

Full of Grace



Fatima Sanctuary

Words by Joy Adan

In the still of the spring night and bathed in the glow of hundreds of thousands of candles, Eugene Menguito stands amidst a sea of people, brightly coloured banners and national flags. Metres away, the statue of Our Lady of the Rosary makes her way through the crowd, travelling through the square on a bed of white roses. Devotees sing Ave Maria with so much fervour the song rings out across the town. It is a sight and sound the Menguitos will never forget.

“We could feel our hearts pounding like we could feel the closeness of Heaven,” says Eugene. Hours later, he wakes at dawn to capture an early-morning photo of the day’s first rays bouncing off the stone and steeples. “The location of our accommodation in so many of the cities we visited was literally at the doorstep of the churches or shrines,” he explains. “Everything was walking distance away. So to be able to get up early and capture the sunrise photo of the shrine was incredible.”

The tranquil silence of the early morning air and empty streets brought the spirit of Fatima alive in a unique way. This, and the candlelit rosary from the previous evening, are magical moments that have been three years in the making.

Eugene and his wife Regina, their siblings Rowena and Jeff Barcelon, and Raymundo and Bernadette Torres, all live in three different cities spanning the east coast of Australia. They first raised the idea of taking a holiday together in 2016 and the Marian pilgrimage offered the perfect trifecta; a family getaway that took them out of the busy-ness of everyday life; the opportunity to explore Europe; and a journey discovering the many blessings of Mary and the saints

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“Before going on this pilgrimage, I never knew so many saints existed; I never knew their stories,” says Bernadette, admitting that it was visiting the saints that struck her most during the trip. The pilgrimage allowed them all to discover more about the richness of Europe’s saints and their lives of holiness, prayer, and courage. “Learning about them, visiting places like Loyola, Avila and Paray-le-Monial, places where really significant events happened, then seeing the dedication of the people who preserve all these places – I was really blown away.”

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For Eugene, the highlight was seeing the childhood home of St Thérèse of the Child Jesus, who he had grown up asking for intercession. “When we saw Lisieux on the itinerary, we committed to going on this trip.”

Inside St Thérèse’s childhood house, Les Buissonnets, the pilgrims see perfectly preserved clothing, books and toys, the oak-panelled dining room where her family shared meals, and the backyard where she would have played before joining the Carmelites. “Now that we’ve been there, witnessed her home and upbringing, we’re brought even closer to her, to Mama Mary and Jesus,” says Eugene. “Not a day passes without St Thérèse included. This makes it all so real.”



Eugene & Regina Menguito

Lisieux was just one of many stops and saints along the trip that reveal a new dimension to the Catholic faith the couples were introduced to as children. During the bus ride to Lourdes, they watch a movie about Saint Bernadette Soubirous, the poor peasant girl who, after seeing the Virgin Mary, discovered the spring of healing water that has flown through the Pyrenees Mountains for over 150 years.

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With an afternoon free to explore the town, they make their way along the Upper way of the Cross of the Espélugues, where 115 life-sized copper figures illustrate the Lord's passion in vivid detail, then stop at the Grotto of the Massabielle, where Our Lady first appeared and instructed Bernadette to "Go and drink from the spring."



Lourdes Grotto

"Experiencing Mass, drinking and dipping in the spring water, then visiting Saint Bernadette's birthplace, and travelling to the Convent of St Gildard in Nevers where you see her incorrupt body...all of these are experiences we will carry with us for the rest of our lives," Eugene says. He recalls the candles burning at different prayer points in the sanctuary, and the bright flowers and handwritten prayer intentions on the floor of the cave where the spring still flows; "We couldn't help but feel all the saints and Mary so close to us."

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"We believe people can change their ways, be converted, be better and become messengers and witnesses to the good news of the Lord our God," Eugene says. "This is what we learned from St Ignatius when we visited Loyola in Spain, from St Teresa's mystical experiences in Avila, from St John Vianney's dedication and commitment to the Church, and from St Margaret Mary Alacoque at Paray-le-Monial, the home of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The experience of learning about and visiting the saints who, in one way or another, formed us in our early years, confirmed so much of what we believe and know today."

Months after returning home after the trip, the magical moments of this 19-day journey live on for Eugene and Regina. "Friends and family listen to our experience and they become more interested; their own prayers and their devotion increases," Eugene explains. "Now that we have had the opportunity to experience something so life-changing, it is as though we have a responsibility to spread the good message and bring others to Jesus, just as Mary and the saints did."

Visitations & Saints

Saints Featured

St Anthony - Lisbon



St Jacinta & St Francisco - Fatima



St Teresa - Avila



St John of the Cross - Segovia



St Dominic - Caleruega



St Ignatius - Loyola



St Bernadette - Lourdes

