News



Women and girls dressed in pink and blue like the Virgin statue and carrying Jesus dolls, take part in the Our Lady of Remedies procession in the small town of Lamego, in the Douro River Valley, Portugal, Friday, Sept. 8, 2023. One of Portugal's largest and oldest religious festivals, the two-week celebrations that culminate with the procession, draw thousands. (AP Photo/Armando Franca)

Giovanna Dell'orto

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Lamego, Portugal — September 13, 2023

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Galego and Cabano, two dark-haired oxen, pulled the sacred image of Our Lady of Remedies on a procession float for more than two hours through this small town in Portugal's wine country.

They remained unperturbed even when two cannons fired salutes at the procession's end, but their owner, a local farmer, beamed with pride.

"I love to work with animals, and I have a lot of faith in Nossa Senhora dos Remédios," said Antonio Faustino, who guided the massive animals in the celebration of this particular image of the Virgin Mary, venerated here since the 1500s. "There is no word to explain the emotion."

Lamego's festival, nicknamed "Portugal's pilgrimage," is one of the oldest and largest of the many religious feasts that throughout summer draw tens of thousands of people to hamlets and metropolises. They remain popular in this rapidly secularizing country, where the Catholic Church has been reckoning this year with a long-ignored clergy sexual abuse scandal that Pope Francis addressed when he marked World Youth Day last month in Lisbon.

The Maronesa oxen pairs, and several others pulling floats through Lamego's steep cobblestone streets past several churches – some dating back to the Middle Ages – make this festival rare. Typically, it's the faithful who carry the various likenesses of Mary in similar festivals across the world.



A handler struggles to control an ox pulling a float portraying the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, during the Our Lady of Remedies procession in the small town of Lamego, in the Douro River Valley, Portugal, Friday, Sept. 8, 2023. One of Portugal's largest and oldest religious festivals, the two-week celebrations that culminate with the procession, draw thousands. (AP Photo/Armando Franca)

It fits the agricultural traditions of the Douro River Valley, where vineyards produce port wine. In early September, the grape harvest is in full swing, predominantly done by hand on the narrow, terraced hillsides.

A century ago, the Vatican formally granted special permission for animals to pull the floats with life-sized statues of the Virgin Mary, said the Rev. Fernando Albano Cardoso, who for 40 years has organized the festivities.

As agriculture becomes more mechanized, however, it's difficult to find farmers like Faustino, who has brought his oxen to Our Lady for 10 years and plans to continue doing so.

Another uncommon aspect of the procession is the iconic century-old sacred image standing on the bow of a boat-shaped float – the Virgin Mary breastfeeding infant Jesus.

"It's the nicest moment for a woman, to nurture a child," said Albano. The priest said the statue symbolizes the motherly care for all faithful by Our Lady of Remedies, whose statue is normally venerated in a sanctuary nearly 700 steps up a stone stairway ascending the town's highest hill.

Last Friday, people two or three deep lined the procession route, many having staked out a spot with folded stools the night before. More observed from festively draped windows.

They watched in silence as the oxen pulled the five floats. Proceeding with them were solemn marching bands, the bishop and local clergy carrying a sacred relic, and about 200 faithful in historical or Biblical dress.



The Our Lady of Remedies Baroque sanctuary, nearly 700 steps up a monumental stone stairway, is lit in the background as people stroll along the main avenue in the

small town of Lamego, in the Douro River Valley, Portugal, Friday, Sept. 8, 2023. One of Portugal's largest and oldest religious festivals, the two-week Our Lady of Remedies celebrations that culminate with a procession through the town, draw thousands. (AP Photo/Armando Franca)

At least 50 were women dressed in pink and blue like the Virgin statue, carrying Jesus dolls or real babies. Among them was Julieta Pereira, who has lived in Switzerland for more than 30 years but came back to her native Lamego to take part in the procession as a vow to Mary for healing her from complex heart and knee operations.

"It will be hard, but we stop a lot, so I'll get little rests," Pereira said, adding that as a child she used to ride on the floats, as several children did this year.

Filipe Mendonça brought his two children to watch the procession, as he has done since his childhood.

"It's a family tradition that I want to transmit," he said. Even though he's not a regular churchgoer, the feast matters as a family and community moment.

That combination of faith and local traditions helps the Catholic Church remain an important institution in contemporary Portugal, where 80% of citizens describe themselves as Catholic, according to Alfredo Teixeira, a theology professor at the Catholic University of Portugal in Lisbon.

Traditional religiosity developed in relationship with the social structures of a farming society, he added, so that Christian worship merged with reverence for "the God of our land."

But for all the timeless quality of the Lamego procession, there are also poignant contemporary reminders.

Along the route, people applauded when more than a dozen firefighters marched in step, their golden helmets and silver axes gleaming in the sun. It signified how vulnerable locals feel to increasingly destructive wildfires raging during extreme heat waves.

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One of this year's floats represented Our Lady of Peace, her statue framed by flags of conflict-ridden countries like Ukraine and Libya. A unit of the Portuguese Army's special forces – wearing green fatigues, red bandannas and white gloves – helped carry the floats from the assembly point into the streets, where they were hitched to the oxen.

A contingent marched alongside the main Our Lady of Remedies float, and gingerly loaded her statue on a military jeep to carry her home to the sanctuary after the procession ended at the special operations headquarters on the same hillside, next to a granite 16th-century convent.

"The religious component is an intrinsic part of the community," said Lamego's mayor, Francisco Lopes, who marched alongside civil and military authorities. That makes preserving the tradition a priority even as the city grows more multicultural, he added.

The festivities – which aside from the Sept. 8 procession also include more than two weeks of markets, fairs and concerts – give a needed boost to the local economy. While most villages in Portugal's interior are slowly depopulating, even former residents come back for these feasts.

Jennifer Esteves came from Germany with her two girls, ages 1 and 4, to visit the sanctuary alongside her mother and grandmother, who first brought her here to pray when she was 6.

She arrived too late to enter the packed church for the Friday morning Mass, but she loved seeing the crowd.

"Many people have faith, especially in this Virgin," she said after reciting a prayer inside. "When we visit Portugal, we always come."