



# À LA GROTTTE

*A SHORT STORY OF YOUR  
JOURNEY TO THE GROTTTO . . .*

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# *An introduction to your own spiritual journey to the Grotto . . .*

*Welcome to Lourdes!*

*Imagine having just traveled over one thousand miles from Gaming to Lourdes, finally arriving at your destination. The journey thus far has been uneventful except for the last stop where you stole away from the group to grab a snack and almost missed your connection. You had hoped to study on the train but were enamored with beautiful landscape views out the window. You arrive at the train station and look up to a sign la Gare de Lourdes. Your group of peers from school congregate together in the aisle of the train before disembarking. Together in a line, you jump from the train to the platform. Crowds of people surround you. You look up in awe, and try hard not to stare but are completely overtaken by the sense of compassion you witness in this small landing zone. Men in navy blue blazers physically assist the sick and disabled for safe passage off the train. Welcome to Lourdes. You begin to realize that the international language of Lourdes is love, manifested in a smile. Before you even notice that it begins to rain, a lump swells in your throat and heart.*

You cannot help but to consider the physical conditions many of these pilgrims have. You wonder if this will be part of your volunteer service. You think how blessed you are and feel selfish for thinking so. Your heart breaks as you see those who are less fortunate and suffering from physical struggles. You become wildly impressed by the different languages spoken and the cohesive teamwork in which this station runs. The pilgrims you see gleam with joy as if they too feel like they have finally arrived. The lump in your throat subsides to the loud noise of excitement you hear. As each of the volunteers on the team greets those who have made this journey with utmost excitement; the excitement is reciprocated. You have never seen anything in your life so profound.





# TO THE FOYER AVE MARIA

*You are exhausted from the travel and weary from the burden of carrying all you need. This weighs on your body. You reach inside your bag for a rain poncho and are reminded of the visitors who spoke about the Lourdes Mission Trip back at school. They tried their best to prepare you for the array of emotions you would feel by offering your service. A young energetic woman conveyed to our whole group that volunteers were needed in Lourdes, truly needed to make this journey possible for others. We now see for our own eyes. You look inside your belongings for the address to The Foyer Ave Maria. Your home for the next seven nights. Next on your checklist is to find your accommodations and your pilgrimage leader. As you join the others and navigate through the small town of Lourdes, you notice the exotic and beautiful architecture which you did not expect from a small and quaint town. You walk through cobblestone streets and alleys; you take pictures of this castle-like town located in the gorgeous Pyrénées Mountains. The loud dinging of basilica bells in the background are loud but also very uplifting. The chatter in the street is exhilarating. So many different languages spoken from all over the world.*

Using the GPS from your cell phone, you walk past your accommodations three times before realizing this is where you will stay. GPS always has a way of stating “you have arrived” and without failure never quite being at your destination. You are skeptical of whether you are in the right place. The Foyer Ave Maria doesn't look like your average hotel and there is no big sign or address to confirm this is it. The building is tucked away but to your surprise you see a friendly woman dressed in a navy blue suit waving her hand vigorously for you all to join her. The woman is beautiful and friendly offering handshakes and hugs and greeting the whole group. Her invitation is calming to you.

The accommodations are simple and humble, reminding you of the dormitories in school. The building is bustling with volunteers from all over the world. You share a room with a friend from school. Two twin beds will provide you both with a place of respite from the long days of volunteer service that await you. You're invited to settle in your rooms and gather in the first floor cafeteria. This room will be used for a daily greeting and meeting room.

After about a half hour, all of your peers are now inside the dining room anxiously awaiting instructions from the nice lady who greeted you. The group decides to take the rest of the evening to sight see since service or training will not start until tomorrow morning. You walk with a group of friends from the Ave Maria across le Pont Vieux (The Old Bridge) over the River de Gave. This bridge, that St. Bernadette herself once walked, will serve as your path to the Grotto. You see signs everywhere pointing to la Grotte de Lourdes. You wonder how long it will take to get there and contemplate whether you should be stopping at one of the many bistros, cafes and patisseries you walk by. You pass by a multitude of souvenir shops. Shelves lined with different sized containers, glass and plastic to fill full of Lourdes water. Rosaries and statues of Our Blessed Mother fill the rooms that have no doors so you can venture in and out freely. Beautiful paintings are stored behind the cash registers and guarded by what you can only assume is the shop owner. From the sidewalk, you're mesmerized by the paintings, so vivid, so full of detail and color and wish you had a way to bring something so large home with you to be reminded of the way you feel right now. You continue on to the Grotto and decide this must be the first thing you do in Lourdes.



# À la Grotte, to the Grotto . . .

As you continue to walk, you see the Sanctuary first before anything else. You are transported back to when you watched childhood movies. The castle-like structures of the Sanctuary along with the river are so similar. This feels like a magical Catholic Disneyland and you speed up your pace knowing this is it. Finally, The Grotto of Massabielle, where Our Lady first appeared to Bernadette. The feeling of being present in the Grotto with Our Lady is one that you have never experienced before. Absolutely breathtaking and the air that surrounds you is so peaceful you can't imagine ever leaving. Your heart stops racing from the anticipation and calms to a steady beat. You are filled with peace. You know now that this mission trip was right for you. The Grotto is quiet, all you can hear are faint whispers of prayers and the Rosary in the background.

You pull out a prayer card, Promise of Joy, that was just given to you by your pilgrimage leader. Now, close your eyes ... imagine the beautiful Grotto and prayerfully consider the sick and suffering as you pray, remembering all the pilgrims in search of miracles in Lourdes ... make the Sign of the Cross ... deep and slow like Bernadette ... then begin to pray the *Promise of Joy* prayer that we pray during our special time in Lourdes together...

O God, Thank You for calling me on  
this spiritual journey to know You more fully.

I promise to embrace with joy all that You  
present to me on this pilgrimage.  
Bless me to be patient, compassionate and loving as I  
meet You in others.

O God, give me the grace to welcome the  
unexpected, to  
see Your blessing in every moment and  
to be awed by holiness wherever encountered.

Please renew me to return home refreshed  
and transformed in You.

Amen.

# TO MASS AT THE CRYPTE CHURCH

One of your friends nudges you and whispers quietly that you have been praying for over an hour. There are others in the Grotto, praying with the same intensity. The Grotto is filled with people from all different backgrounds. Some have traveled together as a formed group to which you can tell by the matching ensembles they wear. Others are alone, quiet and prayerful unaware of the others around them. Mass is around the corner. We have to go.

As you head to church, the aroma of coffee beans permeates the air. This smell attracts all your senses and draws you in. Inside the dimly lit shop, a small group of European men stand in a small circle, sipping their coffees, exchanging laughs and stories in French. You can tell the men are European before you even hear them speak by their slender figures and the accessories they wear. They are dressed in hats, scarves, and slender fit pants that can only remind you of fashion magazines you have seen in a grocery store aisle back home. They do not look like tourists but more like they are enjoying a quick interruption in their workday.

Your group meets for our Welcome Mass at the Crypte Church. You walk up two big ramps (like the arms of Our Lady, welcoming us to her Son), stunning architecture. This is the first church built at the request of Our Lady to Bernadette. You're reminded of the apparitions you read as you prepared for pilgrimage. "Go, tell the priests to come here in procession and to build a chapel here" she told Bernadette at the 13th Apparition. We enter by way of a tunnel-like hallway that was dug by the men of the town of Lourdes, including Francois Soubirous, Bernadette's father. They worked 24 hours a day for three months chiseling through rock to complete the entrance tunnel and the chapel. The location is significant, directly above the Grotto. Bernadette was present in this chapel for its dedication. This was the only chapel Bernadette ever saw. Mass begins with the entrance hymn Immaculate Mary. The long corridor suggests a right of way to a place of silence and personal prayer. The church is smaller than you and the others imagined. Long dark wooden pews separated by an aisle lead you to believe only a little over one hundred people could fit. The rows had plenty of room to spread out amongst your group. The priest has kind eyes and acknowledges each one of us and we make the sign on the cross and sit.

After Mass, we begin to explore the holy reliquary where we lit a candle and marveled in the presence of precious relics from St. Bernadette. A blue drape hung from the very top of the ceiling with a portrait of Bernadette as a young peasant girl wearing a matching blue bandana.



# TO THE SAINT MICHEL CAFETERIA

The group ventures next to the Saint Michel cafeteria where we will eat lunch and dinner daily. Your phone has now served as a photo repository of landmarks to backtrack your way through town to ensure you find this place again. You are provided with meal tickets for the week. They look like raffle tickets back in the States. You're told to treat these tickets like cash! Each ticket will provide you with an opportunity to make selections from four different sections. You read the signs in front of the glass shield. Entree, Fromage, Dessert, and Poisson/Poulet. You're confused as to why the entree is first, but remember that this means starter in French; unlike the restaurants you have been accustomed to your whole life. You start there. Many different selections of cheeses you are unfamiliar with but feel the urge to try and taste. A voice behind you from your pilgrimage leader encourages that when choosing dessert, go for the pastries over fresh fruit. She laughs and says "You will be walking miles and miles to burn them off". Lastly, you select chicken and vegetables. You take your tray and head to a table that has four seats at the end open. You are reminded to take the delicious French bread. The woman in the cafeteria points to her belly signaling how the bread will fill you up. You smile back, nod your head in appreciation and add to your tray. The debate for the best bread in the world is established by your first bite.

You sit next to volunteers that are wearing beautiful white nurse dress uniforms. The uniforms sparkle bright white in the fluorescent cafeteria lighting, immaculate and unspoiled, having worn only their best to be in the presence of Our Lady and her pilgrims. You are starving and are trying not to devour your food in front of such beautiful women. You strain to hear which language they are speaking. Possibly Italian. They share a smile, the international language of Lourdes. The women say "*che Dio vi benedica.*" You now know by the roll of their tongues, these women in fact are Italian. *God Bless* you too.



# BONNE NUIT GOOD NIGHT

*You head back to your room* exhausted after a big meal and a long walk. On your walk back, you see a backstreet of restaurants. Some have lined tables up outside due to the nice weather while music and street lamps light up the night. You're bewildered by how narrow the streets are. You are also slightly startled when the small cars drive by at accelerated speeds around the windy roads in town. What is the speed limit here, you ponder? You contemplate how the cars in the states would ever fit.

You want to get as much sleep as you can to be prepared for tomorrow. What will this week bring? Will you be able to physically help the pilgrims? You worry! Will you be able to keep your emotions together when the time comes to go in the Piscines, the baths? You wonder! Before you can worry too much about unknowns your head hits the pillow and you rest for a week full of adventures, experiences, traditions, processions, prayer and service.

*Bonne nuit*

GOOD NIGHT