

Our Parish Pilgrimage in 2016 to Noblat and Lourdes

What it meant to me

by

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I had the privilege of being one of a group of thirty pilgrims who went to Saint Leonard de Noblat and Lourdes in August, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of our parish of St Leonard's in East Kilbride.

I have always felt a connection with St. Leonard's Parish even before I came to live in East Kilbride, as the late Canon Kieran O'Farrell who founded the parish had served in my home parish of Sacred Heart, Bellshill, and involved some of his former parishioners in fund raising for his new parish, such as bring and buy sales, garden fete, and of course raffle tickets, plus a parish dance.

Our journey to Limoges was trouble free, and we settled into our Hotel where we were based for the next three nights. On Tuesday morning we set out by coach for Saint Leonard de Noblat where we had Mass in the impressive Collegiate church where St. Leonard is buried. After Mass we had a guided tour of the church followed by a tour of the town. After lunch we had free time, and I visited a book shop to buy some postcards. The lady serving me said that she had been to Glasgow when she was a teenager, and our gallant John said "Oh that would only have been a couple of years ago then."

On Wednesday our Mass was in the imposing Cathedral of St. Etienne in Limoges, which we had time to explore before lunch. After lunch we had a guided tour of the historic centre of the town.

We left Limoges on Thursday after breakfast to visit Rocamadour en route to Lourdes. I found Rocamadour to be quite breathtaking, and Mass in the chapel of Notre Dame took me back to the days before the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, when Mass was celebrated with the celebrant having his back to the congregation. After lunch we continued on our journey to Lourdes where we were staying for four nights. This was my fifteenth visit to Lourdes in eleven years and I felt elated as the coach neared the town. Prior to my first visit in 2005 I never had the inclination to visit Lourdes. I had the impression that it was too commercialised. My sister's parish, St. Andrew's in Livingston, go to Lourdes on Pilgrimage each December for the feast of the Immaculate Conception and my sister persuaded me to go. From the minute I entered the Domain and stood before the Statue of the Crowned Virgin, I felt a wonderful calm settle over me. Each time I visit now it feels like coming to visit an old friend. On one of my previous visits to Lourdes Fr. King was our Spiritual

Director, and I have to say that his enthusiasm for the shrine and Our Blessed Lady ('Our Mammy' as he calls her) has not diminished.

On our first full day in Lourdes I was shocked to find that my mobility was impaired, due to what I now know to be a flare-up of osteo-arthritis. James McVittie and John Johnston mysteriously acquired a wheelchair for me and I am most grateful to them. I have to say being in the wheelchair gave me a different perspective of Lourdes, a good one it must be said. My visits are usually later in the year when it is quieter, and I was not sure what to expect, but I need not have feared; although it was busy, it was not uncomfortably so, and being in a wheelchair did have some advantages as in Lourdes wheelchair users are usually given priority.

I enjoyed all the Masses and services in Lourdes, and I found the Stations of the Cross led by Fr.Chromy very moving, heard from the point of view of Jesus' Blessed Mother.

I enjoyed the tranquillity at the Chapel in Hosanna House where we had morning prayers, and later Mass in Bartres and the veneration of the relic of St. Bernadette.

The spectacular scene of the torchlight procession never ceases to amaze me, but I am always a bit anxious from a health and safety point of view about the flimsy candle covers. The International Mass on Sunday in the underground Basilica was packed to capacity and it was wonderful to see the clergy processing towards the altar, and to know that our own two priests were among them, and then to have our parish mentioned in the roll call. My thanks go to Assunta who pushed me to the Basilica, and as a result was separated from the rest of our group.

A very poignant part of the Pilgrimage for me was the ceremony of lighting the parish candle and also one in memory of the late Rona McEwan, who had planned to be with us on pilgrimage, and the prayers for our sick, particularly Mary Hagan and Eunice Sneddon, both of whom were due to be with us, and also for the deceased clergy and parishioners over the past fifty years.

As well as all the reverence and piety of the many services, the social aspect was equally uplifting. It was good getting to know and talk with fellow

parishioners whom one knows only well enough to pass the time of day. My favourite evening was the Quiz hosted by Fr. King, and not just because our team won.

I would like to thank all who helped me in any way during the time in Lourdes, particularly Fr. Chromy who wheeled me about in Gavarnie, and Rosemary my room- mate.

On a final note, back at Glasgow airport, the man who met me with a wheelchair said his wife had been to Lourdes as a teenager and that she now has multiple sclerosis and he would like to be able to take her back to Lourdes. I was able to tell him about the charity organisation "Across" who take sick and disabled pilgrims to Lourdes by jumbulance, as I have first-hand experience of travelling with Across as a helper, and my daughter, who is a nurse, travels each year with both Across and HCPT. In fact, many members of our parish travel with Across including Fr. Chromy, Sr Sophie and Maureen Duffy, who is a group leader, to name just a few. It is very humbling to watch the wonderful work done by these organisations when dealing with their VIPs especially as all of the helpers, nurses and chaplains are volunteers. As well as taking part in the spiritual life of Lourdes, the VIPs also visit places of interest such as the Lac de Lourdes, the caves at Betharram, Gavarnie, and the Fort in Lourdes. Hopefully the lady whose husband chatted with me will get to Lourdes some time soon, and who knows, she may even be on the group with Fr. Chromy and the other members of our parish who travel with Across. Lourdes has a way of bringing people together in what may seem like coincidental circumstances but which I believe is Our Lady's plan.



At the Basilica in Lourdes



Rocamadour