

HCPT Lourdes

Easter 2012

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Growing up attending Catholic primary and secondary schools, you are never challenged about your faith, why you believe what you do, why you gather once a week to celebrate a man who died and rose from the dead three days later. When I went to university, I was challenged by agnostic and atheist friends for the first time about why I made my yearly pilgrimages to Lourdes and believed so strongly in religion. At first, I was unsure on how to reply to them. But now I know what to say: because of what I witness at Lourdes every time I am there.

I first went to Lourdes in 2008 as part of the Brentwood Catholic Youth Service (BCYS) and have been every year since and will be returning in summer 2012 for my fifth visit. I had been told about Easter Lourdes with the HCPT but had never considered it because I was so committed to the summer and did not want to change. But I was convinced by Sarah Barber, the director of the Youth Service and a heroine in her own right and signed up to go.

I was told Easter week with disabled children would be more different than summer than I realised but I did not really consider in what ways. First and foremost, the journey was different to what I normally experience in the journey through France. My group, 709 or T.B.G., was responsible for loading seven hundred pieces of luggage onto a train at Calais station and then unloading it in Lourdes. It was tough physical work for a Sunday evening however having flat beds during the night did make things better than sitting in a seat on a coach! This was one of the many things we did during the week that went unnoticed but made a huge difference to the week.

The second major difference I noticed was the atmosphere around Lourdes during the week. There is normally quite a solemn atmosphere of reservation around the town but during Easter week, it is full of colour and life with children walking around the streets in their colours enjoying a week away. One of the funniest or most annoying differences (depending on the weather) is being squirted by water guns as the train drives through town. I must have got squirted six or seven times during the week although two of those times I did ask for it – it's for the children! Another example of the atmosphere difference would be at the Trust Mass on the Thursday morning when all the groups gather in the Underground Basilica in the Domain to celebrate Mass with all the HCPT groups. My group was at the entrance at 8am to meet and greet every group as they arrived with songs and cheering. I was given the honour of wearing the famous Tigger suit and am sure I have never received so many high fives, hugs and been in more photos in all my life. It was pretty toasty in that costume but it was a great laugh and I'd happily get that dehydrated again next year. The Trust Mass itself was a celebration of its own, with a sea of colour across the whole basilica, banners of every group and country and a sing song at the end when dancing Tigger once again received lots of love.

The joyful and funny moments were balanced out during the week with more solemn moments of reflection. I was lucky enough to work in the Baths twice, once in the main baths and the second time in the children's one. It is the memory of working in the children's one that will stick with me. It was both heartbreaking and inspiring to see some of those disabled children who will have to be cared for their whole life placing all their trust in you for two minutes as they bathed in the holy water. It was amusing that their parents made more fuss about the temperature of the water than they did! It was a sobering experience for me personally and puts a lot of minor grievances we have into context. Other humbling

moments included mass in the chapels of the main basilica, a reconciliation service and walking through the Grotto at night in silence and praying together as a group there (even in the rain).

At the beginning I said I struggled at first when I was challenged by friends about my faith. At Lourdes you see it first hand; the power it has in people's lives, the trust they place in a God we do not meet in life, in a man who rose from the dead. I have seen floods of tears every time I have been to Lourdes, friends pour their hearts out to each other and relationships and friendships develop and repair. For me, Lourdes is more than just a place of pilgrimage where Our Lady appeared to Bernadette. It is a place to renew your faith, to witness it first hand, to see its strength in people's lives and to challenge how you see yourself. I would recommend any young Catholic who is unsure about their faith or is questioning its importance to go on the pilgrimage to Lourdes at Easter or summer with your diocese or youth service and find your answers there.

I would like to express my thanks to everyone in Group 709, Paul Lyon and Father Dan Mason for all their hard work and for sharing a fantastic week with me. I would also like to thank Father Martin O'Connor for his continued support of youth activities in our parish and diocese – your help is greatly appreciated. Finally to Sarah Barber for convincing me to go! You're a hero!