

OSV Newsweekly

Virtual healing Catholic volunteers bring the faithful to Lourdes and Lourdes to the faithful Maryann Gogniat Eidemiller OSV Newsweekly



The faithful in Kenya participate in a virtual pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes. Virtual pilgrimages to the shrine take place all over the world. Photo courtesy Marlene Watkins

Every year, 6 million pilgrims visit the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes in southern France to pray for healing from illness and injury of all kinds. The sanctuary marks the spot where in 1858, 18 apparitions of Mary — identifying herself as the Immaculate Conception — appeared to Bernadette Soubirous. Giving the 14-year-old a message with the general theme of: “Pray and do penance for the conversion of the world,” Mary also instructed young Bernadette to dig in the dirt for a spring.

The water that flowed from that place has since brought comfort to many — and has inspired an entire network of volunteers to spread the good news of Mary’s message to the whole world.

Volunteer network

One of the main cogs in the wheel of the Lourdes sanctuary is the *Hospitalité Notre-Dame de Lourdes* — an association as old as the apparitions themselves.

“In the 19th century, if you were handicapped, you never left the house,” said Marlene Watkins, founder of *Our Lady of Lourdes Hospitality North American Volunteers*, the only North American branch of the French association. “Then Lourdes happened and people started taking the sick there by train. The good people in town would hear the train whistles and come to carry pilgrims to the grotto. The bishops saw their goodness, and through the graces, they became an association of the Church.”

Founded in 2002 in Syracuse, N.Y., the North American Volunteers facilitate the training and logistics for English-speaking volunteers at Lourdes; coordinate pilgrimages for those with special needs — including the ill and handicapped, their family members, and medical volunteers and caregivers; and introduce thousands more to Lourdes without requiring them ever to physically set foot in France.

“We go to Lourdes to serve the sick and to take care of them, and we take the sick to Lourdes,” Watkins said. “And God has given us the grace to know that not everyone can go, so we bring the grace of Lourdes to them with virtual pilgrimages.”

Since 2004, the North American Volunteers has guided more than 77,000 people to Lourdes via virtual pilgrimages held at parishes, schools, universities, prisons and youth groups. The group’s efforts have spanned more than 31 states and 10 countries on four continents. Their rocks — taken straight from the Lourdes grotto and blessed by a pope — have circled the globe and crossed over the North Pole.

CHANGED BY LOURDES

Marlene Watkins went to Lourdes in 2000 when her best friend won a trip of her choice. I think she chose Lourdes for me,” Watkins said. “She knew that I was in need of it.”

At the Marian shrine in France, she felt nourished by the waters and basked in the grace “of all these beautiful blessings.”

She never expected to return, but a year later she prayed for two women that she loved and realized that if they were ever going to Lourdes, she’d have to go with them. They arrived on Ascension Thursday 2001 when a record number of pilgrims kept them in line seven hours a day, for four days.

Watkins begged a man behind the gates to let them in. He summoned a woman who brusquely asked, “Can you touch your toes?”

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A volunteer anoints a woman at a water tap at the Lourdes sanctuary in France. Photo courtesy Marlene Watkins

The virtual pilgrimages, directed by Fran Salaun of Wappingers Falls, N.Y., are given by trained guides who recreate an interactive journey with projections, narration, prayer, (including the Rosary), a Eucharistic blessing and processions. Pilgrims can touch a grotto rock that has been blessed by a pope and dip their hands or wash their faces in water from Lourdes.

“Afterward, many people say that they feel that they have been to Lourdes,” Salaun said.

Pope Francis also has granted a plenary indulgence for the experience.

Dan Revetto of Los Angeles credits Lourdes and the virtual pilgrimages with giving him the courage to become a permanent deacon (he will be ordained later this year). He heard about the opportunity when he and his wife traveled to Lourdes, where he met Watkins.

Revetto trained as a guide and has since presented virtual pilgrimages to 700 people in parishes, probation camps, detention centers, schools and prayer groups.

He’s heard stories of healings, including how vision was cleared in an injured eye, circulation was returned to a damaged toe, and how shingles suddenly went away. There are spiritual blessings, too.

“There was a guard in a women’s probation camp who had been listening,” Revetto said. “He told them, ‘This is a story of conversion. It’s about change and love, and all of you have it within yourself to experience this.’ He was not Catholic, but he saw the story as complementary to the message they were trying to get through.”

LaVern Pottinger of Rice Lake, Wisc., has been a virtual pilgrimage guide for five years and accompanied Watkins to churches, schools, orphanages and a prison in Kenya.

Going to Africa, he said, blessed his spiritual life with reminders of what people will do to hear the message of Mary and God.

“We all have baggage in our lives, and she is a mother to everybody,” Pottinger said. “She is willing to accept everybody in her arms, if they want it.”

Peace and healing

For those who can make it to Lourdes, they’ll see a decided increase in the number of English-speaking volunteers. Before the American branch was formed, Watkins said, only 16 Americans were volunteering in Lourdes out of a total of 8,000. Now North American volunteers rank fourth.

Continuing the tradition of their predecessors, volunteers at the sanctuary transport pilgrims from the trains and assist them in the men’s and women’s baths.

Many seek spiritual or emotional healings, and others who are praying for physical relief from ailments may find at least peace. There have been 69 documented cases of miracles.

“We bring people who are on kidney dialysis or oxygen, or are paraplegic,” Watkins said. “We’ve had Hansen’s (leprosy) patients from Hawaii and people who died weeks later.”

Dr. Linda Satterlee, who practices near Grand Rapids, Mich., found her faith reaffirmed through volunteering.

“The strength and courage of the people from all over the world gave me an enlightenment into my profession and redefined my position as a physician,” she said. “The very business of medicine gets in the way of knowing and dealing with the person as a human being.”

In her time as a volunteer, Satterlee also has witnessed “incredible conversions of physical states,” when the infirm gained more energy and improved outlooks after spiritual and emotional healings.

*Changed by Lourdes
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“I didn’t know it then, but she wanted to know two things: was I physically able to bend over, and would I do what was asked of me without question?” Watkins said. “She told me, ‘Come with me this day to bathe the sick and the dying, and I give you my word that those you love will come in.’”

Watkins was led up steps, given an apron, and for seven hours she served women from all over the world. Many spoke English, but most of the volunteers did not. She suspected that she had been recruited from the line because she spoke English and realized that there was a need for English-speaking volunteers. In 2002, at the invitation of the Hospitalité Notre-Dame de Lourdes in France, she founded Our Lady of Lourdes Hospitality North American Volunteers.

Maryann Eidemiller writes from Pennsylvania.