



**By Maryann Gogniat Eidemiller**

Marlene Watkins calls the Lourdes experience the “liquid grace of mercy.”

“The Gospels and the miracles of Christ and the mercy of God are tightly connected to Lourdes,” she said about the site in France where, in 1858, Mary appeared to Bernadette Soubirous. “The miracles and conversations are acts of grace — and acts of mercy.”

Watkins, a self-described “housewife,” in 2002 founded Our Lady of Lourdes Hospitality North American Volunteers based in Syracuse, New York. “We go to Lourdes to serve the sick and take care of them, and we take the sick to Lourdes,” she said. “Since our founding, we [have] brought over 4,000 to Lourdes in more than 200 pilgrimages. Then God has given us the grace to know that not everyone can go, so we bring the grace and mercy of Lourdes to them in virtual pilgrimages.”

Since 2004, volunteers have guided more than 115,000 people on interactive pilgrimages with processions, blessings and opportunities to touch rocks from the grotto and to dip their hands in water from Lourdes. Pilgrimages have been held at churches, schools, youth groups, universities and prisons in more than 38 states and in 14 countries on four continents.

“The liquid grace of mercy is changing people’s lives,” Watkins said. “The sick and the dying return to the sacraments. When we go to super maximum prisons, they cannot believe that they can be forgiven. I tell them that the pope himself sends a plenary indulgence with the pilgrimage, and that you can be forgiven and go to confession and have a new life. I have seen hardened criminals sobbing. The door opens, and you can see God’s mercy.”

As the Church begins this Year of Mercy, OSV is happy to select Watkins as a 2015 Catholic of the Year.

*Maryann Gogniat Eidemiller writes from Pennsylvania.*