



Our Lady of Lourdes and Saint Bernadette (Part I)

Recently, I went on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in France and would like to share with you some thoughts regarding my experience there. I was part of a group of forty pilgrims from Ireland, meeting them at the Dublin airport. It was from there that we traveled to Paris and via motor coach went to Nevers, the city in which St. Bernadette's incorrupt body is laid to rest in the convent chapel, where she had prayed as a nun. From Nevers we went to Lourdes, about 400 miles to the south.

It was in Lourdes on February 11, 1858 that the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to Bernadette Soubirous and asked that a chapel be built, processions take place and pilgrims come to the spring to drink and bathe in the waters. Bernadette presumed the "water" was the River Gave, a few feet from the grotto where the apparition took place. However, the Blessed Virgin was referring to the ground beneath the rocky grotto. Bernadette was to scrape the soil and soon a gush of water came forth, where none had been previously. This water has now been channeled so that the millions of pilgrims who come here each year may do as our Blessed Mother asked: drink the water and bathe in its pools. Many miracles have been attributed to the holy water and countless people who have experienced Lourdes return to their homes with a sense of peace and acceptance of God's will, even if their particular prayers for a physical healing are not answered according to their requests.

The shrine at Lourdes is prayerful, peaceful and sacramentally rich in offering so much to those who come in faith. In addition to celebrating Mass there each day, I was able to experience the sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick. One of the highlights of the pilgrimage was to be immersed in the waters of the grotto. There are individual pools set up for the pilgrims and upon arriving at the pool (there is usually a long wait....my wait was three hours) one is helped into the water, which is about three feet deep. Before, during and after the immersion, the pilgrim is invited to pray. A statue of the Blessed Virgin is placed in a niche above each pool. I will never forget the experience of entering the water and coming out of it with a sense that something holy had taken place.

During my long wait I witnessed many people in wheel chairs and stretchers who had come to be immersed in the water. As they exited the area, I could see that they were still in their wheel chairs and stretchers. However, there was a peaceful expression on each face that I cannot truly describe in words. Being able to accept with peace and inner strength that God is present to His people and will help us no matter what we have to deal with is certainly a gift and for many who found this peace at Lourdes, a miracle! I experienced that peace and pray that all of you may come to know it in your own lives.

Father David

NEXT WEEK: MESSAGE OF LOURDES FOR US