



## Lourdes 150

**A S A TEENAGER** I was fascinated by Lourdes, a town in South West France at the foot of the Pyrenees, where 'the Lady' was said to have appeared to Bernadette Soubrius in 1858. I was proud possessor of a picture book, *The Voice of Lourdes*, which I still have, I listened to the record of church bells and singing that went with the book and hoped one day to go there myself. Like many I read the *Song of Bernadette*, a novel by Franz Werfel, but never saw the film.

'The Lady' in the story revealed herself as 'the Immaculate Conception', an idea unknown to Bernadette, who was an uneducated peasant girl, and the Church came to see these appearances as confirming the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, proclaimed in 1854, four years earlier. Springs sprang up in the Grotto, once the village rubbish dump, and people bathe in the waters and drink from the springs in the hope of healing. Amongst the countless experiences of healing – physical, psychological and spiritual – have been 67 cures formally pronounced as miracles. For a cure to be accepted by the Church there has to be rigorous medical and scientific examination. The cure has to have been instant and inexplicable and not something that could be explained in a psychosomatic way. (A cure from asthma or anxiety – though real enough – would not be counted as an official miracle, the sudden disappearance of a tumour would).

Nowadays anything up to six million pilgrims visit Lourdes each year and this year, being the 150th anniversary, the Society of Mary has organised an ecumenical pilgrimage, on which many of us are going. Our visit will coincide with the feast of Our Lady of Walsingham, celebrating similar appearances eight hundred years earlier (in 1061) to the Saxon noblewoman, Richeldis de Faverches. We look forward to the candlelight processions, the camaraderie and, most of all, we pray, to an experience of growth and renewal in the life of the Spirit.

Pilgrimage is not about where you go or what you find there but about the journey. We have lost some of this in modern times, where travelling is immeasurably easier, but, of course, the journey is not just the travelling but the preparation for – and anticipation of – where it is we are going. In that sense, like the journey of the Israelites in the wilderness, pilgrimage is the journey to the Promised Land of eternal life with God. For that journey, and in that journey, trips to Lourdes or Walsingham, Jerusalem or Rome, are rehearsals and training exercises.

May God bless you as you journey through life towards his nearer Presence.

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