

## From the Diary of Bishop John Francis Norton – 1925

### Inscription....

*Diary kept for my dearest Mother  
on the P. & O Steamer "Mongolia"  
by John F. Norton  
With the Australian National  
Pilgrimage to Rome & Lourdes 1925.*

17<sup>th</sup> May

When dawn came we could see the lovely country we were passing through. It was "fair as the garden of the Lord". All during that day it continued the same- miles and miles of beautiful vineyards, crops of many kinds, long white limestone roads bordered with plane and poplar trees. Every few miles there was a town or village with charming old churches raising their spires among the tiled roofs. Many of the hills were castle crowned. No wonder they call it "La Belle France", no wonder they fight with the fury of tigers for its defence, no wonder that later on at Lourdes in the great processions when the intercessor cries out "Notre Dame de Lourdes sanvez de France" they reply in a very passion of piety.

At 7.30am we were in Toulouse and it was arranged that our special train should stop there for two hours to give us the opportunity of having Mass and having our breakfast. We had our coffee and roll first and then we set out to Mass. Fortunately the nearest Church to the railway is the chief sight of Toulouse. It was begun, I afterwards learned, in 1080 and is supposed to be the first Romanesque Church in existence. St Sermin or Saturnin in whose honour it has been erected was martyred by being dragged by the bull he had refused to sacrifice to Jupiter. The Archbishop celebrated Mass and then we had a little time to see the wonders of this lovely church in the paintings, windows and stone work. Then we visited the crypt. It has a number of most precious relics- St Barnabas, St. James Major, St Jude, part of the Crown of Thorns and of the True Cross, but particularly of the head and body of St Thomas Aquinas. I said a little prayer at them all and then had to hasten back to the train.

The journey continued through similar beautiful scenes to those we had seen earlier in the morning, but now the loveliness was enhanced by glimpses of the Pyrenees, their lofty heads covered by snow that glistened in the sun. About one o'clock we stopped for a few moments in Tarbes, and then we knew the object of our pilgrimage was not far off. An hour later we were in Lourdes.

I lost no time once the Bishop was safely in his room in getting into the grounds very close to the entrance of which was our hotel fortunately. There before my eyes were the Churches with which we are so familiar through pictures. The beautiful grounds were clad in a mantle of vivid green, the trees, especially the fine chestnut trees were in blossom, the long grass was full of wild flowers, it was like paradise. When I mounted the steps that lead to the top of the Rosary Church whose dome is now surmounted by a bronze crown and cross, given by Ireland, I looked in the direction of the Grotto and I saw that in front of it a large body of the pilgrims were forming in procession. We knew later that they came from Belgium. A



banner was carried in front. Then came the men, hundreds of them with lighted candles. A Bishop carried the Blessed Sacrament. It was followed by a great concourse of men and women, amongst whom I joined. We wended our way slowly round in front of the Rosary Church. Here, on two sides of a square the sick were arranged in invalid chairs. All around a great throng of their friends were repeating after the priest the invocation for the sick, "Lord we adore you- Lord we hope in you"- "Lord we love you" "Lord he whom thou lovest is sick" " Lord if you wish you can cure him".

The Bishop carried the Blessed Sacrament into the square and then blessed with it each of the sick in turn. Then the people were blessed. The beautiful ceremony was not over a moment too soon, for at times the singing was lost in the thunder peals and soon heavy drops began to fall, the first of a great downpour. I got into the Church among the Belgians who were about to say the Rosary. There are two pulpits occupied by two priests. One gave a little explanation of the 1<sup>st</sup> mystery, then the people on the Gospel side announced the first part of the Our Father and the Hail Mary and they were answered by those on the Epistle side. At the end of the decade came many invocations, both priests and people kneeling and facing the altar with arms extended. Then, the priest in the 2<sup>nd</sup> pulpit explained the mystery, and so on alternately. It was most impressive and I could have stayed there for hours.

At night there was the "procession aux flambeaux" in which thousands joined. Beginning at the Grotto they wended their way up the right hand rampart (rampe means a slope) and down the other. Then, along the esplanade of St Michael, singing "Ave Maria of Lourdes". Then they came back to the refrain "Ave, Ave, Ave Maria"- they lifted on high the long candle that each one carried, giving a real significance to the "Hail Mary". Each little group of the procession sang together, or tried to, and the result was not a harmonious chorus, it is true, but a wonderful exhibition of spontaneous love for the Mother of God.

When the procession had finished, all assembled in the open space in front of the Rosary Church and, led by one of the priests, the people sang all together the Nicene Creed in Latin. At the end each one brought his candle, now half burned, and placed it in a receptacle near the Grotto, so that the two old men who have the happy task of tending the votive candelabra might not be in need of lights on the following day. It was now past nine, yet many remained praying still, but the majority made their way home to bed.