

A Journey of Hope: the Applause of Our Ancestors
by Matias Grau, Jr.

Matias and Padrona watched James as long as they could. They could not afford to travel from Petra to Palma where he would board a steamship for Cuba. The turn of the 19th century in Mallorca was not easy.

Somewhere around 1880, Matias and Padrona had met and fallen in love. They were peasants, uneducated and poor. But they had each other and lots of love.

In the late 19th century, a pest infestation threw Mallorca into a deep recession. But the young couple plodded on. Their first child, James, was born in 1885.

Conditions worsened, forcing many Mallorcans to seek a better life elsewhere. And so now, in 1900, Matias and Padrona were watching their 15-year-old son walk away. They would never see James again.

Behind the emptiness of a life without their child, they had a hope that stretched far into the future for a family filled with success, joy, and the same love they felt for each other.

In his pursuit of a better life, James reminds us of Pope Francis's people of hope: "They are men who do not stay still but . . . feel the need to move, to go forth . . . men who are able to look beyond themselves, who know how to look upward."

James had no certainty of an idyllic future as he stepped onto that ship. He did not know that the ship would not make it to Cuba, that he would disembark in Biloxi, make his way to New Orleans, become a waiter, marry Lillian Galiano, and support his family by serving coffee and beignets at the Morning Call for the rest of his life. But he—and his parents—did have faith in God's plan for him.

In 1918, a boy would be born to James and Lillian - Matias. His life was simple but would turn rich and full when Shirley came into his life. As young Catholics, they would raise their four children, including me, in the loving embrace of Sts. Peter and Paul parish. They would see their four children lead successful lives and add ten grandchildren to the family.

Now imagine Matias's father, James, 15, separated from his parents in a ship heading to the Americas. It's 1900. It's cold. It's wet. It's miserable. What keeps him going is the hope that he bears from his parents, the hope for a better life, the hope for a family safe and rich in love. James and his family—my family—were the realization of the hope of Matias and Padrona, a hope that could not be realized in Mallorca, but a hope they welcomed as "a gift that God offers us every day." (Pope Francis)

When I think of my great-grandparents at that wrenching moment of separation, I think of the wonderful image Alex Rios creates in his poem "A House Called Tomorrow": "And those who came before you? When you hear thunder, / Hear it as their applause."

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