

LIVERPOOL ARCHDIOCESAN PILGRIMAGE TO LOURDES

HISTORY

In August 1975 a letter arrived at Evesham House from then secretary of the Diocesan Lourdes Association Fr John Mc Gee.

The letter was an invitation to attend a meeting at Sacred Heart, St Helens to consider what steps could be taken to involve young people in the Diocesan Lourdes Pilgrimage. This letter had three main points.

- 1) The 1975 Lourdes Pilgrimage was the smallest ever from Liverpool.
- 2) There were very few young people on the Pilgrimage.
- 3) They were now fighting to survive as a Diocesan Pilgrimage.

Since 1923 Liverpool Diocese has successfully been organising Pilgrimages to Lourdes - the majority of people travel by two specially chartered trains - some by Jumbalance and a few by plane. In more recent years parishes have organised coaches whilst many families travel independently by car.

So in 1975 the Youth Service was approached by the Diocesan Lourdes Committee looking for ways of attracting young people to their annual Pilgrimage. It was envisaged that the young people would assist with 100 + sick from the Diocese. We reached our target that year of 100 young people and each year increased our numbers slowly.

The first Pilgrimage of the Youth Section was to be marred by a serious accident to one young pilgrim causing deep anxiety for some seven days, but the joy, the enthusiasm and the energy of the young people was to have a decisive effect on the entire Pilgrimage from the very beginning of their arrival at Lourdes.

Since then each year has seen an increase in numbers. From the two coaches which formed the initial Pilgrimage a third one became needed for the more Senior Young Adult-the "Over 18's" Coach. It soon became apparent that a policy of area provision for young Pilgrims should be developed and this took place as follows:

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| 1) Liverpool Coach | 2) Liverpool and I.O.M. Coach. |
| 3) 18+ Group. | 4) A Sefton-Knowsley Coach |
| 5) A Cheshire Coach(Warrington-Widnes)
Ashton in Makerfield. | 6) A Wigan-Leigh Coach. |
| 7) A Lancashire Coach. | 8) St Helens' Coach. |

This year we are completing our area provision with a St Helens Coach.

These eight coaches now cover the key areas of the Archdiocese so that young people wishing to go to Lourdes may do so with other young people from their own areas.

Such an approach has also the obvious advantage of making a preparation and a follow up service easier.

Our greatest advertisement we found is by word of mouth - poster and announcements in Parishes and Schools were unattractive and brought little response. The biggest attraction for our young people is helping with the sick and many are convinced of its value and enjoyment by the previous years group.

With 400 young people this year coming from the key areas of the Archdiocese the Youth Service has now reached the task it had set itself. Its main work for the Pilgrimage will now be to keep this momentum going.

A great deal of time and energy is spent each year in recruiting and preparing young people for the Lourdes Experience. Indeed this has now become a regular feature of our yearly programme.

By way of postscript one would like to comment on the influence or effect of the young peoples' presence. In taking home some of the spirit they receive, in speaking with great enthusiasm of their experiences, they not only interested other young people but also their parents, their uncles, aunts and other adults so that a host of fringe groups from the archdiocese began to arrive and join in the Liverpool Pilgrimage.

Those who work with young people and who now witness the throngs of pilgrims lining up behind the Liverpool banner at Lourdes are pleased to note that the presence of the young people had an effect in achieving this.

PREPARATION

Several weeks before leaving for Lourdes each coach calls a meeting of the staff i.e. on each we have a leader in charge; 1 or 2 Chaplains, a nurse; 3 group leaders (each in charge of approximately fifteen young people) and in some cases 3 Assistant Leaders.

At this meeting they go through the Itinerary, delegate responsibilities, arrange the programme of free time, and look at the problems that they may encounter - in particular those arising from experiences of the previous year.

STAFF VARIATIONS

Some coaches use a system of two responsible young adults i.e. 18-22 year olds to take charge of groups.

Not all staff are Catholic Youth Service - many are voluntary Youth Leaders, teachers, past members of the Youth Service etc. who volunteer their services as leaders.

Approximately two weeks before leaving we invite the young people travelling on that coach to a meeting. The programme for that afternoon or day includes introduction of staff and young people; talks and slides on Lourdes; Mass; Video of previous years Pilgrimage; a talk by our nurses; a meeting in small groups with group leaders to discuss 'What to bring lists, Itinerary etc and concluding with refreshments and social.

FINAL PREPARATION

The Thursday before departure a meeting is arranged in the Irish Centre for all young pilgrims. A final briefing re; working with the sick people is given by the Pilgrimage Doctor and Chief Handmaid and Brancardier. A vision of the entire Youth Pilgrimage is apparent and at 8 pm everyone goes to the Metropolitan Cathedral where a special Mass is said for all those travelling to Lourdes the following week.

Over 1500 generally attend this Mass.

Afterwards the young people have a social/disco in the Irish Centre in order to meet those travelling.

TRANSPORT

We use 49 Seater Coaches with toilets, video and coffee bar facilities. Additional Groups - usually there are one or two minibuses with their own Chaplain and Leader.

AGES : Under 18's Section 14-18 year olds.
Over 18's Section 18-25 year olds.

ACCOMMODATION

Travel is overnight with a stop for breakfast, an opportunity for swimming, football showers and Mass in Poitiers Youth Hostel. We have six nights in Lourdes where we stay in small family hotels - one coach to a separate hotel.

WORK IN LOURDES

In Lourdes itself the under 18's are responsible for transporting the Sick people from the hospital to the services, the Grotto and the Prairie. They go shopping for the sick, and visit and entertain them at night.

OUR 18+ GROUP

This group has developed over the years building up from 15 - 78 in numbers. But the biggest development is in their programme in the hospital, - serving meals, washing and bathing patients, dressing and preparing them for the night. Much work is also done by this group inside the Baths .

A more recent development was the help given to to a coach from a parish who brought their own sick people - without the over 18's daily help this group would not have been able to bring their sick people.

SPIRITUAL DEVELOPEMENT

Father Harnett calls a meeting of all the coach chaplains to discuss and plan the spiritual programme for our young people.

To support the young people Spiritually in their work each coach programme includes a Penitential Service, Group Masses, Night Prayers, Stations of the Cross and a visit to the Holy Baths. Many of these services are arranged by the young people with the assistance of the Chaplain and Leaders.

RELAXATION

By way of relaxation each coach includes a tour of Lourdes town and a look at its history, a trip out to the mountains and local area, opportunities to go swimming, time for shopping and an hourly sing song and social each evening in a chosen cafe.

REPRESENTATIVES

The young people come from every area of the Diocese. Often we have a person of contact in an area i.e. Priest, teacher, parent or Youth Leader who encourage the young people to go on the Pilgrimage and help them with various fund raising efforts i.e. dances, raffles, collections, donations etc.

We encourage these people to offer places to all young people no matter whether they are unemployed, at school, at work or from families of low or high income. However, we do insist that the young people travelling are all aware of the implications of the Pilgrimage. They go fundamentally to help the sick, to experience the Spiritual aspects of Lourdes, and, to meet other young people socially.

FUTURE AND FOLLOW-UP

We find the key to the success of our Pilgrimage is often in our choice of Leaders and Chaplains, our careful preparation for the Pilgrimage with young people and the establishment of an atmosphere which allows for prayer, fun and giving of time to the sick.

Many of our young people establish a friendly relationship with the sick people and often continue this with letters and visits when they return—we encourage this. We also encourage each coach to organise a re-union which often includes in the programme Mass, Video Film of the Pilgrimage, sharing of photographs, comments on the Pilgrimage, and concluding with a Social.

We also help organise a review meeting for the staff of each coach to help plan the following years youth pilgrimage.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How important is the Pilgrimage to our work as a Catholic Youth Service? *- Parish -*
2. In what ways do the young people benefit from the Lourdes experience?
3. What, if any, spin - offs does the Pilgrimage have?
4. How relevant is the content of the preparation meeting?
5. How necessary is a follow-up programme?
6. In what way can we improve the Pilgrimage?