

Fruit of the Vine

By Fr. David J. Simonetti

Our Blessed Lord told his disciples, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and everyone that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit... Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. (John 15:1-2,4-5) Throughout the Holy Scriptures the Eternal Word speaks to us often of vineyards, vinedressers and bearing fruit that will last. I find it no small thing that the in the landscape of Medjugorje one finds vineyards growing. It is here in this place that the Lord calls us through His Beloved Mother’s voice to be “pruned” in order to bear more fruit in the Christian life of holiness.

I first became really aware of Our Lady’s presence in Medjugorje and of the events that were going on there sometime in 1988 through people who had gone there on pilgrimage and then returned to share their personal stories. One notices how people come back on fire for the faith and with a great desire to share it. Fire transforms what it comes into contact with! I remember we had a Holy Hour in our Church and the Priest gave out medals that had received Our Lady’s special Motherly blessing during one of the apparitions. When I received mine I distinctly recall feeling that the Blessed Virgin Mary was drawing close to me, that this was HER SPECIAL PERSONAL GIFT JUST TO ME! And it was – for all who received one. As I grew in my desire to respond to Her the flame to consider the Holy Priesthood which I had in about sixth grade started to rekindle in my heart again. I began attending Holy Hours, praying the Rosary, going to Confession and seeking God’s will for my life. I also desired to go to Medjugorje myself. I was about half- way through college and thought that after I graduated I would go sometime – I was going to leave all of the timing and details to Jesus and Mary.

It would be eight years before I specifically heard Our Lady call me to come to Her in Medjugorje. In January of 1996 I had picked up a flier for an upcoming pilgrimage led by Mr. Andy Zovko with Fr. Charlie Becker accompanying as a spiritual director which would leave on May 13. When I read it the timing was just right. I had a very strong conviction in my heart that She wanted me to come – now, on this trip. Right after I decided to go I entered into what I call a period of personal trial which the Lord was using as a purification in order to prepare the ground for planting. I had firmly decided to go and was not going to let anything stop me. I believe with all my heart I heard Our Lady’s confirmation of Her call come through my own mother’s voice. Remember now, at this time the horrible

war that had gripped that region was fresh in the minds of all who saw the nightly news during the past few years. My mother saw the flier advertising the trip in my room and said to me, "Why don't you go. I think you should go on this." I heard her words and was aware of the grace that permeated them and knew in my heart that was the Blessed Mother's further invitation.

The travel from Chicago was almost thirty hours total to arrive in Medjugorje. Fr. Charlie's spiritual direction and Andy Zovko's healing gifts are a perfect compliment to each other and the time spent with them were part of God's plan to allow room for the Spirit to move within us. In the morning we would attend the English Mass, go to the Hill of Apparitions or climb Mt. Krizevac and then have the afternoon free to spend time listening to the Lord in the place where He would lead us. Perhaps one would go sit in the Church, to the Adoration Chapel, go off to a mountain, or walk through the village for example. It was in the long climb up Mt. Krizevac to the Cross standing at the top and assisting people who were struggling with physical limitations that I felt in such a profoundly deep and personal way the joy of Christian charity. In the evenings we would attend the rosary prayed in Croatian and stay for the Mass along pilgrims from around the world. The thing that struck me was listening to so many different languages as you moved through the crowd. As we listened to the rosary being recited although it was not in our native English you knew exactly what was being said and could pray the words in your heart with them. It gave me a firmer understanding within of the universality of the Catholic Church. The night would end with our group meeting in the Chapel near the Zovko farm with prayer and talk of the days experiences.

Something very special happened to me in that little village in the hills of Bosnia. A transformation was taking place. A CONVERSION! God knew when the time would be right for me to go, the time that my soul would be most open to receive His grace – as I am sure it is for all the pilgrims in the Mysterious design of Providence. When I returned home people began to ask me to come to their homes and share my experiences with them. They would gather their family, relatives and friends for the visit. We would pray the rosary and I would share my story. As this went on people began asking me to lead prayer groups in their homes monthly and at one point I was leading a rosary and prayer cenacle in up to five homes a month. At this time I was also a volunteer chaplains' assistant in a Catholic Hospital a few nights a week. The Lord was preparing me for my mission to come. The point of the Lord calling one to Medjugorje is then to have you return home to BEGIN YOUR PARTICULAR MISSION. I also started attending Fr. Charlie's Wednesday night prayer group on the Southwest side in Oak Forest, Il. It was truly a special time of grace.

In the Great Jubilee Year 2000 I entered the University of St. Mary of the Lake, (Mundelein Seminary) and began preparing for the Priesthood for the Archdiocese of Chicago. Our Lady was kind to me and placed a fellow across the hall from me named Angelo whose family is from Croatia. He had been to Medjugorje a number

of times and he and his mother actually led pilgrimages there. We became friends quickly and prayed the rosary together along with MMP Cenacles every month. In June of 2003 I was half-way through seminary and had experienced the grace and desire to go back to Medjugorje with Fr. Becker and Mr. Andy Zovko for the June 25th anniversary. This time I invited Mr. Ron Kirsch and his son Tony to come with me and the group. I felt the timing was perfect because I wanted to experience this outpouring of grace to help my discernment and prepare me for the final two years of work and study before I was to be Ordained. This pilgrimage was different though. I do not believe I even brought a camera. I was not there to look for anything sensational or to see extraordinary signs. The Lord had me in a different place of growth than I had been seven years earlier in 1996 on my first pilgrimage there. I went there to be with God. To listen for His Will and to grow closer to the Blessed Mother. I went there to PRAY. During the apparitions on the anniversary, (which happens to be the date of my baptism as a child) I asked Our Lady for a very special favor. After the pilgrimage Fr. Becker and I were going on to Italy for the Marian Movement of Priests retreat with Fr. Stefano Gobbi and then on to Rome. I wanted for so long to meet the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II but I did not know how that would ever come to be. So during the anniversary apparition I asked Her if she could somehow arrange that I could meet him. I would leave it in Her Immaculate Heart. While on the MMP retreat someone arranged with a Priest of our group to leave us tickets for the Holy Father's Wednesday audience in Pope Paul VI Hall – with two tickets for the seats in front that allowed the bearer to go up and meet the Pope. One of those two tickets were placed into my hands. My grateful hands. Our Lady of Medjugorje showed me the kindness and love of Her Mother's Heart once again. I was able to kneel down before Pope John Paul II the Great, kiss his ring and pledge my love and support. It made for a very nice photo as well that I proudly display in my office above a poem I composed about that moment with Peter called, "In The Shadow Of The Rock."

I was Ordained a Catholic Priest by Francis Cardinal George on May 21, 2005 for the Archdiocese of Chicago and at my First Mass I consecrated my Priesthood to the Blessed Mother. I desire everything that God wishes to give to me to be given through Her Heart. Medjugorje has a most special place in my heart, never to be erased in time or in eternity. I am hoping to go back in the not too distant future as an act of thanksgiving for my vocation to the Lord and His Mother, and for all that they have done for me in His Divine Mercy. Countless vocations to the Priesthood and Religious life have been the fruit of one's pilgrimage to this tiny remote place on the earth. A place filled with grace which is Medjugorje.

God's Peace

Fr. David J. Simonetti