

Lourdes 1958.

The year 1958 saw the 100th anniversary of Our Lady's apparition at Lourdes. All the Christian Brothers' schools in the UK and Ireland decided on a pilgrimage to Lourdes to mark the event. Scotus Academy participated and the cost to each pupil taking part was a hefty £16.00 ! There was no charter air travel in those days and the entire journey was to be undertaken by train.

So on a Thursday morning in Mid-April 1958 we all left from the Waverley Station – many taking a tearful goodbye from their mummies and daddies. After an eight hour train journey we arrived at Kings Cross then had to get across London by Tube to Victoria Station. We finally arrived at Folkstone around 1 o'clock in the morning thoroughly worn out. We then had a two hour crossing by an old ferry to Calais where we boarded our train for Lourdes around three am. We were all shepherded into 3rd class compartments on a very basic French train with hard wooden seats for our comfort. This certainly was a pilgrimage in the real sense of the word !

After a rough old journey of 17 hours we finally arrived in Lourdes and were taken to our very basic accommodation in an old-fashioned French hotel. Lots of old wood panelling, creaky lifts and French waiters in long white aprons. For most of the boys this was their first trip abroad and, with the different food and the whole French culture, it was all a real shock to the system. Most of us were instantly homesick and longed to be back home in Bonny Scotland.

The days that followed were filled with morning mass at the Basilica near to the Grotto, afternoon processions and torchlight processions at night. Being the anniversary year, there were vast crowds of people at Lourdes. Many of the pilgrims in the large crowds showed very strong displays of religious fervour and the whole thing became very emotional and quite disturbing for most of the lads – many of whom were only around ten or eleven years of age. The weather was very hot and sunny – being in the south of France. This, too, took its toll as most of us were unused to such hot conditions.

We got very little free time during the day, but most of this was spent around the many souvenir shops which had already developed in Lourdes. Apart from all the religious items sold in these shops, the older boys had quickly discovered that they also sold all manners of cigarette lighters, flick-knives and other dangerous looking weapons. Brother Deignan also found out about these unsavoury items and sternly warned us about the consequences if any of us were found to have bought them !

Finally, the week was up and it was time for the return journey home. Another 17 hours in the French train, plus the journey through Blighty back to Edinburgh. I think we were all glad to get home. However a very memorable experience and one we can now look back on more favourably after 50 years.

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