

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of February 1858, a 14 year old local girl, Bernadette Soubirous, saw a beautiful lady appear in the Grotto of Lourdes. This lady, dressed in white and blue with a yellow rose on each foot, called herself 'The Immaculate Conception' and she appeared 18 times to young Bernadette. Under the guidance of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Bernadette scratched at the soil in the Grotto, revealing a spring. By 1859, thousands of pilgrims were visiting Lourdes, believing that the spring water from the grotto possessed healing properties. A statue of Our Lady of Lourdes was erected at the site of the apparitions in 1864.

Since that fateful day, almost 5 million people a year visit this shrine and the number of visitors is growing each year! 67 accepted miracles and more than 7,000 cures have occurred here.

Amongst these visitors are a colourful array of pilgrims, who you'll hear coming before you see them! These are members of the Pilgrimage Trust, all wearing brightly coloured jumpers, funny hats and singing a rousing rendition of 'Rise and Shine' at the top of their voices.

It all started in England, in 1955, when Dr Michael Strode brought 8 young people with special needs to visit the Grotto in Lourdes at Easter. Thus, the Pilgrimage Trust was born and has grown and grown over the years. Following the expansion of the Trust in England, an Irish branch of the Pilgrimage Trust, the IHCPT, was founded. The Irish Pilgrimage Trust was set up by Anthea O'Grady and in 1971, the Irish group travelled to Lourdes! Now, after celebrating our 40<sup>th</sup> year, over 1,000 Irish people fly out to Lourdes, the week of Easter, joining 4,000 other Trust members from the UK, America, Croatia, the West Indies and Romania.

The Irish Pilgrimage Trust is a registered charity in Ireland that brings young people with special needs to Lourdes the week of Easter each year.

When I was in 5<sup>th</sup> year in school, a volunteer from the Trust came to tell us about the pilgrimage, hoping to find some students interested in taking part. While I may have gone to the talk just trying to miss some class, I was quickly won over by the idea of volunteering. Whether it was the rainbow coloured jerseys, the catchy songs or just seeing the big grins on every face in the DVD, I knew this was the place for me! That Easter, I donned the blue jersey of Group 64, tipped my white cowboy hat to my parents in farewell and set off into the unknown. I joined a different group, Group 61, in my third year with the Trust (purple is more my colour), but regardless of the colour jersey everyone in Lourdes is there for the same reason: to give some young people (and the volunteers!) a brilliant holiday!

A 'miracle' is, by definition, an event that appears inexplicable by the laws of nature and so is held to be an act of God. We don't go to Lourdes expecting miracles, in that sense of the word, but we all rejoice in the 'minor miracles' we see happening around us daily. By the end of the week, the children might be more confident and outgoing, and to us that's the real message of the trip. In Lourdes there are no distinctions made between people based on their abilities, we all become firm friends. I think our Group 61 chaplain, Fr. Michael Sheil (Fr. Mocky to us), put it best when he asked 'who the normal ones really are – is it us with our inhibitions, hang-ups and prejudices, or these children who take everything as it comes?' Part of the appeal of the pilgrimage is about changing people's perceptions and learning how to accept what is thrown at you.

The week begins on Easter Sunday. Usually an early start in Dublin airport, but excitement, nervousness and anticipation block out any tiredness. Trying to get a group, with 10 young people and 14 volunteers, and all their bags, wheelchairs, guitars and funny hats on a plane at 6am isn't easy, but everyone mucks in and lends a hand. Then it's off to Lourdes on a wing and a prayer...literally!

Arriving at the hotel, it's a sudden stampede to find your room, pick your bed and pause for a quick lunch, before heading off to the Welcome Mass. For all the 'newbies' this is a chance to learn the words and dance moves of the unofficial Lourdes anthem "Rise and Shine". A relaxing evening follows, giving us all a chance to get to know each other, let old friends reunite and of course, pestering those smart enough to have brought Easter eggs with them. The banter is merciless, the guitars are pulled out and a friendly game of 'Snap' can soon turn dangerous, but soon it's time to rest the tired heads and get ready for the week ahead!

Throughout the week in Lourdes, we learn the history of the town, Bernadette and the apparitions. There is an endless stream of questions from the children and volunteers alike, from the serious "What does the Immaculate Conception mean?" to the more pressing "How did Our Lady get up there?" (pointing to the grotto), our chaplain has an answer for everything...even if it is "The 46A bus".

One of my favourite masses of the week is the Irish Mass. It's easier to compare this to an All Ireland Football Final than a mass, in fact one year while I was painting everyone's face for the mass, another volunteer asked had I misheard and thought we were going to an Irish match not mass! This mass is for every group from Ireland, a few American groups and a group from Croatia, all in different coloured jerseys, funny hats, faces painted, Irish flags flying and shamrock shaped sunglasses. It has all the trappings of a normal mass, but there is so much more! Singing Mama Mia during the homily, clapping loudly to the hymns, dancing in the aisles and starting a conga line, is considered a normal occurrence here! Some of the young people are asked to get up in front of all these groups and say a prayer and even though we've only been in Lourdes 2 days, you can already see a difference in these children. Leaving their families in the airport, they can be quiet, nervous, anxious and barely look you in the eye, but pretty soon they come out of their shell and are all keen to get up on the altar and say their bit! At the end of the Irish Mass this year, all of the young people in Group 61 got up on the altar, leading the crowd in 'Rise and Shine' and I think the huge grins on all of their faces made my week then and there!

In the underground basilica, the World Mass is held and is hosted by a different country each year. The Basilica of St Pius X can hold 10,000 people! The celebration begins with the procession of banners from all the groups followed by the regional and national banners: the stars and stripes of the US, the chequered red and white of Croatia, the red of Wales, the white of England, the green of Ireland, the blue of Scotland, the blue, yellow and red of Romania, the blue and red of Slovakia. Since the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Irish Pilgrimage Trust was this year, Ireland hosted the mass and it's safe to say it was the best I had been to! With Irish dancers stepping up the aisles and bodhrans on the altar and all of us once again in our "all Ireland final" finery (yes, I got out the face paints again!), the craic was 90! Or should I say 'the craic was 61', since we were one of the loudest groups and the last to stop dancing! Where else could you jump up onto your seats and do your best Irish dancer impressions to "Lord of the Dance" in the middle of mass??

As it was the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Irish Pilgrimage Trust this year, a group photo of all the Irish groups was taken outside the Grotto. Trying to get about 1,000 energetic and colourful people into a photo isn't an easy task! And Group 61 helped in the only way we knew how...we started a Mexican Wave! The usually quiet Grotto was filled with voices singing 'Ireland's Call' and 'The Fields of Athenry'. The Irish manage to make themselves known (and heard) wherever we go!

As you can probably tell by now, I like face painting! So it's no surprise that I love the fancy dress parties in Lourdes! Group 61 likes to pull out all the stops, with large baby costumes, Leprechauns, Cardinals, Spanish Ladies (and that's just the guys!) and yes....the face paints are out again! Even Superwoman made a guest appearance. A few groups will organise this party together and the costumes are always colourful and bright. The tunes will be playing all night and we can't get the groups off the dance floor at the end. Group 61's anthem was 'Living on a Prayer' this year and once the DJ started playing it, we invaded the dance floor with our air guitars!

There is so much to see and do in Lourdes - walking up to the castle, visiting Bernadette's home, partaking in the beautiful candle-light procession or taking a trip up to the snow capped mountains in Gavarnie. However, I think some of our best moments are when we're on the Prairie. This large green grassy area behind the Grotto is where you'll find us whenever the sun is out! We'll play a friendly game of football, a competitive game of rounders or even just make daisy chains!

Many of the places that we can visit are places that Bernadette knew when she was alive: the parish church where she was baptised, the Bolly Mill where she and her family lived and the cachot that provided them with shelter during difficult economic times are all within easy walking distance. At some point during the week we get to visit Bartres. This is a small village in the hills a few kilometres from Lourdes, where Bernadette lived with her uncle and cared for the sheep in the hills.

One of the best experiences in Lourdes is a trip to the Shrine's Baths. Our Lady invited Bernadette to ask people to come and pray at this place. Bernadette discovered a spring and for over a century people have come to Lourdes to drink the water. Many people actually bathe in the water reminding themselves of baptism and forgiveness of sins. No matter how many people explain it and describe it and tell you what to expect, it's really one of those things you just have to experience for yourself. Nothing can prepare you for the icy water of the Baths; in fact it was so cold one year a girl with Down Syndrome shrieked as soon as her toe touched the water. Rolling with the punches, we allowed the young girl to sip a glass of the Holy Water, instead of bathing in it. We thought this was a great idea, until she decided to do her best 'water fountain' impersonation! Another year, a young boy with Cerebral Palsy decided to make a 'jacuzzi bath', by passing wind! While there is always a few amusing stories from the Baths, most people find the experience very calming, powerful and spiritual. I remember being told that you emerge from the Baths completely dry and I was a little sceptical. But I was proven wrong! As soon as you step out of the water, still reeling from the icy coldness that knocks the breath right out of you, your body is dry within seconds. Everyone's experience is different but we all come out of the Shrine saying 'Wow'!

Every year that I've been in Lourdes we have taken a trip to Gavarnie. This small village is situated up in the mountains above Lourdes and we usually find enough snow to have a snowball fight! Our group chaplain will host an outdoor Mass, weather permitting, and once again the guitars are pulled out for a sing-song. We stroll past the cafe and along the stream to pick a nice spot for a picnic lunch

before a long bus journey back to Lourdes. Usually the buses are shared between 2 groups and therefore a sing-off erupts! Especially if it's Leinster versus Munster groups!

One evening during the week, the Trust members partake in the Marian Candle-light Procession. We all walk as one, in a slow steady rhythm, holding candles aloft and softly murmuring the words of the Hail Mary. It is spectacular to see. A river of candle-light flows and ebbs through the Grotto. Thousands of people from different backgrounds coming together with one belief and one hope. Our loud and boisterous group become quiet, reflecting on the week and the meaning of our Pilgrimage to Lourdes. It is a truly beautiful night.

The last day is spent shopping in the town of Lourdes. After the quiet of the Grotto, it's hard to believe we're still in Lourdes when walking down the streets. It's full of souvenir shops. In fact that's an understatement, its overrun with souvenir shops! You can buy everything from bottles of holy water, medals and statues to glow in the dark 6 foot long rosary beads. No matter what is on someone's shopping list, it can be found in Lourdes. After lunch in McDonalds it's time to go back to the hotel and pack. Suddenly we are asking ourselves "How did we fit all these clothes into the bags on the way here?" and trying to find where that missing shoe is.

On our last night in Lourdes our group has a candle lighting ceremony. We decorate a large white candle with ribbons and our names and artwork. One year we each decorated a cut-out print of our hands and put our names on them. Then each child had to pick the name of a volunteer (and vice versa) and they would say something about that person, whether it was thanking them for something during the week or a particular memory that they'll take away from Lourdes. A young boy with Down Syndrome looked at the hand he had picked, jumped up and started dancing. Then he turned to the volunteer and said "You're great!" and hugged her. I think that summed up the week better than anything we could have said. This year we had the Group 61 Awards night. Each young person won a 'category' and got up to make a speech. Even one person's exclamation that the week was a "complete and utter disaster" (I think that had something to do with the fact we didn't get to see the Manchester United match earlier in the week) couldn't dampen our spirits. We even managed to get our 2 student volunteers to re-enact the 'Single Ladies' dance. Those boys had moves to make Beyonce jealous!

The week in Lourdes is great fun, but there is no denying that its hard work. It can be nerve-racking going away for a week with 10 or 11 children, let alone children with special needs. Quite often it's the young person's first time away from home, away from their families and away from their normal routine and for a lot of volunteers it's an experience outside of their normal comfort zone. When a new volunteer asked what to bring with them, I said "Patience...and comfy shoes!" It can be tough trying to teach a card trick to a young person with an attention deficit disorder, so patience is needed. While in Lourdes, we want to let everyone be as independent as possible, even if it means it takes longer to get ready in the morning or to eat dinner. These are those 'minor miracles' we see, the young boy who wants to get out of his wheelchair and play a game of football or the girl who wants the courage to read a prayer in front of a group. Patience is one of the many things I learned in Lourdes. It's a very rewarding experience and it's not just the young people who come home with a fresh outlook on life.

Before we know it, the week is over and we are on our way back to Ireland. There is always time for one last rendition of Rise and Shine, but we soon realise we are getting a few funny looks in Dublin

airport singing and dancing about Noah's ark. Group 61, however, are loud and proud in their purple till the very end and come through the arrivals gate singing "We're Group 61! The mighty mighty 61". Saying goodbye can be tearful. We've all become firm friends and after spending a whole week together it's hard to head home without your dancing partners and roommates! If you ask any of the young people what their favourite part of the week was, they all say "Everything!" and we know that our job as volunteers is done! Hugs and tears and promises of a reunion signal the end of our week of fun, until next year's trip that is!