



DIocese of ST. AUGUSTINE

Office of the Bishop

May 18, 2019

Dear Faithful,

I want to share with the faithful of the parishes in the St. Augustine area the current plans for the Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche at Mission Nombre de Dios. I am sure you have heard about the confusion and some opposition to what we hope will happen on the mission grounds.

The diocese has sought to answer concerns expressed by neighbors of the mission and to respond to objections by some regarding our original proposal. After careful consideration, we have decided to review our original plans.

At the same time, the Diocese of St. Augustine is committed to preserving and protecting these sacred grounds – the site where the first Mass was celebrated on our coast and the location of the oldest shrine to honor the Mother of God in the United States. This property is a treasure entrusted to the Catholic Church and the Catholic people of our diocese. It is a priority that we ensure these sacred grounds are preserved and protected, so they are always available for religious purposes. Our duty remains, as it has been for more than 450 years, to safeguard this most sacred and historic site so that it will always be a place for our faith history to be shared, religious faith to be deepened, and guarantee religious gatherings will not only continue with reasonable facilities for visitors and pilgrims – but flourish.

I hope the information contained in this insert helps answer any questions you may have.

May the joy of this Easter season continue to bring many blessings to you and your families. May all know that we have the privilege to turn to Mary, the Mother of God's own Beloved Son – under her title – Our Lady of La Leche – for her intercession.

Sincerely yours,

+ r. r. Estévez

Most Rev. Felipe J. Estévez, S.T.D.
Bishop of St. Augustine



THE SHRINE OF OUR
LADY OF LA LECHE
AT MISSION NOMBRE DE DIOS
Saint Augustine, Florida

COMMON QUESTIONS & ANSWERS REGARDING ENHANCEMENTS OF THE DIOCESAN PROPERTY

What changes are taking place at the Shrine and Mission?

- A new building is under construction to replace our old offices and gift shop that was flooded by both Hurricanes Matthew and Irma. The new building is called the Pilgrim Center and Pavilion. It is being repurposed on the same footprint and will include offices, the church supply business, and meeting space for pilgrims, spiritual renewal, and ministry/group retreats. A small, covered patio will include picnic tables, public restrooms, and a candle and beverage kiosk.
- The gift shop has been moved to the museum building and offers new items that share the shrine and mission logo, the history of Mission Nombre De Dios and an expanding selection of sacramentals for baptism, First Communion, and confirmation. A new online shopping experience is now available by visiting www.missionandshrine.org.
- Bulkheads have been added to all parts of the mission grounds that border the water to stop erosion and to protect the grounds against the increasing effects of sea-level rise and storm surge that we have experienced in the past.
- Both bridges sustained extensive damage from the past two hurricanes. Their approaches have been rebuilt, and new surface coverings and railings are being added, along with lighting and a new entryway on the Michael Gannon Bridge. Work is expected to be completed in July.
- A fence has been installed on the 26-acre property for security and reverence. We have two outdoor altars, and the shrine is holy ground that should be respected by all, at all times. The gates are open from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Opening earlier and staying open later during the summer is a possibility.
- An enhanced landscaping plan will include new walkways, signage, the addition of 240 trees, and an outdoor worship area adjacent to the shrine where visitors can bring folding chairs or blankets to enjoy the grounds, the celebration of Mass, and outdoor pilgrimages. This plan will be phased in and is expected to be completed by the end of 2020.
- An outdoor walking rosary garden will be added to the back southeast section of the property.

What is the purpose of the site? We are the most sacred and historic site in the United States. It is the site of the founding of Mission Nombre de Dios, the site where the first documented parish Mass was celebrated, and the site of the first Marian Shrine in this country. Our mission is to share our early history, the role of the Catholic Church in the growth of the City of St. Augustine, and evangelization of La Florida.

Why are repairs and construction taking so long? Initial plans were presented after Hurricane Matthew. Additional flooding and damage occurred from Hurricane Irma, which required plans to be redrawn and submitted for permitting with the city. A Visioning Committee was formed to review the site plans, and in September 2018, they made final recommendations to the bishop which were accepted and shared with all clergy in October 2018.

What is the cost and how is the project being funded? A capital campaign is currently in progress to raise \$7 million. The campaign is in a leadership gift phase and, to date, has raised 36 percent of its goal thanks to the generosity of our faithful Catholics across the diocese and from outside the North Florida area. The project is completely donor-supported.

Now that the fence is up, will you be charging guests to enter? There are no plans to charge admission. All gates will be open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and closed in the evening when the staff leaves for the day. We have installed a new pedestrian gate at the corner of Water and Pine streets. It will remain open during business hours to our neighbors shortening the walk to the front entrance.

Where will the outdoor worship area and parking garage be located? Due to widespread confusion and misinformation regarding plans for an outdoor worship area, and the concerns within the community about building a parking garage, these two projects of the master plan have been put on hold.

I'm a neighbor and concerned about evening noise, traffic, and lighting that might affect us.

What are the plans for evening events? Evening events are not held regularly. However, they are allowed on a case by case basis. The average group visiting the shrine and mission is about 60 people. For years, evening vespers, and evening Mass has been celebrated with no complaints. Groups on site are here for spiritual renewal, praise, and worship, and are generally quieter activities. The music is conducive to a religious shrine.

Why has the gift shop been downsized? The Gift Shop and Church Supply sales help support the property. To steward the Gift Shop business more efficiently, we have downsized the floor space and moved it to the front of the property. Also, a newly designed online gift store is now available at www.missionandshrine.org

Will the Cathedral Parish Festival continue to be hosted on the mission grounds? The Cathedral Festival has long been a tradition in St. Augustine. The 35-year-old annual event raises funds for the parish and supports the school. The community is a big part of this fundraiser. At this time, the Bishop is working with the leadership of the Cathedral Parish to ensure the festival continues. Due to construction timelines, the diocese announced the festival would not be located at Mission Nombre de Dios in 2020; however, with no viable alternative location at this time, the mission will host the festival next year to ensure the tradition continues. Father Tom Willis, pastor of the Cathedral, is exploring other options for hosting the festival in 2021 and beyond.

Why are dogs no longer allowed? We are not a dog park; we are a sacred and holy site. Only service dogs are allowed due to insurance and sanitation concerns for the school, parish and pilgrim groups that picnic on the grounds.

Memorials have not been available since Hurricane Matthew. Will these be made available again?

Due to damage from the hurricanes and resulting construction, all memorial sales were put on hold. In July 2019, new opportunities to purchase memorials will be available. Please send an email request for information to info@missionandshrine.org or contact the Shrine directly at (904) 824-2809.

TIMELINE OF RECENT GROWTH AT THE SHRINE & MISSION

- 2012** The Holy See's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments granted a petition for a Feast Day in honor of Our Lady of La Leche to be inserted into the liturgical calendar of the Diocese of St. Augustine each year on October 11.
- 2015** The Prince of Peace Votive Chapel was enlarged to seat 240 people, two confessionals, two offices, and a narthex were added. It was renamed the Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche. The altar was blessed by Bishop Felipe J. Estévez, current Bishop of St. Augustine, on October 11, 2015.
- 2015** Opening of the Cause for the Martyrs of La Florida, with four martyrdom events being investigated that happened on site at Mission Nombre de Dios.
- 2015** The Immaculate Conception Community was invited to serve at the Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche at Mission Nombre de Dios. A rectory and living space was provided. They serve to celebrate the sacraments, provide pastoral care for pilgrims, and lead in spiritual renewal for groups seven days a week.
- 2018** The diocese submitted an application to the USCCB Committee on Divine Worship asking for consideration for a National Shrine status. Our application will be reviewed in June 2019.
- 2018** Re-opening of the excavation of the 1677 church, and adjacent Franciscan hermitage on the sacred acre. We plan to make this a permanent exhibit.
- 2020** The Holy See has confirmed a canonical coronation of Our Lady of La Leche in recognition of a sustained and growing devotion. Her crowning will make her the fourth image of Mary crowned in the U.S.; an honor for our faithful and the City of St. Augustine.

The Diocese of St. Augustine has always invited and welcomed Catholics, visitors to St. Augustine, the local community, and people of all faiths to learn about the special nature of this property. Our visitors are invited to share in its beauty and peaceful atmosphere. By producing a clear, strategic plan and committing staff and resources to fundraise for the preservation and restoration of this national treasure, we are serving as good stewards of the property.

**For more information, please visit our website: www.missionandshrine.org.
or, email the Shrine directly at info@missionandshrine.org.**