



PASTORAL LETTER

Diocesan Pilgrimage to Lourdes

10th and 11th February 2018 – the Twenty-sixth World Day of the Sick

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

This year, 2018, marks the 80th anniversary of the Leeds Diocesan Pilgrimage to the Shrine at Lourdes. This Sunday, 11th February (normally the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes), also marks 160 years since the first apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Bernadette Soubirous at the grotto of Massabielle, the site of the present Shrine. The convergence of these two significant commemorations provide a particular resonance for those organising this year's diocesan pilgrimage.

Each year, the Rector of the Lourdes Shrine proposes a 'pastoral theme' so that pilgrimage groups from all over the world can focus together in prayer and contemplation on a mystery of the Gospel. This year, the pastoral theme is taken from the second chapter of St John's Gospel: the account of the Wedding Feast at Cana when Our Lady encourages the steward to listen to her Son and to "...do whatever he tells you." In July, we will embark on our diocesan pilgrimage to Lourdes with this clear invocation of the Mother of God firmly in our minds and hearts.

Mary encourages us in our faith to listen most carefully to her Son, Jesus, and to do what he says. In order to do whatever the Lord tells us, we must first be of a disposition to listen like a disciple. Mary herself, listened intently to the message of the angel when she was asked to be the Mother of God, and as the life of her son unfolded before her eyes, she "treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart"ⁱ.

So why do we go on pilgrimage to Lourdes? The Church teaches us that "Pilgrimages evoke our earthly journey toward heaven and are traditionally very special occasions for renewal in prayer"ⁱⁱ. At its heart, a Christian pilgrimage is a journey of faith; its goal is to encounter the Lord who offers us the fullness of life. For this reason, our Diocesan pilgrimage to Lourdes takes many pilgrims who are sick and housebound together with others, old and young, who are seeking healing or answers to questions that dwell deep in their hearts. Each person will have their own reasons for going on pilgrimage but it is listening to the Lord and the journey of faith which is the true purpose of Lourdes.

From all over the diocese, over 300 young people come from our secondary schools and colleges to accompany the pilgrims to Lourdes. They help care for pilgrims who need assistance, take an active part in the liturgical celebrations and are often asked to help with the international processions at the Shrine. They do all this with eagerness and great generosity. In Lourdes many young people discover, perhaps for the first time, the love of God which touches their souls and reveals the joy of faith. They too learn to listen to the voice of the Lord as disciples.

The Diocesan pilgrimage could not take place, though, without the whole supporting network of volunteers, including doctors, nurses and carers to aid our pilgrims with their medical and personal needs. The generous gift of their time and the loving care which they provide is, like a miracle, awe-inspiring and beyond adequate expression in words.

In Lourdes, the diocese comes together visibly and distinctly in prayer and sacrifice. We gather as a diocesan group every day for Holy Mass, we celebrate the Sacrament of the Sick and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We pray the Stations of the Cross and, for those who wish, there are opportunities to bathe in the holy waters of the Shrine. As we assemble for the International Mass, the Blessed Sacrament Procession, and the Torchlight Processions, we experience the universal nature of the Church made present by so many people from around the world.

There are many reasons to go on pilgrimage to Lourdes. The desire for healing or the need for repentance can be strong motivators but for so many who have made the pilgrimage, it is quite simply a place where the joy of faith can be more easily expressed and where friendships for life are made and renewed. Perhaps the Lord is stirring you to go on pilgrimage to Lourdes this year, maybe for the first time. You will be most welcome. Whether as pilgrims to Lourdes in person or in spirit, I pray that all of us will listen to the Lord and find that joy of faith and freedom of heart which only the healing and mercy of God can bring.

I conclude with the plea of Pope Francis in his message to the Church this Sunday: “May our prayers to the Mother of God see us united in an incessant plea that every member of the Church may live with love the vocation to serve life and health. May the Virgin Mary intercede for this Twenty-sixth World Day of the Sick; may she help the sick to experience their suffering in communion with the Lord Jesus; and may she support all those who care for them”. Our Lady of Lourdes... Pray for us!



✠ Marcus
Bishop of Leeds

Given at Leeds on the 29th January 2018 and appointed to be read, and made available, in all Churches and Chapels of the Diocese on the 10th and 11th February, 2018, the Twenty-sixth World Day of the Sick.

ⁱ Lk 2:19

ⁱⁱ Catechism of the Catholic Church, §2691