

# lingua weekly

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## Postcard from Lourdes and Stories of Altruistic Work Gina Cariño



Every time my mother comes, she asks to be taken to Lourdes. Relatives come from faraway continents and I am expected to take them there. Friends and relatives of friends and relatives come in order for me to take them there. I have taken so many people there that maybe I have earned my way to heaven!

I'm told I was first in Lourdes at the age of two. That doesn't count. What counts is the first time I went to Lourdes after I'd moved close to the French border. It was to accompany the mother of the friend of a friend of a friend. I remember being frightened at the prospect of seeing many terminally ill people weeping and wailing and flailing their arms like doomsday.

How wrong I was. There was no such hysteria. The shrine is a serene, happy, friendly place. Moreover, it's too easy to say that an otherwise bucolic landscape of green hills and placid streams has fallen into the clutches of speculation and commerce, with oversized signs everywhere announcing menus, rooms, and bottle-virgins for sale. Mind, the bucolic landscape of green hills and placid streams is there all right. And why be killjoy about the efforts of people who are... well, much into Lourdes.

First, my octogenarian aunt-in-law Anttonita. This wonderfully overbearing Basque lady who gives us never-winning lottery tickets at Christmas has devoted two-thirds of her life to the care and comfort of the sick and disabled. Up to a few years ago, August always found her working in a leprosy

center in Alicante province. The rest of the year, she was a regular at Lourdes.

So what a privilege it is to visit the shrine in her company. She knows the ins and outs and has access to every secret niche of the complex, moving around it with authority. She showed me parts of the grounds that are off limits to the public, such as the emergency room of the hospital across the river or the large hall where they keep those funny old-fashioned wheelchairs that make up a big part of the 4 o'clock procession. For years, Aunt Anttonita made it her duty to push an ill pilgrim to the pools. Oh, and close to the wheelchair room are shelves full of patchwork quilts. These quilts are spread over the delicate laps of the pilgrims in wheelchairs. Anttonita had made it her apostolate to knit two blankets per year and now she proudly showed us which of the thousands that were there were made by her own two hands. Nice, huh? She sewed me one such blanket. My cat sleeps on it.

Last but not least, my friends Guillermo and Kevin. One is Filipino, the other is Irish. For ten years now, they have made it their mission in life to spend ten days of September working in Lourdes. Guillermo does physical work, transporting sick travelers from the airport or train station to the shrine and back. Kevin does "police work," keeping the processions orderly and making sure you keep quiet.

At nightfall they deserve some fun and one can have fun in Lourdes, too. You can eat your duck the way you want it cooked and you can even go to a pub for some debauchery while watching the year's big rugby game. I know that's what Guillermo and Kevin did this year. And when the ten days were up, off they went for their cruise on the Rhine.

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