

Memories of Pibrac

Fr. Michael Furlan

June 15 is the feast of our parish's patron saint, St. Germaine. Like most of the facts of her life, even her feast day is not well known. It does not appear on any commonly used liturgical calendars. There are no special liturgical prayers other than those common for "Holy Men and Women." There is one place, however, that is more aware of the life of Germaine Cousin than we are here in Oak Lawn. That place, of course, is Germaine's hometown of Pibrac, France. The year I arrived at St. Germaine Parish in Oak Lawn, the then pastor, Fr. Bill Malloy accompanied a group of parishioners on a pilgrimage to Pibrac for a major celebration of the saint's feast day there. They returned with wonderful stories and pictures of the processions and liturgies that took place honoring our patron saint as well as the historical sites associated with her.

I have my own Pibrac story. A few years later, I had the opportunity to visit Germaine's hometown when our young people traveled to World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany. I joined them in France and while there, we made the pilgrimage on a Sunday afternoon to Pibrac. None of us knew for certain how to get there. (Traveling with young people is such an adventure) The train took us from Paris to Toulouse. Pibrac was still several miles away. We weren't sure how many miles since everything was in kilometers any way. Erica knew enough High School French to find some taxi drivers who would take us the rest of the way to Pibrac. So with high spirits and at high speed we arrived at St. Germaine's hometown. It was closed.

In the middle of June, around the feast of St. Germaine, Pibrac comes alive with pilgrims from all over. On a Sunday afternoon in the middle of August, it's a different story. Several images come to mind, depending on your point of reference: Wild West—"Ghost Town;" Science Fiction—"Alien Abduction;" Evangelical—"Rapture;" Clement Moore—"Not a creature was stirring." There's more activity in our parish parking lot at 9:00 PM most nights than there was in the entire town of Pibrac on that afternoon. Not only were we alone in a strange place, we were also abandoned since the taxis which had brought us there had sped off as soon as we paid the fare. We wandered around the town, looking for someone who could let us into the church where St. Germaine had attended daily Mass. Our goal was for me to celebrate Mass with our group there. Unfortunately, our plan had several gaps in it. We figured we'd improvise. Finally, a car showed up in the plaza of the church. The people from the car had come to visit Pibrac as well, but they were better prepared (with information and a car). They told us that the gift shop would open soon and maybe someone there could help us. Erica used her French once again, while the rest of us used baby talk and Marcel Marceau imitations to communicate with the lady in the gift shop who was able to contact the parish priest.

The priest had several wonderful qualities: he was gracious, he spoke English, and he had keys. He had only recently been assigned to Pibrac and was not there when the previous group of pilgrims from Oak Lawn had visited. But he had heard the stories of the wonderful people who had come from a Chicago area parish named after Pibrac's most famous citizen. Our reputation had preceded us. We convinced him that we were also from that same parish. Considering how different we must have seemed from the image he had been given, it might have been easier to convince him that we had been part of that original group and had gotten separated and had been lost, wandering around

France for the past three years. He opened the church and sacristy and let us “do our thing.” Meanwhile he contacted the gentleman who had served as host to our parishioners on their pilgrimage. My understanding was that he was a member of a society that promotes pilgrimages and devotion to St. Germaine. While we were celebrating Mass he arranged for our transportation back to Toulouse. After Mass we joined him for some pictures and then boarded the taxis back to the train station.

But the high point of the story was the Mass we celebrated in that little church. In a few days we would be joining millions of people on a huge field, outside a major German city for a highly organized, technically advanced, liturgically elaborate Mass celebrated by Pope Benedict XVI, the chief shepherd of the worldwide Catholic Church. But that Sunday, there were a handful of us, in a tiny parish church, in a sleepy French village celebrating a simple, almost impromptu Mass with a parish priest (who was not even a pastor at the time). Strangely enough, it is the memory of that “little Mass” that holds a special place in my heart. In that church, at that moment, young people from 21st century America, shared the same experience as a young girl from 16th century France. Across time and space, across centuries and cultures, the legacy of the shepherd girl from Pibrac met the future of the Oak Lawn parish named in her honor.