

## Memoirs of a Pilgrimage to Portugal, Spain, and France Marian Shrines, September 30-October 13, 2019

There were 42 souls at St. Helena's Church on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019 chatting noisily and wolfing down some breakfast tacos before busing to Austin at 10 a.m. to the Bergstrom International Airport. Even though we had prepared for almost a year for this church pilgrimage, we still were hurrying for no telling what at the last minute. You could already feel the love and the Holy Spirit (John 3:3) among us as the guys helped the bus driver load or line up the big suitcases for the older travelers and most of the women. We would be doing that most of the trip because the tour guides couldn't load everything by themselves and stay on schedule. So, Deacon Dickie would ask for 3 or 4 volunteers. It was beautiful to see everybody pitching in, and we didn't even know each other yet! We grabbed apples, bananas, and other goodies from the "going away" church breakfast, when somebody suggested that they might be confiscated at airport security. They weren't, by the way. We were so early for the 4 p.m. flight, that the Lufthansa Airlines counter was not open yet. So, that gave us a chance to meet our fellow pilgrims, and converse our nervousness away with small talk. Most people were from St. Helena's parish, a few from Holy Trinity Catholic Church, and a few surprise travelers from the Texas Rio Grande Valley. You know that their trip was already one day longer than ours. Some of the folks looked familiar to us from the two meetings we had during the previous 10 months. The only couples we knew were Deacon Dickie and his lovely wife, Alma, and Barney and Lupita Fontenot. Deacon Dickie and Father Lenin, our Spiritual Director, knew that I play piano, so they asked me if I could lead the Mass music at the pilgrimage sites. I didn't realize what an honor that would be later.

Right on schedule, the bus pulled out of St. Helena's toward IH-35 North. Father Lenin suggested that we not leave cars in the front parking lot while we were gone, because of a big church festival taking place on the day of our return, October 12<sup>th</sup>. Our wonderful neighbors, Christy and Tom, dropped us off in plenty of time, and also picked us up 13 days later. More love there. Our bus ride to the airport was pleasant, and lasted only an hour, rather than the hour-and-a-half normally required in traffic. Father Lenin blessed us, prayed a beautiful prayer for a safe and beautiful trip, good health. I believe he covered everything Jesus could possibly do for us, protect us, and more! In turn, we prayed the first day of a novena to the Blessed Virgin Mary. We prayed at Mass, on the bus, in restaurants, on the parking lot, and of course, at the beautiful, majestic cathedrals, shrines, and basilicas. We also wore similar turquoise blue scarves for easy recognition of each other in large crowds, and were given scapulars for the pilgrimage, as part of the process to get consecrated with Our Lady of Lourdes on the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the pilgrimage. That caused me to wonder, "What is a pilgrimage, and what are the reasons a person goes on a pilgrimage?" At first, I assumed it was a church trip with friends to see very famous religious places one sees only in travel magazines or movies. But I was to find out how each person has his or her private purpose (John 6:35) for being on the pilgrimage, such as a promise to fulfill a prayer or promise, go for emotional physical healing, or visit a holy place one only dreamed about. To quote Father Lenin and Deacon Dickie, "The trip and destination are inseparable. The journey is just as important as the end. As we walk together, pilgrims rather than strangers, our encounters, our conversations, our experiences good or bad, can act as a stimulus towards further spiritual reflection and dialogue—not

stumbling blocks, but stepping stones!” By focusing on meeting the other travelers on our bus, we made new friends, allowed ourselves to get away from the familiar and enjoy new and exciting religious places rich in history and Catholic tradition. In this way, we received new found insights and spiritual growth, much like pilgrims did centuries before. According to Father Lenin and Deacon Dickie, “In the Gospel, one hears about pilgrims who traveled to Jerusalem to walk in the steps of Jesus and find wisdom, spiritual healing while visiting ancient places which are special to our faith.” We discovered significant reasons for such a trip when we arrived in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, where pilgrims make the 500-mile hike with friends from France to the Shrine of Saint James, the First Pilgrim and Apostle of Jesus who taught Catholicism in the Hispanic countries of Europe.

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I wish going through security were always as easy as it was that day. It was Monday. Yet, although there were plenty of people, it was not crowded. The TSA personnel recognized our blue scarves as we went through, chatted with us about our trip, and acted friendly towards our group. We had time to eat more of our snacks, make a pit stop, and boarded on time. The thought went through my mind that there is an advantage to traveling in a group, because the security is lax and a church group is easier to process through security. I am really impressed with Austin Bergstrom International Airport and Lufthansa Airlines. Our flight lasted 11 hours and 15 minutes, which seemed like an awfully long flight initially. However, the flight attendants kept us and themselves busy with two meals, a snack, water, complimentary wine and beer, and great service. It was an overnight flight, leaving at 4 p.m. in Texas. So, we arrived the next morning in Frankfurt, Germany. We were herded through passport control; then were in plenty of time for our next flight to Lisbon, Portugal and our first stop on the pilgrimage. We had time to enjoy some good German coffee and stay awake to meet the jet lag head-on for the rest of the day. Germany was 7 hours ahead of USA time. Then we flew southwest to Portugal which was 6 hours ahead. Most of us did not sleep on the flight. Where did the night of the 30th go? It was already the middle of the next day, October 1st in Portugal!

I can't say enough about our tour guide, Sergio, on the bus. He met us in Lisbon and was with us until we arrived at the gate in Paris for the trip back to America. He arranged for local tour guides in Paris and at the Claude Monet estate, but he was our main tour guide. He is from Portugal, and has been a tour guide for over 20 years—speaks English and several languages fluently. He took us from Lisbon to the beautiful village of Fatima, the site of the Basilica of Our Lady of Fatima. We took a quick tour of the outside of the massive basilica, and celebrated a beautiful Mass in one of the side chapels (there are several), to give thanks to God for our safe trip, start our Novena, and practice our music for the mass. I had the honor of accompanying the singing on the organ in the chapel. On the tour of the outside of the basilica, everyone needed a pit stop (some were getting to be emergencies), so we found time for a break. Then we went to the hotel, checked in and ate dinner, and got ready for the beautiful rosary and candlelight procession. Remember, this was the same day we had landed in Frankfurt, Germany, taken a 2-hour flight west to Lisbon, traveled by bus 70 miles to Fatima and hit the ground running to Mass and walk around Our Lady of Fatima Basilica. Most of were running on fumes! At our hotel, we ate a nice Portuguese buffet dinner—lots of cheese, bread, and fish. Our hotel was within walking distance of the basilica. There weren't any open souvenir shops except for the hotel gift shop, so it was packed with people. We bought two candles, since the candlelight started at 9 p.m. and people were busy buying candles and walking towards Fatima. It was only Monday night, and yet you could hear all kinds of languages as hundreds/thousands of people were at the Chapel of the Apparitions, where there is a statue of the Virgin Mary located right on the spot where she appeared to the three shepherd children,

Lucia 9, Jacinta 7, and Francisco 6, in 1917, three children who are Saints in the Catholic Church canonized long ago. That is also where I played the organ and our group sang, along with other visitors in the congregation at Mass. What a blessing and honor it was for the group and me to be that close to the site of the miracle of the Apparition. At Fatima, the rosary was conducted around the Chapel of the Apparition, followed by the procession. The candlelight procession was beautiful, reverent, and meditative, with pilgrims from all over the world, singing and praying in their respective languages. They showed peace in their faces, smiling, and considerate to not bump into the next person. It was an amazing experience of co-existence without feelings of hatred. Instead, a feeling of wondering why there are so many wars and violence. Just focus on the Virgin Mary, and ask Her to intercede.

The next morning, we toured the basilica on the inside and viewed the majestic interior of this beautiful tribute and shrine to Our Lady. On the grounds where the procession had marched, there was a massive round building, which seats 25,000 persons and is decorated in modern art. A huge place for large crowds, such as visits by the Pope is necessary since the main basilica holds only about 900 persons. We also took a group picture with the basilica behind us. Next, Sergio took us through the city on the bus to the nearby village of Arujel where the homes of Lucia, Jacinta, and Francisco are located. The children were poor shepherds, and their houses were small and crowded. The homes are museums now, and just like the basilica, are visited by 7 to 9 million visitors each year. Lucia's niece, Maria de los Angeles, 99 years old, lives across the street and she is a nun. Our guide told us that whoever wished to go greet her could just go in to the house, as she was sitting near the door. Well, of course, everyone in our group immediately lined up and walked over. I reached over to shake her hand and hold it gently with my other hand and leaned over to say "God Bless you Sister, and thank you for seeing us". Instead, she talked very softly, in Portuguese, I suppose, and kissed my hand and then my cheek! She did that for everybody that greeted her! What a sweet and remarkable lady! Walking back to the bus, several of us vowed to never wash our hand and spot where the niece of one of God's saints had kissed us! It was another special blessing. I wondered how many pilgrims/visitors she blesses that way every day.

We didn't have a chance to shop or buy much at Fatima, because we left the next morning to Santiago de Compostela, Spain, another 4 hours by bus to the northwest coast of Spain. Before going too far out of Lisbon, we went to the city of Vigo, where our hotel was going to be. We went there to check in and leave our suitcases. We took a vote to cancel a winery tour on our schedule so that we could visit the Church of the Eucharistic Miracle, Saint Stephen's Cathedral in Santarem, Portugal, a village about 45 minutes north of Lisbon. In America, we call villages as towns with 1,000 to 2,000 population. Santarem is a "village" with around 62,000 inhabitants. Streets were very narrow and we had to walk on the street and make way for cars going home after work. But Saint Stephen's is in a category by itself. It is known as the Church of the Eucharistic Miracle.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a housewife in the parish went to a sorceress to help her to stop her husband's infidelity. The sorceress told the woman she could help, but told her to bring a consecrated host back to her from Holy communion. The woman went to communion, took the host from her mouth, and put it in her handkerchief in her hands. She had not gone but a few steps, and handkerchief was bleeding, as if the woman was bleeding from her hands. She took the host home, and explained to her husband what had happened. They put the host in a chest. That night, a bright light emanated from the chest, and both the woman and husband venerated the host, and took it back to the priest at Saint Stephen's the next day. The priest put the host in a plastic box. However, when they checked the next day, another miracle occurred as the host and blood had broken the plastic box and it was now in a

sacred pyx. Since that day, it has been placed on display at Saint Stephen's Church for public veneration. It is one of other miracles approved by the church, and some still being considered. Another eucharistic miracle occurred in the 1800's in Amsterdam. I had not heard of this church or miracle so it was a powerful discovery for me. For Catholics and doubting Christians, the truth that the Eucharist is the body and blood of Jesus from the Last Supper comes to life from this miracle. (John21:30) It confirms that when we go to communion and take the host into our mouth, we receive his Divine presence, HE becomes part of us, with us, so that we can be like him and live as he did. The Eucharist duplicates Jesus' act at the Last Supper when he broke the bread and said "this is my body", then took the wine, gave it to the disciples and said "this is my blood". And we were able to visit this wonderful church in the "village" of Santarem, Portugal. The pyx is now on display at the altar in Santarem, and has been analyzed as having the DNA of Jesus. That was the most powerful testimony for the body and blood of Jesus, and I have read about the Shroud of Turin. The consecration of the bread and wine at each Mass is known as transubstantiation into the body and blood of Jesus Christ, by the power and prayers of the priest. This was only the second day of our trip, and it was one of the most powerful and impactful testimonies of miracles I had ever seen in my life! And this took place after our powerful visit at Our Lady of Fatima! I couldn't wait to find out what other surprises there would be!

We finally departed the beautiful, ancient Saint Stephen's Cathedral, walked through the narrow streets, and boarded our bus to get underway towards Spain and our next adventure. Santiago is a beautiful city, close to the western coast of Spain on the Atlantic Ocean. The Cathedral of Saint James is there where Saint James, the Greater (brother of John the Divine), is buried. Along the drive from Portugal, to prepare us for what we would see in Santiago, we viewed the movie "The Way" starring Charlie Sheen and Emilio Estevez. The movie is very good, showing scenes from the 500-mile trip from France on foot, and the misadventures and friendships made along the way. We saw several pilgrims who were traveling by foot or bicycle, and met a young man from Colombia who was making the pilgrimage on foot. Along the way of Saint James, pilgrims get a passport stamped at various points, and, upon arriving at the cathedral, receive The Shell, a symbol of arriving at the ocean and completing the long journey. Unfortunately for us, the cathedral was under repair. But we still received a guided tour, celebrated mass in one of the chapels, and visited the tomb of Saint Santiago (James in English). We also saw signs later along the highway that told pilgrims they were on the "Camino de Santiago" or way of Saint James. We actually got to walk a short distance along the Camino de Santiago. Before arriving at Avila, Spain, we stopped at a gas station for a restroom break and to eat a sandwich. In Europe, the gas stations are more like travel centers, so you take a break, eat, shop for souvenirs, and maybe get a room to rest. Across from where we stopped, we took pictures of the "Camino de Santiago" sign where the path to Santiago takes pilgrims by the spot where we were. We didn't see any pilgrims hiking there, however. Many pilgrims do the 500 miles from France; some 250 miles from Burgos or Portugal; and it can be done on bicycle also. We were about 100 miles from Santiago. Susie and Renee took a picture to pose exhausted, as if they had already traveled 250 miles from France. But it was only half a block to the sign...

From Santiago, we got on the bus and continued on the rest of the 5-hour drive to inland Spain and the beautiful ancient walled city of Avila, home of the first woman doctor of the Catholic Church, Saint Teresa of Avila. Burgos and Avila were amazing because (1)they are medieval cities from the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, (2) Avila is a walled city built by the Moors, and then taken back by the Spaniards, and (3) Burgos/Loyola nearby are home to Saint Ignatius of Loyola, one of the main doctors of the Catholic faith

and doctrine. Saint Teresa is from Avila, and joined the Carmelite order of Descalced Sisters; her convent and the cathedral dedicated to her are there—both inside the walled city at the top of a mountain. The Descalced Order of Sisters means they wore only sandals and often wore no shoes, taken from ACTS 7:33 and Exodus 3:5 which stated “take off your sandals; you are standing on holy ground.” She wrote about meditation, prayer, and exemplified a closer, personal relationship with God. Saint Teresa was described as a mystic, and encouraged deep prayer, along with devoting her entire life efforts to be close to God 24 hours a day. She was often observed in a trance-like meditative state which sometimes resulted in levitation, as was testified by numerous witnesses. She died at age 67, and was beatified and canonized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In modern times, her writings and influence are recognized the world over. Because she was sought out extensively for teaching her insights, she shunned the attention, and moved to other cities by opening several other convents, so that she could focus more on prayer and meditation with God.

The walled area was a fortress, castle city, and holy city at different times. It has 80 watchtowers and 8 massive gates all the way around. Our hotel and restaurant were Saint Therese’s convent, all within the walls. At night, we walked around the walls to walk off dinner, entered through a side gate and found an inner plaza or courtyard that must have been used for community gathering during the city’s full population. The men in our pilgrimage took pictures of the women, and the women took pictures of the men’s group pictures. It was fun to imagine how life in the walled city would have been during times of peace as well as war. The center of the city was the courtyard with the enormous cathedral nearby. It was beautiful and memorable.

The next day, we drove to Burgos, and Loyola, Saint Ignatius’ birthplace. As I mentioned before, he is one of the 33 doctors of the Catholic Church. I read some about Saint Ignatius, and found that he established Catholic Universities all over the world in his name. I have heard of Loyola University in New Orleans, Chicago and somewhere in California. We were in for a treat, because there was an annual medieval festival going on. It was Saturday, and everyone was dressed in medieval era costumes. There were markets, food booths, street parades, etc., around the cathedral grounds. Burgos is in the Basque Region of Northern Spain, so there was the multi-cultural aura of Spain, Moorish influence (Arab) music and belly dancing, different foods, Basque and French language being spoken, and of course, Spanish. The Basque language is so complex and dissimilar from Spanish or French, that its origins are unknown! Even the names of cities are totally different spelling and sounding. For example, the beautiful city of San Sebastian, on the northern coast of Spain is called Donostia in the Basque language, nothing like San Sebastian.

We hated to leave the festive medieval air of Burgos/Loyola, but we had to drive through the Pyrenees Mountain Range in northern Spain and go north into France to get to the unbelievable “village” of Lourdes, France. What was once a village, is now a city of 13,000, (100,000 volunteers, and 6 million visitors each year), with 150 hotels, restaurants, many gift shops with religious articles, a massive basilica dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes, and an additional underground basilica which holds up to 29,000 people for Mass. That is where the Pope celebrates Mass when he comes to Lourdes. Our hotel was in the midst of the shops, and just two minutes from the basilica. We had time to shop for gifts; I made several trips to the Holy Water fountains to fill bottles for gifts back home. Additionally, Susie and I took a dip in the healing, miraculous waters with the loving, patience, and careful assistance of wonderful volunteers. The greeter points to me just before going in the water, telling the volunteers “English or Spanish”, so that they can communicate with me. That was the most difficult part because I

couldn't speak French and they couldn't speak English. They did know how to say "Sit down". I did, and the water was cold! They pull you up quickly, and you are covered all the time. Say a short prayer, wash your face with beautiful fresh water, and then, miraculously and strangely, we were dry within minutes of putting our clothes back on. The volunteers were amazing! Remember that many of the pilgrims are disabled, in wheel chairs or in various handicapping conditions. Yet they assist every person so that everybody can benefit from Mary's healing waters. Most of the fellow pilgrims took a bath (quick dip) in the healing, miraculous waters from the spring which Saint Bernadette discovered from the apparition of the Virgin Mary. At night, we participated in the nightly candlelight procession adoring the statue of the Virgin, and praying the rosary. The statue was beautifully lit up for the 20 or 30 thousand people in the procession. From the castle or fortress at the top of the hill, there was an image of Saint Bernadette as a young girl projected on the wall facing the procession. It looked as if she was smiling at us from heaven! We recited the rosary as we walked, with the leader saying the Hail Mary in at least 6 different languages during each decade of the rosary. We answered in our own language, and the other pilgrims in theirs, e.g., Italian, German, Asian, Russian or Slavic, and some others not easily recognizable. It was beautiful to feel the warmth, love, peace, unity, faith, and hope together with people from all over the world. There were many wheel chair-bound pilgrims at Lourdes looking for healing miracles or relief from their handicapping situations. So, there were hundreds of volunteers all day long who pushed the physically-challenged persons in the procession, to the baths, in and out of the baths, to Mass, and back up the hill to the hotels. We found out that these volunteers pay their own way to Lourdes, pay for their own hotels just to serve God, Our Lady of Lourdes, and their fellow human beings. It was a beautiful thing to see such a demonstration of love and kindness. Many handicapped pilgrims were extra heavy in their wheelchairs, so they required two and sometimes three volunteers—men or women to transport their patient. I happened to notice one of the young women pushing a wheelchair pilgrim uphill. She was chatting excitedly with her charge and the wheelchair pilgrim on her left. But there was an expression on her face that could only be described as angelic, and showed warmth, love, patience that could not have been put on. It was authentic agape love, that is, unconditional love for her fellow human beings. (John 13:34) states "Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other." The thought that went through my mind was "Is she a nun, or other religious person?" But there were so many other young and older persons assisting the handicapped. So, I decided that she was not a nun, and all the volunteers were just like her. It was one of the most touching examples of love I had ever witnessed. I may have been imagining things, but the next day, everybody on the bus seemed anxious to help each other more than they had helped before. Lourdes had had a significant effect on me, and I thought that about others on the bus. Our adventure in faith at Lourdes was amazing, since we spent two nights there; visited Saint Bernadette's home at the mill in the castle on the mountain. Her family became very poor when her father was unemployed. The only space to live was a one tiny room at the mill on the mountain. The Virgin appeared to Bernadette as she went one day to gather wood near the world-famous Grotto. The rest of this amazing story is now told and retold throughout the world. Saint Bernadette is buried at Nevers, France, and her body is miraculously incorrupt, that is, she is just as beautiful as the day she died at the young age of 35. She suffered from asthma since a young age, and that was the reason she died so young.

That night, we had another beautiful dinner at the hotel, sang happy birthday to Kelly. What a beautiful place to celebrate your birthday, among great friends and a holy place such as the Basilica location of Our Lady of Lourdes! Several pilgrims remained at the hotel bar for a drink, and as the crowd thinned ready to go rest and pack, a few of us gathered around the piano, and sang another birthday sing-along

for Kelly for her birthday. We knew we had singers in the pilgrimage!! Happy birthday, Kelly!. Reluctantly leaving Lourdes, we were nevertheless anticipating another great adventure. We were going to ride the Bullet high-speed train to Paris, almost 500 miles to the north. We stopped three times, the third time at Bordeaux, France. But then, the train conductor “put the pedal to the metal”, and we reached a speed of 242 miles per hour. The train was unbelievably quiet and extremely smooth. That was not my first time on a European train, but the first time on the bullet train. We arrive in Paris very quickly after trying some good French coffee at the café car on the train. Everybody helped unload the suitcases from the train, and we had to roll our own through the huge train station to our bus waiting for us. Sergio introduced us to Katherine, our new tour guide for Paris. She had a delightful French accent on her English, and was very knowledgeable on her history and religion. We proceeded to the hotel for quick check-in and met the guides at the bus. We were taken to the Seine River for a night cruise of the City of Lights. For Being the month of October, the weather was really nice, cool, and windy on the boat. However, we had to go inside to get earphones, find the English language presentation and follow along as we toured Paris along the river. Paris, especially the River Seine and Eiffel Tower, are the most visited monuments in Europe, with the Alhambra Castle in Granada, Spain and Vatican in Rome coming in second. It was chilly outside on the top benches of the river boat, even though we were traveling slowly. I listened to some young people next to us speaking in a very beautiful language I did not recognize—not German, Italian, or Russian. Being the curious and friendly tourist, I asked them in what language were they conversing. They answered (in perfect English), saying that it is Finnish. Of course, they were from Finland in far Scandinavian northern Europe. It was very interesting to chat with them. They informed us that they study English as soon as they start elementary school. Most of the Europeans we met spoke English, French, Dutch, and Italian, or at least enough to get by. Most of us on the pilgrimage speak English and Tex-Mex Spanish, so we did okay in Portugal and Spain. But I felt more helpless in France and the French language. I made a brief promise to myself to practice more phrases in French, because it sounded like such a classy, smooth, yet difficult language to speak and read. The river cruise was beautiful, but disappointing to see the majestic Our Lady of Notre Dame Cathedral completely dark and not available to photograph or even get a suitable view of the towers. It was a side view, and the explanation on the earphones covered the unfortunate fire which badly damaged Notre Dame in May 2019. Susie and I were in Paris a few years ago with some friends as part of a bus tour from Germany. We saw a lot of the city and were able to visit Notre Dame and the Louvre Art Museum. But this time we visited different parts of the city, as well as several areas outside of Paris. Following the river trip, we went to the hotel to get some rest, and get ready for an early breakfast, and head to the French countryside the next morning. It was a 2-hour drive to Lisieu, France where we visited the scenic city and the majestic basilica of Saint Therese of Lisieu, the Little Flower. Early in life at the age of 15, she entered the Carmelite convent, and dedicated herself to God, teaching prayer and meditation while carrying out the simple, daily chores and tasks of life. She described her life as a little way of spiritual childhood—not great deeds, but great love. She loved flowers, and saw herself as the Little Child of Jesus. After a long struggle with tuberculosis, she died at the young age of 24. She was canonized by Pope Pius XI in 1925. Had she lived, she would have been only 52 years old when she was declared a saint. In 1997, Pope John Paul II declared Saint Therese a Doctor of the church in tribute to the powerful way her spirituality influenced people all over the world. We celebrated mass in one of the chapels located at the bottom floor of the basilica and I had the honor of playing the organ at that Mass. The village is set among the hills in a rural setting, so the basilica is at one of the highest points in the city. One has to go up nearly 50 steps to enter the massive building. Our director wanted to take a

group picture on the steps. However, everybody scattered around the beautiful grounds of the basilica, until it was time to go. As I visited Lisieu, I felt embarrassed to know that I have not been inside the Basilica of the Little Flower in San Antonio, where we live. I learned so much about this grand lady and saint from the pilgrimage to Lisieu! I promised myself that the Little Flower Basilica in San Antonio is a definite "must see" when we get back to Texas.

Our tour guide hurried us to the bus, because we had to drive another couple of hours to Giverny, east of Paris to the estate and amazing gardens of the French painter, Claude Monet. Monet was born in Spain, but he studied, lived, and worked in Giverny, outside Paris all his life. Again, our group had an appointment at a certain time, so we did not have time to stop, shop, or make a pit stop until arriving at Monet's estate. We walked and walked through acres and acres of flowers of every color, height, shape, and combination. Monet would sit in his sitting room every day, looking out at his gardens of vibrant colors, and was inspired to paint his wondrous masterpieces. We toured his house and gardens for at least two hours before returning boarding our bus and heading towards Paris. Monet did not like the black color, and never used it in his work. This was one of the sites which was not a religious location on our pilgrimage, but was certainly a worthwhile stop on our journey. The next stop was back in Paris, where we would take a quick tour of the famous Eiffel Tower, the most visited monument in Europe.

The Eiffel Tower stands above all of Paris, and looks small from far away. However, as we neared it walking next and under it, it is an incredibly huge monument with a large base, and a far-reaching height of 1063 feet. Although our group had a scheduled reservation, we waited in line for over 1 ½ hours. The wind was blowing very strong, and we were concerned that tower would be closed before we had a chance to go up. Finally, our turn came up in the elevator, which holds around 40 or 50 people. Our fare was for the second level, which is over 300 feet high. For a more expensive fare, there was a smaller elevator which took brave souls all the way to the narrow top of the tower. We walked all the way around the observation deck, enjoying the spectacular view of the magnificent, ancient, modern, worldly city. Paris is a strikingly beautiful city by day and even more dazzling at night—that's why it is called the City of Lights. By day, it is shining white—all the buildings! And it's a large city, with approximately 10 million inhabitants, and millions of visitors each year. There is, however, ONE eyesore in the view—a tall skyscraper, dark gray in color, which Parisians point out that they do not appreciate it. It is the Montparnasse Tower, and has a wonderful observation deck at the top, 56 stories high. But, of course, the dark-colored monstrosity does not match the dazzling white view of the rest of the city. Although it was day time, the view was breathtaking, and finding the River Seine, the Champs de Elysee, Tour de Triumph, Sacre Coeur Basilica, Our Lady of Notre Dame de Paris, and the Louvre Museum was easy from that vantage point. I was proud to be able to recognize these famous landmarks from the observation deck since I had been in Paris before. So, I pointed them out to some of the others in the group. Reluctantly, we had to leave, because our guide was already at the pre-arranged meeting location on the ground, so we had to depart the famous landmark. The hot dogs at the café smelled delicious, but because the line was so long, none of us could wait. We left hungry, and because we had to catch up to our appointment at the next site, we missed lunch that day. Thanks to some of our resourceful travelers on the bus, there were Fritos, pretzels, peanuts, m & m's and other snacks being passed around and shared. Lots of examples of love again....

From the Eiffel Tower, Katherine informed us that we were going to the Sacre Coeur Basilica, but were going to have to walk quite a way. However, along the way we would pass about a block in front of Notre Dame, and would have a chance to take some pictures of the famous cathedral on the way to

Sacred Heart (Sacre Coeur). What she didn't mention was the uphill climb up more than a couple of hundred steps to get to the basilica. For that reason, she had tickets for the elevator to transport the less able to bypass the steps. I had been anxiously looking forward to visiting Sacre Coeur again for a better visit. After seeing the inside of the massive building, several of us walked the steps since it was downhill. Sacred Heart has Baroque architecture, and is resplendent with its white exterior, which matches the rest of the shining white scenery of Paris. The inside was ornate, artful and full of many wonderful things to see and appreciate. However, it was noisy from the chatter of so many tourists; it was difficult if not impossible to focus if you wanted to take a few minutes to pray or meditate among the holy and ancient relics. I had visited Sacre Coeur about 4 years ago with the German group, and found a similar environment then. It is located in Montmartre, which is the heart of the Bohemian community. Apparently, that community celebrates a lot! This time, there was a festival on the outside grounds of the cathedral, so the it was crowded and noisy also. The air was filled with aroma of French sea food. So, one couldn't help but focus on food rather than the cathedral. Sacre Coeur is beautiful and historic, and very lively when I compared it to the other amazing cathedrals we had visited that day. It was getting dark, and Katherine mentioned that she and the bus driver had a surprise for us, and we had to be there by 8 p.m. The bus driver negotiated the traffic as best as he could, despite running into after work traffic. When we arrived at our destination in downtown Paris, we found several other buses, and they were parked within inches of each other! They were so close that we hit the next bus on the rear-view mirror, and fortunately, only bent it backwards. Katherine still did not tell us what the surprise was, only to hurry out of the bus, and hurry across the street. We went around the corner and followed the rest of the crowd to an open field and view of the Eiffel Tower. Its lights were on, and precisely at 8 p.m., the lights started dancing up, down, around, and changing colors to red, white, and blue, the national colors of France. Needless to say, that was our surprise, and it was spectacular! Every 30 minutes, the Eiffel tower performs its light show for five minutes, and everyone is taking videos, pictures, and selfies. It was worth waiting for our surprise! After the show, we went back to the hotel, ate a late dinner, and had some to shop for some Paris souvenirs and gifts for family and friends back home. The next day was our last day in Paris and in our pilgrimage, so we were determined to enjoy every minute of it. The bus driver and guide took us to our first stop, the Church of the Miraculous Medal, home to Saint Vincent De Paul and Saint Catherine Laboure, from the Order of Sisters of Charity started by Saint Vincent. I had heard of the Miraculous Medal, but did not know the amazing story of Saint Catherine. The Virgin Mary appeared to Sister Catherine three times in 1830 at the church where she was saying morning prayers. On one of the apparitions, the Virgin requested that Catherine ask the priest to print 20,000 medals with the image that Catherine was seeing, and distribute the medal to the faithful. The beautiful image was Mary in all her splendor, with her hands open at her side and rays emanating downward. The back of the medal contained the letter M located on the cross of Jesus. She explained to Catherine that the rays were an invitation to all the people to believe in Mary and receive her graces to live a good life with Jesus and God, convert to the faith, protect from evil, and perform miracles. Finally, after 3 years, the priest complied with the request, and the medals were printed. France and much of Europe underwent a severe plague during this time, and thousands of people died. Miraculously, the people who wore Mary's medal survived the deadly plague. The medal became known as the Miraculous Medal and has been associated permanently with Saint Catherine Laboure in Paris. Adding to our wonder and awe, we celebrated Mass at the Church. Father Lenin asked us to place our souvenirs, gifts, and personal crucifixes or medals we were wearing, place them on the altar to have them personally blessed. So, we received our special blessings right in front of Saint Vincent De

Paul's and Saint Catherine's beautiful incorrupt bodies at the amazing church there in Paris. She died almost 200 years ago, but her body is beautiful as ever, and appears to be asleep. That was another powerful, prayerful, and unforgettable moment for us during the pilgrimage.

The final cathedral we visited was not very far away in the city, and most of us did not know much about it. I thought the visit would be rather anti-climactic compared to the wonderful surprises we had already enjoyed. We were in practically a "save the best for last" surprise. It was Saint Chapelle Cathedral, an 11<sup>th</sup> century church that was the private worship place of King Louis of France, a very devout Catholic and influential. Tradition is that the king obtained Jesus' Crown of Thorns from its location in Rome and had it on display at the front of the chapel, in addition to nails and wood relics from the Holy Cross. Sometime during the wars going on in France, the Crown of Thorns was moved to Notre Dame Cathedral for safeguarding. It remained there until recently when the disastrous fire occurred at Notre Dame in May 2019. Miraculously, and thankfully, the Crown of Thorns was not damaged. We learned that it has been moved to another undisclosed location in Paris for more complete and necessary safekeeping. As we entered the church, we were treated to an amazing display of colors, because the walls were completely made up of stained-glass windows—hundreds of them! It was a bright sunny day, and the church was built so as to allow the bright sun to shine through, focusing on the red and blue colors. In the afternoon, the focus is on blues, yellows and the other colors. Each pane of the windows depicts a different scene from the bible. Katherine explained the architecture, and how the windows were supported by special wooden columns. The stained-glass windows WERE the walls from floor to ceiling! She said that if we were impressed with the beauty and magnificence of the floor where we were, the top floor would make us feel as if we were in heaven! She took us through a narrow spiral stairway at the front of the church, and you could hear the oohs and ahs as each one of us entered the top floor. The stained-glass windows reached 50 feet all the way to the ceiling! Remember the colors coming through and shining on our faces? To say it was beautiful sight does not adequately describe what we were witnessing. I wanted to see the individual scenes on each pane, to see if I could recognize it from the bible, but the scenes were too small. Katherine further explained the panes are in order from the old testament to the new testament. Another amazing fact we learned was that each pane has been removed twice in history to prevent them from being destroyed during the bombing of Paris in World War I and on a later occasion. I can't even imagine how the massive cathedral might have looked without the panes and the walls boarded up to protect the inside. As the beautiful stained-glass show was not enough, the columns were decorated with large statues of saints and/or apostles. We walked around trying to guess which saint each statue depicted. Now you can see why I thought this special church was saved for the last. All of the others were extraordinary for their amazing story and attraction. But Saint Chappelle is in a wonderful category by itself!

Our pilgrimage included a nice dinner at a French restaurant near the Moulin Rouge night spot. So that evening, we shopped a while for the last opportunity to buy gifts, and then went to dinner. We walked uphill through the narrow streets and came to a small but cozy restaurant owned by an Egyptian family.

An interesting side light occurred as we were waiting for the seating at the restaurant to empty out for our reservation. As the people came out to the sidewalk, we asked where they were from. I noticed their nametags had Spanish names. They said they were from the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. I mentioned that we also had some guests from the Valley. Then, they also mentioned that they were on

a church pilgrimage from Birmingham, Alabama, home of EWTN, the Catholic worldwide radio station. So we chatted for a while about the nice coincidence as the restaurant got ready for our onslaught of 42 hungry guests. What are the odds that we would meet other Texans, on a similar pilgrimage, in the middle of Paris, at the same time of day, at the same restaurant? Our group of 42 took over all the seating spaces, so it became a noisy, fun-filled event after the interesting and wonderful day we had experienced in the French Capital. We were treated to a nice meal of chicken, rice, dessert, and wine. The guide had warned us that getting to the restaurant would involve walking uphill, so some of the less able walkers stayed at the hotel and ate there. After dinner, we walked back, took pictures in front of the world-famous Moulin Rouge, but didn't go in the renowned night club. We learned that the cover charge is 100 Euros, and it was during the week! We went back to the hotel, shopped a little more, then went to pack for a very early 4:30 a. m. departure to the Charles de Gaulle airport, and our flight to Frankfurt, Germany. From there, we would change planes, and fly home to Austin, Texas. The tour company had warned us earlier that we would be in a hurry at the Frankfurt airport because we would have only 1 hour and 10 minutes between landing from Paris, and the departure flight, with suitcases, to Austin. It seemed unlikely that 42 people in one group, with at least 42 checked in suitcases would make the connection timely and smoothly. Thanks to the efficiency of the German airline Lufthansa, they had assigned an individual escort specifically for us into two groups, and whisked us through the massive Frankfurt airport through back hallways, elevators, and buses. They took us in two separate buses, driving for 10 to 15 minutes, until we arrived at our airplane. It was held up until we and other passengers from connecting flights to America were all on board. Somehow, our suitcases made it to our waiting plane flight to Austin with us. How about that for airline efficiency? I was very impressed with the punctuality and hospitality of Lufthansa, and would recommend them without hesitation.

Our flight to Austin was slightly longer than the one to Europe because of the headwind rather than a tailwind on the eastbound flight. It was smooth, uneventful, and enjoyable. And, we found out that our suitcases had all made it without exception. Most of us said a little prayer of thanks to God and the Holy Spirit for guiding us through Frankfurt and for our safe and enjoyable flight back to America. After a fairly quick check through U. S. customs, we were met by our bus and loaded up quickly to get on the highway to San Antonio. At Saint Helena's, there was a festival going on, so there were many cars in the parking lot. Father Lenin blessed our suitcases, and gave us a blessing as well. We said our goodbyes to our new friends who had been so close during the last two weeks, and finally caught our rides home. We were tired, but were already excited to talk about sharing and comparing pictures, getting phone numbers and addresses, e-mail addresses, etc. Father Lenin promised to schedule a reunion for us as soon as practical in view of the holidays coming up in November and December. Some of the ladies, including Susie have met for lunch several times, and have scheduled another luncheon around Christmas. The pilgrimage group had a reunion on January 26, 2020 at St Helena's, and it was wonderful to review pictures and recall the amazing memories from our trip.

Closing thoughts and reflections: I think I learned a lot about myself as a result of the pilgrimage. Although I grew up as cradle Catholic, I found out how little knowledge I have about why I have my faith and about where Catholicism started. I was also awed by the miraculous works of God in preserving the bodies of certain saints to enhance the faith and convert millions of later generations of believers. Additionally, I learned about the lives of some saints, how powerful and influential they were and still are, and even more impactful after they were beatified and canonized. I learned how grueling and tiring the go, go, go of a pilgrimage can be. I don't mean in any way to say it was not enjoyable and

worthwhile. Most of our schedule was flexible, allowing us to be late. However, we were scheduled for Mass every day at a specific time in one of the beautiful shrines, and their times were NOT flexible. If we were late, we had to forfeit our time to another pilgrimage group. There are that many pilgrimages every day! That worked to our advantage in Paris when we still had 15 minutes of our allotted time, so that Father Lenin could bless our gifts at Saint Catherine's altar. As a result of the pilgrimage, we made lasting friendships with the other pilgrims from Holy Trinity and Saint Helena's Church, and look forward to continuing our relationships and perhaps go together on another trip in the future. Finally, the pilgrimage served as a strong boost to Susie's and my faith, as water gives life to living plant and makes it bloom and provide all its potential. What we learned in the pilgrimage illuminated many questions I had, and provided the light as the sun provides the warmth and light to the planet. We need that love, warmth, and encouragement to continue our journey of our wonderful Catholic faith. I have to thank Deacon Dickie Yzaguirre and his lovely wife, Alma, and Father Lenin for their leadership, planning, and spiritual direction on this pilgrimage. I also thank my wife, Susie, for her support in planning, packing, organizing our plans, shopping for gifts, and for sharing in this important faith journey.

Daniel P Gomez and Susie Gomez

March 2020

Commented [DG2]: