A SELF-GUIDED TOUR OF THE

AVE MARIA GROTTO

St. Bernard Abbey, Cullman, Alabama 35055

The Ave Maria Grotto is located on the grounds of Saint Bernard Abbey, the only Benedictine monastery for men in the state of Alabama. The Abbey was founded in 1891. The Grotto consists of a landscaped hillside containing 125 small stone and cement structures, the handiwork of the creative genius Brother Joseph Zoetl, O.S.B., a monk of the Abbey for almost 70 years.

A pleasant two-block pathway winds beside the miniature buildings, passing in front of a large cavern-like grotto (from the Italian word for “cave”) on the lower level of the hillside. Opened in 1934 on the side of a former stone quarry used by the Abbey, the Grotto was a continuation of the work of Brother Joseph, who built his first replicas around 1912 and his last—the miniature of the beautiful Lourdes Basilica Church—in 1958, when he was 80 years old.

Brother Joseph Zoetl was born in 1878 in the town of Landshut, Bavaria. In 1892 he came to the newly founded Saint Bernard Abbey, where his monastic life was spent in prayer and in laboring in the Abbey power house. When not busy shoveling coal into the furnaces, Brother Joseph took time to construct miniature buildings using stone, concrete, and donated discarded materials such as broken plates, costume jewelry, ceramic tile, beads, marbles, seashells, and more.

Originally Brother Joseph placed his creations in the gardens near the monastery, but due to the large number of visitors coming to see them, they were moved to the present site in 1934.

Brother Joseph gathered ideas for his work from extensive reading of history and the Bible—and from his remarkable imagination. Of all the factual replicas he constructed, he had seen only about six: those in his hometown of Landshut and those at Saint Bernard Abbey. All the others were built from photographs or printed descriptions.

Brother Joseph, who died in 1961, is buried in the Abbey cemetery, the final resting place of the monks of the Abbey. The cemetery is 100 yards north of the Grotto gift shop, and the path leading to it is across the Grotto parking lot. Visitors are welcome to visit Brother Joseph’s grave.

BETHLEHEM

Here is commemorated the birthplace of Jesus Christ. Above the enclosure is written *Venite Adoremus*, Latin for "Come, let us adore." (Mt 1 & 2; Lk 2)

THE TOWER OF THANKS

Constructed by Brother Joseph to thank his many friends who sent him materials for his works. The green glass balls on top are Irish fishing-net floats.

ST. PETER'S SHRINE

Constructed of pumice rock, it honors the chief apostle and first pope. "Peter" means "rock," hence the use of this material. Note the figure of Saint Michael the Archangel.

MONTSERRAT ABBEY

A famous Benedictine abbey and pilgrimage site near Barcelona, Spain.

WAYSIDE SHRINE

Typical of European and Latin American countries; such Catholic shrines are located along roads and pathways, where travelers stop to offer prayers, turning heart and mind to God.

CASTLE TRAUSNITZ AND ST. MARTIN'S CHURCH

These two miniatures depict landmarks in Brother Joseph's hometown. The castle's name, meaning "Trust Not," comes from a broken promise of protection once made by the baron to the local people.
Saint Martin's Church—where Brother Joseph was baptized in **1878**—has the tallest brick tower in the world at 432 ft.

STATUE OF LIBERTY

Brother Joseph built this as a tribute to his adopted country. Designed by **Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi** (the Eiffel Tower was designed by **Gustave Eiffel**), the statue stands 151 ft high.

STATUE OF CHRIST

Made by Father Timothy Harrison, who said that the concrete was difficult to work with and preferred to let Brother Joseph handle the building structures.

RED CROSS TOWER

Built as a tribute to the Red Cross for its work during World War I.

HOLY CROSS MOUNTAIN

Named for the distinctive cross-shaped snowfield on its northeastern face in the Rocky Mountains.

SAINT KATERI TEKAKWITHA (1656–April 17, 1680)

A Roman Catholic saint who was an Algonquin-Mohawk virgin and laywoman.

TEMPLE OF THE FAIRIES

For this fanciful structure Brother Joseph used more than a dozen old cold-cream jars. Can you find them? Note the tiny pipe organ.

POPE PIUS XII

HANSEL AND GRETEL VISIT THE CASTLE OF THE FAIRIES

Note the beautiful little children and the terrible dragon, which is bound by a heavy chain!

ST. BERNARD COLLEGE BUILDINGS

Depicts the history of the Abbey and its preparatory school. An old log cabin was purchased in 1891 along with 160 acres—at two dollars an acre—to form the beginnings of the Abbey.
The map of Alabama with the phrase "Here We Rest" refers to the meaning of the Native American word "Alabama."
See the replicas of the library and Abbey Church buildings of hand-cut stone. A model of an earlier proposed Abbey church is to the right of the walk.

CATHEDRAL OF MOBILE

The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Mobile, Alabama, dedicated in 1849, was the first church in the U.S. to be dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary under this title.

MISSIONS

Here Brother Joseph recreated some of the missions founded by the famed California missionary and Franciscan friar Blessed Father Junípero Serra:
San Diego de Alcalá (1769, the first), *San Juan Capistrano*, *Carmel*, *Mission Dolores*, and *San Buenaventura*.
Other mission churches include *San Miguel* (Santa Fe, New Mexico), *San Fernando*, and *Santa Barbara*.

CASTLE OF TYROL IN GERMANY

The ancestral seat of the Counts of Tyrol, which gave the Tyrol region its name.

ROUND TOWER

A mysterious stone tower in Newport, Rhode Island—possibly built by 14th-century Irish missionaries.

THE ALAMO

A mission church (San Antonio de Valero) in Texas and scene of the famous 1835 battle during the Texas Revolution.

THE GUARDIAN ANGEL

This small grotto honors all guardian angels. The blue cross inside the cave is made from blue ink bottles.

ARTISTIC REPRESENTATION OF THE GARDEN OF EDEN, CARMEL OF LISIEUX IN FRANCE, AND SAINT THÉRÈSE CONVENT

St. Thérèse (the "Little Flower") was born in Lisieux, France in 1873 and entered the Carmelite convent at age 16. She is revered for the heroic virtue she practiced in performing her everyday tasks.
She died in 1897 and was proclaimed a saint in 1925.
This grotto was made from Alabama marble; the statue is from Italy.

ITALIAN SECTION

ST. PETER'S BASILICA

In Rome, built over the tomb of Saint Peter the Apostle, the first pope (Mt 16:13–19). It is the largest church in the world, covering 4 acres and holding over 70,000 people.
Brother Joseph constructed the miniature in 1954, using an old birdcage to make the dome.

MONTE CASSINO ABBEY

The world's most famous monastery, founded by Saint Benedict in the 5th century. Located atop a mountain south of Rome, it has been destroyed by war four times, most recently in 1944 by Allied bombers. It has been completely rebuilt.

ST. SCHOLASTICA

Saint Benedict's first monastery at Subiaco in the mountains near Rome.

ST. ANSELM'S

The international Benedictine college on the Aventine Hill in Rome.

THE PANTHEON

Built by the Romans in 27 B.C. as a temple to all the gods. Later it became—and still is—a church.

VESTAL VIRGIN

The Vestal Virgins' duty was to keep the sacred fire of Vesta, goddess of the hearth, home, family, and fire. If a virgin allowed the fire to go out, she was put to death.

AQUEDUCT OF APPIUS CLAUDIUS

Built in Rome in the 3rd century B.C. to carry water into the city.

THE COLOSSEUM

Built as an open-air theater for entertaining Romans. Here early Christians were martyred, and gladiators fought to the death. Much of the structure still remains.

BASILICAS, TEMPLES, AND CATACOMBS

Famous buildings are scattered on the hillside: St. Paul's Outside the Walls, St. Agnes, St. Lawrence, St. Domitilla, the Vestal Temple, Tomb of Saint Petronella, and Saint Sixtus Chapel.
The catacombs—underground rooms and tunnels—served early persecuted Roman Christians as secret places of worship and burial.

THE LEANING TOWER OF PISA

The bell tower of the cathedral in Pisa, Italy. A cathedral church is the seat of a bishop.

STATUE OF SAINT FRANCES CABRINI (Mother Cabrini)

Standing by itself to the west, it honors the first American citizen to be proclaimed a saint—an Italian immigrant who labored for the poor in America. She founded 67 institutions, including orphanages, hospitals, schools, and convents. She is buried in New York City.

LIFE-SIZE STATUE OF BROTHER JOSEPH ZOETL

The statue of Brother Joseph stands looking toward his Ave Maria Grotto. At his feet is a model of his home parish, Saint Martin's Church, Landshut, Bavaria. His replica of this church was seen earlier in the tour.

THE AVE MARIA GROTTO

The Ave Maria Grotto stands 27 feet high, 27 feet wide, and 27 feet deep. The structure is decorated with countless pieces of colored stones and glass. Brother Joseph built the altar using crushed glass, stones, and cement. He also made the stalactites hanging from the ceiling.
The Virgin Mary, standing with the Christ Child, is shown as Our Lady of Prompt Succor (Our Lady of Quick Aid). To the viewer's left is Saint Benedict of Nursia, founder of Benedictine monasticism; on the right is his twin sister, St. Scholastica.

SCENES FROM THE HOLY LAND

These scenes portray locations associated with Our Lord—from His birth in Bethlehem through His death on the cross and Resurrection in Jerusalem.

BETHLEHEM CAVE

The first scene in this section, where Jesus—God made man—was born (Mt 1 & 2; Lk 2).

CITY OF JERUSALEM

The Gate of Herod leads into Jerusalem, a name meaning "City of Peace."

THE TEMPLE

The place of sacrifice and worship for the Jews, including Jesus and the early Christians.
The "Holy of Holies" originally contained the Ark of the Covenant bearing the Ten Commandments.
The Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C. and the Ark was never seen again. Rebuilt, the Temple was destroyed by Rome in A.D. 70.

FORTRESS OF ANTONIA

Near the Temple, this fortress was the headquarters of Pontius Pilate, proconsul at the time of Jesus's death. Here Our Lord was scourged and condemned to die on the cross.

GETHSEMANE

At the foot of the Mount of Olives, where Our Lord suffered His agony and was taken prisoner (Mt 26).

CRUCIFIXION

The two crosses flanking Our Lord represent the two thieves—one known as St. Dismas, the "Good Thief," who asked Jesus for forgiveness and salvation (Lk 23).

DORMITION ABBEY

A Benedictine monastery on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, near the traditional place of King David's tomb and the Last Supper. On this site the Blessed Virgin Mary is believed to have died. Buried in Gethsemane, she was assumed into heaven.

THE RESURRECTION

Brother Joseph placed Jesus's tomb beneath Calvary. In the place where He was buried, He rose (Mt 28).

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Spoken by God to Moses on Mount Sinai and written on two stone tablets (Ex 20 & 34; Deut 5).

THE BRAZEN SERPENT

Prefigures Christ on the cross. In the wilderness Moses was commanded by God to place a bronze serpent upon a pole so that all who had been bitten by poisonous snakes could look upon it and be saved (Num 21:4–9).

JACOB'S WELL

Near Shechem, where Our Lord spoke to the Samaritan woman about "living water" (Jn 4).

TOMB OF LAZARUS

Where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, near the home of his sisters Mary and Martha (Jn 11).

HOLY LAND BUILDINGS

Connected with Our Lord's life: Bethphage; Ascension Mosque and Chapel; Church of the Annunciation; Church of Naim (where Jesus restored to life the widow's son).

End of Holy Land.

GROTTO OF ST. JOSEPH

Foster father of Our Lord and patron of Brother Joseph, whose baptismal name was Michael (Mt 1 & 2).

THE FIRST "LITTLE JERUSALEM"

Presenting some of Brother Joseph's earliest attempts at constructing miniature buildings.

MOUNT TABOR

The statue of Jesus stands atop this famous mountain, where He appeared transfigured to Peter, James, and John. The basilica commemorates this event (Mt 17; Mk 9; Lk 9).

NOAH'S ARK & TOWER OF BABEL

Two favorite Old Testament events recorded in stone and cement (Gen 6–9; 11).

CATHEDRAL IN MANCHURIA

Built by Swiss missionaries and later destroyed by communists.

GROTTO OF ST. ANTHONY

Patron saint of finding lost things and lost people.

DANIEL'S TOMB

The prophet's traditional burial place in Susa, Iran.

PYRAMID

An example of the tombs of the pharaohs.

WAYSIDE SHRINE

A small place of prayer along the way.

HANGING GARDENS OF BABYLON

One of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, possibly built by King Nebuchadnezzar II (640–562 B.C.). Note the elephants (2 Kings 24).

GREAT WALL OF CHINA

Begun in the 3rd century B.C.

CRUCIFIXION TOWER

A wayside shrine commemorating Our Lord's death on the cross, which saved the world from sin.

ECCE HOMO SHRINE

Recalls the words of Pontius Pilate, who had Jesus scourged and beaten. Presenting Him to the crowd, Pilate said *Ecce homo*—"Behold the man." The crowd demanded crucifixion; Pilate permitted it (Jn 19:5).

BENEDICTINE SHRINE

Brother Joseph's tribute to Benedictine monks. See the Benedictine cross on top and the mottos: *Pax* (Peace), *Ora et Labora* (Pray and Work), and *I.O.G.D.* (*In Omnibus Glorificetur Deus*—In all things may God be glorified).

BASILICA IN FATIMA, PORTUGAL

OUR LADY OF FATIMA SHRINE

Celebrates the appearance of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1917 to three children in Fatima, Portugal. Mary asked them to pray for the conversion of Russia, which suffered revolution that year.

DIE WALD KAPELLE

German for "The Forest Chapel"—a beautiful wayside shrine honoring the Blessed Virgin Mary.

LOURDES SHRINE

In the south of France, one of the most popular shrines in the world. The Blessed Virgin appeared to 14-year-old Bernadette Soubirous in 1858. A large church was built on the site, and many miracles have occurred there. This replica was Brother Joseph's last, built in 1958 when he was 80 years old. He died in 1961.

ST. POPE PIUS X

Known as the "Pope of Peace" for his great efforts to prevent World War I. He granted small children the privilege of receiving Holy Communion.

DEDICATION TO BOYS IN SERVICE

SHRINE OF THE AGONY IN THE GARDEN

Dedicated to former Saint Bernard students killed in World War II. The 29 crosses in the cemetery represent those alumni.

THE AMERICAN FLAG

Made from colored marbles, glass, and cement, this was Brother Joseph's way of honoring Saint Bernard's fallen veterans. Only 48 stars appear, as the flag was constructed before Hawaii and Alaska entered the Union. Crosses honor Saint Bernard students killed in: WWII (29), Korea (3), and Vietnam (2).

BENEDICTINE MONASTERY IN KOREA

At Seoul, where Benedictine monks operate a large school. Many Benedictines were killed by communists during the Korean War.

WORLD PEACE CHURCH

The Catholic Cathedral of Hiroshima, Japan. Completed in 1954, it is dedicated to world peace and the hope that an atomic bomb will never again be used.

BASILICA OF KNOCK

A famous shrine of Our Lady in County Mayo, Ireland, built after the 1879 apparition witnessed by a group of faithful aged 5 to 75: Our Lady, Saint Joseph, Saint John the Baptist, and Our Lord as the Lamb of God.

BASILICA OF OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE

In 1531 the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to the humble Juan Diego at Tepeyac near Mexico City. A large church was begun that year and became the most popular Marian shrine in the world.
In 1946 Pope Pius XII declared Our Lady of Guadalupe the Patroness of the Americas. A new basilica was completed in 1976.

OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE SHRINE

The former entrance to the park. The adjacent original gift shop is now a guest house.

BASILICA OF JASNA GÓRA

At the Monastery of the Pauline Fathers, founded in 1382 in Częstochowa, Poland. A shrine to Mary, the Mother of God, it is the spiritual capital of Poland.

SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF GOOD HELP

A Marian shrine located in the Diocese of Green Bay, in Champion, Wisconsin. It stands on the site of the reported Marian apparition to the Belgian-born woman Adele Brise in 1859. The apparition was formally approved on December 8, 2010, by Bishop David Ricken—the first Marian apparition approved by the Catholic Church in the United States.

Born in 1925, Mr. Leo Schwaiger labored to preserve Brother Joseph's work beginning in 1963. At the request of the Abbey and in the spirit of Brother Joseph, he contributed several additions to the Grotto, including the Basilica of Knock, Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Great Wall of China, the Pyramids, Montserrat, and the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Help.
Leo retired in September 2014.