

My dear fellow pilgrims,

"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; by the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes?"

The Lord God uses the weak, unwanted by the world, to shame the wise and fulfill his promise of salvation. To be here with you this morning, celebrating Mass (as your presider), at the very Chapel of Apparition is a miracle - a fulfillment of Our Lady's promise. In July of 2010, thirteen years ago, I was a seminarian of *Colegio Eclesiastico Internacional Bidasoa* in Navarra, Spain, and we were here for our summer pastoral work at the John Paul II Support Center for the Disabled. During the day, we helped out in the facility, and every night attended the daily rosary and the procession. We were fortunate to be here for about 14 days! In one of my personal conversations with Our Lady, I remember telling her that it was my desire to consecrate the future of my priesthood to her - I said, *Mother - today - I totally dedicate my vocation to you - please take care of it.*

My vocation to the priesthood is totally hers, not mine, and she could do with it as she willed. I believe that she took my "offer" seriously, and - since then, I had

the most significant and meaningful journey of my life.

I hope I could tell you that what happened next was a series of nice and smooth-sailing events that led me eventually to my ordination - but on the contrary, things became tough for me, and I was not ordained with my class. I finished my degree in Theology, but I wasn't ordained a priest. Confused and a lot disappointed, I continued to have faith and persevered, and I prayed this special prayer I learned from St John Paul II and Our Lady of Fatima: *Totus Tuus Maria, Totus Tuus*.

A series of unfortunate events happened which brought my journey from the Philippines to the United States. To cut a long story short, on May 13 of 2012 - a date very significant to Our Lady of Fatima - I found myself being accepted (again a seminarian) to the Immaculate Conception Seminary for the Archdiocese of Newark. My years at the seminary were not as easy-flowing as the years I had in Spain, but I know in my heart at that time that the Lord wanted me to persevere in prayer - and to hold on to Our Lady's promise, even when the road seemed dark and shaky. The Lord reminded me that my priesthood was His and our Blessed Mother's, and my priesthood was not mine.

When my mother passed on in 2016, I was called to ordination to the diaconate. And the first image of our Lady that I was asked to bless is from Our Lady of

Fatima! And in May of 2017 - a year important to Our Lady of Fatima since it celebrated the hundred years from Her last apparition, I was ordained a priest.

Our Lady gave me back the priesthood on the year special to her; she did take care of my priesthood. This is why I can say: to celebrate Mass with you as presider at the very location of the Apparition of Our Lady of Fatima is a miracle! I don't see anything that happened as a coincidence; with the Lord and Our Blessed Mother, there are no coincidences, but only God-incidences! God wanted to fulfill His plans, build His Kingdom, using me - a broken, weak, sometimes unwanted instrument.

So, today, with you my group of pilgrims, I make my final stop of our Marian Pilgrimage of Thanksgiving. Now, to thank Our Lady of Fatima for fulfilling yet another promise which affects me directly: the promise that she might continue to take care of my priesthood, as I continue my journey with you at the end of this pilgrimage. And I believe that Our Lady of Fatima is very much present in my life's journey - and she will be for you too, if you would let her.

Thank you, Our Lady of Fatima, for bringing us all here, no one here is here by accident - journey with us always and show us the way, not only in our present pilgrimage, but also throughout the ups and downs of our journeys through life that might lead us to Heaven. Thank you for teaching us here on earth that

through the perseverance in faith in Your Son, we will be able to do little and small things that will impact the world, and in faith, be closer to Him - one bead - one "Hail Mary" - at a time.

Your parish priest - a fellow pilgrim,
Fr JC Merino

*Our Lady of Fatima, Portugal
The Church of the Little Flower*

*"Remember the past with
gratitude. Live the present with
enthusiasm. Look forward to
the future with confidence."*

