

## A. Pilgrimage Highlights 2000 to 2017 Of the Ortega Twins Luz and Nila

**T**he Carmelite way of life reminds us how worthless are all our human ambitions when placed next to the glory of God. God is reminding us, that at the end of the day we shall live with only one important project: “to live in the presence of the Lord- and to praise Him all our life.” We, the Ortega Twins enjoy having a mixed life- that is, both married and Secular Carmelites.

**B**orn in 1954 to parents Judge Evaristo Ortega and Rosa Ubaldo, both a devout Catholic. We were named after the wives of the incumbent Philippine President Ramon Magsaysay and Vice President Carlos Garcia, Luz and Nila, respectively. Both were schooled in private religious schools from primary to tertiary levels. We enjoyed life experiences and later separated geographically when both were focused nurturing our children and profession. In the 90’s, we witnessed the growth of a new life cycle with the birth of our children. However, as secular members of the Discalced Carmelites, St Teresa Community, I (Nila) traveled three hours from Vigan City for the monthly meetings at the OCDS House of Prayer, Pindangan Ruins, City of San Fernando, La Union. God disposes, Jesus has furnished us with the answer in the Gospel. He said, “I bless you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children”. In 1999, as we celebrated the Year of God the Father, it was the breakthrough of our persevering discipleship.

**S**ince then, we follow the footsteps of our Savior. We are to balance family and our religious vocation as lay persons. To some, we are misunderstood for our zeal in following the footsteps of Santa Teresa de Avila us pilgrimages to the various continents of the world living in Carmelite convents. But many others look at us with wonder and admiration, feeling the love we have for God the Father, God the Holy Spirit and God the Son, our Savior.

**L**ast June 2023, Pope Francis declared Sister Lucia “Venerable”, as her canonization is in progress. Miracles through her intercession are expected to come from all corners of the world. In the light of our spiritual journey, doing things “the Little Way”, in the Carmelite way, we believe God continuously works on us to fulfill the Lord’s commission. Guided with the spirit of Fatima, we share some testimonies that chronicle our life experiences of faith, hope and charity to present.

**E**mbarking to pilgrimages outside the Philippines weren’t easy without external constraints or approval from our own families, even then in God’s way, these pilgrimages were made amidst all difficulties. Serendipitously as disciples, God works in perfect time.

**W**e went on a Jubilee and Millennium Year Pilgrimage in 2000 despite the bombings in the Holy Land. Mesmerized with the holiness and sacredness of the place, we praised God because we were able to see Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus.

**O**ur Marian Pilgrimage in 2002, we prayed at the sepulchres of Sr. Lucia's cousins, Jacinta and Francisco. Next to the tombs of these two saints, was the prepared final resting place for Sr. Lucia of Fatima. Unfortunately in our Fatima 100, we were not able to see her tomb because the Basilica was closed for the anniversary preparation activities. Consoling ourselves, a helpful couple brought us to the apparition site of Our Lady of Ortiga.

**T**he 2002 Marian Pilgrimage one night, it was a dream-desire to visit Sr. Lucia to deepen our apostolate for the devotion to the Holy Trinity. Seeing Sr. Lucia would give us more tranquility and inspiration. But beforehand, we already anticipated the constraint of not seeing her. However, just being in the place was already a grace.

**W**e attended our Gregorian University, special course, "Pastoral Communication: Planning and Practice on April 13-June 25,2004. Greeting the Apostolic Nuncio, His Excellency, Antonio Franco "Happy Birthday" facilitated our scholarship grant and Italian visa issuance. However, we encountered some constraints for being late in our attendance to the course. During our Gregorian University Study Break, we were supposed to visit the first Carmelite monastery founded by St. Teresa of Avila. On May 28, we went to the train station for our tickets for Spain but only on connecting trips up to Nice, France. However, buying our tickets for Spain, our cash was just enough for one round trip ticket from Nice to Spain. No way to back to Rome. I, Nila knowing the obsession of my twin Luz to see the place, I had to let her go. I was left behind at the Filipino Missionary House of Fr. Clavero Guerrero.

**O**n May 18, 2004, we Twins were in Rome. It was the Pope John Paul II General Audience at St Peter Basilica. I (Luz) shouted, "Papa! Papa!" "For the Pope?" One of his guards beside him asked. "Yes!" I exclaimed. The guard extended his hand for the statuette. The Pope smiled. Those who witnessed the instant gift-giving were awed. I was doubly awed when I learned that the statuette was a fitting birthday gift, for that Wednesday's General Audience was a day after His Holiness' last birthday. He was 84, born May 18, 1920.

**O**ur Mexico pilgrimage in 2006 marked our visit to Basilica of Santa María de Guadalupe and to the Tepeyac Hill where Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to St. Juan Diego.

**W**e attended the OCD General Chapter held Fatima on April 20, 2009, when Fr. Saverio Cannistra of the Sacred Heart, OCD was elected Superior General. Here, he emphasized the significance of the celebration of the Feast of St. Teresa as the beginning of the preparation of the Fifth Centenary of the birth of St. Teresa. As we spent time reading the life and writings of St. Teresa, the spirit of St. Teresa invaded our souls and touched by the souls of women and men battered with issues and problems in those days, we twins made a point to do our part in the Philippines.

**U**pon our return to La Union, I (Luz) produced a stage play “Born for You-The Life of Teresa the Avila”. Local casts were taken from the Sea and Sky College, Don Mariano Marcos Memorial State University, and both Twins played the role of Teresa de Avila. It was shown in three venues: Ortega Cultural and Sport Complex, City of San Fernando, University of Northern Philippines, Vigan City, and Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Theater, Camp Aguinaldo, Quezon City.

**A**ll three venues were a success, however, it almost turned to be tragic to us twins. Twin Luz almost got choked during the first stage play because she was wearing the Jubilee cross she bought during 2000 Pilgrimage at the Vatican. Fortunately, one of the characters, Blanche noticed, she quickly pulled down the curtains appearing like an intermission until she regained herself. But Twin Nila was not spared for nearly death during the second stage show at the AFP. She got a stroke and was rushed to the hospital, but then continued the show ignoring it was just an ordinary pain. However, after the stage play, because of persisting pain and further diagnosis, no way, she had to undergo a coronary artery by-pass. With the love of St. Teresa and trust to God, as the play was all for the glory of GOD, Nila fully recovered from her operation given all the care and support of our families and of course, all the attending cardiologists at the Philippine Heart Center played so well.

**I**n 2009, we were at Carmel Hue Vietnam for the Centennial Jubilee celebration. After the event, Mother Prioress of Carmel Hue gave us a travel companion. We visited the Basilica of Our Lady of La Vang, the sanctuary built to honor an apparition of Mary in 1798. and the Carmel Monasteries at Saigon, Binh Trieu and Nga Trang.

**O**ur Avila 2015 Pilgrimage was a two-month spiritual journey as members of the St. Teresa Community in San Fernando City, La Union, Philippines. It was one among a myriad of responses to the spiritual challenge entrusted to the Carmelite family to celebrate the life, love and work of La Santa Madre Teresa on her 5th birth centenary. Accommodation was at Centro Internacional de Avila through God’s sent angel, a lady from Barcelona. March 28 was our baptismal day so, it was a double celebration with St. Teresa in Avila.

In our 2017 Fatima 100 Pilgrimage, through the help of the Congregation Daughters of St. Mary of Leucato, a Filipino couple, living five minutes' walk to the Fatima Sanctuary accommodated us for two days. As a gesture of appreciation, we gave the first of the seven statuettes of St. Teresa of Avila.

It was a great sacrifice, we Twins walked on our knees at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal praying the Rosary as an act of penance, sorrow for sins and offerings to request favors. Twin Nila prayed for son Neil to pass the bar examinations, and God answered her prayers.

Indeed, it was a miracle his son passed on his fourth try. October 13, was the 100th anniversary of that 1917 "Miracle of the Sun" was a misty day. We meditated on the message of our Lady of Fatima, we prayed for peace during the recitation of the Holy Rosary at the apparition chapel. Mama Mary's presence was felt like a "happy atmosphere mist," and indeed an exhilarating state of happiness.

In the Fatima 100 Pilgrimage, upon setting our foot at the colonnade, I (Luz) received a personal revelation from God. "There were people moving towards my direction. Someone was pointing at me with a joyous greeting saying – "I knew that lady is somebody special...I took a portrait of her." Then there were flashes of cameras." This memorable encounter at Fatima was a manifestation of what I claimed that since 2002 or 15 years ago, seemingly I looked like Sr.

Lucia. Coincidentally, at the airport in Greece, a co-passenger sketched my face and later gave the portrait to me before embarking for Turkey. It was a great gift which I treasured a lot. Sr. Lucia, OCD, truly led me with my Twin in attending the Centennial Anniversary on October 13, 2017. I was amazed at how similar I was with Sister Lucia, the visionary, looked alike in our childhood. Lucia's picture was taken when she was 9, while, mine was 12 years old.

The taxi driver did not know where the Cathedral at Greece was located and so we told him to bring us to the Discalced Carmelite Monastery. It was fortunate that the nuns were having a retreat that day and the retreat master, a friar from France, speaks English. We stayed at the Monastery guest room during our stay in Athens.

On December 3, 2017, while at Sucre, Bolivia, we encoded our trips experience – "Ortega Twins Carmelite Vocation" translated in Spanish for a copy to the Carmelite nuns. We reflected on the meaning of a Secular Carmelite; a life lived in prayer, silence and simplicity! Superior General Fr. Saverio Cannistra, OCD on his message to the Order for the Feast of St. Teresa 2010 said, "When Teresa speaks of prayer, she doesn't speak of it as a simple act or a spiritual exercise.

A most committed Spiritual life leads us to its final aim to recite the Our Father with full adhesion of mind and heart\_ her comment in the last sixteen chapters of her book bears witness to this. Perfection therefore is to be so adult as to be able to pronounce as one's own the words that Jesus pronounced talking of God: Our Father!

**S** mitted with the faith of Fatima and nurtured by the Carmelite way of life, we, the Ortega Twins will brave the challenges facing our advocacy of the devotion to God the Father. It will serve as a reawakening that God the Father is our, Creator, Father Almighty, Judge and God of Salvation.

**I**n our pilgrimages, we had encountered lots of constraints and indifferences from others in many forms, but in God's guiding care, we had overcome them. As St. Paul said: "who can separate us from God", if we trust in Him, all will pass.

**S**oon, God the Father Tower, which we call in our Iloko dialect "Bantay ni Ama Ken Maria" will catch the eyes of many people, not only in the Philippines but other parts of the globe. Its location along the national highway is invigorating, overlooking the San Fernando Bay, pilgrimages will climb the stairs to pay homage, touch the colossal image of God the Father, and kiss the Image of Nuestra Senora de la Luz. After all, one day our faith will beckon everyone in due time.

**M**any a pilgrim may have experienced renewal in visits to Rome and St. Peter's Basilica, but those unable to go may find themselves transformed up there in the "Bantay ni Ama ken Maria" - the next pilgrim site.

**L**et us make the Philippines as God's country: Region 1 as Home of God the Father, and La Union as Pilgrimage Destination and San Fernando as God's City.