

**Our Parish Pilgrimage in 2016 to Noblat and Lourdes**

**What it meant to me**

**by**

**John Johnston**

I was privileged to have been part of our pilgrimage to Noblat and Lourdes at the end of last month to mark the 50 years or Golden Jubilee of our parish. Thirty of us set off after morning Mass on Monday the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August to Glasgow Airport and then on to Bordeaux in France. We reached our hotel in Limoges, near Noblat, later that evening, and at dinner we really began to “gel” as a group, despite some of the worst, corny jokes and one-liners I have ever heard!

The next morning we set off by coach to make the short journey to the Church of Saint Leonard in Noblat; the Church contains his tomb and other relics attributed to him. We were given a very warm welcome by Martine Tandeau de Marsac, the President of the Commission to safeguard the church and legacy of Saint Leonard, and several of her colleagues. Father Chromy celebrated Mass there along with Father King, I was absorbed by Father Chromy’s homily which touched on the word “distance” several times and in a few different contexts: the distance in miles from East Kilbride to Noblat, the “distance” in time since Saint Leonard lived and ministered in the very place where we were now, and the “distance” in time since our parish was formed fifty years ago. He reminded us that we were modern day pilgrims who represented everyone who was or had been a parishioner during those fifty years.

As Father was speaking, I began to reflect on all of that but in particular on the fifty years since our parish began. I thought of my primary school days in Saint Leonard’s and being taught by Mrs Mary Fitzpatrick in what was the original school opposite the church. Now Mrs Fitzpatrick was a great teacher, but having a window seat on the top floor of the school didn’t prove helpful when trying to focus on her every word! My seat in class looked directly on to the church house and car park which at that time was under construction, so I remember it very well. I remember feeling the first draw toward the building industry way back then, not because the structure was slowly taking shape before my eyes, not because I was impressed by the design of the building, but because the joiners, bricklayers, plumbers, electricians and roughcasters got to play football in the car park for half an hour every lunch time! So given the number of times Mary had to tell me to “face the front”, little did she know

that my time in her class did eventually result in my “vocation” to the building game!

I also reflected on all the people I was lucky enough to have known who had worked tirelessly for the building up of the parish; all of their names and all of their faces appeared in my mind. The vast majority have gone to their eternal reward. It would not be appropriate for me to name them here for fear of leaving anyone out but I believed that somehow there and then we were in union with all of them at that moment, there in the church of Saint Leonard in Noblat, France. Thank God for them.

At the end of Mass Father Chromy formally thanked Martine and her colleagues and gifted them with a couple of little “mindings”, some of Scotland’s most famous exports, for which they were very grateful! After Mass we were given a guided tour of the church by Martine and a chance to look at close hand at the relics and tomb of our patron. Our tour continued on to the outside of the church and the external facades, then on to the old part of the town. I found the tour very interesting; by the time it was over the temperature was high, and it being lunch time, there was no alternative than to have a bite to eat, and, of course, an ice-cold refreshment! (only because it was so hot, honest!)

The following day after breakfast we walked the relatively short distance from our hotel in Limoges to the Cathedral of Saint Etienne where Father King preached at Mass on God’s forgiveness and mercy: as God our Father is understanding of us, we must be so of others; we must be welcoming to those who come to our church and who wish to be part of our parish community.

After lunch we took part in a guided walking tour of the old town of Limoges, then back to the hotel for dinner; judging by the loud laughter it was clear that everyone was enjoying the perfect balance of the spiritual and the social!

The next day, Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> August, was the day we left Limoges to begin the second part of our pilgrimage south to Lourdes. We travelled by coach, stopping at Rocamadour, a small cliff-top village in south-central France known for its complex of religious buildings. We had Mass there in the Chapelle Notre-Dame, with its Black Madonna statue. Local legend has it that the Gospel character Zacchaeus, the short man who in order to see Jesus had to climb a

tree, visited Rocamadour; the legend also suggests that Zacchaeus was married to Veronica, the woman who wiped the face of Jesus during his passion.

Father Chromy in his homily during Mass made the comparison between both of these Gospel characters who both went to great lengths at some personal risk to see Jesus; both were rewarded by Jesus for their efforts, Zacchaeus by having Jesus come to his house to eat and Veronica by receiving the impression of the face of Jesus on the cloth she had wiped his face with. Father likened us to them in that we also want to see Jesus; how do we do that? by seeing Him in the Gospel, in the Sacraments, in our prayer time. But we have to see Him in each other, especially in those who are struggling in life. If we look to see the face of Jesus in others, we can be sure that we will see His face in eternity.

After Mass we enjoyed a couple of hours there, where the “best sellers” were the local ice cream and the locally brewed liquid, sort of amber coloured, beautifully tasting, very refreshing, with a nice white head on it!

We arrived safely in Lourdes that evening. The next morning after breakfast we made our first visit to the shrine as a group. Father King preached that morning at Mass in St Patrick’s church that we had now arrived in this holy place, that we had come to be with our spiritual mother, the mother of Jesus, the mother of our Church. As he spoke, like us all there at Mass I’m sure, my thoughts went to my own mother, my earthly mother, Mary Johnston, who passed away nearly eighteen years ago, who worked so tirelessly for almost forty years in Saint Bride’s parish and who passed on the faith to me. I could remember her taking me and my younger brother, Jim, to Mass every morning when Mass was celebrated in the old parochial hall in the village, before and whilst the present church of Saint Bride was being built. Thanks to her mother (my Gran Annie McGhie) her faith was preserved and strengthened despite fierce resistance from my Grandfather who was strongly against any religion but in particular the Catholic faith. Both my Gran and Mum in her younger days had to pretend to visit “The Barras” every Sunday to make sure they got to Mass in Saint Alphonsus’, close by. I recognised their struggle to keep their faith alive against all the odds and the great gift that it is to me today; I

thanked God for her and felt great joy in thinking how happy she would have been to know that I had made it to Lourdes for the first time.

After Mass we had a brief guided tour of the shrine and I had my first glimpse of the Grotto where Our Lady appeared to Saint Bernadette eighteen times. Father Chromy led some of us in the Stations of the Cross at the far end of the shrine whilst Father King led the Stations for the remainder of the group in the shade nearer to the church. Appropriately, Father Chromy chose the Stations as though spoken by Our Lady which were very moving and thought-provoking, adding to the emotion I was feeling that morning.

Later that day after lunch we attended Eucharistic Adoration in the vast underground Basilica dedicated to Saint Pius X which was attended by huge crowds from all over Europe and beyond. That evening as a group we took part in the candlelight rosary procession around the shrine.

As always, we gathered for a relaxed dinner together. It was then that I began to notice that the wine that was placed on the tables almost miraculously kept replenishing itself; it never seemed to go down! But after some careful observation I realised that there was a lot of eyelash fluttering by some of our ladies whenever the French waiter approached their tables. Of course he loved all the attention being lavished upon him and it was only fair that he return the compliment by ensuring that the glasses of the ladies in question were always topped up! .....No names, no pack drill but the chief culprit Marie McLaughlin (or Miss McClelland, my ex cub leader as I first knew her) must have had cramp in her eye lids.....the things you learn when in the prolonged company of several retired teachers and a bank manager!

After dinner each evening we would have a chat, or a wee sing song would break out as directed by our group MC, Mr Willie Dickie. Only on one night did we play second fiddle to the Irish and Italian singing pilgrims, but I can assure you that we wiped the floor with them on the next two nights!! We had everything from Al Jolson to The Bachelors, but one song kept being sung, one with what seemed like hundreds of verses and apparently associated with Lourdes. I had never heard it before but since then I can't stop singing it, so contagious is its chorus....."Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory" – that it has been rolling around my head for a fortnight now! This had been

predicted by Philomena Russell; she said to me and my “roomy” (my “Bro” as he called me), Jim Lee, that once we heard this song, we would never forget it. She was right but I suppose when you have so many verses and a catchy chorus.....and with actions, you’ve no chance! But the one person who knew every word of every verse .... and all the hand movements . . . was none other than Father Chromy! He also led us in the verse that has no words.

On the Saturday morning we travelled by coach up to Hosanna House, a centre run by HCPT for its VIP guests (the sick and the handicapped) where we had morning prayers against the most stunning backdrop of hills and mountains that would have given The Sound of Music a run for its money. We then had Mass in Bartres, the village where Bernadette spent some of her early childhood, Father Chromy preached on “suffering”: the suffering and ridicule that Bernadette endured during the early apparitions, the suffering that Our Lady went through at the foot of the Cross. He reminded us that our lives may not be without suffering but if we nurture our prayer lives, receive the sacraments and try to relieve the suffering of others, we will remain very close to God.

That afternoon some of the group took a walking tour of some of the places associated with the life of Bernadette, such as the house where she lived happily for a number of years and the Mill that her father ran until their fortunes took a turn for the worse. We also had a tour of the Lourdes Museum which housed artwork, photographs and a scale model of Lourdes and the surrounding area before the apparitions began. Rosemary Shekleton and I had wanted to see the official Lourdes video which was being screened in English at 4p.m. in the information centre, and because the tour started slightly later than planned, we had to break off from it to catch the video. We had been told by the staff there that we would have to book and that you couldn’t just turn up, so we naturally thought that it would be packed; when we got there we were the only two people in the lecture theatre!

Just before the start I had to go outside leaving Rosemary sitting herself. She decided to eat the banana she had been carrying around with her but whilst I was out a Spanish priest looked in to find Rosemary on her own, half asleep with the heat, trying to eat a banana! I’m sure the priest thought that she needed help or had indulged in a little glass or two of something quite strong!

Once again after dinner in the hotel we had a great time, but that night Father King organised a quiz which was hilarious. We were pretending not to take the winning too seriously but underneath the easy-going exterior, we were all determined to get the answers right. At one point when Father King offered one team the concession of a half point for getting some of an answer correct, Father Chromy leapt to his feet shouting....." hod oan a wee minute, that's no' fair"! Obviously he and his team had the right answer; in my team we laughed it off but all agreed quietly to "watch him like a hawk"!

The next day being Sunday we had international Mass in the underground Basilica of Saint Pius X which was attended by literally thousands of pilgrims from all over the world. Many of the groups were mentioned aloud and welcomed to Lourdes in their native language over the sound system. Although we had to wait a wee while, our parish of Saint Leonard's was announced and we all cheered. The priest who hailed us didn't quite get the pronunciation of East Kilbride right but nevertheless it was an immensely proud moment.

That evening we had a very special ceremony. Father Chromy had organised the purchase of two large candles, one to commemorate the parish pilgrimage and the other in remembrance of Rona McEwan who had sadly passed away only a short time ago. Rona had fully intended to be part of the pilgrimage and would have been with us in Lourdes. We gathered around the candle shelter where they were placed on the stand and Father led us in prayers for her and for all the deceased priests who had served in our parish.

He also remembered two of our sick who had intended to be on pilgrimage with us, Eunice Sneddon and Mary Hagan, and all those who had worked to build up the parish. He left no one out and went out of his way to make sure that everyone in the group was included in the prayers. I found this to be a beautiful and moving moment.

Like all good things, the pilgrimage ended much too soon. As I reflect on it, it had the perfect balance of spiritual and social, I got to know so many people better and really felt a unity with everyone. I enjoyed sharing a room with the Venerable James Lee. This title was bestowed on him by Mr McVittie who reckoned that Jim was so good, wise and holy that Pope Francis would give him a special dispensation to be called Venerable even though he was "still here"!

You notice I referred to my old teacher (he prefers 'former' to 'old') as Mr McVittie; when I attended St Bride's High School, Mr McV was so revered that I would have felt more comfortable calling him "your reverence" but as the years have come and gone he has let me into the secret that he has a Christian name, James, which he encourages me to use although sometimes it still doesn't seem right. It was good to spend a lot of time with him in France and enjoy the great conversations we had whilst we were away: here we were forty years on from my school days and I was still learning from him. One title I will never contemplate calling him is, of course, Jim. I did so once in the hearing of Anne who gave me a yellow card and a warning that his mother used to tear a strip off anyone who called him Jim; he was christened with the name of James, she would indignantly point out.

I know Sister Sophie had a good pilgrimage. I'm sure her prayer life was enriched when we were there but I definitely know that she had a great time driving Sheila Cassidy's mobile scooter. She would spend ages parking it outside the hotel, back and forth to get it just right. Let's face it - she just wanted a wee shot on it as often as possible! Secretly I was hoping she would leave the keys in it so that I could get a wee shot too!

On our last morning we had Mass in the Chapel of Saint John Vianney, very close to the grotto. The Gospel of the Mass was fittingly the wedding feast of Cana in which Our Lady plays a prominent part. We all know this Gospel so well where the guests at the wedding were running out of wine so Our Lady tells Jesus "they have no wine". As I reflected on this in this very holy place, I thought of all the thousands of pilgrims I had seen that week in Lourdes, the many millions who had ever visited Lourdes since the apparition; I thought of all of the sick (always referred to in Lourdes as the VIPs) who had come, and all the helpers who had given so generously of their time, all of the Masses that had ever been celebrated there, and all of the sins which have been forgiven there in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, all because Our Lady had appeared to a poor, simple peasant girl here in this very place. The fruits of the apparitions were so clear and boundless; people had come in their millions, yes, to see the place where Our Lady appeared but as a result they had had their faith and spiritual life strengthened and renewed. Although Our Lady features significantly in that Gospel, and in Lourdes she is highly honoured, her



apparitions were not for the purpose of seeking attention for herself; rather, in Lourdes she does as she did in Cana: she points to Jesus and says “do whatever he tells you”.

## NAMES OF PILGRIMS

Rev. Gerard Chromy

Rev. Francis King

Sister Sophia McGuinness

Sheila Cassidy

Mae Cleary

Jesse Dickie

Willie Dickie

Maureen Duffy

Assunta Glen

John Johnston

Bernadette Keeley

Jim Lee

Katherine Mackenzie

Mary McCann

Catherine McFarlane

Cecilia McGrath

Marie McLaughlin

Marion McLaughlin

Anne McVittie

James McVittie

Ann Orr

Mary Paton

Maureen Rooney

Elaine Rose

Philomena Russell

Rosemary Shekleton

Margaret Thomson

Mary Tulley

Agnes Young

Isabella Whitters



**Mass in the church of St Leonard in Noblat**



**Mass in the church of St Leonard in Noblat**



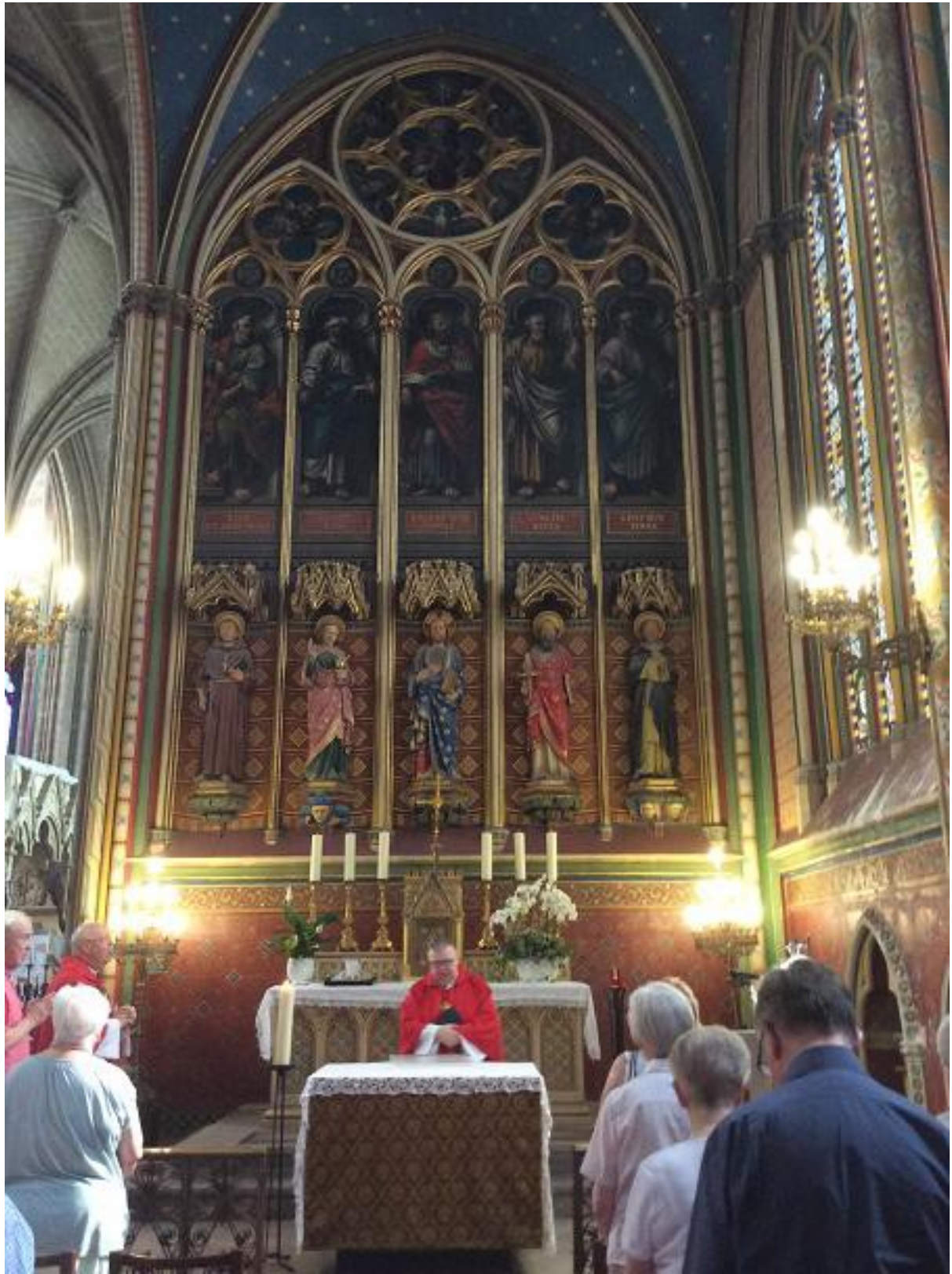
**Mass in the church of St Leonard in Noblat**



**Mass in the Cathedral of St Stephen in Limoges**



**Mass in the Cathedral of St Stephen in Limoges**



**Mass in the Cathedral of St Stephen in Limoges**





**Mass in St Patrick's Church in Lourdes**



**Mass in St Patrick's Church in Lourdes**



**Mass in the chapel of the Black Madonna in Rocamadour**



**Mass in the chapel of the Black Madonna in Rocamadour**



**Some of our pilgrims in the Torchlight Procession**



**Some of our pilgrims at the International Mass**



**Sheila 'Knievel' Cassidy and Sister Sophie**



**Mass at Bartres**