**Lourdes Pilgrimage - Homily at the Grotto**

It was Thursday the 18th of February. This was the third apparition and the first time that the beautiful Lady spoke to Bernadette. Encouraged by her family, Bernadette asks the Lady's name and presents a writing tablet to her, so that she might write it down. The Lady answers “This is not necessary…(and then) Would you do me the kindness of coming here for two weeks?… (and then) I do not promise to make you happy in this world, but in the other.” These three sentences express the way Bernadette was to ive the joy of conversion.

It is not necessary to see someone's passport or identity card to know them. We do not need to have a blood test or know someone’s DNA. This comes from being in their presence. Bernadette learns the inner contours of the Lady's life by being with her. Spending time with her, often in silence, she becomes familiar. This mirrors the experience of Zaccheus in the Gospel – it is enough for him to catch sight of Jesus, to climb the tree so that his eyes may rest upon Him, to draw close to Jesus. This is the invitation he gives to us...come and see what my mother wants to show you, come and see what it means to experience a change of heart, come and see how to live joyfully.

“Will you do me the honour of coming for 2 weeks.......” It is heaven that takes the initiative. Jesus draws near to Zaccheus – “can I come and eat at your house today”. So too the Lady with extreme courtesy invites Bernadette. We know it was not easy: to face the ridicule of the town coming to this place which was the rubbish heap, where the refuse from the hospital was dumped, where the local pigs would come scavenging for food. Surely a heavenly creature would not come here?

This is the extraordinary humility and tenderness of our God......born in a stable. 14 days seemed a long time for a 14 year old girl, coming in the early morning, in the damp and the cold. Like Bernadette we have each responded to the Lady's invitation. We come here that we too may encounter the heavenly Lady, perhaps especially in the dumping grounds of our lives, where we feel most distanced from God or our loved ones, most poor. With deep tenderness she approaches us, embraces us, and encourages us to draw close to her Son.

“I do not promise to make you happy in this world but in the other”......a reminder to us that we live against a transcendent horizon. The encounter we have is not just with somebody on this earth, but with someone who comes from that other place where we long to be. That world which is eternity with God.

Life is a kind of restlessness. Once Bernadette had encountered the Lady, her heart ached for the time she would see her again. So it is when we have to leave Lourdes, as we must. We leave something of ourselves here too, just as all those people who have passed through the Grotto smooth the rock. But it ‘smoothes’ us too, makes life more bearable, richer, deeper, softens the hardness of our hearts and makes it possible for us to love more, forgive more, be generous to others in a new way.

May the beautiful Lady who appeared here touch our hearts and lead us ever more deeply to her Son. May she show us the joy of conversion and help us share this joy with those in our world who so desperately need it.

Rt Rev Mark O’Toole

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