

## **2018 Pilgrimage to Lourdes, by assisted pilgrim, Christine Bryan**

My pilgrimage to Lourdes began, when the carer pushed me, into the taxi, together with my case and 3 bags. Linda had travelled from Bedlington, in 2 buses, to get me up, and ready. The driver drove me miles, to school, Washington. There, my dear friend, Laura Ions met me. She took my house key, from me, and gave it, to her mother. Mrs. Ions kept it, for the next 9 days. A few minutes later, I was hoisted on to a stretcher and wheeled into the jumbulance. I was next to a window, through which I had an excellent view, of the English countryside.

When the journey finally began, at half past 12, Mick Davison led the prayers and gave Holy Communion to each pilgrim. At Wetherby, we collected an old friend, Kim O'Connor, whose father, I knew, many years ago. The rest of the journey was long and tedious. We were caught in a lot of traffic, this made us late, for the Eurostar. We had to wait hours, at the Channel Tunnel. The following day, we drove, for hundreds of miles, through fields of sheep, trees and corn sheaves.

As we approach Lourdes, Mick Davison led the prayers, in thanks-giving. When we finally arrived at the outskirts of the city, it seemed like a mirage. A few minutes later, we are outside the Accueil St Frai. I am the last, to disembark. Bishop Seamus's greeting amazes me. It made the seemingly interminable journey worthwhile.

In the Accueil, I meet Peter Jones, our deacon. He's pleased, to see me, after our long journey. I decline the offer of a meal. Laura, at my request, helps me, ready, for bed.

What a difference, a good night's sleep makes. When Laura comes into the ward, at 7 a.m., I am ready to face the opening day, of the Pilgrimage and pushes me, to the dining room. To my dismay, there aren't any croissants. Using my iPad, I send a message, to the kitchen staff, "If there aren't any croissants, tomorrow, I'm going home!"

The Opening Mass is celebrated in the Underground Basilica. The theme of the year is "Do whatever He tells you." Bishop Seamus preaches a sermon, about the importance of spending time, each day, with Our Lord, in prayer. It reminds me, of a hymn, my mother used to sing, "What a friend we have in Jesus." The Offertory Hymn is the "Hail Mary," set to music. It was on the Come from the North cassette, which I bought, the first time, I went to Lourdes, with the diocese, many years ago

As it's raining, when we leave the underground Basilica, we hurry back, to the Accueil. I am sitting, near the dining room, when a young lady sits beside me. She introduces herself, as Niamh. She tells me, that her mother, Helen, is manager of the bookshop, at the Cathedral.

After lunch, it's almost time, for the Holy Hour, again in the Underground Basilica. Bishop Seamus is standing, at the entrance. He waves to me. I return the greeting. At the beginning of the Holy Hour, we sing one of my favourite hymns, "Christ be our light." The service, itself, is Benediction, which churches used to have, in the days, before evening Masses. To complete the Holy Hour, we sing, "Blessed be the Lord, another of my favourite hymns.

Using my iPad, I tell the young ladies, chosen to help me, that I would like to go, to the Grotto. We are just in time, for the second half, of the Rosary. Then, I use my iPad, to tell the young ladies, I would like to light some candles. As this is the first time, at Lourdes, for the young ladies, I have to show them, where the candles are situated. First, I light some, for the intentions, of a friend, at church, then I return, to light 4 more, for my family, and one, for a friend, who unfortunately couldn't make the pilgrimage, this year.

Then, I use my pad, to tell the young ladies, I would like, to go, to the Carrefour. They ask, where it is. I reply, "A short distance, from the Accueil." They push me, to the cafe, after, first, looking it up, on Google, on their phones. On arriving, at my favourite watering hole, I ask for a half shandy. The young ladies take the coins, from my purse and, a few minutes later, bring the drink.

On returning to the Accueil, I take my leave, of the young ladies. The afternoon was a pleasant experience, for them. Laura tells me, that after dinner, we will be taking part, in the torchlight procession. Our diocese will be leading it. After the meal, a young man, introduces himself, as Michael Armstrong, saying, "You won't remember me. The last time, I was here, was in 2009." Yes, I Do remember him. As he's a physio-therapist, he helps, with personal care. We exchange a few words, then we are told to assemble, in the ground floor, .A.S.A.P.

The candle-light procession is for me, the highlight of the week, as I like, to follow the "Aves", in different languages. Nearing the end of the procession, we are lined up, in front of the floodlit Rosary Basilica. The choir sings the "Hail Mary," set to music, again. It's beautiful. Then, it's time to return, to the Accueil. Although it's late, many shops are still open. Laura helps me, to get ready, for bed. In the morning, (Sunday), it's an early start, because Mass will be celebrated at the Grotto, at half past eight. I am delighted, to find that croissants are being served, in the dining room.

At the Grotto, the Gospel is "The feeding of the five thousand." Fr. Stott preaches the sermon. The closing hymn is "Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord." Then, we all lined up, on the steps, of the Rosary Basilica, for the pilgrimage photo-graph. This done, 2 young people are selected, to push me, where I want to go. I use my iPad, to tell them, first, the Grotto, then the Carrefour. At the Grotto, I say my own prayers. Inside the Carrefour, I ask the waiter, in French, for a decaffeinated coffee, Then, "Does this café provide Wi Fi?" (Although I have been here, many times, in previous years, Laura has let me, use the Internet, provided, by her mobile phone.) After the waiter assures me, that this café does provide WiFi. I send a message, to one, of my carers, at home. The coffee drunk, we return to the Accueil, for lunch.

Before the meal, I meet David Garrity, an old friend. He tells me, he has brought his teenage son, Dominic, with him. Both are on duty, in the dining room. Dominic bears a striking resemblance, to his father. In the afternoon, we can please ourselves, what we do, provided we assemble at the Accueil, for the Blessed Sacrament Procession. I come out of the ward and see Bishop Seamus, talking to Michael Armstrong. Laura asks them, if they will stand, one at either side of me, so that she can take a photo. I will treasure the photograph, for the rest of my life. This done, she asks 3 young people, if they will accompany me, to the Carrefour. Using my iPad, I have an interesting conversation, with a young lady, called Grace Copeland. She tells me, she is hoping to study French and German, at university. She is horrified, when I tell her, a few details, of my past life. We agree, to keep, in touch. Then, we return, to the Accueil.

The service is held, in the Underground Basilica. Bishop Seamus carries the Blessed Sacrament, from the tent of Perpetual Adoration. During the service, I hear another hymn, which was on the Come from the North cassette,- Lauda Jerusalem, Hosanna.

Before the evening meal, I meet Deidre James, who I knew many years ago. She and her husband, Joe are very kindly doing the washing, for the assisted pilgrims.

After dinner, as I am exhausted, Laura gives me, a shower and I go to bed.

On the Monday morning, the Stations of the Cross begin at half past ten. Peter Jones, our deacon, conducts them. At each station, he gives a short address, from a by-stander, or a friend, of Our Lord. It was very realistic and very moving. This completed, we return, to the Accueil, for lunch.

After the meal, we had Mass, at the esplanade, an open air location, to the left of the entrance to the Rosary Basilica. Clare James reads the lesson. I hear yet another 2 hymns, which are on the Come from the North cassette. The Offertory Hymn is "Take me, Lord. Use my life." Which Fr. John Skivington sang. He was an annual pilgrim, to Lourdes. Sadly, he suffers Malacular Degeneration, nowadays. The Communion hymn is "I say, "Yes," my Lord." It brings back memories of Bryan Robinson, who used to come to Lourdes, every year. He was so full of life, the last person, one would have expected, would succumb, to Cancer.

After the Mass, Niamh asks me, where I want to go. I use my Ipad, to tell her, the librarie, (bookshop), where I used to renew my subscription, to the Lourdes magazine. I buy my Post cards there, each year. Inside the building, I choose my cards, then, using my Ipad, I ask the lady, behind the counter, in French, if she remembers me. She replies, "Of course, I remember you." We have a short conversation, in French. I leave the building, feeling happy.

The Carrefour is our next port of call. I spend a pleasant hour, chatting to Niamh and her friend. After dinner, the assisted pilgrims and a few of the nurses are entertained, by an Elvis impersonator. He's brilliant. We spend a lively hour, listening to the old songs.

The following morning, (Tuesday) we had our Reconciliation Service. One of the many hymns is another one, on the Come from the North cassette-"On Eagle's Wings." It's based on Psalm 91. After the service, we go for our annual immersion, in the baths. Then we return to the Accueil, for lunch. In the afternoon, instead of our usual outing, to the City of the Poor, we had Mass, in the Rosary Basilica. It begins, by Bishop Seamus, sprinkling each of us, with holy water. The Gospel is the Baptism of the Lord. Sweet Heart of Jesus is the Offertory hymn.

After the Mass, David Garrity offers to be my escort, for the remainder, of the afternoon. Using my I pad, I ask him to push me, to the Grotto, first. He pushes me, behind the Grotto. I see the flowers, surrounding the spring. Next, I ask, to be pushed round the route, of the processions. He obliges, and, as I request, takes a lot of photo-graphs. At this point, we are joined by David's son, Dominic. As usual, our last port of call is the Carrefour. We have a lively hour, drinking and chatting.

After dinner, I have a shower and go to bed. This is to enable Laura, to go out, with a mutual friend. As I lie in bed, I hear the pilgrims singing, lustily.

On the Wednesday morning, we attend the International Mass, in the Underground Basilica. This vast building holds 25,000 people. Most of the Mass is in Latin. I face a large close circuit television. which shows action, of the Mass.

Afterwards, we hurry back, to the Accueil, to prepare, for our annual outing, to the lake of Lourdes. We are loaded, into the Jumbulance, then driven, through the majestic Pyrenees, to the lake. First, we go, to restaurant, for a 3-course lunch. I decline the first course, as it's too hard, for me. The main course of broccoli and roast potatoes presents a real challenge, to me. The third course, peach melba, slips down, without any difficulty.

After the meal,, 2 young people are chosen, to write my post cards. Both are very keen and willing. The time flies. We finish, just in time, before someone shouts, "It's time, to return." We drive back, through the mountainous region, to Lourdes and the Accueil.

We prepare for dinner. Afterwards, as Laura has already obtained permission, from Elaine, our president, we prepare for the candle light procession. This time, we are spectators, instead of participants It was beautiful.

Thursday morning dawns, the last day, of the pilgrimage there is a service of liturgy of the Word and Anointing of the Sick, in the Underground Basilica. Before it begins, Bishop Seamus and I exchange a few words. The Gospel is about Our Lord, calming the sea. After the Service, we return, to the Accueil, for our last lunch, of the pilgrimage.

At 2pm, we are pushed, to the Rosary Basilica, for the Closing Mass. I always find this moving, all the more so, this time. Instead of the Psalm, we sing yet another hymn, which was on the Come from the North cassette, "Magnificat Magnificat anima mea Dominum". At the end of the Mass, the young people are invited, to come. On to the altar. Bishop Seamus thanks them, for their wonderful work. He urges them to attend Mass at weekends. Then tributes are paid, to various people, lastly Fr. Stott and Bishop Seamus.

After the Mass, we are pushed round the back of the Grotto. Bishop Seamus lights the thick diocesan candle. Then, we take a last look, at the Domain, the shops, and the hotels. We return, to the Accueil, for our last evening meal. Laura packs my case. Then, she helps me, to get ready, for bed.

In the morning, Laura wakes me, at 6. As my wheelchair has gone, ahead of me, I have my breakfast, on my bed. A stretcher is used, to transport me, to the Jumbulance. Once again, it's farewell to Lourdes.

How different, the return journey was. After a day of travelling, we reached the Channel Tunnel. We travelled Northwards through England, without any delays. Kim O'Connor, the nurse, was dropped off, at Wetherby. Shortly after that, Laura rang for a taxi, to collect me, at Washington.

We arrived at Washington, I was wheeled out, of the Jumbulance and hoisted into an alternative wheelchair. Christine Jones gave me, a large bunch of flowers. Then I was pushed into the taxi, where I said, "Goodbye," to Laura. Very shortly, after that, I was en route, to Seaton Sluice-the end of another brilliant pilgrimage!