

By Brian Verzella

I recently had the privilege to take a pilgrimage to Lourdes, France and Madrid, Spain for World Youth Day. Though I read a book about Lourdes prior to making the journey, much like a fiery sunset or a rich symphony, it is something that needs to be experienced firsthand in order to begin to fathom its depths. In her repeated apparitions to Bernadette Soubirous (Saint Bernadette), the Blessed Virgin emphasized the importance of prayer, penitence, and poverty as a means of drawing closer to Christ.



Not unlike the miracles that Jesus performed in his lifetime, the miraculous accounts of healing that have occurred at Lourdes are signs that point to a greater, internal spiritual healing which God continually offers mankind. Though important in its own right, the real miracle of Lourdes, I feel, isn't so much the abundance of miraculous healings that have occurred, but rather the

overwhelming confluence of faithful from throughout the world who are inexplicably drawn to Lourdes to pray and worship God when they could be spending their vacation doing any number of things. As I walked around in quiet contemplation, I was struck by the diversity of the pilgrims, all fervently praising God in their own language and in their own unique way at all hours of the day.

The seed of faith which was planted by Jesus through Mary and cultivated by Saint Bernadette has blossomed and born much fruit in a world increasingly malnourished and in need of lasting sustenance.



A scenic twelve-hour bus ride which took us through the Pyrenees Mountains, punctuated by an over-heated engine that left the group stranded (fortunately at a “desert oasis”), brought us to Madrid to celebrate World Youth Day. The theme for W.Y.D 2011 was taken from Saint Paul’s Letter to the Colossians: “Planted and built up in Jesus Christ, firm in the faith.” The experience offered in Madrid was truly fertile ground in which to renew, rejuvenate, and reaffirm one’s faith in communion with individuals from every corner of the world. The love and joy which emanated from the participants were pervasive, palpable, and contagious; able to soften and transform the heart of even the staunchest cynic, dismayed and confounded by thousands of “guests” descending upon their city. “Where two or three gather in my name,” Jesus said, “there I am among them.” The two million who gathered at Cuatro Vientos Airport for the final Mass celebrated by His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, were a powerful and visible reminder of the unity and vitality of the Church. During the prayer vigil on the eve of the Mass, a violent storm, complete with heavy wind, driving rain, and spectacular lightning, delayed the proceedings for about a half-hour. However, the enthusiasm of the pilgrims was not assuaged. On the contrary, the storm that developed at the end of a virtually cloudless week in Madrid energized and further unified the crowd and, in a way, seemed to make manifest a deeper, collective inner longing within us. One could sense that something great was occurring; it was as if God was saying, “pay attention, be alert!” Too, the storm could perhaps be seen as symbolic of the many

and varied storms which often threaten the Church and test the resolve of her members.



As members of the Body of Christ, it is imperative that our mountain-top experiences translate into our everyday life. It can be difficult to maintain the same religious fervor when there aren't millions at our side waving the same banner. We must bear in mind, however, that we are *not* alone. Not only are our efforts joined with that of the greater Church Militant, but we have the Church Triumphant, the Communion of the Saints, legions of angels, and God Almighty at our side! When the young shepherd boy David went out to meet Goliath alone on the field of battle, he knew that it wasn't by his own strength that he would defeat his foe. Likewise, the Holy Spirit will empower us to engage and overcome our spiritual Goliaths, to move mountains, and to fearlessly and diligently spread God's kingdom on earth. With lives built on the firm foundation of Christ, our lives, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, will be "blessed and happy and [our] happiness will influence others. They will wonder what the secret of [our] life is and they will discover that the rock which underpins the entire building and upon which rests [our] whole existence is the very person of Christ, [our] friend, brother, and Lord, the Son of God incarnate, who gives meaning to the universe." Despite the obstacles which we will inevitably encounter and apparent evidence to the contrary, the Universal Church is thriving and vigorous. With a unified voice, she offers a compelling and life-giving alternative to the empty promises of the world. We are many parts but one body. We are the salt of the earth. We are children of God.

More photos at http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.1930464341565.2095372.1240920089&type=1 and http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.923079089997.2385388.5621720&type=1

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