

## LOURDES: A PILGRIMAGE IN RETROSPECT

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**A** FIRST impression of Lourdes is never worth recording. The aeroplane touches down at Tarbes, the little pilgrimage climbs into a coach, the tarmac unrolls in all the secular splendour of a large main road. Arrival by train is only a more congested version of arrival by train at any crowded spa. And from either approach the city of Lourdes at first glance has nothing particularly striking to offer.

The pilgrim, in fact, must give himself time. Above all, he must draw no rapid conclusion, whether favourable or not. Lourdes is like a promontory thrust into the familiar dimensions of time and space and it is fitting to explore it slowly and with an awe appropriate to the act of investigation.

In the city itself incongruities abound. The air seems to rain medals, rosaries, postcards. Shops have unexpectedly nationalistic names, like 'St Lawrence O'Toole'. Little notices on the counter announce *Ici on cause wallon*; and great bazaars, like some reverential Woolworth's, overflow with excellent people buying containers in plastic for Lourdes water, and tiny statuettes brightened with phosphorescent paint.

All that is by the way. The point of pilgrimage centres is that they are visited by pilgrims; pilgrims are ordinary human beings; and ordinary human beings do not engender round them an air of delicate abstraction from the world. It is not surprising, therefore, that even the entrance to the *Domaine*—the heart of Lourdes—might very well be the entrance to some public garden in Vichy or Harrogate. A few wheeled chairs, or invalid carriages, move slowly along the curving path, but for the most part the crowd flocking in and out is a very ordinary crowd. Behind it, however, lies an area far from ordinary. Its centre is a vast open space, round which curves a descending ramp built for processional purposes and running from the level of the upper basilica in a baroque sweep to the lowest level of three superposed churches. There is no buying or selling here, and the sensitive pilgrim will experience a sense of relief mildly dispelled by the riotous mosaics

of the lowest church—an architectural confection which looks with one eye towards Byzantium and with the other towards an *art nouveau* swimming-pool. Behind again, an open promenade runs beside the river Gave towards the baths, and it is at this point that the elements of a difficult equation suddenly resolve themselves. For there, set in the high rock behind the basilicas, is the Grotto, quite simple, wholly welcoming, and there, in a flash, all the incongruities of the outer town drop away.

First there is the quietness of the Grotto. Before it there may be an immense crowd, preparing for a procession; there may, late at night, be no more than a handful of pilgrims on their knees. But under the rock, blackened by the smoke of a century of candles, and hung, in one embrasure, with a touching accumulation of sticks and crutches, there is always silence. Behind, across the Gave, a wide green meadow reinforces this impression of peace. To one side, as like as not, a visiting bishop will be speaking from the pulpit in Italian, or German, or Spanish. The invalid chairs are wheeled forward, the crowd is pressed behind wooden barriers. But inside the Grotto itself the peace of recollection rests unbroken.

The activities which centre on the Grotto are unvarying. Their power to move—to move this pilgrim, at any rate—lies in the fact that they all turn on the sanctification of poverty and sickness. Lourdes is above all a place in which those who are rich and well and contented must ask themselves a few painful questions. Some of the questions will be answered at the Grotto, some at the hospitals nearby. For all day long, helped by innumerable voluntary workers, the sick are being taken to the baths beside the Gave, and every afternoon, at the end of a long procession, they are blessed in front of the lower basilica. The conclusion to be drawn from this ceremony may not be very novel, but it is seldom struck home with such force. The spectator—let alone the full participant—must feel himself jerked out of the world of bustle and business, gossip and income tax and private commerce, into the main stream of the river of humanity. It is a humanity drawn from every source. Among the sick are Anglicans and Jews, simply because Lourdes brings every visitor down to a single basic reality. It is a reality to which miracles are only incidental. We are poor, we are on the wrong path, we need help. These are the three statements—it may seem—which are implicit in the

extraordinary story of St Bernadette; and they are statements which are rubbed home by the evidence of our eyes as the processions (torchlit by night so that the *Domaine* is encircled by a broad moving ribbon of fire, but by daylight concentrated on the sick) wind singing round the great open space beneath which a new and far larger underground basilica is now being built.

Inside the hospitals themselves the lesson of St Bernadette is reinforced with a total absence of sentimentality. The spectacle might easily be a ghastly one, since many of the sick are physically in desperate case. In fact, however, to go from ward to ward is a surprisingly enlivening experience. The problems of running a hospital for pilgrims, coming and going in groups of diverse size, present difficulties for which a secular hospital provides no analogy; in addition, much of the help is voluntary. Yet the impression which remains is of absence of fuss, added to a pleasantly astringent efficiency. It is the spirit of St Teresa, luckily for the sick, which animates the nuns rather than that of those saints whose lot in life was to be mild and merciful rather than efficient.

Beyond the limits of the *Domaine* and the hospitals, the spirit of Lourdes hovers most powerfully in the *Cachot*, that tiny lock-up, now a chapel, in which the *Soubirous* family were given lodging, and in the nearby village of *Bartrès*, where the poverty and constriction of a cramped childhood were briefly lifted for St Bernadette among the delicious pastures of the open countryside. There is nothing eagerly pietistic, no clamant emotional demand, about these places; yet they help to explain why the same pilgrims return to Lourdes as often as they can. For they emphasize the extreme matter-of-factness about St Bernadette and her visions and the consequences of her visions. This matter-of-factness lies in the urgency with which they demand action. Granted that we all give an emotional response more readily than anything else—because it is so much easier to give—the emotion becomes more naturally a driving force at Lourdes than elsewhere. Do something about the poor. Do something about the sick. Do something about yourself. In this atmosphere such injunctions go beyond the range of pastoral advice, however compelling. They go straight to the heart. After a few days the phosphorescent statuettes, the endless trays of cheap medals, the plastic containers—cumbrous as hot-water bottles—with coloured

views of the *Domaine* stamped to their sides, fall into virtual invisibility. The pilgrim has had his own vision: a partial one, and clouded by his own insufficiency. But he will not, in the future, wholly forget it.

## NEEDED: A HISTORY OF LOURDES

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**M**GR F. Trochu published in 1954 *Ste Bernadette Soubirous*, now translated and 'adapted' by Fr J. Joyce, S.J. (Longmans; 25s.): omission of notes and references has reduced the book from 585 pages to 400 and it will doubtless be the definitive 'life' of St Bernadette in English. Yet I feel that a History of Lourdes is still required. Lest I seem over-critical, and at the risk of being over-personal, may I say that already at school I was spell-bound by 'Lourdes'—in spite of books. Lasserre's book was clearly a 'literary' work by an enthusiast, not an historian: two persons sent me Zola's *Lourdes*, no less clearly rationalist, though I could not then know of its deliberate mendacity. I went to make a novena at Lourdes and sought for every trace of Bernadette and Abbé Peyramale. I returned, and remained, ever more beholden to our Lady of Lourdes, but not till, long afterwards, I read Fr Cros's three big volumes, did I feel that my 'devotion' had historically irreproachable foundations. A 'history' must not seek, or be afraid, to 'shock'.

Instinctively I turned to page 40 in the translation: Bernadette on her way to collect wood passed an old woman who was 'doing some washing'. I knew that Bernadette had said *des boyaux*. I turned to Trochu: the translation was quite faithful; but the French relegates the *boyaux* to a coy footnote. 'La Pigouno' 'did not hide' that what she was washing was—would 'offal' offend the delicate ears of England, or even America? Again, when the children returned after the first Apparition, Toinette says (page 46) that she will go to sell the bones they had collected, so 'the mother hurriedly began to tidy Toinette's unruly curls' (*recoiffer les boucles folles de T.*). But Toinette is originally reported simply as saying: 'My mother decided to comb our hair; she