



Celebrating the shrine of life

By Marion Amberg

While many couples unable to have a baby are choosing fertility treatments that are contrary to Catholic teaching, others are finding miraculous answers at the Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche in St. Augustine, Florida.

“My mother wanted a baby but couldn’t have one, so she came here to the chapel to pray, and here I am!” quip many pilgrims to shrine staff. They believe that, without the intercession of Our Lady of La Leche y Buen Parto (Spanish for “Our Lady of the Milk and Happy Delivery”), they might not have come into the world.

“It’s no spiritual coincidence that the shrine is a wellspring of life,” says Eric Johnson, its director. “The shrine is part of Mission Nombre de Dios (“Name of God”), where the first parish Mass in what is now the United States was celebrated on September 8, 1565—the feast of the Nativity of Mary.” He also explained that the shrine has no association with La Leche League.

Honoring Mary as a nursing mother

Located on what is known as “America’s most sacred acre,” the ivy-draped, Spanish mission-style chapel of coquina stone has an aura of peace and grace. Over the entrance, there is a statue of St. Peter holding the keys to heaven, while inside, small wooden benches seat about 30. Behind the altar, a halo of light encircles a wooden statue of Our Lady of La Leche nursing the infant Jesus.

There’s more to the hand-carved icon, however, than a beautiful maternal image. Painted in the style of Old World iconography, the statue’s colors each have a special meaning. The cream color of Jesus’ blanket and nightshirt symbolizes that He is the Lamb of God. Mary’s red dress signifies a sacrifice—the death of her Son on the cross—and the blue mantle her humanity. She is, after all, a mother.

And that’s why Our Lady of La Leche is so endearing, say Anthony and Lisa Smrek of Jeffersonville, Pennsylvania, the parents of two “special deliveries.” “We don’t always think of the Blessed Mother as a nursing mother. We see beautiful pictures of her gazing at Jesus, but here she is nursing and nurturing her Son.”

Trusting God’s plan

The Smreks first visited the Shrine in 1996, following a harrowing ordeal in which doctors diagnosed Lisa with a tubal pregnancy and advised her to get an injection to

terminate the pregnancy. But heaven intervened when a nurse named Maria persuaded the couple to get a second opinion. This time, the conclusion was that she did not have a tubal pregnancy. Shaken by the experience, the couple knelt before the statue and asked our Lady’s intercession for a happy delivery. Daughter Dana — healthy in every way—arrived six months later.

Nurse Maria’s advice saved their preborn baby, but it would take another “Maria” to give them a second child. “I had medical procedures and surgery, but I couldn’t get pregnant,” Lisa explained. “I remember

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