

November 16-30, 2015

■ ■ ■ Experience

Retirement is indeed a time of blessing as one gets to accomplish dreams long cherished but unfulfilled. Not only was I able to come to Leuven to study biblical theology at the Catholic University here in Belgium, but I also had the wonderful opportunity recently to serve as volunteer at the Grotto in Lourdes, France. I would like to share this experience so that others may also enjoy this privilege.

No one can remain unmoved by the faith of the people who come to Lourdes. Thousands of pilgrims come from every corner of the world, some in groups organised by their churches, others with family and friends, and many with the sick, the infirm, and even with people who are dying. What unites all these people is the fact that they expect a healing, a miracle, an encounter of a different kind. And yes, miracles do happen, although they may not all be visible; for everyone goes back home with a feeling of joy, peace and contentment.

A volunteer ('*bénévole*') is part of the '*Service Pilotes*' directs the pilgrims by giving them information about all the facilities that are available in order to make their pilgrimage really meaningful and fulfilling. Each '*pilote*' works from 9 in the morning until noon, and again from 2 in the afternoon until 5. Those who come for the first time are trained by the coordinator, Mr Philippe Lafaille, and taken on a guided tour of the sanctuary by another experienced '*bénévole*'.

One is also given a blue and yellow '*gilet*' / vest to wear bearing the universal sign 'i' standing for "Information," and the word '*Sanctuaire*' behind. We are also equipped with a '*dossier*'/a file which contains all the schedules of the Masses, and other devotions, besides maps of the whole layout of the sanctuary to guide people to places like the '*picines*' (the holy bath in the water from the miraculous fountain), and the building where confessors in different languages are available throughout the day.

Meeting people from different parts of the world was one of the most interesting experiences. But what was most touching was the openness and readiness of some of the pilgrims to share their personal lives, as a way of expressing their gratitude for the help they received. There was one Filipina settled in New Jersey, U.S.A., who said she had first flown from the U.S. to the Philippines, in order to bring her sister along with her because the latter had been diagnosed with cancer. Another Frenchman with a severe speech impairment managed to communicate by means of gestures the sorrow with which he had come to Lourdes as his wife/mother/someone he loved very much had died recently. An American with Alzheimer's and several other serious health issues had come all the way to Lourdes just to experience healing by plunging his head in the healing waters.



**A call to serve
at the Grotto
in Lourdes**

A woman from Egypt came to me pleading to be allowed in the *picine* although the time was nearly over. She was so eager that I took her, half running, which she did most willingly but with great difficulty, because she was very ill, and her nephew had gone to fetch a wheel chair. I finally succeeded in convincing the '*hospitaliers*' at the '*picines*' to allow her in. When she returned after the dip in a wheel chair, she sought me out in the crowd, which is not easy as we do not remain in one place for long; taking both my hands in hers she wouldn't stop kissing it in gratitude for what

By Agnes Fernando

I had done. Such experiences are uplifting and will remain indelibly etched in my memory.

The most difficult task was not having to be on one's feet the whole day, but rather having to tell some people gently but firmly that smoking, dogs, eating, and talking on the mobile phone, are not allowed in the precincts of the sanctuary. However, this volunteering service was such a rich and rewarding experience, that I hope all those who know to speak French, as the majority of pilgrims who converge on the shrine at Lourdes are either French or Francophone, and have a desire to serve God and humanity will also experience.

Each volunteer is expected to finance his/her own trip to Lourdes, but simple accommodation is offered at an incredibly minimal charge, and food (good French cuisine) is free. One is expected to serve for a minimum of 7 days, and a maximum of 21 days.

What I experienced was a time of grace both for myself, and I believe, also for all those people I came into contact with. For every 7 days that one volunteers, one gets a day off, which can be utilized to make one's own pilgrimage.

It is said that it is more blessed to give than to receive, but believe me, God cannot be outdone in generosity; and the more we give, the more we are blessed. Just incorporate this one week of service in your itinerary when planning a trip to Europe, especially if you are visiting France, and you will not only be serving people but also making a meaningful pilgrimage yourself. ●