

(Nuestra Señora de Covadonga Reina Del Rosario Santissimo de La Trinidad y Las Cordilleras)



Our Lady of Covadonga enshrined at St. Joseph Parish in La Trinidad, Benguet.

Every day more and more devotees and pilgrims from all over the country are flocking the San Jose Parish Church in Poblacion, La Trinidad, Benguet to venerate and pray for miracles and blessings at the centuries-old image of Our Lady of Covadonga. The image is temporarily encased in a glass box while awaiting completion of her final shrine at the new Parish Church.

Historical Background

The devotion to the Brown Statue of Our Lady of Covadonga has its origins in Cavadonga, a mountainous region of the province of Asturias in the extreme northwest of Spain. Following the Islamic Arab invasion of Spain in 711, Roderic, the Christian Visigoth King of Spain was defeated and killed at the Battle of Guadalete. The battle was decisive and led to the swift conquest of most of Visigothic Spain.

The remnant of the Visigoth nobility retreated to the remote mountains of northern Spain.

According to texts written in northern Iberia during the ninth century, they elected in 718 AD a man named Pelayo, or Pelagius, as their leader. Pelayo's father had been a dignitary at the court of the Visigoth King Egica. Pelayo gathered a band of warriors to resist Islamic encroachment. When in 722 the Arab commander of Spain sent an army to eliminate this resistance, the Christian army made its stand at a place of many caves known as Covadonga.

According to tradition Pelayo retreated to a cave where a hermit had secreted a statue of the Virgin Mary, saved from the Muslim conquest. He prayed to the virgin for victory. In the subsequent battle the Christians made use of the natural defences. Christian accounts of the battle claim miraculous intercession and that the slaughter among the Moors was horrific. Moorish accounts describe the battle as a mere skirmish. However the moorish commander fell in the battle, and his soldiers fled. This victory, considered the first of the Christian reconquista of Spain, established the independence of the Kingdom of Asturias in north west Spain.

Pelayo credited the intercession of the Virgin Mary for his victory. And in recognition of this miraculous intercession, King Alfonso I, the Catholic (739-757) commanded that a monastery and chapel be built on the site in honor of Our Lady of Covadonga. The sanctuary came to be run by Augustinian canons but was destroyed by fire on 17 October, 1777. The shrine was rebuilt piecemeal, until replaced by a great Basilica that was consecrated in 1901. The basilica houses the current statue of Our Lady of Covadonga, dating to the 16th century. Pope John Paul II visited the shrine during his papacy.

The Galleon Trade and Our Lady of Covadonga

During the Spanish conquest of the East in the 1500's, the Galleon trade was established between the Philippines and Spain ushering the Spanish colonization of the Philippine Islands. It became a common practice that each Galleon that sailed to the East carried an image of the Blessed Mother carved in hard wood fashioned after the medieval queens of the time. This was a part of the Christianization effort of Spain. Each image was brought into land and a church or fortress was built in her name. Because of the vast trade and commerce all around the Philippine Islands, there came to be numerous shrines scattered all over the archipelago in honor of Our Blessed Mother. Some of the more popular ones are Our Lady of La Naval in Manila, Our Lady of Manaoag in Pangasinan, Our Lady of Peñafrancia in Naga, Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage in Antipolo, Our Lady of De Guia in Malate, Our Lady of Piat in Cagayan Valley, and Our Lady of Covadonga in La Trinidad, Benguet.

It is believed that the image of Our Lady of Covadonga was carried by a Galleon that docked in the ports of La Union. Later her image was brought up the mountains of the Cordilleras by the Spanish conquistadores who wished to Christianize the mountainous regions of North of Luzon, the Cordilleras. It is said that the conquistadores carried her image and ascended by foot through the mountainous paths on the boundaries of La Union and Benguet into a beautiful flat valley surrounded by mountains. They named the place La Trinidad and built a stone chapel to house the image and started the devotion to Our Lady of Covadonga.

A clear evidence that the Spaniards stayed there is the name of the place, La Trinidad valley, which is the only Spanish-named town in the entire province of Benguet. The Spaniards also founded the Parish of San Jose there but, unfortunately, due to the large indigenous pagan population, the devotion to Our Lady did not prosper. In the meantime, lowlanders from the neighboring Ilocano regions slowly migrated to the town of La Trinidad and they were the first Roman Catholics to live in the area. The natives remained strong in their culture and pagan beliefs.

The Roman Catholic faith gradually flourished in La Trinidad. In the 18th century, the stone church was ravaged by a fire by still unknown reasons. But the image of Our Lady of Covadonga was saved by the religious townfolks who painstakingly built a wooden Church in the turn of the century. This wooden church grew and became the earliest center of the Catholic faith in La Trinidad, with mostly local Ilocano migrants as parishioners and some natives gradually embracing the faith.

But the Church got burned again after the Second World War, in 1948, and all records and historical data about the parish was lost in that fire. The centuries-old Image was saved once more and it was later moved in one of the homes in the Poblacion area, residing for a time in the Sales's family home. In the 1950's a small wooden chapel was built on the same site and the image was placed at the right side of the altar, unmarked and without any adornments or garments for many years.

In 1979, a new replica of the image of Our Lady of Covadonga was donated from Spain to the San Jose Parish Church by devoted Asturians led by the Cacho family. This replica was received by the then Parish priest, Rev. Fr. Camilo Declercq, with the Most Rev. Bishop William Brasseur, Vicar Apostolic to Benguet and the Mountain Provinces, in attendance. The centuries-old statue was removed from the right side of altar to give way to the replica. The original image was transferred to a smaller chapel of the Sacred Heart in the same town only to be forgotten and left in utter neglect.

Old image “rediscovered”



Eventually, the new Cacho replica was enshrined in the main church of La Trinidad and this started the awareness of the name Our Lady of Covadonga, not only in the town of La Trinidad but also in the City of Baguio and other neighboring provinces. To further promote the devotion to Our Lady of Covadonga, the Children of Our Lady of Covadonga (COLC) was organized by local women devotees in the parish. Aside from spreading the devotion, COLC also served as the curator of the replica image.

The old image at the Sacred Heart Chapel was almost forgotten until a massive research on the devotion to Our Lady of Covadonga was undertaken in 1999. The project was spearheaded by Rev. Fr. Rolando Astudillo, the Parish Priest of San Jose Church, together with the members of the COLC. It was soon revealed that an age-old image of Our Lady of Covadonga was stored somewhere in town. The COLC and other concerned devotees helped in the search and soon they rediscovered the centuries-old image at the Sacred Heart Chapel. They reclaimed and painstakingly restored the image on September 1999.

The new Cacho replica was soon removed and transferred to the Sacred Heart Chapel in Km. 5 while the old original image was brought back. A procession in honor of Our Blessed Mother was made on December 8, 1999 headed by then Bishop Ernesto Salgado, Vicar Apostolic to the Mountain Provinces, and the original Image of Our Lady of Covadonga was temporarily enshrined in a glass encasement at the right side entrance to the wooden San Jose Parish Church. Her Episcopal Coronation and Declaration as a National Marian Shrine was held with a concelebrated High Mass on her feast day, September 8, 2005 by His Excellency Msgr. Carlito Cenzon, Bishop of the Diocese of Baguio and Benguet. On that day, she was proclaimed "Nuestra Señora de Covadonga Reina del Rosario Santissimo de La Trinidad y de las Cordilleras." She now awaits her final Shrine as the new Parish Church is under construction and may hopefully qualify as Basilica Minore, given the proper appointment from the Vatican.

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