

## **MESSAGE OF THE SUPERIOR GENERAL TO THE CAMILLAN COMMUNITY OF LOURDES OF THE CAMILLIAN PROVINCE OF POLAND**

9-11 December 2016

*Pastoral Visit*

*I do not promise you happiness in this world, but in the other (III apparition, 18 February).*

*Penance! Penance! Pray for the conversion of sinners (VIII apparition, 24 February).*

*Go and tell the priest to build here a chapel where people will come on pilgrimages (XIV apparition, 3 March).*

*Lady, can you tell me who you are? The Lady revealed her identity to the young Bernadette: "I am the Immaculate Conception" (XVI apparition, 25 March).*

### **Words spoken by Our Lady during the apparitions at the Grotto of Massabielle – Lourdes (France) – to the young Bernadette Soubirous (1858)**

*I thank all of you from the heart for your ministry, and I ask you to be welcoming to all, witnesses of fatherly tenderness whatever the gravity of the sin involved, attentive in helping penitents to reflect on the wrong they have done, clear in presenting moral principles, willing to walk patiently beside the faithful on their penitential journey, far-sighted in discerning individual cases and generous in dispensing God's forgiveness.*

**Pope Francis, *Misericordia et misera*, n. 10**

*We are called to promote a culture of mercy based on the rediscovery of encounter with others, a culture in which no one looks at another with indifference or turns away from the suffering of our brothers and sisters...The works of mercy affect a person's entire life. For this reason, we can set in motion a real cultural revolution, beginning with simple gestures capable of reaching body and spirit, people's very lives....The culture of mercy is shaped in assiduous prayer, in docility to the working of the Holy Spirit, in knowing the lives of the saints and in being close to the poor.*

**Pope Francis, *Misericordia et misera*, n. 20**

Pursuing the goal of meeting our Camillian confreres in order to demonstrate our nearness to them, on 9-11 December, I, as Superior General of the Order, visiting Lourdes for the first time, and Fr. Laurent Zoungrana, the Vicar General, who had already been once to this Marian place, made a (canonical) pastoral visit to the *St. Camillus de Lellis* community of Lourdes (France).

This pastoral visit had a very special character: we have been completing the pastoral visits to all the Camillian communities in the world, in all those countries (41 nations) where the Camillians are present. After almost three years of journeys in the Camillian world, we are now completing this stage of the undertaking of our general government; taking on the identity, as well, of pilgrims, having journeyed towards the Sanctuary of Lourdes in a spirit of prayer and of thanksgiving to God and Our Lady for their constant inspiration and protection during all these journeys.

### **Some data on Lourdes and its famous sanctuary**

Lourdes is a small town in the south-west of France at the feet of the Pyrenees. Today it has about 16,000 inhabitants and 198 hotels to accommodate the pilgrims. It is 900km from Paris and can be reached from the French capital by train in six hours.

It also has a large airport (a place to test the new aeroplanes of the European consortium Airbus, which has one of its assembly plants in Toulouse) for the large number of charter flights that arrive from all over the world. The Sanctuary of Lourdes, as we all know, is one of the most important Marian temples in

the Catholic world and every year it receives about six million pilgrims – first of all pilgrims from *France* and then, in second and third place, *Italians* and *Spaniards*. Many go to Lourdes to give thanks for graces that have been received or in the hope of a miracle or a miraculous cure for an incurable illness. The flow of pilgrims who go to Lourdes to pray, to give thanks or to ask for a special grace or relief in suffering is very great. There are pools and many sick people are helped to go into the waters, looking for a cure for their own illness. On every pilgrimage, in every Marian sanctuary in the world, man is always a pilgrim looking for health and salvation! At the present time, this sanctuary has a group of about 900 employees who help the pilgrims in all their pastoral needs.

The Sanctuary of Lourdes has a medical committee to examine the cases of inexplicable healings. According to Dr. Alessandro de Franciscis, the chairman of the committee, since the apparitions at Lourdes ‘we have had over 7,000 inexplicable healings but only 60 of them have been recognised by the Church as miracles. Three quarters of the healings have taken place near to water. The elements which have a great significance in Lourdes and support popular piety are: light, rock and water, in addition, naturally enough, to the sign of the cross (cf. Dr. Alessandro de Franciscis, *Les Merveilles de Lourdes*, 2017, 27).

Rock is the embrace of God, who is solid as a rock. In Massabielle (‘it was my heaven’, was how Bernadette defined this place), as in Bethlehem or the Holy Sepulchre in Gethsemane, the rock of the grotto has also hosted the *transcendent*.

The light is made up of the thousands of candles that have continually burned around the grotto since 19 February 1858. On that day, Bernadette reached the grotto with a candle in her hand that was alight until the end of the apparition. The processions of lit candles expresses hope.

The water of Lourdes is a sign of life but also a sign of another water – the water of baptism. Bernadette said: ‘Take this water as though it were a medicament... You need to have faith and pray. This water will not have any properties without faith!’

The historical almanac of the Sanctuary records that over 80% of the people who were healed or who received a miracle were women. The youngest was two years old. The countries of the people who were healed are as follows: France (55 people), Italy (8), Belgium (3), Germany (1), Austria (1) and Switzerland (1). Most of the healings took place through contact with the water of Lourdes (50 cases) in the pools.

Pope John Paul II, who was very devoted to Our Lady, visited the Sanctuary of Lourdes twice. The first visit was in the year 1983 when, still young, he was in a good physical state. The second visit was in 2005 and he went to Lourdes as a pilgrim and a sick man, without being able to stand up and accompanied by a wheelchair. In 1992, Pope John Paul II instituted the *World Day of the Sick*, to be celebrated every year on 11 February, the anniversary of the first apparition of Our Lady to the young (she was fourteen at the time) Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes. What most commands the attention of the simple visitor or pilgrim to Lourdes is the presence of a crowd of sick people and people with disabilities. Officially, more than 80,000 come to the Sanctuary every year from all countries of the world.

Lourdes is also a place where congresses of a theological-pastoral character are organised. An international congress is planned for 10-13 February 2017 in concomitance with the twenty-fifth World Day of the Sick, with the presence of Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Secretary of State of the Vatican.

Here is a fine testimony of the Camillian ministry exercised in the Sanctuary of Lourdes. It is provided by the Camillian chaplain, Fr. Musielak: ‘Lourdes receives people from all over the world who are attracted by this very special place, where we rediscover hope and joy, despite the difficulties of our daily lives. At the feet of the grotto we are able to give thanks to God for His love. We find Mary who, in her tenderness, takes us to her Son. Illness can be experienced as an injustice and thus a person feels that he is forgotten or even rejected by God. Through the sacrament of the sick, another pathway can be opened up when a person discovers that his suffering is lived in union with the passion of Christ. He finds that he is reconciled with God and realises that he is loved by He who created him. I have noticed that very often suffering is ‘transfigured’... In the grotto we can lay down our heavy burdens, the great dramas of our existence (cf. P. Zbigniew Josef Musielak, *Les Merveilles de Lourdes*, 2017, 12).

Bernadette Soubirous (1844-1879) was born to a very poor family. She had bad health (asthma) and was illiterate, and she was only fourteen when he experienced the first apparitions in 1858. After the

apparitions, she entered the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Nevers (a small town in the centre of France) and dedicated herself to looking after the sick sisters of her Order. She was called the nurse of the house. She fell ill and died at a very young age, at the age of only 35. Her incorrupt body has been kept in the convent of the Sisters of Charity of Nevers since 1925. Bernadette was beatified in 1925 and canonised by Pope Pius XI on 8 December 1933.

## **How did the Camillians come to Lourdes?**

The arrival of the Camillians in Lourdes was characterised by a series of events that almost made their very presence impossible. After the initial difficulties had been overcome, other problems arose for the first religious who had settled in Lourdes. We will record below some of the most important events of this history.

In May 1989, at the General Chapter held in Bucchianico, a motion of the Province of Piedmont was approved which involved the project of 'studying the possibility of establishing a Camillian presence in Lourdes, with a pastoral and vocational purpose'. The mission of setting in motion the necessary talks was entrusted to the Camillian Province of France.

On 22 February 1995, the then Superior General, Fr. Angelo Brusco, asked the Provincial Superior of France, Fr. Pierre Allheily, to study the feasibility of the project: 'the project of establishing in Lourdes an international community of Camillian religious who would dedicate themselves to ministry and the pastoral care of vocations'.

At the General Chapter of 1995, the Lourdes project was presented to those taking part. On 8 December 2001, a house worth 282,000 euros was purchased. A new house to accommodate various religious and visitors and pilgrims was also planned but this project has remained on the drawing board. At the present time, the Camillians still live in the original house, which, however, is only able to accommodate three religious.

The first Camillians to arrive were from Benin and Burkina Faso. The first was Fr. Jean de Dieu. In April 2005 Fr. Anicet Ametonou (Benin) and Fr. Bernard Nana (Burkina Faso) also arrived. On 30 November, an agreement was signed with the bishop of the diocese of Tarbes and Lourdes about the presence of a Camillian community in Lourdes. On 14 April 2006, the Superior General of the Order canonically erected the religious house in Lourdes. It was agreed at the outset that support for this religious community would be entrusted to the responsibility of the General Curia, given that the Province of France was not in an economic situation to take responsibility for it.

Unfortunately, the presence of these first young Camillian religious did not work. This was for a variety of reasons, both as regards pastoral ministry and at the level of fraternal relationships within the community, and they were moved out of Lourdes. The local bishop refused to accept new African religious. Given this reality and the impossibility of sending new members to this community, the Province of France, through its Provincial Superior, Fr. Thierry de Rodellec, thought about closing this Camillian experience in Lourdes. After describing this situation at a meeting of the major Superiors of the Order, the readiness of the Province of Poland to take responsibility for this mission emerged. A chronicler recorded this event in the following way: 'The Province of Poland, on specific conditions, agreed to send three religious to Lourdes, starting in the second half of the year 2008. The Lourdes project, starting at the end of 2008, will thus be managed by the Province of Poland'.

Today, fortunately, after all these events which made our presence in Lourdes almost impossible, everything seems to have been overcome: we have a fine Camillian community which is esteemed by everyone, by the people up to the bishop.

## **The Camillian community of Lourdes**

With this visit to the Camillian community of Lourdes (France), I ended my pastoral visit to the Province of Poland which has taken place in five stages on the following dates: on 12-23 May 2005, with

Fr. Gianfranco Lunardon, the Secretary General of the Order, I visited the Camillian communities in Poland on the occasion of the meeting of the major Superiors of the Order which took place in Warsaw; on 8-12 March 2016, with Fr. Laurent Zoungrana, the Vicar General of the Order, I visited the Camillian community in Madagascar (Fianarantsoa); on 19-21 June 2016, with Fr. Gianfranco Lunardon, I visited the Camillian community of Berlin (Germany); on 29 September to 3 October 2016, with Br. José Ignacio Santaolalla, I visited the community of Tblisi, the capital of Georgia in the region of the Caucuses. On all these visits, with the exception of the one to Madagascar, the Provincial Superior of the Province of Poland, Fr. Arkadiusz Novak, and his Vice-Provincial, Fr. Mirosław Szwałoch, were always with us.

Fr. Zbigniew Musielak, the Superior of the local Camillian community and a chaplain at the sanctuary of Lourdes, accompanied us on a 'catechesis' tour of the most important places in the sanctuary: the grotto of Massabielle where Our Lady appeared to the young Bernadette on 11 February 1858; the numerous chapels inside the sanctuary complex; the underground basilica; and the *Notre-Dame* accommodation centre (an enormous area that can accommodate about 900 sick or disabled pilgrims). We also met the bishop of the Tarbes and Lourdes, Msgr. Nicolas Brouwet, as well as Msgr. Xavier d'Arodes di Peyriague, the vice-rector of the sanctuary and the coordinator of the international service of pastoral care. We lunched with the chaplains of the sanctuary – about thirty-one diocesan and religious priests of various Congregations who provide pastoral service in the sanctuary on a permanent basis, offering their services for confessions, welcoming and listening, celebrations, and care for the sick through the ministration of the sacrament of the anointing of the sick. During the most important moments of the liturgical celebrations, with the presence of a large number of pilgrims, these 'permanent' chaplains are helped by another 150 priests who assist them on a temporary basis.

The Polish Camillian community came to Lourdes in the year 2008 and it is currently made up of three religious: Fr. Zbigniew Musielak, Fr. Marian Suierczek, and Fr. Piotr Długolek. They live together fraternally with a very intense ministerial and pastoral agenda and they help one another. In addition to service at the sanctuary, Fr. Marian provides pastoral care to a parish which has twenty-four chapels, and Fr. Piotr is a chaplain at a residence for elderly people, at a hospital, and at two communities of women religious. He is also responsible for housework (cooking, cleaning etc.) in the community.

On Sunday morning, 11 December, at 10.30, we had the privilege and the grace of celebrating the Eucharist in the grotto of Massabielle at the end of our pastoral visit to the local Camillian community.

### **Some recommendations and the prospects for future development**

From everything that we saw and heard in our meetings, we realised that you as Camillians are appreciated and esteemed for your work of ministry, both in the sanctuary and in the two parishes, both by the local leading figures and by the people.

You take part in an exemplary way in the local Church, in cooperation with the diocese, working as chaplains in various religious Congregations, and without losing the finality of our Camillian charism you have always placed the sick at the centre of your concerns and your activities. And at Lourdes there is no absence of sick and suffering people who come for healing and relief.

At a community level, you live in harmony, trying to help one another as regards your needs. May Our Lady of Lourdes conserve this fraternal unity! Nobody is perfect but we can support each other and help each other in line with our limitations or at least be tolerant of our differences.

Given that you live in a special place of profound Marian spirituality, your responsibility is greater as regards praying and educating people to pray and to contemplate beyond the chaos and frenetic pace of daily life.

Do not forget to come together in fraternal prayer and to pray for us, for the central government, for our sick brothers, and for the whole of our beloved Camillian Order.

Looking to the future, we perceive great potential for this Camillian presence of ours at Lourdes. One of the reasons that led us to go to Lourdes, the initial project, was to exercise a ministry that was profoundly in harmony with the Camillian charism and to be an international community, with a view to

activity involving the promotion of vocations. Has this project remained a mere utopia or can some attempts be made in this direction?

We believe that it would be very good for our young students to live in Lourdes, at least for a month, during their holidays, and to engage in a period of pastoral internship, undergoing intense ministerial experience under the supervision of some Camillian religious. This would help them a great deal in the process of discernment and growth as regards their Camillian vocations.

We believe that we will be able to speak much more about Lourdes in the context of our Order and of St. Camillus in the context of Lourdes, both as a potential for growth in our spirituality and ministry and as a possible source of new Camillian vocations. Thousands and thousands of young volunteers go to Lourdes to help the sick and people with physical disabilities. If people do not know about us, or if we do not make people know about us, or if we are timid in proclaiming our charism, it is clear that it will be difficult for us to attract new vocations.

We end this Message with our heartfelt thanks for the fraternal hospitality and welcome that we experienced amongst you. We felt very happy amongst you, in the house of our Mother, the Mother of Heaven, Our Lady of Lourdes.

*O beloved Mother, inspirer of mercy!  
You who appeared to Bernadette in the niche of the grotto of Massabielle,  
In the cold and the shadow of winter,  
You transfuse the warmth of a presence, the friendship of a smile,  
The light and the beauty of grace.  
In the emptiness of our lives, which are often dark and painful,  
Marked by pain, suffering and illness.  
In the emptiness of this world where evil is powerful,  
And at times confuses us as regards our beliefs of faith.  
Give us the grace and hope to be able walk in peace and serenity,  
The discernment of spirit always to do what is right and good  
In the eyes of God.  
You who guided Bernadette to the discovery of the spring,  
Accompany us, as well, towards He who is the source of eternal water and life,  
He who has given us the Holy Spirit to strengthen and illumine our steps  
In our Camillian and Samaritan ministry.  
Amen!*

Rome, 12 December 2016  
*Memorial of Our Lady of Guadalupe  
The Patron Saint of Latin America*

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***Fr. Leocir Pessini***  
***Superior General***

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*Fr. Laurent Zoungwana*  
*Vicar General*