



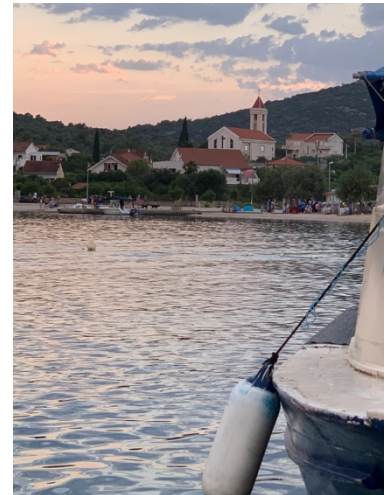
Church bells echo in the distance. These are not bells sounding through a speaker, as I am used to. These are *real* bells. The first night I heard them in Vinišće, their deep, loving, faithful chime sounded throughout the cove, and reminded us that all of the beauty before us is ours, thanks to God alone.

I remember Vinišće as a tiny fishing village, without electricity. The best moments of my life were spent here in the summer time, when I was a child—staring at the milky way and the millions of stars; making wishes on every shooting star I saw; having to use candles and gas lights; racing across rocks and stones from the village to our house in the second cove; catching my first fish; rowing in a boat by myself at the age of 4; these are my summer memories of Vinišće. They are as picturesque, magical and memorable

as an Ivana Brlić Mažuranić fable.

When I was 7, I left Croatia and moved to America with my parents, sister and brother. No longer could we visit every summer, but we so much looked forward to the summers when we could. My heart ached for Vinišće's shores, its deep, blue sea, its people. But life marched on and work, marriage, children and life's responsibilities, kept me away for much too long. Until this year....

After 18 years, I came back with my *OWN* family—my Cajun-American husband, my 11, 10 and 8-year-old Texan-born girls and me. It was our first adventure as a family in Croatia and in Vinišće.



I had plans of showing them so many towns and sights within our beautiful country. Yet, we found ourselves in Vinišće, each day making plans and then incapable of sticking to them because the sea kept calling... Vinišće kept calling. Most days, we could not seem to convince ourselves to leave this dreamlike village. The beautiful, real people and the true presence of God around every corner simply stole our hearts.

The other night we took a walk and my youngest said an angel was holding her hand. Her hand was slightly outstretched and looked to be in the shape of a hand-hold. Then she took mine in her other hand. She said, "Yes, it feels like yours, but only calmer." She suddenly slipped and nearly fell. She said the angel was there to protect her. After the near-fall, she told me she saw the angel fly

above her and leave. A child's imagination or the purity and love of God? Each can decide on his or her own. I choose to believe in the latter.

It was through the simple act of trying to find the grave of an old family friend that we were introduced to the human kindness, love of neighbor and presence of God's love in this town. After our first Mass in Vinišće, I asked one lady if she happened to know where this friend's grave was. Literally everyone remaining in the church after Mass came to our assistance. That is how we met don Marin. And through him we met don Ćipa. And then don Marino. We were invited for juice; enjoyed wonderful conversations and felt so welcome.



I cannot express what a treasure this town is, not only in its unique beauty, but in its people and its priests. don Marin, don Ćipa and visiting don Marino are so open, welcoming, willing to listen, and they are true representatives of God. Sacred Heart--what a perfect name for such a heartfelt church. Every homily we have heard has been uplifting and thought-provoking, while also taking the Word of God and applying it very succinctly to today's world.

We do not have much of this in Texas. I drive 30 minutes to get to a church, because the one 10 minutes away is empty, cold, with a disrespectful congregation and a priest who either needs more help or simply forgot why he chose the calling of becoming a priest.



My family went to Medjugorje thanks to the amazing kindness of Mr. Petar. The girls missed him as soon as he left. He came into our lives like an angel and left just as quickly, without any expectations of a thank you of any kind.



He brought two of my daughters and my husband to Medjugorje (I had to stay home with my youngest because she was not feeling

well). The experience left them changed. Their hearts are more open and their faith even deeper. God touched their souls as Michelangelo's painting shows the near-touching finger of God giving life to Adam. This



life-changing, faith-strengthening experience was all due to a man who would not take a penny for the goodness he did. Even a “thank you” was too much. It was simply his calling, his duty, he said.

In America, I cannot walk through town (in fact, I have to drive everywhere) and see my local priest at a café, inviting my family to have a seat with him. I cannot hear a simple choir of townspeople whose voices sound like the greatest Klapa voices flying down into the church from heaven. I cannot see my retired priest, riding a four-wheeler every day and waving hello. I cannot hear the word of God expressed so eloquently at EVERY Mass through the intellectual, emotional, realistic homilies that truly touch my heart, saturate my soul with the Word of God and fill me with thought for the week to come.

I feel somewhat cheated. But then I feel fortunate. For how many others can say they experienced such a summer? How many others came this close to God and his ever-present love and beauty?

While the swimming, exploring and fishing have all been pleasurable, memorable and fun, going to Mass on Sunday, meeting the devoted and kind priests who take care of this truly special and enchanting town has been a highlight unlike any other.

Thank you, Vinišće. Thank you, Sacred Heart Church and its congregation. Thank you, don Marin, don Čipa and don Marino for welcoming us into your church, teaching us and enriching our lives. You have impacted us in ways you cannot know.

Ivana Šegvić-Boudreaux  
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