



Our Lady of Czestochowa

God is everywhere. I know that I didn't have to travel to Doylestown, Pennsylvania, last year to find Him, but I went anyway. Here is how I discovered Him in a special way along with His Mother Mary.

The 90-minute drive from Philadelphia took me through scenic woodsy areas and picturesque hilly back roads to the National Shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa in Doylestown. The Shrine is situated at the top of a hill, surrounded by serene, green grounds; Rosary and Stations of the Cross gardens, and a retreat house. Behind all this, is an expansive cemetery which has separate sections for clergy and veterans.

The Shrine, which was built in 1966, honors Mary as Our Lady of Czestochowa which was known for centuries in Europe and more particularly since 1683 when the Polish forces, through her intercession, defeated the Ottoman Turks at Vienna.

The history of this world-renowned painting dates back to St. Luke, when according to tradition, the Evangelist painted the holy image onto the top of a table built by Jesus. This sacred painting was moved from Jerusalem to Constantinople and eventually made its way to Poland in 1382. As the horses pulling the wagon which was carrying the painting across the Polish countryside came to Czestochowa, they stopped and would not move. This was taken as a sign from Mary and the icon remained there under the watchful care of the Pauline Fathers, who also are the administrators of the Shrine in Doylestown. Soot and candle smoke eventually darkened the image and it became known as the "Black Madonna."

My first thoughts as we pulled into the parking lot were joy and hope. The majestic church surrounded by nature filled me with awe – what a church is supposed to do! My mind and heart felt the glory of God. Once inside I marveled at the beauty of the floor to ceiling stained glass windows, depicting the history of Christianity in Poland and America. Also striking were the sanctuary-wide bas relief of the Trinity and the revered image of Mary. I relaxed with thoughts of God's own beauty and what I believe to be the beauty of heaven. I prayed at the side chapels dedicated to Mary such as the Chapel of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

My visit reminded me that I am a member of the family of God, and specifically, of the universal Catholic Church. Many nationalities were represented at the afternoon Sunday Mass, one of few in English, not Polish. I knew in my heart there is a God and the people with me at Mass were united as one family in our love for Him and His love for us.

After such encounters, I think how nice it would be to experience such faith-filled excitement every time I am in church and especially in my own parish church. Sadly, that is not always the case for me. That's why trips to unfamiliar places which are outside of my everyday routine are so valuable as they inspire me to a renewed energy to carry on and share the life of Christ with the people I know and love.

It has been said that the Our Lady of Czestochowa icon in Jasna Gora, Poland, which means "bright light," has "beamed as a lighthouse of hope" in times of hardship to pilgrims not only from Poland, but also from all over the world. Now, our church has again, its own commemoration to Our Lady of Czestochowa, who I pray will inspire us with hope.

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