

## Lourdes Pilgrimage 2023

Tracey Scott and Ciara Kenny

Last August Tracey Scott, and Ciara Kenny took up the opportunity to take part in the Clonfert Diocese Pilgrimage to Lourdes as a youth volunteer representing Portumna Community School. Together they have reflected on the experience below.

Lourdes is a holy site in France, where Mary the mother of Jesus appeared to St Bernadette. Many miracles are associated with Lourdes, especially Lourdes water at the baths and the via prayers at the grotto. With some kind encouragement and a little nudge of persuasion from our school Chaplain Ms. B Dunne, we volunteered to partake in the pilgrimage as youth helpers this year. With some nerves and more eagerness, little did we know this would be a life-changing experience that will always stay with us. Arriving at the airport at 5 o'clock on a Friday morning is when it all began. There was a great buzz and excitement. Looking around seeing some people in need of more care than others made us question what we are doing here? Little did we know that experience would create such special bonds with very special people. Many of the Pilgrims had been to Lourdes several times previously and for others this was their first. Our first hurdle was a delayed flight which resulted in getting to know people more and beginning to form friendships.

The pilgrimage began with a welcoming ceremony where we were responsible for the transportation and hydration of those in need of care. In short this meant pushing wheelchairs, listening to stories, joking, and cajoling through 40-degree heat. Some of the pilgrims in need of help were terminally ill, dealing with ongoing health issues or in need of a miracle. Faith brought them to Lourdes and us to accompany them on their journey. We were in Lourdes to support pilgrims' needs in a lighthearted way. We were known as the "yellow t-shirts, and you couldn't get lost as you would see us a mile away. For both of us the most moving experience was the relationships with the assisted, and the medical staff who were inspirational. These were nurses by vocation, who chose to be there and give up their holidays in support of others. And they were great Craic!

Day 3 we went on a hike up the mountains with the rest of the "yellow t-shirts". It was an enjoyable time to see more of the beautiful area we were in and this was a wonderful occasion to bond and get to know the rest of the youth group. We headed back to the hotel for dinner and two of the youth volunteers were on water duty as the temperatures were scorching in St Joseph's church. This was quite a sad mass, and it was difficult seeing many illnesses and many more upset. However nonetheless it was an uplifting mass as one man on the pilgrimage shared earlier on in the pilgrimage, the story of his son's sickness. During the mass of the anointing of the sick he went up to the altar with joy and solidarity as he shared the news of his son returning from theatre and on the mend. This gave the ceremony, and everyone present a feeling of unity and comfort.

For both of us, the candle-light procession was just so special. All the sick and assisted pilgrims accompanied by their aids come together at the sanctuary to be together, by candlelight only, and pray in their own language. This was so moving. Before going if you told either of us this would have been the highlight, I would not have believed you, but there is something about the spirit of Lourdes that cannot be written down. And it there in this experience.

Wednesday was of course our last day, it was disheartening to think of returning home after five days of bounding ,forming lifelong friendships with not just the youth group but with the inspirational nurses .You felt like when you were returning home that you were leaving it all behind but that was not the case it was a life changing experience which both of us will never forget. We landed at Knock airport at midday. We all said our Fairwells to each other which was sad as we had such a magical experience together. Reflecting on the five days in Lourdes, both of us describe it as a life-changing opportunity, it is an experience that teaches you so much about yourself and others and we believe that we have come back with a new outlook on life. We found this experience so fulfilling and we have so many delightful memories. The memories, friendships, and lessons we learned there will stick with us forever. We were told before we went that it's difficult to explain the peacefulness and tranquility of Lourdes to those who have not experienced it for themselves, and I completely agree.