

## Two Moate Community School students reflect on their experience in Lourdes.



On the 27<sup>th</sup> of May, we, Orla Higgins and Leonie Canavan, started our journey to Lourdes. We waited in anticipation outside B&Q on a blustery afternoon. Despite the weather, our spirits were not dampened. We met with some of the other youth helpers from the area. At first, when we boarded the bus, we were shy and did not have much to say. However, within a matter of minutes, conversation became effortless between us. Suddenly, we arrived at Knock Airport and greeted the other youth helpers and our leaders Fr. Declan Shannon, Frank Devine and Karen Flanagan. We each collected four Youth Helper Ireland t-shirts, which we would wear for the following five days. The journey to Lourdes was almost as speedy as the one we had taken to the airport. We got off the plane and we could immediately feel the heat. Then made our way to the St. Louis De France Hotel and willingly went to bed.

Little did we know that this would be the start of many late nights and early mornings as we got up at six the next morning and made our way to the non-surgical hospital in the grounds of the Basilica. We helped serve breakfast and organized the assisted pilgrims into wheelchairs and chariots.

First, we went to the Grotto mass, our first mass of many. We were astounded by the constant flow of people around us and yet there was a silence from all those attending the mass. We then made our way to the Ardagh and Clonmacnoise mass with the assisted pilgrims. After that we had a chance to get to know all the assisted pilgrims better through a chat and a cup of tea. We discovered that we had a lot more in common with them we thought. Both of us developed a bond with certain pilgrims as did the other members of our group. After this all of the youth helpers were given the chance to get confessions in the Church of Notre Dame. This helped to prepare us for the work ahead. That night we were astonished by the torchlight procession as we escorted pilgrims along the route with lanterns in hand. It is impossible to describe just how remarkable this scene was, where a river of a thousand lights glowed against the black of the night sky. We returned to the hotel exhausted but satisfied in how rewarding this work was.

As usual we ventured to the hospital at six the following morning and while helping with breakfast, we could not help but noticed the amount of work which had gone into preparing this pilgrimage. The handmaids and brancardiers had transported all the pilgrims' favourite Irish foods, wheelchairs, medicines and the Ardagh and Clonmacnoise banner from Ireland to the hospital. This massive task on their behalf astonished us and made us feel we had it much easier. The mass we

attended this day took place in the underground basilica. This is an extraordinary place of prayer which can hold 30,000 people and was filled to capacity for this particular ceremony. Descending into the Basilica with wheelchairs and chariots proved to be a challenging task. Our first thought on the underground basilica was that it strangely resembled an underground car park, and trust us; you need strength on your side to successfully control a wheelchair or a chariot when both entering and leaving the basilica. Luckily we had our new friends to lend us a hand; this sense of team work was truly inspiring. This mass was something else, at least a hundred priests lined the altar and each was carrying a flag to represent their country. The ceremony was done through many different languages, with the main language being English for this particular mass as the majority of people were English speaking. After lunch, we changed into lighter clothes and embarked on the difficult journey which would take us up to the highest point of the grounds. Even for us *fit* young people, Fr. Declan Shannon and Monsignor Noonan this journey was a difficult and tiring one. There is no comparison to the stunning, gold, life size statues at each of the ten stations. As usual, it was our job to happily contribute to the stations and a reading was said at each station. That evening at dinner it was one of the volunteer's birthdays and we were lucky enough to get a slice of cake! We were blissful that we were given the opportunity to just sit around the lobby singing, playing music and to revitalise ourselves with a much needed break. However, we were quickly interrupted by a disgruntled Karen who was in search of the culprit who sent her all the way up the eighth floor and back down to every floor along the way in the elevator, on her trip to the lobby. Not naming anyone in particular Orla! The ice cream is a point of the trip that cannot be ignored, and although we were in Lourdes, we were atomically transported to Italy eating ice cream every evening.

The next morning, after our usual routine, we had a mass in the Chapel of Notre Dame. Unluckily for us, this particular chapel was on the top of a hill full of spiraling ascending slopes. We all took part in the mass cheerfully, some of us carrying the diocesan flag and doing readings. Our next activity listed on our timetable was by far the most impressionable of all the goings-on; The Baths. We both felt that it was a truly inspirational experience that we felt strengthened our faith immensely. The people working on the grounds were strict to the extent that every half hour or so, an intercom announced: Shhhhhhhh! This was especially noticeable as us youth helpers and our assisted pilgrims were waiting to enter the baths. There were three divisions in the baths: men's, women's and children's. However, for one of the mothers from Ardagh and Clonmacnoise, getting her little girl out of the bath was a more difficult task than she thought as her daughter loved splashing about so much! All twenty three youth helpers willingly decided to go into the baths as we knew that not doing it would be something that we would regret in the future. About six people at a time were taken into the changing rooms and our advice is to forget about any inhibitions that you may have, as we had to strip down with the aid of a handmaid holding a cloth around us before wrapping us in a damp white sheet, which, to be perfectly honest, did not cover much! Going into the baths was a somewhat surreal experience. One by one, after thinking of our intention, the two handmaids either side of us immersed in the Baltic temperature water! However, it remained unnoticed to us as we were simply too over whelmed by the whole experience. When we got out, there was a silence amongst us twenty three youth helpers and we could not help but be amazed at the effect the baths had on us. That afternoon, our task was slightly more enjoyable as the assisted pilgrims trawled through the town in wheelchairs and on foot, with our

help of course. This was by far one of the most enjoyable tasks that we were given and the assisted pilgrims' enthusiasm was unfathomable. Each of us took a different pilgrim out to the shops and then to the Grotto to have a quiet moment away from the rest of the group.

That evening we spent a while preparing our party pieces for the festivities that would be held that night in the hospital. Once again, the hospitality of the handmaids could not be ignored as they had prepared lots of tasty treats. We entertained and fed the pilgrims as well as taking them out for a dance. They taught us some of their moves and we taught them some of ours! Our job was hands-on as we served all the party food that night. Occasionally we snuck a treat for ourselves! We even managed to get a dance from some of the priests there! Of course, us *talented* young people provided some musical entertainment that night including; Irish dancing, some traditional Irish tunes and some not so traditional which proved to be hits among the assisted pilgrims. This night was thoroughly enjoyed by all present.

On our last day, we went to visit Saint Bernadette's home place, where she was nursed as a baby and began her life of hardship. In the little church in Bartres the youth mass was held, in which we all participated as youth helpers. Four people from our group were commissioned at this mass as Eucharistic ministers. We also acted out the 'Our Father' because it was the year of the "Our Father" in Lourdes and this emphasised the importance of this special prayer. After the mass which marked the end of our Lourdes adventure we returned back to the Hotel and repacked our bags with memories that we had shared. We got dressed up into our *glad rags* as Fr. Declan called them and we were ready for a fun night out. This night consisted of a visit to an Italian restaurant followed by an ice-cream on the way to the *disco bar*, where a night of fun was to be had. We met up with the youth group from the Kilmore diocese, which made a nice change from our usual group as we got to mingle among unfamiliar faces. We returned to the Hotel, and some made a failed attempt at an all nighter (namely Leonie!) the



following morning we got up at the crack of dawn, had a quick breakfast and made our way home, exhausted but happy with our time in Lourdes.

Reflecting back on our adventure in Lourdes, we realise how blessed we were to get this opportunity. There is no doubt that it was a life changing

experience, clichéd as it sounds. For us, our favourite parts were the Baths and the prospect of helping people. We felt that our personal faith was strengthened immensely over the five days and that the people that we met will always hold an important place in our hearts. Voluntary work is something that we both hope to do a lot more of in the future, and this would not have been made possible without the support that we got from our families, our Principal Kevin Duffy, our Deputy principals Maura Murray and Tom Lowry, the staff in Moate Community School and of course, the school chaplain, Carmel Mc Cormack. We would like to take this opportunity to thank them and our leaders Fr. Declan Shannon, Frank Devine and Karen Flanagan for all the help and support that they gave us.

By Leonie Canavan and Orlan Higgins

