

## **Diocesan Pilgrimage to Lourdes July/August 2016**

### **Thursday 28th July.**

Kieran came to stay so as to cut his journey from Brighton to Heathrow and in order to give me a lift! There was a little problem of an alarm going off in his room at 2.30am. I had no idea of the existence of this clock. We left the house and arrived not more than twenty minutes later at Heathrow which is closer than I thought. Mind you, at 5am...

### **Friday 29th July.**

(Mass today offered for Mary

Westlake)

Colin was the first person I saw and we joined him and the group in checking in which went quite smoothly. Full English breakfast followed then over to Gate 21 where we boarded soon after. One passenger failed to arrive, delaying the flight for about forty minutes while the baggage was taken from the hold, then off we went. I was sitting next to Graham and Alex who is on the staff at SJB in Woking and who knew Charlotte who is getting married in Effingham in the next couple of days!

The flight was about a couple of hours duration, arriving at Toulouse airport where we joined coaches for our drive to Lourdes. Sitting at the front next to Pete who told me he was running the disco at the Garden party at the end of the week.

I forgot to say that there was a considerable change in temperature, but as everyone knows who has been to Lourdes, which sits in the Pyrenees, the weather can change within the hour. I had only visited Lourdes around Eastertime twenty five years back, eleven times in all with H.C.P.T.

Around 60 people are in our hotel, the Irlande, with Fr. John Hull and Deacon Richard from Shoreham. Paul is our leader, whose job is to keep us informed and to get us to the right place at the

right time which as everyone knows is no easy task. Lunch was first on our itinerary followed by 'rest'. Dinner is on the programme for 6.30pm, so I had a nap and then went down to the Grotto and had a wonderful 60 minutes of quiet prayer, a good start to the pilgrimage. The next, was gathering to go to attend Mass in the large underground Basilica, leaving the hotel around 8pm. I met up with Brian and a number of other priests and Deacons. I must say the Redshirts did a wonderful job of providing a welcoming passageway all the way from entering the Domain all the way to the Altar, all smiling and waving. I found my back was giving a little trouble there being no back support on the seating. Bishop Richard greeted and led us through the Sacred Mysteries.

A short stop of an hour and a half at the 'Little Flower' for some 'refreshments' followed, where I met Marie, Declan and Seamus, then Mike joined us and finally Linda, Fernanda and Chrissie. We had a great laugh. Bed just after 11pm, though, without air-conditioning it was pretty humid, and in the early hours I opened the window for some cool air to enter the room. The end of Day one.

**Saturday 30th July.** (Mass for Effingham and Fetcham parish)  
I always bring my own kettle so managed to get in 2 coffee's before entering the dining room. Breakfast at 7am. Very strange are the metal coffee drinking cups and saucers, which burn your lips unless you wait for thirty minutes for the liquid to cool. I managed to find a ceramic one which saved the day! Croissant, bread roll, cheese and ham and a very weak suggestion of marmalade with coffee was the first 'top-up' for the events following.

We gathered half an hour before Mass and made our way slowly back to the Underground Basilica where we had our pilgrimage Mass in the centre of the building. Much better acoustics. Just before Mass Bishop Richard came up to me and said that he had

really encouraged the Redshirts to come along to my Vocations talk this evening. During the Mass we had a ceremony of Blessing of Hands.

At the end of the Mass, Bishop Richard presented Adam and Ray with some very special medals from the Pope - Pro Ecclesia - for services beyond the call of duty.

Next was the procession out of the Basilica and down to the Holy Door at the entrance to the Domain. This consisted of six giant square pillars of wood beautifully decorated with scripture surrounding the theme of mercy which Bishop Richard explained to us. Non stop today! From here it was straight up to the front of the Rosary Basilica for the Pilgrimage photo. Once again, I have to commend the Redshirts who lined the routes with their colourful umbrellas, waves and smiling faces. They were really enjoying themselves too. I spoke to Michael, one of the Redshirts from our parish, who admitted not getting to bed until 2am! but who had spent over an hour just before that at the Grotto in prayer.

Lunch, followed by a walk back down to the front of the Rosary Basilica for our Hotel group photo. I recognised Nigel leading his group on the way down and then straight after, Ben and Melita and their daughters, Shannon and Kayleigh asked me why I had my photo taken in the WRONG HOTEL GROUP? It took a while to realise they were pulling my leg!

I had thought I might just join Fr John Hull's walk around the town with Deacon Richard but just before leaving the area in front of the Basilica, a man came up and introduced himself to me as though knew me. He said he was from Worth. I was trying to wrack my brains as to which monk he was but my head could not get it. Then he explained that he came to the daily Mass there with his wife, Catherine and that they remembered me from my monthly celebrating that Mass. Catherine, I had seen just

moments before but just could not remember where I knew her from and then it clicked. It was this that made me turn around after chatting with them for a while to realise I could not see Fr. John and Deacon Richards, 'Tour about Town' group. They had gone. Then I suddenly noticed one of our young ladie's beautiful red hair, and Paul alongside her so made my way down to the Holy Door end of the Domain in order to join them.

We started off, a group of about 24, over the river then turned right down a minor road and found ourselves at the birth place of Bernadette. It was here, waiting for the group to do the visit, that I suddenly felt very tired and left them in order to get back, have a siesta and get my Vocations talk ready for this evening.

Well, after a good twenty minute nap, I got onto the computer and finished my talk, adding a large chunk about Baptism which Bishop Richard had suggested, then, feeling I was as ready as I could be, I went down to the Grotto for an hour which was heaven. Walking back I passed Ben and Melita who were sitting at the Little Flower, not stopping myself as I thought I was late for the 6.30pm dinner, only to find that it was at 7pm tonight so I quickly returned to the LF for some liquid refreshment with Ben and Melita.

I decided to miss evening prayer with the group in order to find out just where I was to give the Vocations talk and what a surprise I had when I did find it. It was just opposite the Continental hotel I had used eleven times, twenty five years ago when I used to come with H.C.P.T.! I found it a bit tricky getting in, but eventually found my way to the venue hall which in fact was the chapel of Our Lady of Sorrows. A sister was quietly sitting at the front reading from her Divine Office. She made me welcome and then assured I would look after everything, left, promising to return before the end of my talk to lock up. The first to arrive was a couple who had one of the banners, so I asked them if they could

stand in an appropriate place to show people how to get into the place. I noticed Deirdre outside obviously doing the same thing. Fr Brian from Sutton Park was the first to arrive then Bishop Richard appeared at the gates in his tropical hat, followed by Fr Tony Churchill. The numbers 'tailed off' then, Bishop Richard suggesting we wait awhile just in case people could not find their way. Fr Colin appeared next with Doreen Bergin along with a number of young men and women. We started about twenty past nine with 16! Not bad, as I was told last year, nobody came! I then gave my presentation which was really the story of how I became a priest. The people were very kind and gave me an ovation at the end, though not a standing one. I tried to take a collection but then thought, 'maybe this wasn't the right place'.

On now to the Little Flower for some 'light refreshment' before retiring.

**Sunday 31st July** (Mass today for all my family and friends)  
I gave myself an extra 30 minutes in bed, arising at 7am and found the dining room full at 7.30. Breakfast habits have to change when you go away and even more so when you go abroad. So, for breakfast I would have one of the 'Nimble' croissants - remember the bread in the U.K. which was all air - with butter, a slice of ham and a slice of cheese. After which I would have another, 'Nimble' croissant with butter, a slice of ham and a slice of cheese and then the bread with butter, and a very very mild excuse for marmalade. It used to be that the nearest thing you could get to marmalade was apricot jam. Remember those days? Coffee would finish it off, and lastly, checking to see whether I had remembered to take my pills or not.

I went upstairs to do one or two things thinking I was in good time, but when I got down to the reception area, everyone had gone! Off course, this morning we begin with the International Mass in the Underground basilica and we all have to be in place

early. I managed to get down there in double time, and, following another priest who looked official, turned left on entering, instead of right and going down the slope, and followed him down some steps leading down to the sacristy right at the end of the building.

A 'Madame' was handing out the priestly stoles which I put on and started wandering out of the room but was very quickly told that all priests must wear a chasuble as well. All our priests finally arrived and we joined the long procession of Servers, Deacons and priests, possibly 150 to 200, and processed down to the main altar and then to our seats. There were a number of bishops and possibly Archbishops too. Our Bishop Richard was next to the main celebrant and had a part of the Eucharistic Prayer to say.

I have to say the organisation with setting up, queues, the distribution of Holy Communion... they have it down to a 'T'! It all runs so smoothly. Just before the final blessing the video screens shifted to World Youth Day from Krakow with Pope Francis and thousands of young people really enjoying themselves. What a wonderful picture of faith, friendship and solidarity. All there because of their shared baptism.

The next surprise came as we priests started off in procession to leave the sanctuary. The priest in front, who I did not know turned around and set that 'things have changed'. Instead of continuing to the sacristy to disrobe, we turned right, and processed up the ramp across the Domain to the Grotto where the Main celebrant led us all in the Angelus, after which we all processed back to the sacristy.

Lunch followed pre-lunch refreshments, followed by another walk down to the Underground basilica, this time for the Diocesan Reconciliation service led by Fr. David Parameter. It had started raining as we walked off from the hotel and I was glad I had

brought my 'double' umbrella. All the priests sat on the little benches beneath each of the pillars but as there was no back support, I started to experience a lot of pain there. The musicians were brilliant, playing until the last person had finished their confession. At the end of the service I walked up the ramp with Fr. John to find that the rain was really coming down so I told him I was staying inside to say my prayers while he took my umbrella to get back to the hotel.

At around 4pm, for about twenty five minutes, I noticed a large circle of men had formed over to the side, all in prayer. They were the men who looked after the direction of all the pilgrims before, during and after the ceremony. I was very impressed.

Around 4.30pm, I realised that I would have to move on as the pilgrims were starting to enter in preparation for the Blessed Sacrament procession so I walked over to the Rosary Basilica and finished my quiet time there.

The last group activity was the Torchlight Procession, sadly in slightly wet conditions this evening. Our diocese headed the procession and while Bishop Richard and all the priests led the long line of pilgrims, each with candles, just in front the Basilica went up the steps to join the choir near the front doors. A short stop for a little refreshment on the way back to the hotel then a very welcome bed, 'perchance to sleep?'

**Monday 1st August.** (Mass today for all I know who are suffering or in any sort of pain, physical or mental)

Leaving the hotel just after 8.30, we made out way to the St Jean Vianney chapel for our Mass, a wonderful way to start the day. Situated on the top floor, lots of light and open windows, we celebrated using the theme of loss, bereavement and suffering. All were encouraged to offer their prayers out loud and be supported by the groups prayer.

Stopping at the Little Flower for some light, pre-lunch refreshment, Melita and Ben were passing, and noticing me, came across and asked whether I slept there? ‘Excuse me, but why would you think that?’ I innocently enquired, to which Melita responded that every time she passed I was to be seen there. ‘But I only come for the milk!’

At 1.30pm, those going to the Baths gathered while the rest of us going for the ‘Water Experience’ left a little later. Our role, after settling on four benches the other side of the river on the prairie, was to offer spiritual support for those in the baths. Fr. John led a meditation on the benefits and wonder of Water, which we take for granted each day. We ended by lighting a candle for the group. I wandered over to the chapel for Adoration which Fr. John had pointed out as the ‘quietest place in Lourdes’. He was right.

On my way back to the hotel, I stopped and chatted to a ‘friendly face’ at the Little Flower (L.F.)

4pm, the next gathering for a walk to the area just in front of the Bandstand next to the Chapel of St. Bernadette for the Blessed Sacrament Procession, our diocese leading the proceedings. Fr. Barry Wymes joined us for this. It was good seeing him as I had seen his name on the list but thought maybe he was unable to come. Upon arrival in the Underground Basilica, we all formed into groups and were blessed by our Bishop with the Sacrament. The ceremony lasted about one hour in all. A short stop at the L.F. to chat with friends on the way back.

Following supper, we had evening prayer and a short presentation in preparation for the Mass of Anointing the following day. I then joined the other clergy in the Underground Basilica at 9.30pm for the Reconciliation service for the Redshirts and young helpers.

Once again a very moving service supported wonderfully by the music group who started with that lovely hymn 1,000 reasons. Lots of takers for confession, I left there around 11.20pm, while some of the priests were still busy. On the way back I stopped at the L.F. to chat to a few friends. Met Imogen and Chris and met other friendly faces. Matthew had his 10th anniversary announced and sung while Richard - yellow shirt - on the stroke of midnight had his birthday noted by all in a loud rendition of "Happy Birthday". I managed to get to bed and switch the light out by 12.30am!

**Tuesday 2nd August.** (Mass today for John Ghazal)

Arriving at the dining room at 7.30am, I thought the group must be up on the 'early Stations', but no, it was just as we had a later start today, they were having a little 'lie-in!' One of the ladies who looks after us at table called 'Fabia' is great fun. I happened to mention that in her black dress she could pass quite easily for a 'lady priest', whereupon Deacon Richard took his collar out and handed it to her and she put it in to her collar, while I took a photo to record it.

The first thing on the programme today is Stations of the Cross, some new marble ones alongside the river on the other side, right down the far end. The sun was scorching and the white marble of the 'stations' was cool to the touch. They were very tactile and we were encouraged to touch them. Fr. John, Deacon Richard and myself led them with a number of groups following closely behind us. Stopped off with Minnie and friends for a 'Lemon Presse?' This is a drink made of freshly pressed lemons, quite a few I might add, all in a tall glass. I drank most of it before realising that one is supposed to add sugar and water! Still, better late than never.

A nice 'light' morning, lunch back at the hotel being next, while this afternoon we have our Diocesan Mass of Anointing, 2.30pm, a real highpoint of the pilgrimage. For many the most moving

experience. The music and the liturgy were preformed and directed in such a way as to make the whole experience uplifting for all present. Each hotel group gathering in a circle after the homily given by Fr. Stephen, to administer the Sacrament to the group. The whole experience was very emotional.

From here I tried to find a 'quiet' spot for my hour, but, there being so many people about - I think the whole of Spain has come on pilgrimage - and the sun being so hot, I ended up going all the way down, past the baths right down the end and found one of those metal benches under a tree with the occasional cool breeze. I had to move after an hour as the ladies seem to be queuing around me, and I did not want to suddenly end up in the baths with all of them! Walking up past the Grotto where I think they were ending the Blessed Sacrament procession or beginning Mass, I found a cool place in the Rosary Basilica before heading back for dinner which is at 7pm this evening. Oh yes, its party night tonight and many of us have agreed to 'perform'. It turned out to be excellent and full of talent, from Fr. John's rendition of 'I'm a little teapot...' to our young people 'hoola hooping' and singing. All was led by our compare 'Georgia' who with help put the whole thing together. Bishop arrived and told a wonderful story of an animal that goes, 'boing, boing, boing' all over the place! We had Albert the Lion, a great favourite, a selection from Winnie the Pooh,

all interspersed with jokes from Georgia

### **Wednesday 3rd August.**

Sally's birthday today, 21! Managed to sing it at breakfast, to which I was first to arrive - where is everybody? We gather for Mass at the Grotto this morning. It was nice and cool for us priests but I really felt for all the pilgrims in the heat of the

sunshine. I was told that this is to be our hottest day yet! The setting was truly wonderful with the tree of candles and the cave. Fr. Seamus gave the homily after which we moved over the bridge to bless the benches which have been placed in honour of Lady Sarah who gave so much of herself to make the pilgrimage what it is now. I have to say again, the liturgies and music have been 'second to none.'

Lunch at 12 noon then a quick twenty minute session of Egyptian P.T. after which we gathered for the walk across to another hotel for a garden party. I noticed Pete was looking after the music on the perimeter wall. It was a great affair as we were all able to spend some time with others we had met on the pilgrimage, some only from a distance. Ice cream and drinks available too.

At 5pm we made our way over to the other side of the river where the Redshirts were giving a presentation of their work, witnessing and song with an emphasis on Ray's 'handing on the baton'. This was continued later in the evening at the Little Flower. Dinner at 7pm followed by Evening prayers and announcements about travel for the following day. Lauren surprised me at the end by presenting me with a gift of her rosary, which had been a focal point of the pilgrimage. That was so kind of her. She has played a very special part of the pilgrimage to all of us.

10.15pm and its down to the Grotto to light our candles for all those back home, followed by our last 'prayers in the darkness of the night', which down at the Grotto is very special for everyone.

At the Little Flower preparations were being made for Ray Mooney's entrance. Everyone was asked to 'don' a redshirt, slight problem for many of us being the size of the shirts available! We all lined the street for his entrance, which, when he saw it, he just ran as fast as he could through the whole crowd catching 'hi-fives' as he passed. The noise from the crowd, one would have thought

royalty were passing. I was very tired, and after announcing the 91st birthday of John, where everyone joined in, I went back to the hotel to get six hours sleep.

Thursday 4th August.

Down to breakfast at 7am then back upstairs to throw everything into the case. Back down stairs and over to the Underground Basilica for the last Mass together. Bishop Richard made reference to us to this year being the 'Year of the Mole' as we had spent so much time in underground! What a wonderful week. So much has happened and so many lives have been affected and changed by the wonderful experience. So many new friends made. So much love given and received. We will not be the same again, which is just as well, we go home changed, full of the love of God. Thank you Mary, for giving us your son, thank you for bringing each one of us here to Lourdes, and thank you for the changed brought about in each one of us for the better.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.