

## HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT OUR LADY OF THE PILLAR?

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What do you know about Our Lady of the Pillar? Have you heard of her? Except for Hispanic peoples, especially Spaniards, and lovers of Hispanidad, she is most likely not as widely known as the Blessed Virgin Mary of other famous shrines. Yet her story predates the gospels and was told long before the gospels were written. This is an interesting story, seemingly unbelievable, about Mary's first apparition in history.

### *Origin*

The tradition tells us that seven years after the death of Jesus, on January 2, 40 A.D., The Apostle St. James the Elder, brother of St. John, sat tired and disappointed by the bank of the Ebro River in what is now Zaragoza, Spain. The people of the Roman province of Hispania (Spain/Iberian Peninsula) were not open and receptive to the Good News of Jesus and St. James was ready to give up his efforts to evangelize them. On that January day the Blessed Virgin Mary, still living in Palestine, appeared to James atop a column or pillar of stone. With encouraging words, she assured him that the people of Hispania would become Christians and that their faith would be as strong and durable as the pillar on which she stood. To remember the visit and promise of the Virgin Mary, the first Marian shrine was built around the pillar. And James began to convert the pagans of early Spain.

### *Skepticism*

Many will automatically think this is just another pious myth among many Catholic legends and an interesting story for tourist

guide books, or another excuse for celebrating a weeklong fiesta around the time of the feast of Our Lady of the Pillar, which is celebrated on October 12. Some will suspect this is simply one more occasion for selling glitzy, chintzy Marian souvenirs. Why would an enlightened person of this modern era believe such a story? Yet neither natural nor religious reasoning have been able to discredit and discard the story of Mary of the Pillar and relegate her to unbelief and something unworthy of genuine devotion.

On the positive side, it is interesting to note that the German Augustinian stigmatist and visionary of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich, comments on Mary of the Pillar's appearance to James. With rich detail she describes the Zaragoza event in chapter 14 of *The Life of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*.

Some, even with scientific reasoning, might dismiss any claims of sincere devotion of Marian devotees. The story of Our Lady of the Pillar does seem unbelievable, unless you grew up with it or have an unshakeable faith. Anyone who was raised in Zaragoza or somewhere in Spain, anyone who has grown up knowing Our Lady of the Pillar, is intimately linked to her as any Mexican person is to Our Lady of Guadalupe, or any Irish Catholic is to Our Lady of Knock. The same is true of Lourdes and the French, or Fatima and the Portuguese.

### *The reality*

For devotees of these and other Marian apparitions, Mary is not only the Mother of Jesus and of the Church; she is above all their mother – and our mother. Some might even be lapsed Catholics, but they will at least once a year on her feast day visit her church or pray to her.

Our Lady of the Pillar has a special place in the lives of many, not the least of which are those who bear her name. In Spain and in Latin America the name “Pilar” is commonly given to girls at baptism. At one time in Spain almost everyone wore a medal of *Nuestra Senora del Pilar*. Our Lady of the Pillar is also immensely

important in the history and mission of several religious congregations and movements, especially the Marianist Family founded by Blessed William Joseph Chaminade.

Devotion to Mary is something that cannot be dismissed simply with psychological and sociological explanations. This devotion goes beyond collective pride, national identity, and the need to belong. It is something more mysterious, something that transcends time, cultures, and even reason itself.

We learn to live with the seeming contradiction between reason and faith, between believing Mary is our mother and thinking all this is unbelievable. After all, faith is about love, mystery, and life. And those are real, even if we cannot understand them. Just because we do not fully comprehend all this and cannot fully explain it, does not mean it does not exist.

Let the thought and the image of Our Lady of the Pillar be a forceful reminder that we walk in the footsteps of St. James and the early Christians of Hispania in following Christ. May she be for us a pillar of faith.

Perhaps the conclusion penned by Franz Werfel in his popular novel, *Song of Bernadette*, says it best: “For those who do not believe, no explanation is possible. For those who believe, no explanation is necessary.”

Our Lady of the Pillar, pray for us!

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Author’s note to editor:

The following information can serve as a complementary sidebar to this brief article.

## **OUR LADY OF THE PILLAR**

**Feast day:** October 12

**Traditional date of apparition:** January 2, 40 A.D.

**Shrine church:** This is the first church built in Mary's honor. The present basilica church was built between 1681 and 1961. The previous church was destroyed by fire in 1434. The frescoes were done by Francisco Goya in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Statue:** The statue atop the pillar of stone is about one foot in height and depicts the Virgin Mary with the Infant Jesus, who is holding a dove in his hand. The original statue was destroyed in the 1434 fire. The present statue dates from the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. Mantos are skirt-shaped cloaks that drape the pillar on which the statue stands. The use of mantos began in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, and currently number about 300.

**Significant miracle:** During the Civil War of the 1930s, two aerial bombs were dropped on the shrine church, but neither exploded. Those bombs now hang on the shrine wall.

**Patroness titles:** Patroness of Spain  
Patroness of All Hispanic Peoples -- by declaration of Pope John Paul II in 1984

