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Shrine of Our Lady of Luján (Argentina)

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Spain, the Motherland, has passed on to Latin America a unique legacy: Marian devotion.

Fr. José Julio Matovelle, in his *Obras Completas* of 1891, compiled a list of shrines and images of the Blessed Virgin in Latin America (beginning with Mexico and ending in Argentina, with a special focus on Ecuador). He listed 150 different titles of the Virgin, 24 of which have their origin in Latin America. Of the 70 dioceses in Latin America, 50 have the Virgin (under some title) as their patroness.

The legend of the “pure and immaculate conception of Our Lady of Luján” has many aspects that are similar to that of “Our Lady of Buglose” which took place in the Pyrenees and is noteworthy because it occurred near the birthplace of Vincent de Paul, our founder. The events that gave rise to this legend took place in 1621 and subsequently the shrine of Buglose was entrusted to the Congregation in 1706. The Shrine of Luján was given to the Congregation in 1872.

In 1630, a wealthy Portuguese landowner from the district of Río de la Plata, who held extensive property in the interior of the country (Sumampa-Santiago del Estero), a distance of about 1200 kilometers from Buenos Aires, wanted to dedicate a chapel to the Mother of God on his land. As a first step he asked a friend of his, who lived in São Paulo, Brazil, to send him a statue of Our Lady. This friend responded by sending not one but two statues.

There are many similarities between the events of Luján and Buglose. In the latter case, an ox discovered the statue and the oxen refused to travel any further once they reached the town of Pouy, the seat of the ancient chapel that was destroyed by the Huguenots. In the former case, in Buenos Aires, after having crossed a shallow part of the Luján River, the oxen would not continue their journey and the cart that transported the statues became immobilized until the statue was removed from the cart. The statue was an image of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady, 20 inches in height (38 centimeters) and made of terracotta.

The statue remained there while the muleteers continued their journey, transporting the other statue known as “Our Lady of Compassion” another 1,150 kilometers to Sumampa.

A hermitage, the first shrine, was built on the bank of the Luján River, and many devout believers from all parts of the country traveled there. Then, in 1671, a rich landowner who also lived on the bank of the Luján River, but about 30 kilometers away, bought the image for 2,000 pesos for the priests of the Cathedral of Buenos Aires who also owned the hermitage. He brought the statue to his land and there, with the help of a priest who attributed his restored health to the Virgin Mary, built a chapel and donated land so that a small town could be established around this second shrine which was inaugurated in 1685.

In 1730, the town of Luján was established as a parish and became an attraction for devout pilgrims who wanted to fulfill the promises they had made to God.¹

Another person was privileged to miraculously recuperate his health in 1737, and then, responding to the call of the first pastor and the Bishop of Buenos Aires, proposed to build a new church. Juan de Lezica y Torrezuri, from the Basque country, named “The Founder, the Benefactor, and the Mayor of the Shrine of Our Lady of Luján” began the construction. After eight years of laborious work, the third shrine was completed in 1762. Massive like the faith of its builder and the generosity of the pilgrims, it rose like a fortress in the midst of the ruins of the village.

From 1731-1871, 26 diocesan priests ran the 30 curacies of the parish. During that time period 17,165 baptisms were celebrated; this number gives us an idea of the increase in the number of pilgrims who visited this shrine throughout the years.

On 3 December 1871, a pilgrimage (perhaps the first official one) was begun in Buenos Aires. Soon it became obvious to the pastor, Luis Duteil, and to the Bishop, Federico Aneiros who was in charge of the Archdiocese, that a new building and more organization were needed to handle the growing number of pilgrims. They decided to entrust the shrine and the parish to a religious order.

The “Bayoneses” Fathers, recently arrived in the country, refused the offer, but after some initial hesitation, the Congregation of the Mission accepted.

¹ In Argentina and Chile: people who fulfill pious promises by participating in procession are referred to by the name *promesantes*.

On 28 February 1872, Eugene Freret and three French confreres took charge of the parish and the Shrine of Our Lady of Luján. The Vincentians would remain there until 18 November 2001.²

Twenty-six curates, 23 pastors, 105 vicars would work here. Some other significant statistics: 778,639 baptisms (not including those for 2001). This averages out to 6,083 baptisms annually or 112 weekly. This growth occurred over a long period of time. The largest number of baptisms took place in 1984 when 23,267 people received the sacrament.

From the beginning Fr. Feret and his associates began to repair the old and deteriorating church, as well as revitalize the life of the parish community and evangelize the pilgrims.

There is no doubt that the presence of Fr. George Marie Salvaire in this mission marked a definite high point in the history of Luján and the work of the Vincentian Community there. Much has been written about him and yet it is still very difficult to accept the limitations of space when recounting his story. He was French, born of French and Spanish parents. He arrived in Argentina in 1871, the year of his ordination. He was part of the first group of missionaries to arrive in Luján. In 1874 he was sent to the villages to evangelize the indigenous population. Sentenced to death by the aborigines, he called upon Our Lady of Luján and promised to write a history of this devotion and enlarge the shrine if his life was spared. The son of the chief saved him and he was convinced that the Virgin Mary has rescued him. He fulfilled his promise and in 1884 published two large volumes entitled *History of the Virgin of Luján*. Leo XIII blessed a precious crown that had been made in Paris and the crown was placed on the head of the statue on 8 May 1887, in the presence of 40,000 pilgrims. Eight days later the Archbishop of Buenos Aires laid the cornerstone for the future basilica. Inspired by the cathedrals of his country, Fr. Salvaire planned to build a gothic style structure. In 1889 he was named pastor and chaplain of the Shrine of Luján. He looked for ways to fulfill his promise, but was unable to do so. In 1890, he began the magazine *La perla del Plata*, a publication of the National Shrine. He had discovered his prophetic mission.

When Fr. Salvaire died in 1899, the visible construction of the basilica's apse and transept formed the outline of the future temple. The organized pilgrimages were also an answer to his desire for greater veneration of the

² Editor's note. In *Nuntia* (November 2001) the departure of the Congregation of the Mission was noted: "Farewell to Lujan. On 11 November, invited by the faithful of Luján, who filled the Basilica, the Argentinean Province, represented by many confreres, concluded, in a farewell Eucharist presided over by the Visitor, its pastoral service at the National Shrine to Our Lady of Luján, where the Congregation of the Mission, through its missionaries, "constructors and guardians of the Shrine," had given service to millions of pilgrims for 130 years."

Mother of God and offered a way for her children to repay the Virgin for their growth in faith, hope and love of God and his Son, Jesus Christ.

The Congregation of the Mission, faithful to its charism and guided by a spiritual impulse, continued the dream. New builders appeared in the person of Frs. Brignardello, Dávani, Gimalac, Prat, etc., and so did new evangelizers, administrators, and confessors who sowed the good seed and brought about reconciliation at all levels.

The shrine was completed in 1935 and replaced the now deteriorated and ruined building of Lezica y Torrezuri. Several chapels and schools were also built within the parish boundaries and these served the needs of the Christian community which continued to grow.

At the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Basilica of Luján was administered by 14 Vincentian missionaries, the majority of whom were young. They took great care to begin the liturgical renewal and to write about these new changes in their publications: full and active participation of the laity and the importance of shrines for the popular devotion of the people. *La perla del Plata* (May 1966, # 2607) highlighted the progress that had been made in the parishes and also raised the question about those persons who neither practiced their faith in some consistent way nor were part of the local parish community. What was the role of the shrine in these situations?

During the previous year (1965) in the Basilica of Luján communion had been given to 240,000 persons, 9,709 baptisms were registered, 375 confirmations and 348 marriages (47 of which were regularizations).

Some pastoral agents felt uneasy and looked askance at the movement of the shrines, feeling that it was like casting pearls before swine. Obviously this was very painful to hear and gave way to a communal reflection that concluded that the shrines presented a very beneficial religious-social phenomenon.

In the magazine, there appeared an editorial entitled "Shrines versus Parishes." It was not very well thought out nor did it respond to the present reality. It annoyed many people and thus made it difficult to remain focused on the theme. But what was written was written. The shrines, especially those like Luján, are attractive to those who have a special devotion. At the same time they are also centers where many believers, who for various reasons find themselves on the fringes of their local churches, can come together to discover anew, either consciously or unconsciously, that they are members of the Universal Church. The shrine then becomes a mission center, a source of grace for those who find themselves alone and alienated, a place that brings together people who share a common faith, hope and love.

An example of this is seen in the religious laxity of the “immigrants,” who found in pilgrimages to the Shrine of Luján not only an affective coming together of peoples of diverse ethnic backgrounds, but also a place where they could express their profound devotion to the Virgin Mary, a devotion of a believing family in exile. Without any pretext of being an inclusive list, we simply mention Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Polish, Slovenians, Croatians, Slovaks, Germans, Italians, Galicians, Catalans, Japanese, Paraguayans, Bolivians, etc., all of whom found in the shrine the great upper room where the Eucharistic banquet was realized.

Bishop Zapelac, the Ukrainian Eparch stated: “For many of the people who journey to Luján, and participate in the Mass (two hours in duration and in the language of the people) and fulfill their Easter obligation, all of this is a matter of life or death.”

The Argentinean dioceses have experienced many spiritual benefits as a result of the organized pilgrimages. The 18 dioceses that make up the province of Buenos Aires (310,000 square kilometers) annually schedule their Marian devotions in the Basilica of Luján. These groups might be charismatic or devoutly Catholic, or simply popular in their make-up.

While the bishop or archbishop concelebrates the Eucharist with his priests, long lines of penitents form outside the confessionals (people waiting three, five, or eight hours). The Holy Spirit is definitely at work during this time.

Frequently young men and women walk the 12-hour/60-kilometer trip from Buenos Aires to Luján. The tabloids calculate the number to be *increasing*, year after year, to more than a million people (make your own calculation: 5,000 people fit inside the basilica: if every second ten people enter and ten people leave, what happens?!).

Besides these gatherings one must also look at the numerous pilgrimages of dioceses in the interior of Argentina as well as the pilgrimages that are made by so many parishes, schools, and lay organizations, all of whom come here to the shrine to honor the most Holy Mother of God and to satisfy their thirst for God. But the real phenomenon is found in the great number of pilgrims, anonymous individuals, who throughout the years have traveled to this shrine by car, pickup truck, bus and train. They all have their own particular reason for undertaking the pilgrimage but they all share one common objective: to give thanks to the Virgin or to ask her to intercede for them in some particular situation. It must also be admitted that many travel here because of superstition or believing some kind of magic will be worked.

How did the Vincentian community receive and serve the many visitors who traveled to this holy place. In 1966 this answer was given: “Our special charism guides all our work and concretizes our mission (to evangelize the poor) in the world today and in the particular situation in which we find ourselves. The Congregation of the Mission finds here the way to make real its ideals; namely, the opportunity to plant the Word of God in the hearts of the poor and to give them God’s grace through the celebration of the sacraments.” As for the hearing of confession — well that is something quite special and requires almost no explanation. But it should be said that “everyone who waited in the long lines found a missionary who was willing to listen to them, a missionary who was concerned about their spiritual welfare and eager to serve them through the sacramental ministry.” Knowing how to live as missionaries was a source of great satisfaction for the Vincentians and provided the pilgrims with the security of being able to find a true minister of God.

Most of the pilgrims who came to the shrine wanted to leave with some relic, some “blessed” object from Luján. Thus one could find in front of the shrine: 120 vendors selling every type of religious article imaginable and in the area surrounding the shrine, many small shops that tend to the varied needs of the pilgrims.

Many blessings were bestowed on those who came to this shrine. As holy water was sprinkled over the pilgrims, the faith was explained to them. This was especially apparent on weekends and other times when organized groups like schools, parishes and dioceses gathered at the shrine and prayed together. There was definitely a communal dimension to these pilgrimages and yet at the same time it was also an occasion for personal encounter between the pilgrims and the ministers.

The contract between the diocese and the Congregation was terminated on 18 November 2001. The Archbishop of Luján did not want to renew the contract. On 11 November, a Mass was celebrated at 8:00 p.m. to thank and bid farewell to the missionaries of the Congregation. In December of the same year, the organizing committee of all these events published a letter to “publically express our gratitude, esteem and awe” for those who participated in “such a noble and spiritual endeavor.” The letter went on to say: “The humble environment of the basilica’s basement was converted into a crypt for multicultural expressions of Marian Devotion.³ Indeed, the basilica is a symbol of the missionary work of the

³ The images of Mary that are in the crypt represent the following nations: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador, Ecuador, United States, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Uruguay, Venezuela, Germany, Armenia, Austria, Canada, Korea, Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, France, Greece, Hungary, England, Ireland, Italy, Lebanon, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Czech Republic, Sweden, and Ukraine.

128 Vincentian priests and brothers who toiled for so many years at this shrine.⁴ Only a few members of the community have plaques erected to honor their memory, but the names of all of these missionaries have been written in the Book of Life. The proclamation of God's word, the memorial of Christ's passion and death celebrated daily, God's people being made holy through the sacraments of Baptism, the Eucharist (at present, 15,000 communions a month), and the reconciliation of millions of Christians from every social class, all this, plus supportive and charitable action that, through specialized organizations, extends to even the most remote dioceses of the republic are reasons to give thanks, and you, like us, feel the impact of the departure of the Vincentian Community. Yet we are certain that the work of God will continue, and we consider ourselves, laymen and women, to be the leaders of this movement that marches forward in accordance with the will of God, a movement that builds on the foundation laid by those who came before us, a movement rooted in the spirit and the charism of Vincent de Paul: to evangelize and serve and make holy the people of God, and to see Christ in the neighbor, especially those who are poor."

(CHARLES PLOCK, C.M., translator)

⁴ Editor's note: When the Congregation was leaving Luján, a member of another religious congregation wrote the following: "This Marian Basilica remains here as a sign of the faith of the Congregation and a witness of the untiring labor of its members who stone upon stone have given the Virgin of Luján this beautiful house of worship. For almost 130 years (1872-2001) the Vincentians have lived here and influenced this area of the country by their evangelization. They have left their mark here and formed many friendships and now we say sad good-bye to men who cared for this sanctuary and at the same time we offer to them our prayers of thanksgiving."