



350 Pilgrims visit D'Oppe Grotto

BELGIUM - In an era marked by heightened ecological awareness and a deep sense of responsibility for our planet, we, as Christians, have reason to take pride in the environmentally friendly settings of Marian pilgrimage sites. Many of these sacred places are situated in serene, secluded locations that harmoniously coexist with nature. These Marian grottos, nestled amidst lush trees, serene ponds, and vibrant flowers, not only emphasize the vital role of nature in praising God but also underscore the urgent need to safeguard our environment from the unrestrained exploitation driven solely by profit motives. In the case of D'Hoppe, we are fortunate to have a grotto enveloped by a verdant forest and a picturesque park, showcasing the union of spirituality and ecological preservation.

The geographical setting of our Grotto offers both convenience and allure, drawing numerous groups of pilgrims who choose to assemble here for various purposes. Beyond their primary objective of prayer, these pilgrim groups come together to reinforce their bonds and demonstrate their mutual care and concern. In an era when environmental protection takes center stage in social media, international relations, and political agendas, many pilgrims opt for our grotto as an ideal destination that caters to their spiritual, ecological, social, and communal needs, thereby nourishing their souls and deepening their connections with one another.

Last week, a group of 350 people visited our grotto and organized various group activities. They walked and prayed together in our park, and it was truly heartwarming to witness how Mary serves as a symbol of communion, unity, and friendship for them. Going on a pilgrimage to a Marian site provides them with an opportunity to strengthen and rejuvenate their relationships with one another. Being in the midst of nature, they feel a sense of belonging and

well-being. It was a delightful day, seeing people laugh and celebrate their bonds of friendship in this place of spiritual richness and faith.

With the assistance of the young missionaries who are willing to help me, I've been able to maintain the surroundings, ensuring they are clean and conducive for people to pray and walk together in the park. Just two days ago, Father Nepo came to help by clearing some wild bushes and removing some trees that were obstructing paths and posing potential threats to those who wished to stroll in the park. I am grateful that these young missionaries understand that being a missionary in the secularized Western world, which was once deeply Catholic, involves more than just pastoral engagement. It also entails caring for the aged confreres, the communities and houses that were once thriving pastoral centers and mission houses.

Fr. Jan, SMM