

WELSH NATIONAL PRILGRIMAGE TO LOURDES

MASS AT THE GROTTA – 27 JULY 2015

At the feet of the statue of Our Lady in the Grotto of Lourdes there are two golden roses. These symbolic roses take us back to the origins of the apparitions to St. Bernadette in 1858. Her incredulous parish priest said that Bernadette's report of 'the lady's' request to build a sanctuary was not enough. He needed more evidence. *"Tell the lady to let herself be known. If it is the Virgin, may she manifest it through a sign. Did you not tell me she appears on a bush of wild roses? Tell the lady that if she wants a sanctuary, may the rose bush blossom"*.

The rose is an ambivalent symbol. One of the many symbolic and beautiful titles of Mary in the Litany of Loreto is "Mystical Rose". During the 12th century, the great mystic St. Bernard of Clairvaux meditated on his devotion to Our Lady as the Mystical Rose. He wrote:

"Eve was a thorn, wounding, bringing death to all. In Mary we see a rose, soothing peoples' hurts. In the rose, which is Mary, we see white for maidenhood. Red for love. White in body. Red in soul. White is seeking after virtue. Red in treading down vice. White in cleansing her affections. Red in mortifying her flesh. White in her love of God. Red in compassion for her neighbour".

It is at the foot of the cross that we see the faith of Mary tested to the final degree. As she watched her dying son, she must surely have

“wondered” in every sense of the word where was God in the midst of all this violence, suffering and pain? Was this the price she had to pay for her act of faith at the Annunciation: *“Be it done unto me according to your word”*. How could this “cross of death” ever become the “tree of life”? The white rose of her faith must surely have turned red with the pain of suffering.

Are not the same questions on the lips of each one of us when we face challenges in our own lives? Whether physical or emotional pain. Perhaps failure, depression, loneliness, disappointment and ultimately death? Where is God in the midst of human suffering? *“Here”* says Jesus with arms outstretched on the cross. In Lourdes, as we know, those who are sick are at the heart of the pilgrimage which brings us all here. The Bishop of Lourdes writes: *“Do not forget, it is often those who are sick or disabled who evangelise the “able bodied” by their commitment to Christ, in their prayer, in their joy and trust in the Lord”*. Those who care for the sick on our pilgrimages will testify in a very personal way how much they receive from those for whom they care.

Is this not the heart of the message of evangelisation of which Pope Francis speaks in his encyclical *“Evangelii Nuntiandi”*? He writes *“... every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelisation. Indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love”*. That surely is one reason for coming to this holy place, to reflect and give thanks to God for touching our lives in this, that or the other circumstance? For acknowledging that God is present just as much in our failure and weakness as in our health and our strength? And in order to make sure that our pilgrimage and our

prayers do not become mere exercises in introversion or self indulgence, Pope Francis again reminds us that we should become missionary disciples when he says: *"... each of us should find ways to communicate Jesus wherever we are. All of us are called to offer others an explicit witness to the saving love of the Lord, who despite our imperfections offers us his closeness, his word and his strength, and gives meaning to our lives what has helped you to live and given you hope is what you need to communicate to others"*.

This surely describes the encounter between Bernadette and Mary in Lourdes. At the third apparition, Bernadette asked Our Lady to write down her message. *"What I want to communicate is not necessary to write down"* Our Lady said. She asked for faith. She asked for trust. She asked for fidelity in suffering. *"I promise to make you happy, not in this world, but in the next"*. The rose of sorrow. The rose of joy. The same flower. The same stem. All part of the same reality of life, believing that God is present to us and for us no matter what the circumstances of life.

Could the final words be those of the English Jesuit poet who, of course, wrote his best poetry whilst living in Wales! Gerald Manly Hopkins wrote:

Is Mary the rose then? Mary the tree?

But the blossom there, who can it be?

Who can her rose be? It could only be one:

Christ Jesus, our Lord. Her God and her Son.