

"Return" to Montserrat

It has been mentioned, more than once, in previous essays, that I went to school at San Beda College in Manila. Originally founded as El Colegio de San Beda at the turn of the 20th century by Spanish Benedictine monks (Ordo Sancti Benedicti), it is now San Beda University. With a very strong law school that over the decades routinely spit out bar exam topnotchers, San Beda's alumni include several supreme court associate justices and a chief justice. The university now boasts of a medical school as well. The monks of San Beda lived in the Abbey of Our Lady of Montserrat, next to the college. During my elementary and high school years, from 1945 to 1955, I never paid much attention to San Beda's history. I do remember quite a few of the Spanish monks, among whom were the Abbott, Rector, Principal and several teachers. Of the dozen monks then active in administration or teaching, only two were Filipinos, the rest Spaniards. (Today, all the monks are Filipinos.) The Spanish monks hailed from the original Abbey of Our Lady of Montserrat, outside of Barcelona. Amazingly, one of the monks from my days is still around. Fr. Benigno Benabarre was a short, rotund, jolly monk. I think of him as the antithesis of the ascetic Benedictines whose motto is Ora et Labora (pray and work). He still graces the halls of the Abbey at 101 years old. I will have to make it a top priority to try and visit Fr. Benabarre next time I'm in Manila. Are monks allowed to have email?

Finally, more than six decades after leaving San Beda, I had the opportunity to visit the mother Abbey in Montserrat, which means serrated mountain in Catalan. From Barcelona, the Abbey can be reached by bus in less than an hour. A cog railway takes visitors to the Abbey grounds, three quarters of the way up the mountain. Besides the Abbey, the complex now includes a hotel, restaurant, souvenir shop, museum, the main sanctuary and a boarding school. Before you say commercialization, remember that monks by definition are required to be self supporting. In the U.S., the favorite product of various monastic orders seems to be.....fruitcake!

Any attempt of mine to describe the mountains of Montserrat would be inadequate. It reminded me of the Dolomites in northeastern Italy. The Montserrat massif rises majestically from the plains of Catalunya. The Benedictine complex is at the foot of one formation, neatly tucked away. From a vantage point at the top, the Abbey itself is obscured by trees. The top can be reached either by hiking or via a funicular.

As we toured the complex, my mind was racing, trying to compare the two Abbeys of Our Lady of Montserrat. My judgment is probably clouded by sentiment, but the altar and apse of the Abbey's sanctuary seemed like a larger version of San Beda's. A major difference is the patron saint. Montserrat's is La Moreneta or The Dark One, while San Beda's is Santo Nino de Praga (Holy Child of Prague). Digressing for a minute, we Catholics seem to have a fondness for dark saints or icons. It turns out that there are hundreds of Black Madonnas in Europe. During our trip to Poland last year, we visited the Black Madonna of Chestohowa, enshrined at the Pauline monastery (Order of St. Paul the First Hermit) of Jasna Gora. The Black Madonna is the most revered of Poland's icons. Manila's most popular icon is the full size Black Nazarene of Quiapo, a statue of Jesus carrying the cross. The procession during its feast day in January is attended by millions. Yes, millions. Check it out on YouTube. Another difference is that San Beda's

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monks always wore white cassocks. But the monks in Montserrat wore the traditional Benedictine black robes, thus the nickname Black Monks. (Val says it is too hot to wear black in Manila.) Black saints and black icons could be the subject of a future essay.

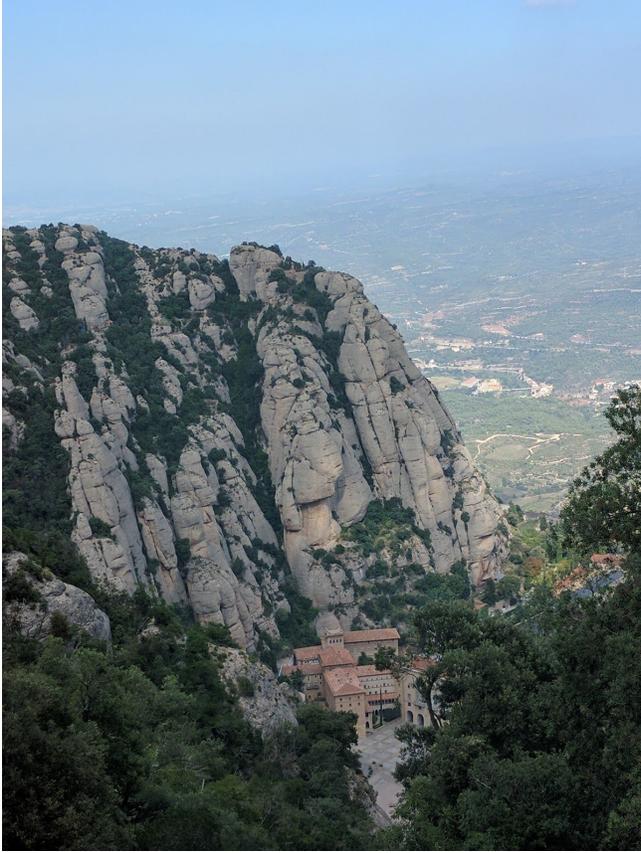
Unlike the Manila monks, the Montserrat monks don't operate a large school. There is a boarding school for 50 boys, ranging in age from 8 to 14. The boys comprise L'Escolania, a choir similar to the Vienna Boys Choir. An audition is required for entrance. Judging from the pictures of their tours, L'Escolania has performed in as many countries and cities around the world as the Vienna Boys Choir. L'Escolania is in fact older than the Vienna Boys Choir by more than a century. I wonder why the San Beda monks didn't organize a boys choir in Manila. Or perhaps they did but it never took off. Most of the L'Escolania choir boys are Spanish, but we were told there were 3 Filipinos. I would have to commend those boys. Not only would they have to be fluent in Spanish, they had to learn Catalan as well. It was part of the curriculum. The Catalan people guard and preserve their culture, sometimes suffering for it in the process. The choir sings several times a day, with the midday performance in the sanctuary. It was the highlight of our visit to Montserrat, listening to these talented boys in a packed sanctuary. But as in any of these types of choirs, their career is short. As soon as their voice deepens, the boys have to leave at the end of the school year. I wonder if anyone tried to fake their voice to stay a little longer.

Before leaving we were able to pray before La Moreneta, lighting a votive candle. But as an indication of the times, she was protected by a thick cover of plexiglass. I was looking for references to St. Benedict, but couldn't find any, or at least it wasn't obvious. There was not a single St. Benedict medal in the shop, everything was La Moreneta. Val, that means St. Benedict's Abbey of Monte Cassino is now on our list.

Since it was our first visit, we didn't really return to Montserrat, as indicated by my title. I was just trying to make a connection between the San Beda Montserrat Abbey of my youth and the mother Abbey that brought forth the Benedictinos from Barcelona to Manila. I was also hoping to find references to our San Beda monks. Were they ordained at Montserrat? How did they choose who went to Manila? Were they volunteers? Were they all or mostly Catalan? That would necessitate going over some archives. That could be in Latin, or Catalan! More unfinished business. We didn't have time to hike to the summit at Sant Jeroni either. If we ever decide to check out the Camino from St. Jean Pied de Port to say, Pamplona, we could swing by Barcelona and return to Montserrat. Val, how would you like to hike the Pyrenees?

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View from the top. Part of the monastery complex can be seen, but the Abbey itself is obscured by trees. The plains of Catalunya is 4,000 ft. below.



L'Escalonia choir during its midday performance. La Moreñeta is in the niche above the choir.