would be. Later, I was told that Sister Lucia often sits there as she watches Mass from above.

After Mass was over, we were permitted to take some pictures inside the chapel and then before we knew it, we were outside and back on the bus to our next destination, Nazare, a seaside fishing village, very picturesque and lined with a multitude of souvenir shops.

Before describing Nazare further, I have to tell you of my disappointment in Coimbra. Not only did I not get an opportunity to meet Sister Lucia, but I also did not get enough time to reflect on being in the same building with her. We were so attentive to the Mass and to the time we spent taking pictures, we never got a chance to do some serious meditation. On the ride to Nazare, I resolved that if I got the chance, I would come back to the convent and try again before we were to depart for home, the day after next, the 14th.

As I was saying, if I was ever going to retire somewhere, Nazare would be at the top of the list. The view from the cliffs above looking down below at the town and shoreline is nothing short of spectacular. And the view was just as striking looking at the cliffs from the vantage of the town itself.

The seafood lunch was a meal I'll always remember. What I thought to be a bowl of soup from the menu turned out to be a seafood meal in a soup that was just downright delicious. The little restaurant had the ambience of a seaside inn nestled in a cove off Nantucket Island. The ocean water was as blue as the sky itself without a cloud, and the sun was out in force just like an Indian Summer day in the Northeast.

I hated to leave, but back on the bus we went - on to Batalha- where the 19th century Dominican Monastery of Santa Maria de Victoria (Our Lady of Victory) was located.

I have seen many churches, basilicas, cathedrals, and so on, over the years, but Our Lady of Victory is almost in a class all by itself. Built over the course of several centuries, it exemplifies several styles of architecture: the late Gothic, Romanesque, Manueline, Mudejar and Italian Renaissance. As for the Gothic, the "flying buttresses" were stupendous and the sculpture over the entrances including the gargoyles were examples of the finest workmanship. It was in this Abbey where many Portuguese greats including Prince Henry the Navigator, himself, were buried.

Calling it a day, Manuela got us back on the bus for the ride back to Fatima where we were to rest up and have dinner in preparation for the big candlelight rosary procession followed by a concelebrated Mass in the Sanctuary area.

By 5:00 P.M. we were back at the hotel. Rather than rest up, I used the time to walk with some of my fellow pilgrims into downtown Fatima to pick up some souvenirs. By this time, the streets were full of pilgrims in anticipation of the evening to come. We got back to the dining hall just in time for dinner, after which we prepared to walk over to the Sanctuary as a group. Before that was to happen, Leroy from Virginia, took me aside and asked me if I would carry the American flag during the procession. My first reaction was to say no since I just did not feel worthy. But he told me that we were short on manpower and that the group really needed my participation. So I agreed and immediately I underwent this transformation from being just me to being the standard bearer for the U.S.A. in this upcoming procession where there were to be thousands under the spotlight of television cameras and high-powered lights.

Before I knew it, we were all assembled in the lobby, and off we went - the ten of us to represent the U.S.A. As few as we were, we had become a close knit group and felt that we would all be there for each other for moral support. Boy! Was I wrong. We were no sooner over there when the marshal of the event singled me out from the others and led me to the front of the procession alongside the flags of other nations. There I was - with a flag the size of the state of Texas under the glare of television lights and under the scrutiny of thousands. I could feel all of those eyes as well as those of the people watching their T.V. sets.

The rosary procession began at 9:00 P.M. and ended on the steps of the basilica approximately an hour later when we then attended Mass. We stood with our flags throughout all of this time, and afterwards, I was seriously tired. My fellow travelers rescued me after the Mass and told me that I held the flag tall and straight, better than any of the other flag holders. I was most proud. I felt that I was on an assignment, that I was America's ambassador to Fatima, and I prayed about it to Our Blessed Mother especially as we processed by the Capelinha. I prayed for our country with all of its rights and wrongs; I prayed for world peace; I prayed for all of those souls who were in jeopardy; and I prayed in reparation for offenses against the Immaculate Heart of Mary. And finally I prayed for all of my friends, relatives and all of those most in need of prayers. What a thrill, especially when you consider that I had no idea this was going to happen!

Once we got back to the hotel, we immediately retired for the evening in preparation for the events of the next day - the 13th. But before I did, I checked with the hotel to find out about the bus schedule to Coimbra. To my great joy, it was possible to get a second chance to visit the Carmela de Santa Teresa Monastery right after the rosary procession and Mass to be held the next day at the Cova beginning at 10:00 A.M. and ending about 1:00 P.M.

I was up early to get all of my gifts blessed at the Sanctuary before breakfast. It was pretty chilly, but I stepped out quickly and arrived at the Cova hoping to find a priest who would help me. Fortunately, I found a priest from Spain who understood my feeble attempts to communicate and proceeded to bless everything not more than 20 yards from the Capelinha and the statue of Our Blessed Mother.

I hurried back, ate breakfast, and joined the rest of our group for the events to be held that morning.

If you can picture the Sanctuary area in daytime just as I described the scene the night before, then you have some idea of what things were like. Thousands and thousands, all gathered for another gigantic rosary procession to be followed by a concelebrated Mass with scores of priests. It was a bright sunny day and it reminded me of what the scene must have been like when the miracle of the sun took place exactly 87 years before to the precise day and hour. Boy! Talk about historical reenactments. The whole event was electrifying.

The sequence of events was as I said very similar to the night before except that this time everything was in daytime, and at the conclusion, there was the farewell song to Our Lady of Fatima, accompanied by a sea of waving handkerchiefs.

It was 1:00 P.M., and I immediately set out for the bus station approximately a half mile away in order to go to Coimbra. My excitement was keen for I was about to go back to Sister Lucia's convent provided, of course, I could successfully find my way. There was no room for error. (Our flight back home was on the next day). I got to the bus station only to see a mass of people returning home to Coimbra and other parts of Portugal after coming to Fatima earlier in the morning to attend Mass at

the Cova.

If you can picture a crowd of people trying to get on a subway train at rush hour in New York City, that's what I was up against along with the disadvantage of not being fluent in Portuguese. In the interest of time and space, I'll just tell you that I made it onto the bus, but only after suffering much anxiety - caused not least of which by the fear that there were too many people on the bus and that I would not be allowed to get on.

So there I was on the bus, trying to plan my next move once I arrived at the bus station in Coimbra. I planned to take a taxi provided there was one to be found.

At approximately 3:00 P.M. the bus pulled into Coimbra, and once I got off, I immediately went looking for a taxi. (talk about luck, or was it more than luck?) I not only found a taxi; but also a nun who had the same idea as I did. Sister Rosaria was a Carmelite nun from Canada of all places who spoke fluent Portuguese and was on leave to visit family in Portugal, and we shared the same goal. If it were possible, we both hoped to see Sister Lucia! For the first time I really felt I had a chance to accomplish the impossible. We agreed to share the taxi to the Monastery and proceeded to drive through the streets of Coimbra on our way to St. Teresa. Once we arrived, Sister explained that I should wait in the chapel, while she introduced herself to the Carmelite community and made her request for a visit with Sister Lucia. All went according to plan, and after being introduced as a pilgrim from America and on the recommendation of Sister Rosaria, I entered the chapel and got my chance to sit, pray, and meditate on the fact that I was just yards away from Sister Lucia, once again.

After about an hour, Sister Rosaria came back for me, and I was immediately filled with a great excitement. Had Sister Rosaria seen Sister Lucia? Or was she about to, and was she coming to take me along? Well, dear friends, my heart was pumping excitedly while simultaneously I was trying to maintain my composure.

I looked at Sister Rosaria and saw almost immediately that today would not be the day when either she or I would get to meet Sister Lucia. To make a long story short, our timing was bad and it just was not possible to see her at that particular moment.

Believe it or not, I took it well. I missed my chance to see her, but took solace in the fact that I did get back to meditate again, and thanks to Sister Rosaria, I was reminded of the importance of offering up our disappointments for the conversion of sinners and for promoting world peace.

In the course of our conversation on the trip back to Fatima (Sister Rosaria was also returning to Fatima as well), we talked at great length about Fatima and a whole variety of topics which helped to energize my faith greatly. But the one thing Sister Rosaria told me for which I will always be thankful, she mentioned that Sister Lucia does read her mail and that I should write to her. At first, I did not see much of a point, but upon reflection, I got more and more excited about the prospect of communicating with Sister Lucia, if not in person, then by pen. I was reminded of the books I had read and how various people had asked Sister Lucia to present their requests to Our Blessed Mother

on October 13, 1917. Up until now, I had always lamented the fact that I had not been there at the time of Christ 2,000 years earlier and that I had not been present at Fatima in 1917 to make my own requests. But now, I realized, I still had a chance. Sister Lucia remains in our midst and is still there to be asked for help just as she was there in 1917.

I immediately started planning my letter once I got back home. What should I write about? I pretty much figured out that I should write from the heart. Not only did I make requests both personal and public i.e. world peace, but I also shared with her information about some of the activities in which we had been promoting the message of Fatima back home in the Philadelphia area. I also thanked her for being there for us in 1917 and for being there for us now in 2004!

In a way, I guess I can say that my trip has not ended because I am writing this account in order to encourage you, the reader, to write Sister Lucia and to take advantage of her presence , wisdom, holiness, and her special relationship to Our Blessed Mother. Speaking for myself, I think that it's a reasonable possibility that the Blessed Mother might just visit Sister Lucia again just as she has on several occasions after 1917, and just as she did Jacinta after 1917 and before her death several years later. With Sister Lucia praying for me, thanks to my letter, I figure my chances of spiritual help are much improved. You can do the same.

Remember, write from the heart. Here is her address:

Irma Lucia (Lucia Santos)
Carmelo Santa Teresa
3000 Coimbra, Portugal

P.S. Her birthday is March 22, 2005 when she will be 98 years old. Wouldn't it be a marvelous thing for her to receive lots of birthday cards? Go for it!

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