



PILGRIMAGE TO LOURDES, APRIL 2025

Fr Robbie Low

MONDAY

At last, after years of pleading, the Pilgrimage start was moved to a Monday. This enabled people like me to finish the services in the parish properly and set off for Bristol airport at a leisurely 8am Monday instead of the mad nighttime dash, after the Saturday vigil, to a coach in car park in Ottery for 2am drive. The downside was that the world and his wife take to the M5 on Easter Monday. It was a long day.

The team was enhanced by the addition of our soon-to-be Deacon Rafael and his wife, Dawn. Both are hugely experienced pastorally and great lovers of Lourdes. We also had Fr Ignatius, an Indian priest from Torquay, young, keen and dynamic. The aim is to bed these three in and then depart. I have only retained the chaplaincy these years because no-one else was available. 'This is my last year' has become a familiar Group 141 joke as I have racked up more 'farewell tours' than Frank Sinatra. But this time it is a reality.

Just how necessary the transfer to younger and fitter pastors is becoming was revealed later that night when, having received some very depressing personal pastoral news, and coupled with extreme tiredness, I had to ask Raf to help me unpack. I stood mesmerised by the simplest task. This is what happens to a 'Parky' from time to time when exhausted.

My problem was that I had to be at the Grotto to celebrate the first mass of the day that coming morning for the repose of the soul of a friend's brother – who had been a 'Parky' too. I went to bed determined that Satan would not have the victory here and that I would be up early and 'go for it'. I set my alarm for 4am as it takes me an age to get up/washed/dressed/prayed in etc but didn't sleep much before that, just rested on the bed.

TUESDAY

I was down for coffee by 5.00 and at the Grotto in torrential rain for 6.15. The faithful Group 141 followed, drenched but fully operational and we celebrated a joyful and profound Mass together, bringing all those on our hearts before the Lord – as we would continue to do all week. I don't think I have ever had so many prayer requests and it is

always a privilege to offer the deepest concerns of people's hearts and souls at the altar. My server for the week is Chloe, a lovely young Welsh trainee medic – one of three in our group – who I first met at Falmouth Uni Cath Soc and who has remained in correspondence ever since. Raf and Sebastian, his son and our musical leader, provided the music – as they would continue to do at each Mass and, more informally, around the cafes of Lourdes.

It is difficult to describe the sense of wonder and disbelief that I should be privileged to be here as priest and celebrate the glorious mystery of the Mass in this holy place.

Drowned, dishevelled, dried dressed and restored and in glorious good heart we came down to a well-deserved breakfast.

The theme of the week is ANGELS AMONG US.

I had shared out the task between me and Raf and Fr I. to do six short biblical studies of the intervention of angels. We went to the Maximilian Kolbe chapel where Raf produced a forty minute tour de force on four of these stories, aided by the band and the lyrics of a song I had written about each recipient of the angelic message. Particularly moving was Raf's opening account of the martyrdom of St Max. Kolbe. A Pole talking about a Polish hero of the Faith.

The children are already becoming a promising joy. They are well behaved, attentive, responsive and getting on well together. Most are Catholic, some are not, one Orthodox, two with no affiliation, but nonetheless enthusiastic to learn and participate.

We return via a café stop to the hotel and lunch. The Café stop sees the musicians at their very best. The songs ring out, the waiters join in, a group of young pilgrims begin to dance in the bar, the voices crescendo, harmonise, echo through the building. They are joined by another musician – this will happen throughout the week – drawn by unrivalled sense of fellowship that this unique pilgrimage engenders.

The afternoon begins with a HCPT welcome liturgy and introduction across the fast flowing river that tumbles and cascades past the Grotto.

This is followed by one of our young helpers leading us on a tour of the historical sites of St. Bernadette's brief life in Lourdes.

Before supper I took a study session with all the helpers except for the two on duty while children did their diaries. This was a tour of two of the angelic interludes in the Bible. The session, scheduled for 30 minutes ran into an hour with questions. These are always exciting as you encounter the eagerness of professionally competent young Catholics keen to strengthen their faith and their knowledge of salvation history.

Dinner was followed by the Torchlight Procession, always moving and giving huge sense of solidarity and the scale and diversity of the Universal Church.

This, coupled with the death of the Pope, binds the family together in affectionate care and concern.

Children safely abed, those who were still standing and not on duty went for Night Prayer at the Grotto.

I took a raincheck, apologised to the Lord and gratefully crashed into the arms of Morpheus.

WEDNESDAY

Breakfast early and I am, as usual, done and dusted by 6.30 and ready to greet the arrival of the others who are still in remarkably good shape.

The children are a delight. Well behaved, keen, responsive and alert to the possibilities of each day and full of deep questions. There are a couple of delightful extroverts but even the quieter ones are blossoming and growing in confidence. It is a measure of the power of this pilgrimage that these youngsters, who mostly had never been away from home and family, should, in the space of 48hrs, so relax into the loving company of total strangers.

Today is the day of the Baths.

St. Bernadette related the message from the Immaculate that we should not only drink from the miraculous spring but also bath in it . In the old days, ie pre-covid, this meant stripping and being girded with a towel and , prayer intentions made, being lowered into the freezing water by two attendants. Anyone who has done this will recall the profound sense of renewal and cleansing in body and soul – and the amazing speed with which you dry off. Nowadays, courtesy of Health & Safety, this is altered to a time of prayer and intention with the attendants before drinking the water and pouring it over your head. Even reduced it is still a moment of utter seriousness and profound encounter. The attendants, in my dozen or so years, have always been so gentle, perceptive and helpful.

One year I met a man there with whom I had been at school over 60 years before. I could recall his name and the House he was in!

There is, as ever, a long queue for this devotion and we sit in the shade of an awning on this sunny day gently chatting and focusing on those we have come to pray for as well as the state of our own souls. In the background an elderly Frenchman gently grinds out a familiar Marian hymn in the style of Tony Bennett. The queuing order is a holy mystery in itself but we are in no hurry and the children are very patient.

Time come we are welcomed by a team of two French ladies and an American who see us gently through.

It is a mixture of the long forgotten intimacies of family bathtime and the life changing plunge into the Jordan with Christ. This is part of the transcendent /immanent overlap that is essential to understanding the reality and promise of this incarnational Faith.

We are, as in the Mass, at the place where Heaven and Earth meet.

A leisurely and reflective walk back to the hotel for early lunch then boarding the coach for Hosanna House, the HCPT chalet further into the mountains. Unusually the place is in chaos, the booking system has malfunctioned and the place is heaving. So while the smoke clears I grab a football and head down to the field in the glorious sunshine. The group follow and we are soon engaged in a mighty tussle and much hilarity. One of our 'quiet' girls turned out to be clearly the 'Man of the Match'. Also, my successor designate, the gentle, whippet thin, apparently holy young Indian priest from Torquay, was revealed as being as gracelessly competitive as me. Dissent from a clear penalty (hand ball above his head), claims for offside – in a park game? and high speed take-outs all reminded me of my old 'seminary team' where justice and mercy were completely abandoned for 90 minutes. Hilarious.

We then celebrated a Mass (of reconciliation?) in the House Chapel and sang my new Easter Hymn.

Home to a teaching session, supper and a long pastoral meeting just enjoying the night and each other's company, trading serious stories, holy wisdom and jokes and remembered mishaps in equal measure.

The helpers are young (20 somethings), hugely committed and would have, I think, persuaded even a depressed Elijah that he was 'not the only one left.' They are truly the best of the best and I am humbled to be in their company, their prayers and their affections and consulted for the remnants of what tattered wisdom has thus far avoided the degeneration of the control panel that once was a brain. With disciples like this the future is not lost – as if, in Christ, it ever could be.

THURSDAY

The day begins for a group of us with a pre-dawn climb to the High Stations of the Cross. Stumbling up the extraordinarily steep hill, breathing hard and heart rattling, we pause at each huge station as I read the poem meditation from my booklet, kneel in wonder at the sacrifice, pray the kyrie for the intention and move on up singing a verse of a Passiontide hymn. Gradually the light begins to reach over the sleeping town and, by the time we descend from the last station to the Basilica of the Rosary, group photo and well earned coffee, the town is gearing up for a new day. The Stations are not only a beautiful devotion but bind us together on the Via Dolorosa as we walk in the footsteps of Jesus.

This is the day of the Trust Mass when all the HCPT pilgrims descend into the great cavernous concrete bunker that is the underground basilica – a place of such repellent ugliness and atrocious acoustic that, far from declaring the glory of God rather challenges Him to inspire any sense of the numinous against such brutalist truculence.

This year North East region are in charge and, to my mind, get it right. The modern is not used as an excuse or triviality or liturgical pantomime – as we endured in an offering a couple of years ago. The music is well chosen and delivered. The sermon – angels among us – simple, accessible, humorous but serious well judged and we left , hearts lifted and that sense of joyful glory at our belonging to the universal church.

I rashly left by the wrong door and found myself, in ten minutes, lost and on the wrong side of town and thus late for Fr Ignatius' talk on Gideon and the angel but still in time to hear the recording of the song he had written about the angel. Brilliant.

He turns out later, when we go for a sing at the riverside café, to be a pianist, a good dancer and excellent singer. The group will be in good hands.

The afternoon is Fancy Dress party time – theme 'FLIGHT'. A lot of butterflies - I have green gossamer wings, a t-shirt of Poussin's 'Flight into Egypt', and a fabulous multi feathered mask. I am also half an hour in the bathroom festooning my arms with temporary tattoos of coloured feathers. How temporary these are remains to be seen. They will take some showering off I suspect. As one who regularly inveighs against the mutilation of the body by pagan art and piercings, I am comfortable with temporary decoration . My son emails to tease me about living out a teenage fantasy.

I note that Fr. Ignatius has come as a much more attractive pink butterfly than my dowdy mottled green. I reflect that jealousy and old age are an unattractive mixture and we all have a good laugh.

We tour the cafes thus attired and sing, sing, sing.

The motto of our group is PRAY HARD – PLAY HARD. And it works.

Straight from this joyful frivolity, with each taking turns to play or perform and brilliantly led by Seb and Raf on blazing guitars, we return, change and change gear for the Blessed Sacrament Procession at 5pm along the riverbank to the Basilica. The Dionysian dancers of an hour ago are now kneeling in the dust in silent prayer before the Lord and will spend an hour in adoration.

There is a surprise on our return. Those who queued up for confession at the central confessionals could not get in so FR Ignatius and I hear confessions. At the end of which I went into supper only to find myself alone. There is another surprise...

The whole group arrive dressed as me – face masks taken from a photo of me. A great practical joke but also, seeing nobody but myself, a vision of Hell !

Fr Ignatius leads night prayer gives a talk on the Rosary and then bed for the children and for us duty til 1 am for the adults and a glass of wine and godly conversation. Much of course, cannot be reported for reasons of confidence, but great things are happening in souls to the glory of God and the constant flow of prayer between the altar, the Grotto and our private devotions are bringing those prayers and intentions entrusted to us to the loving attention of Our Lady and brought before her risen Son.

Hallelujah.

FRIDAY

Today is the day in the mountains. We return to Pont d'Espagne where I recall, in earlier Easters, hauling wheelchairs up frozen slopes by rope. This year the snow is gone and I get a chance to spend a couple of hours in company with a man I haven't seen for more than a decade.

On my second Lourdes Pilgrimage (2014) we came to Pont and ended up playing a ferocious game of soccer against a Bristol team. I still have the scars – many of them inflicted by M. At the end of the match it transpired he was marrying in the autumn and I, in a gesture of Christ-like forgiveness, offered to say a Mass for them on that day. I did and an unlikely friendship began, via internet as M was an expat. In the years in between we have corresponded and he has used me for zoom bible studies etc.

Today I would meet his wife and three cheerful energetic children and catch up.

A beautiful sunny day. NO snow. Sunbathing by the river and me trying to start a desultory game of soccer before altitude, age and complaining heartbeat made me, very reluctantly, leave it to the young.

In an hour with M, a former well placed employee of Big Pharma, what I learned about the Covid crisis was deeply disturbing but this is not the place to extrapolate. It will however fuel my reading and research.

On the eve of the Pope's funeral, there was much to review and sift and pray about and commend the future to God's mercy.

At the end of a leisurely 3 hours we came down the long winding, tortuous roads to the ancient Abbey church of St Savin and were joined in the sanctuary by M's group chaplain, a Cameroon priest, studying in Europe. He and FR Ignatius and I shared the duties in this mass for healing, while I led and preached. Very different liturgical styles were on view.

It was, as ever, a beautiful experience and very moving as each one presents themselves and the prayers of those who have been entrusted to them. We conclude with a great Marian anthem ringing down the nave.

It is our final night and we all dress 'posh' for dinner before going down to the Grotto to light our candles, personal and parish. The care of the children by the helpers is wonderful, especially for those recently bereaved. I happen to have in my shoulder bag a SPUC card which has, on the reverse side, a reduced reproduction of Raphael's 'Disputation of the Blessed Sacrament'. It describes in exquisite beauty the relationship between Heaven and Earth, between the human and the divine and between the mortal and the immortal. The whole 'economy' of salvation hinges upon this and, as in the picture, it is all mediated through the glorious mystery of the Mass. For a bereaved child to learn that the longing of their heart does not go unheard in Heaven and that prayers of love for those who have gone before are never lost and that the Church militant here on earth is in communion with the Church Triumphant in Heaven and the Church in the Purification (Purgatory).

The effect of this little masterpiece dried the tears and brought a radiant smile to the face of the young person, recently bereaved and in distress.

Little miracles of love are happening all over and amongst those who have come to the votive candle sheds opposite the Grotto on the other side of the surging river. So we return to the Grotto itself for a final time of night prayer, the little cleft in the rock ablaze with candlelight and the endless file of pilgrims touching the primeval rock face where the child first saw the Immaculate and knelt in wonder and heard the voice and was obedient.

Weary and joyful and exultant in our providential encounters with one another and with God. We return to our hotel to pack and pray and sleep.

SATURDAY

We move our kit into the store to await the afternoon coach and head for the tiny chapel of St Gabriel to the left of the Rosary Basilica. Fr Ignatius presides and preaches – both well. At the end of the Mass I call him and Raf to stand before me that I may ask God to bless them as they take on the mantle of the chaplaincy of the West Country as I stand down after twelve years. Then I kneel and ask them to discharge me from my duties and bless me for whatever remains for me to do in the ministry in the years still to come.

We are almost all in tears and there is much hugging and photographing .

We depart for the Prairie where the 'Lower' Stations are present on the flat. The children all play a character of the Passion and learn about them if they don't already know. The cross cut marble of the bas relief figures in white marble are very affecting as they emerge from the stone itself.

Having witnessed this we get back to our hotel, collect our bags and head for the coach and Tarbes airport. There we sit in the great open plan café and wait our call while the team porters check in all our luggage, guitars, kit etc and we go through.

Boarding almost immediately we are hit by delay due to 'heavy traffic in Northern France'. An initially turbulent flight turns into a smooth ride home. Then luggage collected, coach boarded, we head for Exeter Services (c 70 miles) to our waiting 'family chauffeurs'.

There is much long, tearful hugging, plenteous thanksgiving and prayers, essential shopping for grub for the missed evening meal and then into the night. After a week of gastronomic blandness I purchase an M&S curry for two - just for me - and we steam through late night fog back to God's own county.

A hot bath. A major unpacking and then a leisurely wade through the Lamb Rogan Josh takes me to 1a.m. bedtime and three hours glorious rest before getting up to start the new day which will see me at Wadebridge early and back to Bodmin.

The pilgrimage has involved that rare and invaluable element of freedom to 'go deep with God' and 'go deep with each other'. Those who felt themselves unloved have been touched by the love of God. Those who had drifted have caught the wind of the Spirit. Those who have walked in the plain have been to the mountaintop and rediscovered the liberating and invigorating powers of the Sacraments. In those where the bonds of communion had frayed, a revival of ancient loyalties to the Universal Church revived. In those who are daily committed to the Lord, a place of trusting fellowship on The Way where the great existential questions can be tackled in a place of safety, trust and friendship.

'THE ROAD GOES EVER ON'- for we are a work in progress and on the way to Eternity in the Presence.

The pilgrimage is a microcosm of that journey and a glorious reassurance of its validity and a test of our desire for such glory.

Imagine if we could live like that every day.

I am most grateful to Emma, our Group Leader for all her work and love and care that makes these 'days out of time' possible.

To Group 141.....it has been a real joy to be your Chaplain these last twelve years. Though I will no longer bear that responsibility, you will always remain in my heart and be just a phone call away in time of need or celebration or simply in the humble pursuit of the ordinary.

God bless you.

