

BUILDING THE CHURCH

Parish of Our Lady of Lourdes Limerick

One of the things that Our Lady asked St Bernadette in Lourdes was to arrange that a church would be built and to ask people to come in procession. I often wonder what St Bernadette would have made of it if she could have imagined the huge basilicas and the vast crowds that come to the grotto year after year in trains and buses and planes.



When Our Lady asked that a church would be, I think she was talking about more than just constructing a church building. What always strikes me in Lourdes is that I am looking at the church being built in another, far more important, sense than bricks and mortar.

In Lourdes you see people joining together in Masses and prayers and processions, singing and praising God. You see people taking care of those who are sick or who are not as strong as they used to be. You see people quietly reflecting in front of the grotto. You see invalids being anointed and you see people going to confession. You see people being helpful to one another and praying for their families and friends, and for peace and justice in the world. You see great crowds, but very little impatience or frayed tempers or angry words.

When I look around me in Lourdes I always say to myself, 'this is the Church!', this is what the followers of Christ are meant to be like – people thinking of how much God loves us and sharing that love with each other. Everybody on the pilgrimage is aware that we have all travelled to this place for the same reason, to think about and to give thanks to Mary our Mother and Jesus our Brother. The presence of so many sick people is a reminder that our plans and our expectations, even our lives, are fragile. We gather in order to remember that, in spite of our weakness, in spite of the fact that we cannot make everything turn out as we would like, we can rejoice.

The sick pilgrims can often be a very clear sign of the truth of what the first reading says, that, perhaps even when it seems that everything has gone wrong, when they are suffering greatly, God sends peace, flowing like a river. It is often said that the real miracle of Lourdes is the peace and acceptance that so many invalids find there.

In all of that, the Church is being built because we are learning to follow Jesus more fully.

It is good, especially at a time when we hear so much talk about 'the institutional Church', to be reminded of what the Church is really about. It is not about controversies and scandals and structures. It is not some sort of dead structure that we can look at as if it had nothing to do with us. It is about understanding how much God loves us and about loving one another as Christ loves us.

On a pilgrimage to Lourdes, you see very clearly that the life of the Church is not just what happens in the Church building. It is not just what priests and sisters and brothers do. The life of the Church is what everybody does together. The reason that a visit to Lourdes is such a marvellous experience is precisely because so many people are involved and working together. When the invalids need to be brought to the grotto or to the baths or want to take part in a procession in their wheelchairs, there is no lack of volunteers. When people are needed to help with the liturgy – the readings and the singing and the prayers of the faithful, you rarely need to ask more than once. The pilgrimage is something that we all do together and everybody feels that they have a part to play.



This parish bears the title of Our Lady of Lourdes. One of the things that this should mean is that the full, rich life of the Church that one sees in Lourdes should be a kind of model for us. Our Lady asked the people of Lourdes in France to build the church. She also asks the people of Lourdes in Limerick to build up the Church here in the parish dedicated to her.

That is already happening in lots of ways. I know that many people in this parish of Our Lady of Lourdes have reason to be grateful for marvellous and supportive neighbours. I know that many people are living with courage and faith in the middle of very sad or difficult circumstances. I know that people who are sick are cared for and prayed for. I know that many mothers and fathers do their very best to share their faith with their sons and daughters.

I hope that this Jubilee Year will be an opportunity and a challenge to build the church, to build the family of God in this parish. On the foundation of all the generosity and concern that exists here, it will be an opportunity to find new ways of involving people in what the life of the Church is really about – loving God through prayer and good living and sharing that love with one another.

When Bernadette told people about Our Lady's request to build a church, they made fun of her. Who was this uneducated little girl to give instructions to the most important people in the town? But what was eventually built was far greater than she ever imagined.

Building up the Church today is no easier. We only have to look around the whole of Western Europe to see that fewer people are going to Mass, the numbers of vocations are falling. But I believe that Our Lady is telling us to build the Church. Pope John Paul has repeatedly said that he sees this Jubilee Year as the beginning of a new springtime.

I hope that, by this feast day next year, we will be able to point to examples of how this parish has been able to find new ways of involving people in the life of the Church. And who knows, we might even be as surprised as Bernadette would have been at how generously God responds to our efforts.

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