

A Pilgrim's Impressions

Random Notes on the Saint Mary's Pilgrimage ~~monograph~~ by Mary Gentges

"What's at Saint Mary's?" asked the ticket agent in the local bus depot. What indeed? How do you explain that for a year you've been chafing to travel five hundred miles to a little Kansas town and see some old buildings ravaged by eleven years' abandonment, or that you cried when you heard one of them was gutted by fire.

In olden times pilgrimages were penitential affairs. Trying to sleep on an overnight bus was penance enough for us! But at last my ladyfriend and I stepped down wobbly-kneed on St. Mary's Bertrand St. in the sunshine of an August morning.

St. Mary's! For me it was a return to the soft hills of my origin. A quarter of a century ago our family had once considered locating here, never guessing what would one day bring me back from the West for a return visit.

We hoisted our luggage and found a phone. "St. Mary's Academy," came the answer, "I'll be right down." In minutes Julio Ramirez was there fielding many questions while driving us to the east edge of the little town.

We turned in the gates and I saw the place of my dreams spread before me in the vivid colors of a summer day. The snow white statue of Our Lady of Grace stretched out her hands in benediction from the circular drive. Up behind her rose the gaping walls of the Immaculata.

From the first moment I never met a stranger—not among the pilgrims who were eager to exchange conversation; not among the "celebrities" who were approachable as friends; not among the volunteer staff who were ever patient at the questions pressed upon them from every side, and who seemed glad to welcome and help each one of us.

The roofless, windowless walls of the Immaculata—hauntingly beautiful—arrest one's gaze from the broad grassy center quadrangle. You find yourself ever looking up the hill to the chapel, which resembles some ancient ruined monastery.

To me the Immaculata became symbolic. As it stood before the fire it represented the Church in all her glory before this present crisis. Now, in its gutted state it represents the current chaos in the

Church. But below in the quadrangle stirs new and vibrant life. The Immaculata will be rebuilt: the Church will triumph.

St. Mary's is a place of hope. The atmosphere is charged with the spiritual. I can understand now how the volunteer workers could labor from sun-up to one a.m. It was a joy to see priests, nuns, brothers, and seminarians in traditional attire all over the campus. It was like a retreat in itself to be among modestly dressed men and women, little girls in dresses, so many young people. Archbishop Lefebvre commented in his Assumption sermon that over half the crowd was under the age of twenty. He complimented the parents on their Christian marriages and large numbers of children, children who are the hope of the Church.

If your Marian devotion has grown routine and wants rekindling, visit St. Mary's! It seems that Our Lady herself has preserved it for this present use. Let Fr. Bolduc tell you how they saw the property, planted a Miraculous Medal, and began a Novena. On the ninth day the property was given to the Society of St. Pius X and a generous benefactor paid off the lien against it. "We received this gratis from Our Lady," he will tell you matter-of-factly. "We have left it in her hands since that day."

You'll hear about the day when Mr. Gayner told Fr. Bolduc, "We have sixteen hundred dollars in debts and only one hundred and eighty dollars in the bank; which one bill do I pay?" As they discussed the problem they opened some envelopes three visiting families had just left at the office. Inside were checks amounting to exactly sixteen hundred dollars!

Or consider the priceless Immaculata windows made in a German factory in 1908. The original plans were presumed lost in World War II, yet the original sketches were uncovered in the factory basement! And three old men in their 90's were located who had been apprentices on the original job! The windows will be remade even though it will take many years.

These things happen at St. Mary's, even in our skeptical age. Here the Faith of the ages, the Faith of the Saints is alive and vigorous.

I found myself unusually moved at religious services; others made the same comment. Who would not be moved when several hundred voices answer the Rosary in perfect unison? Or at the High Mass when you are overwhelmed at the ageless beauty of the old hymns or the Credo you used to sing in grade school? The lump in your throat swells as you join in "Holy God We Praise Thy Name." And if you know the tremendous sacrifices amid difficulties that some parents made to attend this Confirmation it becomes all the more poignant.

I experienced more religion in three days than I had in many a year. How we used to take it all for granted! Here were hundreds of people present because they wanted to be, because they love our Holy Catholic Faith. And best of all, the Holy Eucharist was in our midst. The ages of faith were revisited as the Blessed Sacrament was carried from the small chapel to Assumption Chapel—the procession of altar boys with vigil lights, and the steady ringing of the Sanctus bells, the faithful dropping to their knees as their Lord and God passed by. All this and Heaven too? All we've lost returned to us? It was three days just this side of Heaven!

Assumption Chapel is a stone-walled former dining hall that a couple of weeks previously was still a clutter of equipment. Summer workers transformed it with elbow grease and paint into a perfect chapel. Great columns support the wood beamed ceiling; the stained glass Last Supper is perfect above the beautiful marble altar; a real Communion rail and statues in niches along the walls complete the picture. Of course there were those typical traditionalists' "kneelers"—carpet squares! A shortage of chairs was a slight problem so after Mass the furnishings were on the move across the quadrangle as each man carried chairs to the gym dining area, and vice-versa after dinner!

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