

Two Smiles and a Healing

By Larry Pavlicek

A year or so ago a routine chest x-ray showed a few glitches in my lung tissue a CAT scan later confirmed were the early stages of *idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis*, a progressive disease, considered incurable, with widely varying estimates on life expectancy. So when my friend and Dame of Malta Anne Marie Hansen, invited me on the Order's August pilgrimage to Our Lady of Good Hope in Champion, Wisconsin, it brought to mind the Yiddish expression, "It vouldn't hoit, might help." But even though Our Lady of Good Help, the only approved Marian Apparition site in the U.S., has been the site of healings and other miracles, I knew to leave expectations behind simply look forward to a peaceful, quiet time of recollection.

Which is what I would have done but for the spiritual and emotional issues that came along for the ride. Without going into gory detail, ever since I returned to the Catholic Church there have been snags that kept me from embracing the Blessed Mother. It wasn't that I disagreed with Marian dogmas. Immaculate Conception? Of course! Virgin Birth? Fersure! Bodily Assumption? Certainly! But devotion and intimacy with Mary? Not so much. I simply couldn't let down my guard and allow her to get close to me. Knowing I'd have to resolve this difficulty at some point, visiting a place where she appeared seemed like a good place to start.

Leaving expectations behind is a good idea when visiting Our Lady of Good Help. As an approved apparition site (and now a national shrine), the chapel and grotto are, well, a little underwhelming. Anyone expecting magnificent mosaics, an abundance of gold leaf, or astounding artworks are in for disappointment. While the entire grounds reeks of the sacred, its architecture is similar to what you'd find in simple country churches throughout central Wisconsin, a theme that continues to the apparition site beneath the chapel. Despite row after row blue and white candles lining every wall and the display of canes and crutches attesting to miraculous healings, unregenerate souls such as mine cannot ignore exposed plumbing, plain asphalt floor

tile, and pews that have seen better days. Then there is the statue of Mary herself, her face showing a faraway look that, instead of inviting intimacy, reinforced her holiness and my own sinfulness.

I neither floated from the grotto nor felt let down. A visit to sacred space, no matter how unimposing, is an act of faith and an occasion for prayer that God will honor. But something unique happened when, going from the grotto to the chapel, I stopped at the altar rail before another statue of the Blessed Mother, one far different from the one in the grotto.

This figure, commissioned by the local bishop and recently completed, portrayed Mary as visionary Adele Brise likely saw her - golden blonde hair, soft blue eyes, and the fair complexion of a northern European maiden. Normally waspy portrayals of Mary, Jesus, and the Saints aggravate my sense of historical correctness, but I was drawn to kneel at the railing and contemplate her face.

The image is stunning, lifelike, amazing for portraying such softness, kindness, and tenderness. Unlike other statues of Mary, this one makes eye contact, giving one a sense of the Blessed Mother's complete, unconditional acceptance. The longer I stared into the face, the warmer and more lifelike it appeared until I imagined her lips were moving. Knowing this was my imagination at work, I couldn't help asking, "Are you trying to tell me something?"

I wasn't expecting another apparition, or to hear any audible voices but in those moments a single word entered my mind: consecration.

Total consecration to Jesus through Mary wasn't new to me but it was something I'd avoided for years. Having given my life to Jesus years ago, consecration through Mary seemed redundant and like allowing a third party into my most cherished relationship. These thoughts continued churning in my mind even as I basked in the warmth, serenity, and acceptance the Blessed Mother's image portrayed. It was hard to deny there was some kind of message in play, but what to do about it had me at a loss.

Like Peter, James, and John on the mountain with Jesus, I'd have been willing to camp out in the chapel, but sensed after several minutes it was time to go. On the way out I met Anne Marie and told her of my experience at the altar, confessing I didn't know what to do about it. She

lost no time shepherding me to the Shrine's bookstore where she bought me a book on Marian consecration. Okay, I thought, *looks like step one's in place*. But back at the hotel while thumbing through the book, I wondered what I'd gotten myself into. I was deluged with second thoughts that night and they continued into following morning and lasted until the final pilgrimage Mass.

As the Knights, Dames, and Malades filed into St. Francis Xavier Cathedral in Green Bay, we were directed to pews to the far left. Settling into a seat near the front, I kneeled to pray and happened to look up at a statue of St. Therese, the Little Flower. And there I saw it again; the smile I'd seen the day before in all its warmth, kindness, and affirmation. After looking away and returning several times with the same effect, it was evident what was happening. The day before the Blessed Mother delivered a message; that morning at Mass, the Little Flower confirmed it.

Healing takes time but it's undeniable the process began for me on that pilgrimage. The wounds that stowed away for the journey haven't ached as much and my reservations about the Blessed Mother have morphed from angry resistance to the simple question, "I don't get it; help me out here." Time will tell where it will lead, but entering the third week of consecration to Jesus through Mary, it's been an adventure fraught with plenty of new insights and a number of little healings. I cannot thank Anne Marie and the Order of Malta enough for making it possible.