

TRIP TO LOURDES

Hello, my name is Paulette St. Germain, I've been a parishioner here at St John & James all my life. Last October, through friends in Westerly, I was able to join a group of 30 people mostly from St. Pius X parish in Westerly on a pilgrimage to Lourdes France accompanied by Fr. Chris Mahar and Fr. Ray Suriani pastor of St. Pius who celebrated his 27th anniversary as a priest while we were in Lourdes.

We left Boston on Tuesday October 9th for a three leg flight to the Pyrenees Mountains, upon arriving there; we had a final hour trip by bus to the mountain town of Lourdes. Our heads never touched a pillow till Wednesday night. We arrived mid afternoon on Wednesday and after getting settled in our hotel, we walked to the shrine. The shrine itself is huge and the Stations of the Cross are on a very steep hill. As we were climbing the hill to get to the first church built as requested by Our Lady, I told my friends, I really didn't feel worthy of being there. All the people seemed to be so pious.

We entered the lower church where they have relics of Bernadette's encased in a glass box. The upper church is much bigger and is very majestic. We were quite eager to see the grotto where Our Lady appeared to Bernadette. There is a statue of our Lady standing on rock above the grotto and at the ground level, you can see where the spring arose from the ground where Bernadette was told to dig for water, there is a marble altar within a few feet of this where mass is said quite often during the day.

On Thursday morning we explored the shrine grounds again then went to lunch, on our own in the town. There are many shops in the town which cater to the pilgrims and sell everything and anything religious you can imagine. After lunch I didn't feel well and needed to get some medication. I asked our guide if I had time to go to the pharmacy and he said I did and I went off on my own, I was rather in a hurry to get back to my group; we were supposed to meet in the lobby of the hotel to go back to the shrine for a short film presentation and then visit the underground basilica which seats 20,000 people.

To make a long story short, I lost my handbag, which contained 300 Euros, my passport, debit and credit cards. I never realized this until about an hour later when I was in the basilica. Every day at 5 pm there is a special blessing of the sick ceremony in the underground basilica. The sick are brought in by attendants who are dressed like nuns, but are not nuns, they are brought by buggy's drawn by the attendants, most of them are covered by blankets and the buggies have a roof on them as well to protect the sick from the rain, it rains often in Lourdes (the town is surrounded by mountains) when I discovered my missing bag, I spoke to my guide whose name by the way was Jesus. We left the group and backtracked all my steps (by now it was pouring outside) to no avail, we went to the police to file a report. I needed a passport to get home, but couldn't until I got to Paris another concern. Many people in my group offered me money to get me through this; mind you I was a stranger to most of these people. I can't tell you how much each one wanted to help me with my problem. They were very concerned and

compassionate; but I needed to put my problem behind me to focus on my presence here in Lourdes.

Thursday night we all went to the shrine for the procession and rosary, They sell candles of my different sizes there, to put into these metal candle holders which could hold as many as 100 candles in each of them, (some of them as big as our Pascal Candle) I would say there are over 20 of these on the grounds. Every one holds a burning candle during the procession and rosary around a huge oval ground area about the size of two football fields. There is a statue of Mary at the head of this area and she processes around this area in the dark every night per Mary's request. It is a very moving experience, saying the rosary in unison and singing Ave Maria. The night we were there it was drizzling, and yet there must have been a few thousand people there. If you remember when St. James Church was closed and the Eucharist carried here to St. John's Church, there was a procession and people singing hymns coming down Washington St. That was beautiful to behold, imagine being at Lourdes singing in the dark walking along with candles burning praying to Our Lady.

Friday morning Fr. Suriani's 27th anniversary of priesthood he was the main celebrant & homilist of a mass at the grotto at 6:45 it was still dark, he was accompanied by Fr. Mahar, with the Virgin looking down on all of us it was very moving. They concelebrated the mass for us in a different church each day of our trip by noon we were still on the grounds and it started pouring buckets again. My roommate had hurt her knee before we left home, and by now was unable to walk without assistance. She was praying to Mary to help her get back to the hotel. There really wasn't anyone around who could assist her. Her friend went to look for help and found a wheel chair at the grotto which was not wet and had a blanket with it. Anne felt as though our Lady had answered her prayer. She used that wheel chair until we left Lourdes.

I visited the Baths at the grotto and did bathe in the holy waters, there are separate sections for men and women, you disrobe and are wrapped in a sheet, then one at a time, are accompanied by two women who help you into the bath, you are asked to stoop as if you were sitting then quickly they submerge you to the neck in the water (which is very cold) As you are doing this you all say the hail Mary together. This also is a very powerful experience.

On the grounds, which I mentioned seemed as a football field, a few years ago Pope Benedict had dedicated the year to the Rosary, people had planted trees and had hung many rosaries on these trees all along the field, The following year had been dedicated to the cross, and the same thing was done, people stuck crosses along the field. My mom had a great devotion to Mary, and before she died, she was in a nursing home for 6 weeks, during that time I brought her three rosaries, when she died I got them back and sleep with one of them each night. When I left for Lourdes I took one with me, it was in my pocket that night as I prayed the rosary with my fellow pilgrims, so I left mom's rosary with Mary, knowing Mary was taking care of my earthly mother, whom I loved so much. The shrine also offers confession in many different languages and they have the Blessed Sacrament exposed for many hours daily.

You may ask, did I witness any miracles, not any physical miracles, but I can tell you, you can't go to Lourdes and not be spiritually uplifted by all the prayers and peacefulness surrounding you. The graces are definitely flowing and yours to be had. When we got to Paris, we visited St. Vincent de Paul, The incorrupt body of St. Catherine Laboure, the childhood home of St. Therese of Lisieux, the Basilica of St. Therese, The Shrine of the Miraculous Medal in Paris, Cathedral of Notre Dame in Chartres and I along with a couple of friends, took a train and went to Nevers to see the convent where St. Bernadette spent her life after the apparitions. We saw her incorrupt body.

I can tell you this trip had a lasting effect on me, I feel closer to Mary now even though I too since childhood have had a strong devotion to her. I brought two large bottles of holy water back from Lourdes and have probably given out 50 smaller bottles up to this time. My Lourdes holy water is running out, but the graces are still flowing. Won't you consider a trip to Lourdes, I assure you, and you will never regret or forget it.

Paulette St. Germain