

Santa Fe Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche

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Father Sebastian K. George delivering a sermon and Communion at St. Madeleine Catholic Church, High Springs. (Today Photo/C.M. Walker)

HIGH SPRINGS – Drivers flowing past St. Madeleine Catholic Church off of U.S. Highway 441 in High Springs may see a new sign by the roadside announcing that the Santa Fe Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche has been created.

While the shrine itself is new, the building housing it is anything but.

The lovely white chapel with a cross on top was originally built in 1925 at what was previously known as 140 Northeast Second Avenue and Second Street in High Springs. It was moved to its present location on Dec. 26, 1979, and is set back from the front of the property.

A much larger church was built for the crowds of people who attend church on Saturdays and Sundays. The little white building is used throughout the week for smaller groups of people.

As with all old buildings, it was in need of refurbishing after it was moved. After considerable effort, it is now a sparkling white stained-glass structure surrounded by lush green grass, flowers, gardens, cemeteries, benches and other ancillary structures.

A sign on one of the doors to the shrine, both of which are adorned with flower wreaths, reads “Holy Door of Mercy.”

The Diocese of St. Augustine has named the Shrine as one of the sites designated to welcome visitors during the Jubilee Holy Year of Mercy, Dec. 8, 2015 - Nov. 20, 2016. Visitors during this time will receive the special graces available during the Jubilee Year.

The shrine is open daily and Minerva Couret and others have a wealth of information to share with visitors, referred to as pilgrims, who stop by to pray, walk the paths laid out on the property or just sit in contemplation.

On December 5, 2015, the most Reverend Filipe Estevez, Bishop of St. Augustine, bestowed a special privilege on the parish of St. Madeleine Catholic Church by designating the renovated chapel as The Santa Fe Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche. This allowed for the faithful in the western-most reaches of the diocese who have a devotion to Our Lady to have a place of pilgrimage and spiritual refuge without the need to travel to St. Augustine.

History of a Shrine to Our Lady of La Leche

According to tradition, the Milk Grotto, not far from Bethlehem, is the site where the Holy Family took refuge during the Slaughter of the Innocents before their flight to Egypt. While there, the Virgin Mary nursed the child Jesus. Some drops of milk sprinkled the walls, changing the color of the stone to white.

The image of the Blessed Virgin Mary breastfeeding the infant Jesus dates back to the 16th Century in the Spanish city of Madrid where she is called Nuestra Senora de la Leche y Buen Parto (Our Lady of the Milk and Happy Delivery).

In 1598, the image was rescued from irreverent hands and placed in the home of a married couple. The woman and her unborn child were thought to die during childbirth, and her husband prayed intently to our Lady of La Leche to grant his wife a safe delivery. Our Lady heard his prayer and thereupon, his dying pregnant wife and child were saved.

Together, the couple spread the news to other families about Our Lady's power with God. Soon after, the devotion became famous throughout Spain.

Becoming aware of Our Lady's intercession, King Philip III, who was the ruler during that time, personally undertook the erection of a shrine in honor of Our Lady of La Leche.

Present day benefits of the Shrine

From December 2015 – September 2016, more than 29 group pilgrimages (836 people) have made the journey to the Santa Fe Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche. Visitors from 34 Florida cities have signed into the Shrine's register. Visitors from a similar number of out-of-state locations have come from as far away as Sitka, Alaska. International visitors have traveled from the Philippines, Puerto Rico, China, Australia and England to pray at the Shrine.

“We have had people stop in because they saw our billboard on I-75 and decided to come in and pray,” said Teresa Glaser, a helper at the shrine and the person who is in charge of public

relations. "Our signs have garnered interesting comments," said Glaser. "I love your shrine to Our Lady. Thank you for putting up the highway billboard so that I and all travelers can find this Holy Gem!" said one person. Another wrote, 'Saw the sign from the freeway. Just came for a visit from Michigan...what a wonderful shrine for Our Lady!'"

Needless to say, members of the St. Madeleine's Catholic Church are proud of what has been accomplished in such a short time and the numbers of people who visit the Santa Fe Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche. They welcome all who want to stop in for whatever reason, no matter what their religious preference, and enjoy getting to know new people and helping wherever they can.

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