

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

**What it meant to me**

**by**

**Willie Dickie**

A wonderful week which seemed to fly by, leaving us with never-to-be forgotten memories. The outward journey from East Kilbride to Bordeaux was very smooth though first impressions of the Arrivals Terminal at Bordeaux were not auspicious. One of our group, Jim Lee I think, remarked that it was a bit like the old Derry boat that used to sail from the Broomielaw. Being far too young to remember the Derry boat, I couldn't possibly comment.

The sense of continuity of time and the feeling of belonging to something universal seemed to be in evidence from the outset. Our first Mass was held in the Collegiate Church of St Leonard of Noblat which contains the tomb of St Leonard. The town has been a place of pilgrimage since the middle ages and is beautifully set on a hill above the River Vienne. That sense of continuity of time and of universality was reinforced in our guided tour of the church and town where we learned that it was William the Conqueror, better known for the Battle of Hastings, who had brought the devotion to St Leonard to the south of England and that the Normans had carried the devotion to the south of Italy and Sicily. Migration of peoples is clearly not a phenomenon peculiar to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The guide also provided us with leaflets and maps showing the numerous locations in countries across Europe where there are or have been developments linked to our Patron Saint. Lo and behold! there on the map we see the name 'Torrans', a reference to the hospice with chapel dedicated to St Leonard which was once to be found on the back road from East Kilbride to Hamilton. As we all know, that explains the name given to the district in which we live and to our parish.

As we were shown round the church, we saw many models of churches dedicated to St Leonard in England, France, Malta, Holland, Germany and elsewhere. A feature common to all of these buildings was that they had a tower or spire. Our group encouraged Father Chromy to have a tower, a bell-tower even, added to the building programme currently going on at our church.

On the Wednesday, Mass (and all our Masses were celebrated by our own two priests Fr Chromy and Fr King) was celebrated in the beautiful Cathedral of St Marie and St Etienne in the historic centre of Limoges. The theme of pilgrimage was evident in the shells inlaid in the pavements, signs that pilgrims down the centuries had passed this way en route to Santiago de Compostela.

On Thursday morning we set off for Lourdes with an en route visit to the medieval village of Rocamadour, spectacularly set on a gorge above a tributary of the River Dordogne. It contains the shrine to the black Madonna and has been a place of pilgrimage for many centuries; it has also been a stopping point for pilgrims making their way to Santiago de Compostella. Enthusiasm for a parish pilgrimage or camino to Compostela grew among certain members of our group, especially after our later visit to the Pyrenean village of Gavarnie. These sturdy spirits spoke of walking or even running the camino; the rest of us said we would wave to them from the bus as we passed.

Over the next three days the group was involved in a number of activities: the grotto itself featured prominently, a strangely peaceful and quiet experience despite the numbers there. It was similar with the torchlight procession involving many thousands. The volunteers and helpers are truly inspiring – our own guide made it clear that the sick were very much at the heart of the Lourdes experience, unquestionably the VIPs.

The international Mass, extremely moving, was held in the underground chapel - set in a vast area with a capacity of some twenty five thousand – and was packed. Two massive TV screens were necessary to get a view of the altar etc. The various churches or parishes from across the globe were duly announced; ours was proclaimed to the world as St Leonards East KILBRIDGE and this did give it a medieval feel. Our own two priests were splendid in the main procession though we were probably expecting too much (a nod, perhaps, or a wee smile) when the TV camera picked them out.

There were ample opportunities for pilgrims to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The universality referred to earlier was personified in one priest to whom some of our parishioners went for Confession. Born in Dublin, here he was in Lourdes on his way back from the World Youth Day in Krakow to his parish in Brazil; he had also served at one time in St David's Parish in Plains, near Airdrie.

We also had an interesting visit to Bartres, nestling at the foot of the Pyrenees, where Bernadette spent time during her young life. Hosanna House, centre for HCPT, is just along the road from Bartres; the outlook from its chapel or oratory is simply breath-taking.

I think we all found the week very uplifting, prayerful and joyful. However, it would be remiss not to mention that our evenings were a little animated, with laughter much in evidence and our singalongs even encouraged by the hotel manager. It might be fair to add that the high spirits were fortified by the odd libation. One member of our group, who shall remain anonymous (his name is John Johnston if you are really interested), is thought to have inherited his father's sense of humour and his grand-father's joke book. His gags are so old that even James McVittie hadn't heard them and so corny that even I wouldn't use them.

Thanks to everyone who made the pilgrimage such a success.



**View within the church of St Leonard of Noblat**



**Listening to the guide's talk about St Leonard and his church**



**Arriving early to make sure of a seat at the International Mass**



**Assunta listens as Sheila relives her thrills and spills as a biker**





**Drinking water and discussing spiritual matters.**

**(Don't be misled – certain other 'pilgrims' slipped out of shot when this snap was taken.)**