

Lourdes with Mother, 1999

Our great adventure began on Sunday 12th of September when we flew from Cork Airport to Lourdes. There was great excitement getting ready as Mom checked and double checked that she had her tablets, her cardigan, her night dress and her water, etc. Just to be extra sure that nothing could go wrong, my brother Bill double checked everything again. Also, to be sure, he wrote down a number of phone numbers in case anything happened. What was she to do if Fr. Pat died and she had to phone home? This made us all laugh as we visualised the scenario. Fr. Pat would drop dead at the Grotto, and Mom would then calmly take out her phone numbers and ring home with the news. Enquiring what I was to do if Mom died Bill suggested, laughingly, that we could not afford to fly Mom's body home, so she would have to be buried in Lourdes. Off course all the family would fly out for the funeral.

The airport was crowded with pilgrims and after a lengthy wait, we boarded the flight. Mom was quite happy with the flight and on arrival in Tarbes Airport late at night we headed for Lourdes. Our home for the next five days was to be the Hotel Mercure. Mom and I shared a room together, which was very pleasant for the two of us.

On the Monday morning the first thing to do was to find a wheelchair for Mom. This was a first for both of us because I had never driven a wheelchair and Mom had never had the pleasure of feeling so old and infirm. Another might say what an insult to invite your mother to sit in a wheelchair. Mom being practically minded was pleased with the idea because she often said that she could not walk great distances. The first item on the agenda was for the group to gather for Mass and afterwards to have the group photo taken. Mom had a better idea. 'Let's sleep on in the morning until 11.00am. We can skip breakfast and have a cup of coffee later if we want.' While Mom slept the sleep of the dead, I entertained myself looking out of the window for three hours! Eventually she arose and we started the day. Starting the day with mother is a huge ritual. First she has to have a sit down on the chair to register that she is actually awake and that a new day has dawned. Then she goes into the toilet for a little tour. Then there is the ritual of taking tablets of various colours. Next we must get on her three layers of stockings. First, the knee sock to give support, then the elastic stockings for more support and then the nylons to cover up the lot. After that there is the dressing. Then the shoes, then the hair and teeth, then the lipstick, and finally, 'Where's my stick?' We just made lunch at midday.

As a group our first meal together saw us gradually bonding. Mom and I sat at the end of our long table and two elderly ladies joined us. These were two sisters, who both hailed from Roscommon. I could see them eyeing us wondering would we be nice people to sit with for the duration. The courier asked that we sit at the same table with the same people during our stay. We imagined what a penance it would be to sit next to people who had no desire to talk. Florrie and Margaret were lovely company and because Mom liked them she relaxed immediately. We spent the time together laughing and sharing stories about grandchildren, arthritis, and old age. It was all very pleasant. I took the role of the

animator of the conversations and whenever there was a lull I would chirp in with some little story about people and we would be away again laughing and talking like old friends. Florrie was the wife of a surgeon, now deceased. She had a twinkle in her eye, a lover of fun and story, but her eyes had sadness also. Margaret was a woman in her mid seventies, thin and lively, witty and cheeky, and very independent. She lived unmarried and alone but a great lover of life. We discovered that she loved to travel and she was always on the go.

One of the joys of travelling with mother is that you get to see the toilet facilities in a variety of establishments. That necessitated an adjustment on my part because I had to begin every activity with the words, 'Do you want to go to the toilet first?' Eventually we were ready to greet Our Lady. The wheelchair was a blessing to us both because it enabled Mom to see everything in comfort and it allowed me to do my penance and have a broken back for my trouble. We would laugh together, as I would ask Mom if she were enjoying her holiday. I would then say that it was easy for her because I was doing all the work by pushing the chair around. The great advantage of having a wheelchair, especially in Lourdes is that everyone gets out of your way. Imagine all the Italian Mommas eyeing us. Imagine the sight of a young priest pushing his poor invalid mother around Lourdes. Just to add to the drama I would feign a lame foot when I thought anyone was looking. The sick and dying did not get a look in. To complete the picture I wore my clerical shirt as much as possible. This certainly opened doors. Moses parting the Red Sea had nothing on us. As we approached the Grotto area the crowd would part quickly to allow us to get near to our Lady.

To the one who has never been, Lourdes is impressive. The town is hilly and tightly knit and is surrounded by very high mountains. The views are dramatic and there is a beautiful river running through the town. The approach to the Grotto area is introduced by the Shrine complex which is a broad approach with a huge piazza and an imposing Basilica church stacked with two smaller ones on top. To the side of the piazza are big arch ways which invite you to approach. These lead the pilgrim to the side of the church complex. Here we wandered by the river to the little cave underneath the church. Here is the simple shrine. What strikes you at first is the sight of the statue of Our Lady standing on high. Hanging from the walls of the cave is a variety of canes and crutches, which is a very sober reminder of what happens here. Underneath the statue is an altar where mass is constantly being offered in a variety of languages. All day the pilgrims gather from all over the world. They walk in procession along by the wall into the recess of the cave. Many will rub their hands and handkerchiefs on the wall. The whole area is now paved and sanitised. It must have been very dramatic in days of old. The original river would have lapped its shores right under the cave but had to be moved out from the wall to allow the rest of us to get close to Our Lady. Further along the banks of the river hundreds of candles can be seen lighting. It is the custom in Lourdes to light candles, hundreds of them. Some pilgrims could be seen carrying enormous candles which we to be lit for loved ones and lost causes. Further along the river again we could visit the Baths. The first time I came to Lourdes I imagined the baths to be something like a municipal baths where everybody got into the water and splashed around. This

is a very dramatic and sobering place. Our Lady told Bernadette that people should drink the water and bathe in it. Here thousands would gather every day to bathe in the water. The baths are more akin to the domestic bath tub. The ritual involves undressing, stepping into the tub, reciting the Hail Mary, kissing the statue, and then being baptised into the water. Afterwards you must dress yourself wet and depart renewed. The lasting impression is one of being baptised in very holy water. It is an experience that every pilgrim should avail of. As the crowds gather they sing and pray constantly. Various helpers are on hand to assist the sick and infirm as they come to bathe in the water. These volunteer helpers are young and old alike. They are all consideration and compassion. There is the unspoken hope that someone might arise from the waters cured in a dramatic fashion. This has been documented as having happened. It must be the most moving and special work of Lourdes to lift the crippled and dying into the waters. It is all very special. On the day Mom and I went to the baths the sight of the priest with his poor Irish mother opened all pathways and gates. We were conveyed immediately into the bath area and Mom tasted the waters. This gave her great pleasure and delight.

Our days were spent wandering around the Grotto area praying and observing the thousands who gathered to pray. They came from all over the world. We will always remember the beautiful nun in the wheelchair as she approached the Grotto in the hope of a cure. We will always remember the sight of the young girl, a handmaid, as she prostrated herself in prayer before the Grotto. We will always remember those who came in thanksgiving for miracles and favours. The air was scented with the sounds of many languages and many prayers and hymns. Ave Maria was a constant chant. Sometimes we would just sit and absorb the atmosphere and pray quietly. Our thoughts were with our family and loved ones. We prayed for them all and asked Our Lady to intercede for us. Many times tears came to the eye as we watched the very sick being wheeled to the Grotto. We remarked on the many young men and women who were there just to help. We remarked on some of the helpers who were visibly sick themselves. There was one young man of twenty whose face was burned deep red and who was assisting another man to walk to the Grotto. Many faces carried burdens and pain and everyone was there at the Grotto asking Our Lady to free them from death just for a little while longer.

Some of the great moments in Lourdes are the ceremonies, which take place every day. They are big and dramatic with huge crowds taking part and glorious singing. On most days we took part in the Blessing of the Sick. The procession would start at the Grotto. Thousands would walk behind their banners along the avenue of the Basilica. Then we all gathered in the Piazza. Because we had the wheelchair we were escorted along with many others to the front of the altar. There we beheld the Benediction. Some of the great cures of Lourdes take place at this time. The priest, holy and solemn, would walk among the sick and bless them with the Monstrance. The music is sombre and moving and tears start to flow. All the time we would see the helpers and the nurses caring for the sick. One would walk among the wheelchairs offering cups of water. Many with their various infirmities struggled to drink from the cup.

Another great ceremony of Lourdes is the Candlelight procession. Our Lady asked Bernadette to tell the people to walk in procession, so they do this all the time. After dinner thousands of people converge on the Grotto at night. Along the way we all purchased our candles. The music and prayers started and we began to walk. It is a beautiful sight to see so many people walking and praying by candlelight. Again we converge in the piazza where we receive the last blessing and then we all sing Salve Regina. After the great ceremonies finish for the day it is time for everyone to take coffee and share stories. We can't be praying all the time so many wander among the shops purchasing their medals and statues. The Irish head home for the singsong. On a couple of nights in the hotel we gathered by the piano to sing our Irish dirges. It's a funny thing how people will ask to hear a particular song and the only line they know of the song is the last one. Being of a musical bent, I was asked to accompany on the piano. A highlight of the singsong was the rendition by Fr. Scriven of "Mother Macroi". This is a song that softened many hearts as they sang about their poor Irish Mother far across the sea. Fr. Scriven is one of those type who come prepared to sing their song but when asked have to make much protestations about how somebody else might like to sing instead. Then when the song is finished everyone must ask him for the encore that must be given again, grudgingly. It was funny to hear that Fr. Scriven was none too pleased that he was not given an encore on the first night of the singsong. Ritual can be a very complicated business.

There are people we met there whose memory will live with us forever. John Sexton comes to mind. He is a farmer from Donoghmore in the county of Cork. John is a middle-aged man and a father of eleven children He is what might be called a rough diamond but underneath he is a jewel in the crown. His distinguishing feature is his enormous belly, which travelled everywhere with him. His wife Nora sat by his side all the time. She is shy and not a very good dresser. She will always stand out in the memory because of her blond hair, which was poured straight from a bottle. Both John and Nora whenever they spoke burst into giggles at every word. John, while he may come across as a little bit innocent had a great wisdom about him. Also he has the capacity to be warm and kind. One day John asked me if I would be so kind as to bless his medal. I performed the ritual and enquired as to what he was going to do with the medal. John informed me that he was going to use the medal to cure his sick cow. Silently I laughed but I admired him for his gentleness and love. Later he offered me a drink. Standing at the bar John asked the Frenchman for two Gins and Tonics. When he was served two Jameson whiskeys a great confusion arose. So much is lost in the translation of an accent. John remarked to me that it was terrible that those Frenchmen didn't know much English. It is nearer to the truth to say that the Frenchman probably knew more English than John. Another day John told us about his visit to Bernadette's house. Whilst there the guide told them about the poverty of the family and the little they had. John's own observation was to say that in fact Bernadette and her family were very well off compared to what he was used to as a boy. All of our conversation with John was interrupted by his incessant giggle. A lovely man.

A man who made a huge impression on me was one by the name of JJ Barry. There was nothing remarkable about him at first but all came to light later. One evening John was telling me about his son who died recently in a car crash. He said that tomorrow would be a difficult day because it was the day of his son's birth. I promised that I would remember them in my prayers. The following night as we waited for the candle light procession to start I gazed at the Grotto and prayed for John and his family. As we walked along who did I behold but John and his wife Lilian standing on the side. Quickly I ran to him and told him that I remembered him at the Grotto. I thought that that would be a nice thing to do. The following day we sat and talked. He told me how broken hearted he was, how much he was suffering. A couple of weeks after his son's death he had to attend the funeral of his father. He told me that he went to the Grotto and told Our Lady that he did not want any more crosses. Then he took the miraculous medal from around his neck. He talked about Mary, the mother of us all and how she was watching over us. I thought to myself, what a holy man I was listening to. After that he talked about his life. I discovered that this man was the executive director of the Chernobyl Orphans Project. Many times he has driven to Chernobyl bringing much needed supplies. He talked about the children and their suffering. There were no trumpets blaring. This was a humble man with an extraordinary mission. As he talked he cried and we finished our talk with a warm hug. I asked John to contact me later. I said to him that because he was such a caring man that he needed caring also. It was important for someone like him to have the space to talk about his son and his father's death. I invited him to come and visit me later so that we could talk some more. John Barry made such an impression on me that the following day I purchased a miraculous medal to wear. I am wearing this medal in remembrance of Paul his son, and John Barry a saint doing God's work quietly.

Being one of the priests on the pilgrimage I was invited to be the main celebrant at one of the masses. I was asked to say mass on the last morning and to bless the various religious articles which were purchased. My thoughts were with John Barry. As we left the hotel I saw him carry a special candle which he was obviously going to light at the Grotto for his son. As we entered the Church I informed him that I was going to offer this mass for his son Paul. I am sure that this was a great comfort to him and Lilian. I often thought to myself that God has a plan for me and that he chooses the time and place for me to do my priestly work. Here was a man who needed someone to care for him so that he could care for others. I strongly felt the call to do this.

The last day in Lourdes saw us all beginning to wilt and long for home. The bags were packed and the final presents were bought. We began to count the time for departure in the evening. Suddenly there was lots of rush and excitement. In the midst of it all Mom had to go to the toilet again. At that stage I was on the trot getting two sets of bags to the bus. On the way I tripped over John Sexton's gallons of Lourdes water. Then we were all packed into the bus and trotted off to the airport. Thank you Jesus for the wheelchair because it got us to the front of the check in at the airport and early on to the plane. Behind us was a mob dashing and pushing and shoving in case they might miss the plane.

Many of these people were not accustomed to airports and tickets and passports. The most important thing at the end was to get on the plane and get home. This confusion continued when we landed in Cork and people lunged on top of their bags in order to get out. One lady pushed and shoved me to get her bags. At one stage she departed, so I stood in her place looking for my own bags. Suddenly I was shoved aside accused of taking her place. Then she screamed that her bag had passed her by. It never occurred to her that the bag might go around the carousel again for her to scream once more. At that stage, exasperated, I suggested that she might jump on to the machine and retrieve her blessed bag. Very quickly she turned around with a look that withered me. She stopped short when she saw the collar. Huh!

Back to the real world....