

## History of Our Lady of Peñafrancia



Simon frequented the church and would spend hours in prayer before the altar of the Virgin Mary. Many times, in his deep meditation, he would ask the Holy Virgin to inspire him what he might do to please her. Once, while he was absorbed in the spiritual contemplation of the beauty of the Holy Mother, he lost consciousness. His prayer then found its answer for he heard a clear voice that tried to rouse him from slumber: “Simon, wake up; be on the watch.... From now on your name will be Simon Vela. Go to Peña de Francia west of his country, and there you will find the shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary.”

On the morning of the next day, Simon confessed what he had heard the night before to Father Ortuño, guardia of the convent. The wise father advised him not to divulge the secret to anyone for the priest feared that it might have been the voice of the temptation or the effervescence of a fevered mind. Apparently, Father Ortuño learned of Simon Vela’s losing consciousness, and may have thought that the voice and the message were but vapid figments of the imagination.

Several days after, Simon was praying as usual before the altar of the Holy Virgin, when he heard again the voice saying: “Simon, go to Peña de Francia and there you will find what you have been longing to see.” The next day he asked for the blessing of Father Ortuño and set out to search for the place called Peña de Francia.

For five (5) years Simon Vela traveled far and wide among caves, hills and mountains, in search of Peña de Francia but he could not find the place. He wanted to give up the search, and was in fact already on his way back to Paris, when one night he heard the same voice once more saying: “Simon, do not give up the search; do not give up what you have begun. Persevere and your labors will be recomposed.” This suddenly buoyed up his spirits and so he resumed his search the next day.

Simon went to the Church of Santiago de Galicia. And while he was passing the market place of Salamanca, he saw two men quarreling. One was seriously wounded and fell at Simon’s side. The offender was caught by the crowd who milled around them and he brazenly remarked: “Had I killed my enemy, I would have escaped to Peña de Francia where no one, not even the king, could find me.” Simon was overjoyed when he heard this for now he knew that such a place did actually exist.

Several hours afterwards he resumed his way to the church of San Martin. On his way he met a man selling charcoal. Simon asked the man where he came from a place called Peña de Francia. This was the second time that Simon heard the name of the place mentioned. He then begged the man to guide him to the place called Peña de Francia but for some reason the latter refused to do so.

Simon traced the road through which he thought the man has passed. He then reached a villa called San Martin de Castañar on May 14, 1434. He went to church and after the mass a man to kindly indicate where Peña de Francia was. The man took Simon Vela to a place some distance from the church and pointed to him a hill in the far distance saying that the hill was the Peña de Francia he was looking for. Simon was very grateful and thanked God for having found the man who showed him the place of his dream.

Simon then set out for the place indicated and, after a long weary journey, came to a steep rocky hill. By this time his supply of provision had already been depleted and he was beginning to feel the pangs of hunger. The climb over the hill had considerably weakened him but he lost no heart for he knew deep within him that God had not forsaken him to a fruitless and useless search. And indeed how right he was for on the road otherwise abandoned he found a packet containing a loaf of bread and piece of meat. This relieved him so much until night overtook him and he sought shelter in a cave. Inside he prayed for guidance and soon he was lost in deep slumber.

Early in the morning of the next day, Simon began the search for the shrine in every cave where he had slept the night before. He felt distressed and discouraged for his seemed as distant as it was when he started. He knelt and prayed for strength and courage. And soon he heard the same voice he had heard before sounding clearly through the cave: "Simon, be awake: do not sleep."

Simon continued the search with more zeal in the morning of the next day. At a distance on a rocky hill, he saw a glaring and dazzling light filling the place with its brilliance. Trembling with joy, he approached it and there he found the Virgin Mary with the Child Jesus in her arms sitting on a golden throne. He knelt before her and prayed with all the fervor of his soul. Overflowing with ineffable joy he said: "Oh, Lady, the dream of my soul, the inspiration of men and women! My labors are now ended. Many years have I traveled far and wide to seek you and to drink in the beauty of your eyes! Do not forsake me: be my protection."

In sympathy for Simon, the Lady answered: "Simon, rejoice! Your constancy will be rewarded. Your dream will be realized. Your labors are now ended. Take heed and keep in your heart what I wish you to do. Dig in this spot and take what you can see and place it on the summit of this rocky hill. Build on this hill a beautiful dwelling. You are to begin it and others will come to finish it. This must come to pass as it has been the wish of my child." Then the Lady suddenly disappeared and Simon was left standing alone and rooted in the spot with wonder and awe.

On the morning of May, 1434, on the spot where the apparition of the Holy Virgin disappeared, Simon began the work of digging and excavating. He, however, heard the same voice again saying: "Simon, do not attempt to undertake that big task alone. Undertake it in the presence and with the help of two, three, or more persons." Evidently this was to avert any doubt or suspicion from people as to a veracity of the miracle and the credibility of Simon. So Simon went to San Martin de Castañar, a nearby town from the spot, and asked five men to help him. They were Antonio Sanchez, the parish scribe of the place

These men thought that they were digging for hidden treasure but they were informed that they were going to dig for the objects worthier than world goods their hearts could cherish. They dug and dug, clearly following directions from divine inspiration, and, finally, on May 19, 1434, after removing a huge stone, they found imbedded among the rocks, the most coveted image of the Holy Virgin with the Child in her arms.

Right then and there, all these men received special graces from the Lady. Simon Vela's wound in the head was instantly cured; Pascual Sanchez' defect in the eye disappeared; Juan Fernandez was relieved of a stomach trouble that has been nagging him for ten years; Antonio Fernandez who deaf began to hear; and, finally, Benito Sanchez' finger which was defective from birth, recovered its normal stage. The official document of these miracles and this discovery, duly signed by those present and the Notary Public of the place, is reserved in the archives of San Martin de Castañar to serve as eloquent, if mute, witness to the past, present, and future generations of the veracity of this wonder

Contrary to what its name seems to indicate and the claim of some writers, therefore, the Peñafrancia devotion is not of French origin. It started in the place where the holy image was discovered and that is on the slopes of Sierra de Francia, a mountain range situated between Spain's two famous provinces: Salamanca and Caceres.

It is a noteworthy coincidence that while the primitive image was found near Caceres in Spain, its most venerated reproduction has come to stay in the Archdiocese of Caceres. Which brings us to the story equally touching and wonderful as the story of the original image found in Caceres, Spain of the Virgin of Peñafrancia venerated in the Archdiocese of Caceres in a shrine located in a place locally named Francia.

Way back in the seventeenth century, a Spanish family came to the Philippines and settled in the port of Cavite. They were from San Martin de Castañar. They had a son named Miguel de Cobarrubias.

Miguel grew up under the influence of the Dominican Fathers of the University of Santo Tomas in Manila where he was an intern student in that venerable institution. He studied grammar, philosophy, and theology in preparation for the priesthood. He had with him an image of Our Lady of Peña de Francia and he had been since youth an ardent devotee of this miraculous image.

While he was a student in the university, he was a victim of frequent illness. In some cases he suffered from serious diseases. He used to complain of unexplained pains which often paralyzed his normal movements. Fortunately for him. However, he had this holy image to whom he would have recourse in moments of great pain, anguish, and adversity. He recalled that by putting the image on the part of his body that ailed him most, he would recover from his illness.

This image was actually found on the cover of a book on the history of the Blessed Virgin of Peñafrancia and Miguel de Cobarrubias carried this book with him all around and even in his sleep. Sometimes relief from his illness would be delayed but Miguel, the fruitful devotee of the Lady, never lost heart for he believed that the Blessed Mother, ever solicitous and maternal, purposely delayed the cure to make him repent his sins better.

So many miracles were wrought upon the holy person of Miguel de Cabarrubias but he was always wont to exclaim: “all I can say is that I am the miracle of her miracles because I firmly believe that on many occasions, I owe my life to her.”

In gratitude for the many blessings he had received from the Virgin of Peñafrancia, Miguel de Cabarrubias vowed that, when he shall be in a financial position he would erect a stone church on the bank of the Pasig River in Manila in honor of the Blessed Virgin. He looked for a sculptor to make a replica of the image of Our Lady of Peña de Francia but it took him time before he was able to find one.

Meanwhile, after his studies in theologate, Bishop Andres Gonzales of then Diocese of Nueva de Caceres, ordered Miguel to proceed to Naga City to be ordained priest. He was later given a small parochial church, and six months afterwards, was made parish priest of the Cathedral Church and, subsequently, made the Provisor and Vicar-General of the bishopric of Nueva Caceres which, at that time, covered the entire Bicol Region in its ecclesiastical jurisdiction.

It is recalled that during his trip to Nueva Caceres, a very strong and furious typhoon developed that the was riding was almost on the brink of sinking. Everybody thought that would be their fateful end. Miguel, however, was confident that he was called to a further mission and so he invoked the help of his Patroness Virgin of Peñafrancia and, thanks to his prayer and devotion, the storm subsided and everybody reached the place safe and sound.

Many other miracles were experienced by Miguel de Cabarrubias through the intercession of the Virgin of Peñafrancia and all of these were documented in his letters of 1710, 1711, and 1717 which he sent to the Chaplain of Peñafrancia of San Martin de Castañar.

Having been given a ranking position in the diocese, Father Miguel knew that his stay in this place would be longer and he realized that it would render him incapable of fulfilling his vow in the place where he originally intended to build the stone church. He therefore asked permission from his superiors to build the promised church in Nueva Caceres. The permission was granted but the first difficulty was the location on which the church would be constructed. The solution to this problem proved to be an incident drawn by the hands of providence.

It is said that the cimmarones from the base of Mount Isarog came to see Father Miguel one day and begged him to build the church or ermita on a site which would be reached in less than thirty minutes from the poblacion. Accordingly the cimmarones who have been Christianized much earlier by the Francisca missionaries, Wanted a church where they could hear mass and receive the sacraments. This made Father Miguel very happy because it opened the way to the fulfillment of his vow.

Father Miguel then promptly had a chapel made of straw and other local materials erected in the site indicated by the cimmarones. This must have been around 1710. In addition, Father Miguel asked a local sculptor to carve a statue of the Virgin Mary patterned after the picture of Our Lady of Peñafrancia who has been very instrumental in the many miracles wrought upon the person of the Father Miguel. The image was made from a santol tree.

As a practice in those times, to serve as paint and wood preservative, the blood was used to color the statue. So a dog was caught, its feet body of the dog was afterwards thrown into the river

nearby. Father Miguel, at this instant, remarked: “The Virgin will work her first miracle in Caceres. She will bring back to life that innocent animal that gave blood for her.” Upon hearing his words, those who were around laughed sarcastically. To their surprise, however, the dog began to swim and upon reaching the bank fast to the house of his master. This miracle was also witnessed by some Dominican Fathers who were then vacationing as guests of Bishop Gonzales.

The news of this miracle spread like a prairie fire. It went from mouth to mouth and from town to town. People from all places and all walks of life, suffering from various ailments, mishaps, pains and other misfortunes both spiritual and physical, began imploring her powerful intercession. And Our Lady of Peña de Francia did not disappoint them but only because they had put so much faith on her. In no time she was proclaimed as the foremost and miraculous Patroness of Bicolandia.

The official coronation of Our lady of Peñafrancia our Patroness of Bicolandia took place on September 2, 1924, officiated by the Rt. Rev. Msgr. Guillermo \_\_\_\_\_ their Apostolic to the Delegate. The image therefore of Our lady of Peñafrancia enshrined in her sanctuary in Calle Balatas is about 275 years old. It is an antique statue that has even become the object of desire for many an antique collector. On the morning of August 15, 1981, this miraculous image was stolen from her shrine at the Peñafrancia Church. The entire region was shocked by this news and every devotee of Our Ina could not believe that such a dastardly and sacrilegious act could be perpetuated. Immediately a network for the massive search of the image was military and civilians alike. In the course of following leads to the theft, a policeman was killed and a police lieutenant was wounded when the jeepney they were riding in were ambused by heavily armed men somewhere in Bolo Sur, Sipocot, Camarines Sur.

It seemed that the search would be futile altogether and people almost resigned to the sorry fate of having lost a most beloved image. Most of the leads proved a hax. Meanwhile the approaching feast of Our Lady of Peñafrancia necessitated an image to be borne during the translation and the colorful fluvial procession. One was made at the instant of church authorities and another image was donated by the First Lady.

A little over a year later, the region was shocked, with equal unbelief, with the news that the image has been returned to Rt. Rev. Msgr. Florencio Yllana, P.A., Liaison Officer of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines and former Rector of the Shrine of Our Lady of Peñafrancia here in Naga City. On September 8, 1982, Feast of the Nativity of Our Lady, the motorcade from Manila bearing the Image arrived in Naga City at the height of typhoon Ruping. The inclement weather did not deter thousands of devotees who braved the raging winds and the devastating floods to welcome the image of Our beloved Ina. At 10:00 in the evening of the same day, the image was safely enshrined at the Metropolitan Cathedral where a pontifical concelebrated mass offered in thanksgiving for the return and safe arrival of the image.

The image is now enshrined at the Basilica Minore at Calle Balatas in the City of Naga. She has returned to her flock and her people have gratefully built her a home worthy of her dignity, honor, and maternal position.

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