

Weak tea and strong prayers

The trip did not start off too well. First of all, Croatia airlines incoming late afternoon flight did not arrive on time. Consequently, our flight departed two hours late. Flying into the night sky and into unknown territory, my frame of mind was as dark as the night outside.

Finally, we arrived at Dubrovnik airport and were ushered through Customs and onto a coach ride of three hours. We passed, with sleepy eyes, through three border control points without any hassle. We arrived at 4 a.m. to be told that the hotel had food for us. A cup of weak tea and a snack sent us to a late bed in order to catch some sleep, not mosquitos.

Early next morning, our week's visit began in earnest with more weak tea, the ever popular Cornflakes and some orange juice. Soon, it was time for a spiritual encounter with the Lord with the celebration of "holy Mass." Trying to shake off the cobwebs of sleep, we participated as best we could. The singing was upbeat; the homily was long and the instructions pedantic. Following Mass, we received a briefing and schedule for the same as well as some pointers on how to approach our week in this busy but prayerful place.

That afternoon, we got a reprieve from Mother Nature as thunder, lightning and downpours rocked the place. Later that night, more was to follow – even more severe. We hoped it wasn't the Lord's way of getting our attention. But, yours truly never heard a sound. Not even his own snoring, if he did snore.

That evening, priests from different countries, either populated one of the many confessionals or grabbed two chairs and a language sign, heading off to some corner; reminding people that the priests were open for the business of bringing the Lord's forgiveness, mercy and peace to countless people from different tongues and nations. Lines became shorter as the evening progressed and sinner's loads were lifted. This same routine continued every evening during our week's stay.

Two great Catholic sacraments continued to be celebrated – one in the morning and the other in the evening, becoming the bookends of people's journey of faith.

Between such bookends, people – young and old – rambled around, filled with their own thoughtful prayers and petitions. Some prayed for physical healing, others for spiritual healing. Some prayed for healing of relationships that were severed because of still festering past hurts and resentments as well as resulting bitterness. Others prayed for a closer relationship with their Maker. Some prayer for a lessening of the burden of their own cross. Others prayed for strength to be given to loved ones who had their own crosses to carry. Some returned home with gifts for family and friends. Others returned home with gifts no money could buy. Some returned home, savoring the experience of spending a few days soaking in the plentiful graces of God. Others returned home with the desire to return again in order to continue to satisfy their deepest longings.

Streets, dotted with stores displaying religious objects, rumbled with the movement of colorful coaches, ferrying pilgrims from around the world. A United Nations language of faith reminded one of the universality and appeal of our Catholic faith. Cafes played host to not only meals but also meeting places for people to share a faith story, ask for directions or advice over a cup of coffee or a cold local beer. There was no language barrier because everyone spoke the same language of love. Everyone came to this place to heart the universal language of God's love.

The weak tea reminded me of the thousands of people from all walks of life, from different countries, different ages, different abilities who roamed around the sacred spaces clutching rosary beads, walking stick or bottled water. They all shared a weakness, a frailty, a reminder of the fragility of life and their own struggle with life, relationships and the acceptance of God's will.

The strong prayers epitomized a strong desire for a closer relationship with Creator, Redeemer and Madonna. The bended knees, the well-worn rosary beads, the difficult mountain climbs, the heart-to-heart encounter with a merciful God allowed the pilgrims to grow stronger at the broken places in their lives.

This simple, out of the way, place attracts thousands daily, seeking their own personal vision of a Mother's love, reminding them of a God who loves them unconditionally.

Hemmed in my mountains is a place where a Mother's love is a blessing, given by a Son who offers healing, mercy, forgiveness and peace in a fragile, yet redeemed world.