

DAY ONE



*Shrine of Our Lady of
La Leche*

ST. AUGUSTINE, FLORIDA

It's funny how we can think we know someone well and then one day discover something new that completely changes our perception of that person. After we got engaged, I learned that my husband had spent a summer working at a carnival in a tourist town when he was a young adult. He and his brother had worked one of the cotton candy stands! The thought of my normally reserved and analytical husband swirling clouds of multicolored confection and calling out, "Get your cotton candy here!" sent me into peals of laughter. It was a side

of him I never imagined existed. I'm sure he was good at it and enjoyed himself while working, but this unexpected discovery dramatically changed my perception of him.

That can happen with places, too. For example, you can visit the same park dozens of times and never notice the lovely creek with the little footbridge crossing it in the back corner. You wonder how you could have missed it. Yet you did because you thought you knew everything there was to know about that park. We can think we know everything about our amazing country as well. We've studied its history, traveled around, and kept tabs on the national news. What more is there to learn? Then, one day, something pops up that surprises us.

Signs from the Pilgrim's Path

I had a surprise like that when I visited the Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche in St. Augustine, Florida. Since childhood, I've celebrated Thanksgiving with my family each year on the fourth Thursday of November along with the rest of the United States. I knew the story of the first Thanksgiving—how the pilgrims sailed over the ocean on the *Mayflower* seeking religious freedom, how they had suffered, how the Native Americans helped

them, and how they gathered for a marvelous feast to celebrate the first harvest. I thought I knew it all, but I didn't.

On September 8, 1565—the same day the city of St. Augustine was founded—Spanish explorer Pedro Menéndez de Avilés landed on the eastern shore of what is now the state of Florida and claimed the site for Spain and the Church. Menéndez was captain general of the Indies Fleet and brought with him colonists and soldiers. He also brought with him a Spanish diocesan priest named Fr. Francisco Lopez de Mendoza Grajales, the fleet's chaplain. Upon landing, Menéndez claimed the land and founded *Mission de Nombre de Dios* (Mission in the Name of God), and Fr. Lopez offered a Mass of thanksgiving at a makeshift altar on the shore. This was the first Catholic Mass ever celebrated on what is now the United States of America.¹

After the Mass, Pedro Menéndez hosted a wonderful feast for his companions and new native friends, the Timucuan. This became the first permanent Christian settlement in our country.

The thanksgiving feast held by Pedro Menéndez, his companions, the chaplain, and the Timucuan beat the English pilgrims' celebration by fifty-six years! Why haven't we heard of this

before? Speculation holds that it's because of the eventual English dominance on this continent and the spread of the English language. The story of the English pilgrims' feast at Plymouth took precedence over the founding of St. Augustine by the Spanish explorers. Regardless, the fact that the first thanksgiving feast in the United States actually took place in Florida decades before the one primarily associated with our national holiday changed my perception of the holiday.

When they came, the Spaniards brought with them a special devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Inspired by the date of their landing—the Nativity of Mary—in 1609 they built a chapel and dedicated it to Our Lady of La Leche (Our Lady of the Milk and Happy Delivery, a title that is believed to have been brought to Spain by the crusaders in the Middle Ages). It dates back to a fourth-century grotto in Bethlehem where Mary is said to have nursed her child. When some of our Lady's milk accidentally spilled, the entire grotto turned white; hence it was named the Milk Grotto. It's believed that is how Mary came to be known as Our Lady of La Leche. During the reign of Philip III of Spain, a miracle was granted through the intercession of Our Lady of La Leche when the lives of a woman and her baby who were expected to die in childbirth

were spared. Philip III commissioned a statue to be made of Our Lady of La Leche, and it won the hearts of the Spanish people. The statue shows the Blessed Mother sitting with great love and dignity and tenderly nursing the Infant Jesus. Soon after Menéndez and his men established Mission de Nombre de Dios, Franciscan missionaries from Spain joined them, bringing with them a replica of the statue of Our Lady of La Leche. They built a chapel on the mission grounds and enshrined the statue in it. This became the first Marian shrine in the United States.²

The devotion to Our Lady of La Leche spread rapidly among the Timucua, Guale, and Apalache Native Americans who lived in that area, and it continued to spread as more explorers and colonists came to the land. As our country expanded and developed, the area ceased to function as a mission per se, but the grounds and chapel continued to be maintained and other features and structures were added. It became a popular place to go for solitude and prayer. When a hurricane destroyed the chapel in 1923, volunteers rebuilt it in its original form. The shrine has since become the center of devotion for thousands of women who come to pray for our Lady's intercession in difficulties of motherhood, including infertility,

raising children, and more. On an almost daily basis, women appear at the shrine to offer thanksgiving for petitions granted regarding pregnancy and childbearing. Additionally, men and women of all walks of life arrive, seeking the consolation and intercession of this most tender of mothers in a vast array of concerns. While none have been formally investigated by the Church, anecdotal evidence says Our Lady of La Leche is performing miracles from her shrine on a regular basis.³

The first thing I learned when I reached the shrine was that Mass would begin in a little while. That I could attend Mass at the site of the first ever celebrated in my home country was a tremendous and unexpected blessing! My heart was so full of gratitude that I could barely think of anything else. Although I know this not to be the case, it felt as though that Mass was held just for me. It happened to be the Feast of St. Mark, my husband's patron saint, and this was an added blessing. In the homily, the priest spoke of St. Mark's mission and subsequent suffering and pointed out that we all have a mission and all are called to suffering in imitation of our Lord. Then he said something that will stay with me always. Regarding suffering, he said, "The real question is, 'Who are you becoming in the midst of your suffering?'" I had

never thought of it that way before. Surely there was suffering for the Menéndez company as they forged their way in this unknown territory. Look who they became in their suffering!

Walking the grounds of the shrine, I found it easy to imagine what it was like in 1565 when Menéndez, Fr. Lopez, and their companions first set foot there. Their landing spot is marked by the Great Cross, a 208-foot stainless steel cross representing the no-longer-standing large cross erected by Fr. Lopez upon his arrival. Across a small creek is a life-size bronze statue of the Spanish priest, his arms extended in praise of God. A few yards away is a replica of the makeshift altar upon which the first Mass was offered. Standing at the shore near the cross, I caught myself taking long, deep breaths—not because I needed extra oxygen but rather because I wanted to breathe in the ocean air just as Pedro Menéndez and Fr. Lopez had done. I wanted to breathe in God’s glory and the fervency of their mission to spread Christianity to all shores. I stood straight and spread my arms in imitation of the bronze image of Fr. Lopez. I heard the voices of the soldiers, colonists, and Timucuan—the prayers of praise and thanksgiving, the laughter, the chatter. I heard the clatter of the dishes and the crackling of the cooking fires. For that moment, I

felt the joy of the real first thanksgiving celebration in the United States.

From there, I strolled along the pathways that wind throughout the beautifully landscaped property. I stopped before the statues of the many saints who are honored there, walked the Stations of the Cross, and paused at the spot of the first Mass on US soil. I wondered what my life might be like if the Catholic faith had never been brought here by the courageous men and women who sacrificed so much for the glory of God. I looked around me, seeing in my mind's eye the weary soldiers, helmets under their arms, hands folded, and kneeling to receive our Lord in the Eucharist. I pictured the priest's sacred hands gently placing the Host on each tongue, and I imagined Menéndez kneeling to the side, head bowed in deep gratitude. I, too, bowed my head in gratitude.

Not far from the altar, two archeological excavations are being conducted by the University of Florida. Since the project began in 1993, the archeological team has unearthed some of the most important discoveries in the history of St. Augustine, including a moat believed to belong to the structure that Menéndez built. What else have they discovered? What else will they discover as they proceed with excavation? Perhaps there might be

vessels used for holy Mass or shards of equipment handled by the Spanish soldiers. Maybe deep in the earth are remnants of the Great Cross Fr. Lopez built and raised.

I saved my visit to the chapel of Our Lady of La Leche for last. Admittedly, that was doing things somewhat backward since it's the shrine's main attraction, so to speak, but I didn't want my time there interrupted by a rush to see the other features on the grounds before they closed for the day. I wanted to have the opportunity to sit quietly, take it all in, and pour my heart out to my Mother.

That's exactly what I did.



The chapel is small and simple, yet it is exquisite. It's simply furnished, with a votive candle stand in the back, Stations of the Cross on the side walls, wooden benches, and a plain wooden altar in the front. Humble stained-glass windows let in a splash of sunlight. The chapel's simplicity adds to its allure while at the same time compelling those who enter to focus on the beautiful statue of Our Lady of La Leche, which rests on a pedestal in an alcove behind the altar. Once I'd entered, I couldn't take my eyes off her. I'm almost embarrassed to admit that I initially balked at the thought of a

statue of Mary nursing—it seemed so foreign to me. I've seen images and imagined Mary doing many different things as a wife and mother, and I know that she lived an ordinary life just as we do. It makes perfect sense that she would have nursed our Lord because it's a natural thing for mothers to do for their infants. Still, I never considered something so private and intimate between Mother and Child. But Our Lady of La Leche is so graceful and modest, so tender and loving that it seems perfectly natural. I couldn't resist gazing at her peaceful and reassuring face.

I sat there in silence for a little more than an hour, and in that time, several young women came in, knelt to pray, and left after a short while. A handful of them were in tears. I had no idea what they'd come in to pray for, but I was immediately drawn to pray for whatever it was and to entrust them to our Lady. Strangely, it felt as though I was supposed to be there right at that time and was expected to pray for them. In this moment, that was my calling.

Viewing Our Interior Landscape

Have you ever discovered something completely new about a person or place you knew well that surprised you? Depending on what