

# My Pilgrimage to Lourdes

By Hannah Moriarty

## Day 1/2 – Thursday/ Friday

As a part of Coach 2 from Knowsley, my Pilgrimage to Lourdes began at 7:15am at St. Peter and St. Paul Church in Kirby. After loading our (very heavy!) suitcases and travel bags onto the coach, we celebrated mass with Fr. Ste, our coach chaplain who was unfortunately unable to come with us due to his mother being severely unwell. However, during mass, he presented us with rosary beads from members of his parish (Our Lady's Gateacre) which all had accompanying letters of who they belonged to, and we made sure to carry them and use them in our prayers throughout the week. It was then time to say goodbye to our families and board the coach. This was a huge moment for me as my personal mental health struggles meant that these 10 days of being away from home with lots of unknown situations made me extremely anxious; but I knew that once I was on the bus and got stuck in, I would feel much better - and I did! A few hours, a couple of service stations and a handful of icebreaker games later, a huge curveball was thrown my way. Long story short, I had my mum's passport, and she had mine so after some deliberation it was decided that Kath and I would get off the coach and wait for my parents to drive the five hours to swap passports. The next morning, we took a 7am flight from Stansted to Rome and then after a 9-hour layover and a sprint to the other side of Rome Airport when the gate was announced too late, we finally made it to Lourdes.



## Day 3 - Saturday

Luckily, I was granted a much needed lie in this morning but I met the rest of my coach for lunch before we headed to the St Frai hospital to pick up the Assisted Pilgrims for Mass. This being my first time in Lourdes, I was quite nervous to be working with the Assisted Pilgrims, but the Hospitalité team were always on hand to guide us and all of the pilgrims we were supporting were absolutely lovely. This first Mass we went to was the Mass of Anointing and I had the honour of carrying our Coach 2 banner in the procession. This felt particularly poignant to me as the theme for this year's pilgrimage was 'Come in Procession', so to be a part of the opening procession of the first gathering of the whole Liverpool Pilgrimage was really special. After taking the Assisted Pilgrims back and having our tea, the youth gathered to take part in the Torchlight Procession. My dad had told me that this was the one thing to look forward to and at first, I was sceptical but as it got dark, it started raining and all of Rosary Square was lit up in the darkness with an image of Mary projected onto the Basilica - it felt magical. We then finished our day with night prayer before joining some other coaches at the bar for a singalong and a drink.





## Day 4 - Sunday

Our Sunday started early as we picked up our pilgrims for 8:30 Mass at St Bernadette's Grotto which was celebrated by the Archbishop. Afterwards, my friend Becca and I took our pilgrim, Ann, to do some shopping where we helped her to pick out some gifts for her friends and family before we took her for a cup of coffee. Ann had an amazing sense of humour as she threatened to haunt us from her grave if we didn't let her buy us a Coke! I really enjoyed speaking to Ann as I have lost all of my grandparents so it was lovely to hear stories about her life as they probably would have been similar to those of my grandparents. We then had to take Ann back to the St Frai for her lunch and Becca and I headed back to our hotel for some free time where I helped to decorate our coach's lantern. Every coach was given a lantern which was filled with all of our petitions, including the ones we received from our parishes, and it was brought forward at every Mass and service to offer them up. We decided that we wanted to decorate our lantern with all of our names and those from our coach who couldn't join us, lots of phrases and words that became jokes throughout the week and images of flowers and crosses to spread joy. We also added our mini figure of St Oscar Romero, who was our coach saint for the week - we were challenged to take pictures with him as we worked and share his story to other coaches as they did to us with their saints. After lunch, we headed back to the Domain for Grotto Games, where we joined up with three of the other coaches and took part in some team building games. While we were having fun playing volleyball and solving riddles, the rain came pouring down so the Blessed Sacrament Procession -which we were heading to next- was moved to the Underground Basilica. At this point, I was exhausted and just wanted to go to bed so during the Adoration as the lights were out, I fell fast asleep, kneeling against the bench in front of me. I don't think I was the only one! After tea, we were back in the Domain for a service of prayer and praise. I really enjoyed this as it gave me time at the end of a very busy day to just sit and think about why I was there and what I wanted to get out of the week both spiritually and personally. The day came to a close with a beautiful night prayer in front of the Grotto, before we headed to the bar for some social time before bed.



## Day 5 - Monday

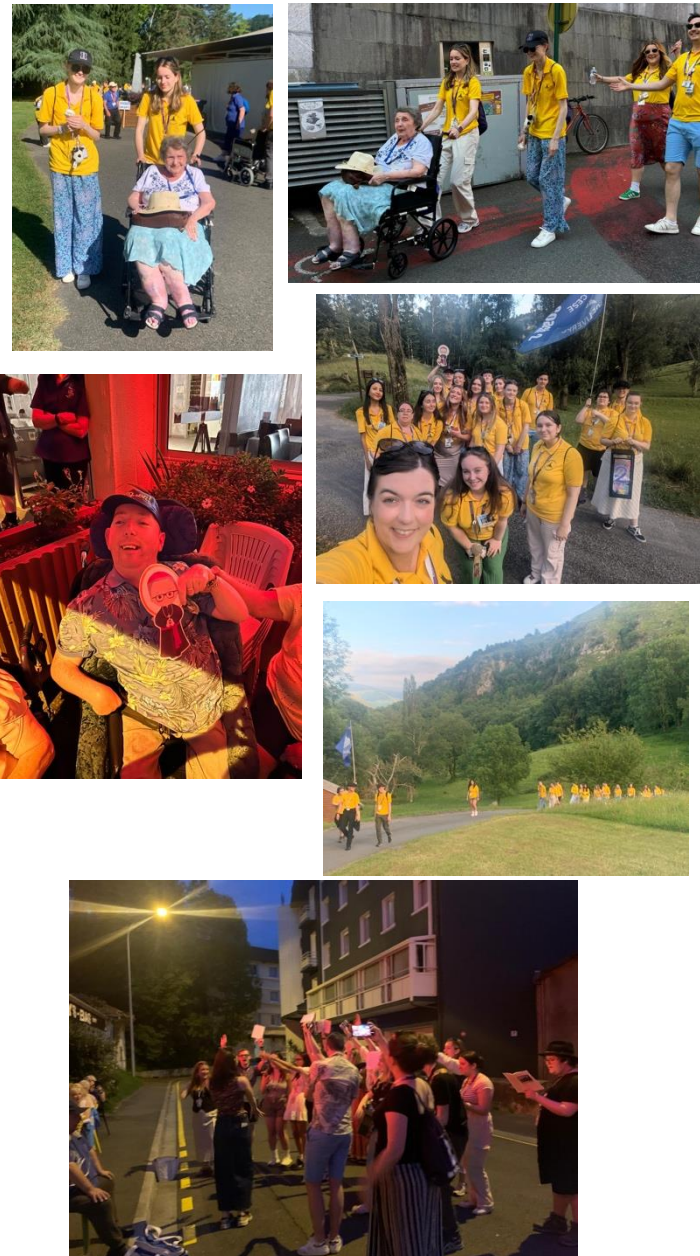
It's our day off! We were blessed with a glorious lie-in until 10am when we hopped on the coach for a drive up into the mountains to Hosanna House. Hosanna House is a centre run by the HCPT as a space for disabled children and youth to reside on their pilgrimages to Lourdes. We had the chance to join coach 6 for Mass said by Fr Matthew Nunes in their chapel, which has stunning views out to the mountains. It was nice to enjoy the peace and quiet for some time and reflect on the week so far and what was to come. Before long, it was time to head back onto the coach to the next stop of the day which was the supermarket where we stocked up on snacks and food for our picnic lunch at the beach. It was a lovely warm and sunny day, so I spent the time lying on the sand, catching up on some sleep before I took a dip in the water to cool off. The time went by too quickly and soon it was time to head back to the hotel to freshen up before tea and then heading out to take the Assisted Pilgrims to the Torchlight Procession. It was a very different experience this time around as I was more focused on the pilgrims and making sure they were okay but once it got dark, it was still completely and utterly magical. Our day ended, as always, with a trip to the bar before heading back to the hotel for bed.

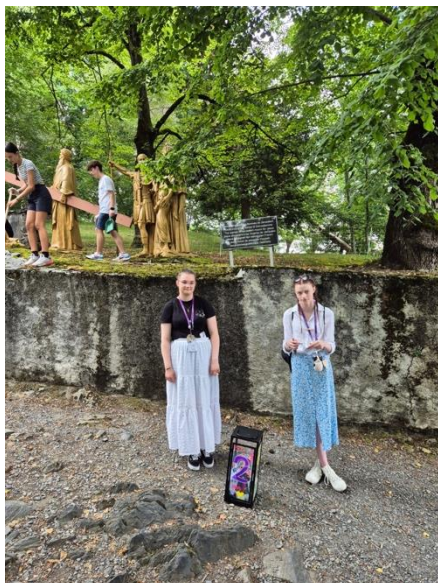


## Day 6 - Tuesday

Today was absolutely sweltering. Our morning started by taking the Assisted Pilgrims around the Lower Stations of the Cross. These were led by some of the youth and ended with a water gesture where the pilgrims were blessed with water from the river. After lunch, we had a midweek Mass in the Underground Basilica with the whole Liverpool Pilgrimage and then for the rest of the afternoon, Ella and I took our pilgrim shopping.

Every year, Coach 2 takes care of a pilgrim called Andrew and today was his 40th birthday so we wanted to surprise him by singing some of his favourite songs. Before tea, we all went down into the basement of our hotel to rehearse for this very special performance. Before the big surprise, however, we still had our youth midweek liturgy to attend. This year, we gathered at the City of the Poor up in the mountains where each coach shared what they had learnt about their saint this week and sang together. As part of this, we carried out an 'Emmaus Walk' where we walked up the hills and around the grounds of the 'City' in reflection and talked about questions we were asked at multiple points along the way. I really enjoyed this experience as it allowed me to share some of the deeper parts of myself with the people I had gotten to know so closely over the past 5 days. We concluded by honouring the theme of 'procession' of this year's pilgrimage and processed through the streets of Lourdes, back to our hotel singing 'As I Kneel Before You'. Keeping the calming and reflective energy with us, we went to night prayer before it was time to go and see Andrew at his hotel. We decided to surprise him, going around the corner, towards him, singing Happy Birthday. From there we sang a range of his favourite songs from Eye of the Tiger to I've Had the Time of My Life and everyone had an amazing time, singing and having fun. Once we had said goodbye to Andrew, his friends and family, we went straight to the bars, carrying the good energy with us and enjoyed the time with some of the other youth before it was time to go back to the hotel at the end of another busy day.





## Day 7 - Wednesday

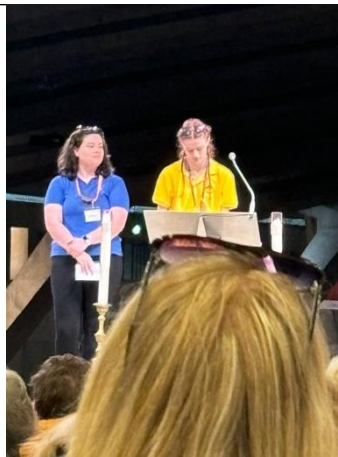
Today was the International Mass, so we were up early to take all of the Assisted Pilgrims down to the Underground Basilica. This was another thing that I had been told about, people saying it was hours and hours long, but it actually wasn't too bad - it was only about 90 mins. We then had some free time before lunch, so I took a much-needed nap and called my parents. This afternoon, we had a Coach 2 retreat day. To start, we had time to explore the Basilicas before heading to the Grotto. We were told to hold our rosary beads in our right hand and touch the wall with our left. It was amazing to feel the smoothness of the wall and think about all the people that touched it before me and all the people who will touch it in the future. We then just sat in front of the Grotto and were given time to be still with our thoughts and our prayers. I ended up closing my eyes and silently praying my rosary and the world around me became so quiet. It felt remarkable as my brain is never that quiet but as I sat there praying, it felt like everything in the world, in my life just came to a stop - a pause. I felt safe. And as a woman in this day and age, one would never just sit on the ground and close their eyes without worrying about something happening, but I did, and I felt completely safe and secure. Once everyone was ready, we headed over towards the baths and the water taps where we washed our hands and face with the water, still in deep reflection and contemplation. Next, we headed up to the start of the High Stations of the Cross, where we, in pairs, presented the reflections on our assigned station. This reflection combined with the physical exertion of walking up the steep hills, made me think of Jesus' own journey to Calvary and the physical and mental toll it must have had on Him. Our retreat day ended with ice cream, courtesy of Andrew's family to thank us for celebrating with him, and of course I had to have my favourite flavour - mint choc chip!

We were all excited to get back to the hotel because it was fancy dress night! This year, the theme was Disney, linking our overarching theme of 'Procession' to the idea of Disney parades. Personally, I was dressed as Clarabelle the Cow who is Minnie Mouse's best friend, but we had a wide range of characters from Simba (The Lion King) to Princess Mia (The Princess Diaries). We all gathered in the basement of the hotel to have a mini party for coach leaders Dave and Mollie's daughter's 1st birthday before hitting the bars, sharing our joy and enthusiasm with everyone else!



## Day 8 - Thursday

Our last full day in Lourdes started with a Mass of Thanksgiving in the Underground Basilica with the whole of the Liverpool Pilgrimage. In this mass, I had the honour of representing the Youth Pilgrimage in sharing a little bit about my experience during the intercessions. After struggling so much at the start of the week, I am so proud of myself for doing this and I feel that it really showed how much more confident I felt as the week progressed. We then took our Assisted Pilgrims back to the St Frai for the final time and said our goodbyes. I loved working with the Assisted Pilgrims as their life stories and experiences made me so grateful for my own life. Every pilgrim I worked with had such a positive outlook on life and were so happy to be in Lourdes that it made me want to make sure they were having the best time possible. After lunch, we waved goodbye to the Jumbulance before doing some final shopping and packing our (in my case very full!) suitcases. The whole Youth Pilgrimage then gathered in one of the chapels inside the Domain for our final closing liturgy. We spent time in prayer reflecting about our week and also joined together in song and dance praising the Lord for our journey this week. We concluded in a very lively dance around the chapel, resulting in a giant conga line, singing with the joy and happiness of being together. Once we got back to the hotel, we had tea before getting ready for our final night out. At midnight, once the bars cleared out, we went down to the Domain for night prayer and to light candles. I decided to light a candle for all the Parishioners of St Wilfrid's, one for my family, and some for personal intentions that had been passed on to me. It was a very emotional moment watching the candles burn and thinking of all of my loved ones, past and present, and how they were there for me. Afterwards, we just sat at the Grotto, silent in prayer, before it was time to head to bed.



## Day 9 - Friday

This morning, we headed down to the Domain for the final time and, as a coach, prayed in front of the statue in Rosary Square, before we placed all of the intentions in our lantern into the box at the Grotto so that they could be offered up to Heaven. We then filled up any bottles with Holy Water from the river to bring back home before we went back to the hotel for lunch and then got onto the coach for our journey home.

Most of us slept all of the 26 hours back to Knowsley, apart from the 3am stop at the French border to go through customs and at 2:30 pm on Saturday morning, we were finally home.

I want to thank everyone who made my first pilgrimage to Lourdes possible, including the Parish of St. Wilfrid's, Widnes for your incredibly generous donations, which managed to pay for most of my trip - I will always be thankful and grateful for your contributions. Thank you to the Catenians, from whom I received a bursary to enable me to make this journey. Thank you to the students and staff at Carmel College, from whom we received so much support through many a bake sale and tuck shop. Finally, thank you to my wonderful family and my new Coach 2 family for being there for me along the way and always picking me up when I fell down.

God Bless and see you next year!