

Our Lady of La Leche statue has special place in Florida diocese's history

ST. AUGUSTINE, Fla. (CNS) – Although its pews were packed during Mass Oct. 10, there was a moment when the Cathedral Basilica of St. Augustine held a solemn silence as a couple processed to the altar with two gold crowns.

Silence reigned as Cardinal Carlos Osoro Sierra of Madrid picked up the smaller crown of the two and approached the humble statue of Our Lady of La Leche. The image depicts an intimate moment as the infant Jesus is cradled by Mary and is feeding at her breast.

The cardinal placed the small crown upon the head of the infant, whose eyes are shut as he is held by his mother.

He then took the larger crown and gently placed it upon Mary's head. At that point, the cathedral filled with applause as the moment of the canonical coronation became cemented in memory.

Cardinal Osoro, who was papal legate for the coronation, joined in the applause for the briefest moment. Then, in reflection of the humble image itself, he placed a quick kiss on Mary's back.

This was a coronation, but it also was an occasion to recall Mary's sacrifice, humility and faith-filled loyalty. The cardinal stood a few feet in front of the image and blessed it with incense before bowing in gratitude and respect.

The Mass was a celebration of the canonical coronation, a formal act of the pope to crown an image of Christ, Mary or St. Joseph in the name of the Holy Father.

The crowning acknowledges that the specific image, while

having local significance, also has universal importance for the Catholic Church as it pertains to Christ's salvation through his death and resurrection. The practice began in the 17th century but became increasingly popular in the late 1800s.

Unlike an annual May crowning held in parishes and schools, a canonical coronation is different in that it honors a specific image.

Our Lady of La Leche holds a special place in the heart of the Diocese of St. Augustine in north Florida, which holds the honor of having the first Mass of thanksgiving celebrated in the New World north of Mexico.

The image of Mary breastfeeding the infant Jesus dates back to the 16th century in Madrid, where she is called Nuestra Señora de la Leche y Buen Parto (Our Lady of the Milk and Happy Delivery).

After learning of miracles associated with the devotion to Our Lady of La Leche, King Philip III wished to erect a shrine in her honor.

More than 20 years later, in 1577, early Spanish settlers brought a replica to the United States and enshrined it at Mission Nombre de Dios in St. Augustine.

While it was destroyed during the Spanish Civil War in 1936, a replica of the original statue is currently housed in the historic chapel on the grounds that is now a national shrine and is the first U.S. Marian shrine.

Granted by the Vatican, the canonical coronation of Our Lady of La Leche is in response to more than 400 years of devotion to this nursing Madonna. Bishop Felipe J. Estévez of St. Augustine credited this devotion with the gentleness of Mary's maternal appeal.

“Since Mary is so tender, parents wanting a child have been very attracted to Our Lady of La Leche. A great number have gone to her and asked for a child and received it,” he said.

Cardinal Osoro presided at the Oct. 10 Mass, which concelebrated by Bishop Estévez and Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami. Before the official coronation, the cardinal offered the homily in Spanish, as Bishop Estévez interpreted.

The cardinal recounted how the “Gospel came to these lands of Florida 450 years ago, and it is here, in St. Augustine, that the first Eucharist was celebrated.”

The coronation was first scheduled to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the diocese’s founding in 1870, but had to be rescheduled because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet, the spirit of the anniversary was still present because, as Cardinal Osoro said in his homily, the celebration marked that the Church “always lives in a state of mission” and in “missionary outreach.”

“We celebrate here and now that the Church that walks in St. Augustine is alive and outreaching to others. ... It is manifested by celebrating 150 years since the beginning of the missionary journey and renewing the call to mission. We are mission. The Church is mission. And each faith is a mission,” the cardinal said.

“The Church that walks in St. Augustine is aware that a mother accompanies us in the mission: Our Lady of La Leche and Happy Delivery whom we crown as Queen and Lady of all creation,” he said.

“The Gospel shows us how to let ourselves be led by God and also how to be children of God, which means living as the Son lived, following him.”

At the end of the Mass, Bishop Estévez approached the statute

and kneeled before it. There, he offered a prayer to consecrate the Diocese of St. Augustine to Our Lady of La Leche.

The prayer said in part: "In such a crucial hour of history, we are thirsting for your help. Take us into your arms and heart and embrace us with all your love. Teach us to pray and to live always in God. We love you, we trust you and we thank you."

At the end of Mass, clergy processed out of the cathedral and were followed by members of the American Association of the Order of Malta who carried the statue of Our Lady of Leche so it could be returned to its chapel at the national shrine some three miles away.

The faithful stood, cheered and clapped as Mary was taken down the aisle and out the doors.

That same jubilation could be heard at the National Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche at Mission Nombre de Dios.

Hundreds of people gathered at the shrine to view the livestream of the canonical coronation on a jumbotron – with a view of the Great Cross of St. Augustine in the background.

Gonzalez is on the staff of the Florida Catholic, newspaper of Archdiocese of Miami and the dioceses of Orlando, Palm Beach and Venice. Contributing to this report was Savanna Kearney with the St. Augustine Catholic, the magazine of the Diocese of St. Augustine.