

A Marian Pilgrimage of OFWs in Spain

Last May 5, Filipino overseas workers from Barcelona made a Marian pilgrimage to the shrine of Torreciudad in the northern part of Spain. The pilgrimage was patterned after the so-called "romeria" that St. Josemaria encouraged Marian devotees to undertake during the month of May.

05/20/2007

As a Visiting Professor at the IESE Business School in Barcelona, Spain,

I consider myself as an overseas Filipino worker. After all, I had to go through the same procedures as any OFW in obtaining a working visa, including having all my ten fingerprints taken to get an NBI clearance, lining up at the Pasig NBI office with seamen, entertainers, domestic helpers, etc. That is why last May 5, I found it the most natural thing in the world to join some 200 Filipino overseas workers from Barcelona to make a Marian pilgrimage to the famous shrine of Torreciudad in the northern part of Spain.

The Torreciudad Shrine is in the middle of the region of Aragon, just a few kilometers from the City of Zaragoza, which is also world famous for the Shrine of Our Lady of the Pillar, believed by Christians to be the first place on earth where the Blessed Virgin appeared to St. James the Apostle before her Assumption

into Heaven. Another famous shrine, that of Lourdes in France, is also close enough for the three Marian shrines to form what is now known as the Marian route. Only 350 kilometers unite these three shrines-- Lourdes, Pillar, and Torreciudad--so that pilgrims can go to all three in a period of two days. I have known of a good number of Filipino families who have included this Marian route in their touristic visit to Europe, enjoying at the same time the beautiful scenes of the Pyrenees and the cultural attractions of Aragon.

The word Torreciudad (Tower City) comes from the origin of this shrine which dates back to the eleventh century A.D. It is on top of a high hill which the invading moors used as a bulwark to defend themselves from the Christians who were attacking them from the North to reconquer the land. In 1084, once they succeeded in reclaiming the area, the

Christians enthroned the image of Our Lady in the Shrine that up to this day is preserved. Since that time, Torreciudad became a place for pilgrimage for Christians from all over the region, very much like our own Antipolo or Manaog shrines being visited by thousands of pilgrims throughout the whole year.

Although the original shrine still exists, what we visited is a bigger and modern shrine completed in 1975 and under the apostolic direction of the Personal Prelature of Opus Dei. The new shrine is a very imposing work of architecture. But what impressed the Filipinos most was the environment of prayer that impregnated the whole place, helping the pilgrims to focus on the main purpose of their visit to the place, which is to show their deep devotion to the Mother of God. Such an ambience of prayer was greatly enhanced by the homily of the

Filipino parish priest who accompanied the pilgrims. Fr. Bernie Alejo, a priest from the diocese of Cavite and presently assigned to the parish for Filipino immigrants in Barcelona, reminded us of the theological truth that Mary is the surest way to Jesus and to God the Father. Fr Alejo emphasized again and again that the Blessed Virgin herself would be disappointed if the only objective of the pilgrimage was to venerate her. Her magnificent obsession is to lead us all to her Son Jesus.

It was edifying to observe that a good number of the Filipino pilgrims took advantage of the occasion to go to the Sacrament of Confession, which is a most pleasing act to Jesus. It was an expressed wish of the Founder of Opus Dei, St. Josemaria Escriva, that there be forty confessionals in the lower portion of the Shrine to drive home the point that the greatest

favor pilgrims can obtain from Our Lady of Torreciudad is their spiritual cure, their being forgiven of their sins through Confession. The Filipinos could go to Confession in Spanish, English or Tagalog (thanks to the presence of Fr. Alejo).

What caught the attention of the Filipino pilgrims was the absence of commercialization within the immediate premises of the Shrine. The nearest restaurants, hotels, and stores were several kilometers below the Shrine. The Foundation that developed the Shrine had enough foresight to buy the properties immediately surrounding the Shrine to prevent what has happened in a good number of religious shrines, the over commercialization of the environment--which somehow diminishes the prayerful ambience people are looking for when they go on a pilgrimage.

May 5 was especially dedicated to the Filipino communities residing in Spain. The officials of the Shrine prepared three images of Our Lady widely venerated in the Philippines. The main one was that of Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage of Antipolo, which belongs to the same genre as Our Lady of Torreciudad, both images being part of the so-called Black Virgins. Then there two others that were used in the procession: Our Lady Mediatrix of All Grace of Lipa and Our Lady of Piat.

The Filipino day started with a procession with these three images being carried to the main Church. The Rector of Torreciudad, Fr. Javier Mora Figueroa (who has relatives in Iloilo), presided over all the religious ceremonies, which included the offering of gifts, the blessing of children, the praying of the Holy Rosary and the Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament and singing of the

Regina Coeli. The Holy Mass was celebrated by Fr. Alejo, who as already mentioned above, gave a very inspiring homily about the role of Mary in man's salvation. His words reminded me of what St. Josemaria used to repeat: We go to Jesus through Mary with Peter (the Pope).

In a way, the Philippines got special treatment by having a whole day dedicated to Filipino pilgrims alone. The next day, May 6, saw a similar pilgrimage but for all of Latin American countries together. Given such a privilege, Filipinos from all Spain should make sure that next year, there will be a much bigger contingent so that Barcelona will not be almost alone in sending representatives. I hope to see many more Filipinos from Madrid, Valencia, Bilbao, Pamplona and other key cities where there are Filipino immigrant workers. The organizers

of the first Filipino homage to Our Lady of Torreciudad are determined to make the pilgrimage an annual event in the month of May.

I would also like to inform Filipino families who travel to Europe for tourism that those couples celebrating wedding anniversaries can make use of one of the many altars in the Torreciudad Shrine for such an occasion. Asking the intercession of Our Lady and giving her thanks for a happy marriage would be a most fitting way of celebrating a silver, pearl, or golden wedding anniversary. Those interested in celebrating anniversaries or other special occasions in the Torreciudad Shrine or their respective travel agents may contact Luis Rojo Sanz at email address luisrojosanz@gmail.com for details.

The pilgrimage done by us OFWs from Barcelona was patterned after the so-called *romeria* that St. Josemaria encouraged Marian devotees to undertake during the month of May, the month dedicated by the Catholic Church to the Blessed Virgin Mary. It consists in praying three parts of the Holy Rosary during a visit to a Church or Shrine especially dedicated to Holy Mary. During the trip, the first mystery is prayed on the way to the Shrine, either walking or by car. The second and main part (the mystery corresponding to the day of the week) is prayed right at the Shrine. The third part is prayed on the way home from the Shrine. In the pilgrimage to Torreciudad, the three parts or mysteries of the Holy Rosary were prayed in four languages: Tagalog, English, Spanish and Catalan (the language spoken in Barcelona). I was impressed to observe that a good number of the

Filipino workers spoke all four languages, demonstrating once again the Filipino talent for learning many languages. There is still time for Filipino families to practice this custom that is very pleasing to Our Lady during the current month of May. There are literally scores of Churches and Shrines devoted to Our Lady in the main cities and provinces of the Philippines.

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Bulletin

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