

HOMILY FOR MASS AT THE GROTTA IN LOURDES
WELSH NATIONAL PILGRIMAGE 2014
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One of the many significant places in Lourdes is the statue of Our Lady, which stands at the centre of the Domain. It is a striking focal point, a place of welcoming, a gathering place as people prepare to make their pilgrim journey to the Grotto.

I am always struck by the symbols of devotion and prayer placed at the foot of that statue, not least the flowers that are left there. Struck too by the crown, which is placed on the head of Our Lady. It reminds us of that mystical text from the Book of the Apocalypse (Revelation) at the end of the New Testament. It speaks about:

“... a great portent appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars”

(Rev 17:1)

Twelve stars on a blue background. The flag of Christian Europe? The twelve apostles? The twelve tribes of Israel? Or the New Israel, which is the Pilgrim People of God? The Church - you and me.

A famous theologian once spoke of those stars being like a “Constellation” surrounding Mary as she reflected His (Jesus) light through her faith. He wasn’t just speaking of the historic Jesus and

her relationship with Him, but the Christ of faith and the fact that the Church and its members must also reflect the same light of faith to shine in a darkened world. He writes that if we want to recapture Catholic “imagination” (not just memory, but the image of Christ) we should do well to understand the “stars”, which form the “Constellation” around the head of Mary.

One way of recapturing the Catholic “imagination” is to go on pilgrimage. The outward journey we make to a place like Lourdes is an invitation to make the deeper journey within, to the darker corner of our lives. Prayer, penance, conversion, healing and forgiveness are all parts of that journey. In doing so, we follow the example of Mary. She is the one who listened and heard the Word of God, even when she didn’t understand - *“How can this be? Since I am a virgin” (Lk 1:34)*. She is the one who believed and trusted God’s Word - *“Let it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:37)*. She is the one who conceived Jesus in her heart before conceiving him in her womb - *“The Lord has done marvels for me. Holy is his name” (Lk 1:44)*.

In making our pilgrimage journey of faith, we are not alone. Each of us could probably walk to the Grotto much more quickly alone; but we walk together. We might make the Stations of the Cross more quietly and prayerfully on our own; But we do it with others in order to *“bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2)*. We might prefer to worship the Blessed Sacrament prayerfully, contemplating the abiding presence of Jesus individually; but we carry it in procession; honor it as members of the Body of Christ here on earth, members of the Church in communion with Jesus and with each other. All images of

the presence of Christ amongst us, and with us, and in us. All parts of the Catholic “imagination”, which we re-member, put back together in this pilgrimage to this holy place.

As individual pilgrims, as young helpers, as those carrying burdens of sickness and vulnerability, meeting people we don’t know, offering a listening ear or prayerful word, all of us are responding in our own way to those haunting words of Mary at the wedding feast of Cana: *“Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5).*

This is what Mary did. That is why her life and example shines light on our lives as we make our pilgrim journey. She teaches us the greatest lesson in the mystery of our faith. That is not so much that **I** believe in God; that **I** love God. Much more that God believes in **me**; that God loves **me**. God alone knows why!