

Love and faith among pilgrims at Lourdes



This week, we hear from teacher KENNETH BLACK about DUNKELD DIOCESE'S trip to the Marian shrine of Lourdes, which brought together pilgrims of all ages in love and Faith

'Where are you heading?' enquired the friendly Irish man as we took our leave from the stopover in the north of France. His face showed more than a little concern when he discovered that our destination was to be Lourdes. "Do you know that they've had a bit of water?" he said.

We did, of course, know that there had been problems and that the 'bit of water' was in actual fact the second devastating flood in a matter of months.

Cars had been dragged through hotels, walls had been simply washed away and areas of the sanctuary had been submerged. The torrential waters pulled down small chapels and bridges; destroyed sacred books and vestments and once it started to retreat the scale of the recovery process was only just revealed.

The floodwaters had left behind a most disgusting legacy, mountains of putrid mud. This mud penetrated every corner, clung to every wall and required to be painstakingly removed by tractor, shovel, hand and brush.

We were only too aware that Lourdes had suffered greatly and that the devastation had occurred only five weeks before Dunkeld Diocese was due to make her annual pilgrimage.

We arrived with trepidation, deeply concerned with what we might find and our concerns were heightened when we realised that our hotel was the only one in the long winding street next to the River Gave that was able to accept guests.

They had pulled out all the stops to open that very day for us, as our long-standing relationship meant we were family. The owners and staff were delighted to see us, as the yellow T-shirts—volunteer workers—of Dunkeld brought some life to the hotel and showed that normality was beginning to return.

The Lourdes Sanctuary was also well on its way to normality with the exception of the St Pius X Basilica. The massive underground church had been filled with water that had lay dormant long after the waters above ground had begun to subside. This was supposed to mean a change of venue for the Blessed Sacrament procession and the International Mass, but then almost six weeks to the day from the flood it reopened too! Dunkeld's pilgrimage was ready to proceed like any other year, a Lourdes' miracle in itself.

In the absence of a bishop, Fr Brian McLean, our director, led the pilgrimage and presented the theme: The Door of Faith. Throughout the week, our chaplains Fr Brian, Fr Neil Gallagher, Fr Michael Milton, Fr Gregory Murphy OP and Fr Kenneth O'Brien focused our minds on the theme and indeed on Our Lady's call to come to Lourdes at each of the services throughout the week.

These Liturgies were once again complemented by our musical director Susan Cassidy and her team of talented musicians. I was struck by the number of times pilgrims from all over the world would stop for a moment's quiet reflection made possible by the beautiful music for our celebrations.

I was moved once again by the relationships that were formed between the sick and elderly pilgrims and their young—and indeed not so young—helpers. To see all barriers being stripped away and in their place the tangible connection between people of different backgrounds and generations is always rewarding but more than that it is a true experience of love. I am often asked what brings me back to Lourdes and the answer is simple and yet so difficult to explain: I want to be a part of the loving environment; to experience God, who is love.

Lourdes attracts pilgrims from all over the world and in these challenging times of practise it is always rewarding to be a part of the Universal Church and witness the number of young people who are actively engaged. Whilst it is special to feel a part of something much greater, it is even better when

you are given the place of honour. The highlight of the week came when we were asked to lead the Torchlight Procession and given the honour of carrying the statue of our Blessed Mother.

As we stood on the steps of the Rosary Basilica, looking out as the procession wound its way forward, I thought of how normal Lourdes 2013 was. Normal in calling thousands to prayer; normal in engaging the young to service; normal in opening the door of faith to so many.

The challenge for the pilgrim is when we return home. How do you make the normal of Lourdes your norm for life?

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