

Opening Mass of the Lourdes Pilgrimage (23.07.23)
Church of St Bernadette, Carmel side
AMDG

On the other side of the river from here, stands a church above the Grotto. It's like nothing else on earth.

Right now, we're in a church built in the 1980s. It stands near the spot where St Bernadette knelt and, for the last time, saw Our Lady. It was commissioned by the local bishop. That's how it works. Whether you're from Leigh-on-Sea, Stansted Mountfitchet, or Walthamstow, your parish church, like all buildings, was the brainchild of someone on earth.

But there's an exception. One day, in the Grotto, Our Lady said to St Bernadette: 'Go and tell the priests to build a chapel here.' She did, and they did. And there, above the Grotto, rises the chapel that Our Lady requested. The only church on earth commissioned by heaven. Oh, there are legends around other churches but St Bernadette, who sought nothing for herself, can be trusted. In Lourdes we can enter a church that Mary built. And perhaps Mary is the only saint in heaven who can build a church on earth.

As you will know from the Old Testament, God had King Solomon build the Temple in Jerusalem, a place where the Israelites could meet their Lord. The Temple would be destroyed by the Romans but not before a new Temple had appeared: Our Lady, who carried in her womb and in her arms the Son of God. This is why she could build a church in Lourdes. Mary was herself a church. A spot where on earth heaven could be found.

This is why we should come to Lourdes. Why it was worth spending a night on a coach or leaving home at 3 am. Lourdes is Mary's gift to us and the chapel she built an invitation in brick and glass to meet her Son in prayer, while caring for others and sharing time together. Be ambitious for these days of pilgrimage. Even if you have come many times, don't settle into old, familiar attitudes.

On the other side of the river from here, stands a church above the Grotto. It's like nothing else on earth. Or it will be unless we become what Mary became, what her church is, what we are called to be: a man, a woman, where God can be found.