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Experience

By Agnes Fernando

A mother visits her children in Medjugorje



Do you believe in miracles? I do. Otherwise, how can one explain the spiritual dynamism that is so tangible in Medjugorje? And how can one comprehend the magnetic force that makes not just old women, but also young men and women gravitate towards the confessionals? St James Church filled to capacity with pilgrims on their knees for three hours every day, praying the rosary, followed by the celebration of the Eucharist, and the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, only manifests the fervour of the people's faith.

I had not heard much about Medjugorje in India; only in January 2014 did I first hear about the apparitions in Medjugorje at a party in my parish in Leuven, Belgium. It was the feast of Epiphany when we exchange gifts randomly. And the gift that came to me was a beautiful picture of Our Lady of Medjugorje, Queen of Peace. The person who had brought that gift said to me, "Our blessed Mother is calling you to Medjugorje." I was thrilled, and brought the picture to my studio, where it has remained ever since. From then on I cherished hopes of joining one of the pilgrimages organized regularly in Belgium. But I knew I could not afford it as I was a student sans scholarship. My part time job at British Council enabled me to save 50 Euros per month on the advice of a friend. Thus, at the end of a year and a half, this amount allowed me to join one of the pilgrimages by flight, for the bus journey would have been too arduous for me as I was just recovering from a bus accident.

We flew to Zagreb, and from there to Split; then we went by bus to Medjugorje, a little town among the hills, as the name itself says. We

stayed in Palma, a small homely hotel run by a devout Catholic family, very close to the Church of St James, the hub of the apparitions of Mother Mary to a group of six children. The hill of apparition where Our Lady first appeared, and the Križevac, the hill of the Cross, are both very rocky hills with no road or path. Yet, what is surprising is that both these hills are filled by day, and sometimes even at night, with pilgrims praying spontaneously.

When I joined my small Belgian group to climb the Križevac, supported by a walking stick, I was pleasantly surprised to find our group expanding, joined by a Croatian family of 5 carrying a baby of 11 months, and later by a large group of about 50 Italians. It was wonderful to be praying the Way of the Cross in Dutch, Croatian and Italian, each one joining in, in his/her own language. I thought of the first Pentecost, as we were all able to understand what was said in our own languages. It was also touching to see small children, young people, and even old women climbing the rocks barefoot in winter. Not surprisingly, I always found a hand outstretched when I needed support to balance. At the end, the priest of our group gave the final blessing. The Queen of Peace, 'Kraljica Mira' in Croatian, had certainly united her children from different parts of the world as one peaceful and praying family.

The long queues for confession were not unusual as conversion was the hallmark of our Mother's message in Medjugorje, just as in Lourdes and Fatima. A very powerful witness of conversion that I came across was the Canadian, Patrick Latta, who by his own testimony was once a successful car dealer leading a life of debauchery, but who having heard of Our Lady of Medjugorje through a priest, and being touched by God's grace had

turned over a new leaf. Selling all his possessions he had relocated in Medjugorje with Nancy, his wife. Realizing the importance of priests for the salvation of humanity, they are now building a castle to provide a haven for priests' retreats. The other spectacular witness of conversion is the Cenaculo, a center of de-addiction which under the inspiration of Sister Elvira has effectively helped drug addicts to make a complete U turn in their lives, and become missionaries reaching out to abandoned children and destitute in different parts of the world, especially Africa.

I did not have the privilege of meeting any of the visionaries who are now grown into adulthood with families of their own. Neither could I meet Fr Slavko Barbaric who lived and worked in Medjugorje had died on the Križevac during a Way of the Cross, and whose spirit seems to hover over the place. Nor could I meet Fr Jozo Zovko who was the parish priest in St James during the time of the apparitions, and who had at first refused to believe the children, the youngest being just 10 years old in 1981, but later became so convinced as to risk his own life and even go to prison in order to save the visionaries from the threats of the Communist forces.

What does it matter that the Marian apparitions in Medjugorje have not as yet received the official stamp from Rome? The faith of the pilgrims who throng the place is evinced by their observance of the messages received through the children, to pray the rosary, celebrate the Eucharist, experience God's forgiveness in the sacrament of reconciliation, fast, read and live the Bible, the Word of God. Besides all this, the 'miracles' that abound, the feeling that all who come belong to one large family, is evidence enough to prove that the place is hallowed by the visit of our heavenly Mother, the Queen of Peace. ●