



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.*

18th May (2nd day in Lourdes)

I had the privilege of beginning my second day in Lourdes by celebrating Mass in the Rosary Church, where there are a large number of altars. During the forenoon a number of the Australian pilgrims, myself amongst them, were enrolled as "brancardiers"- stretch bearers- whose duty it is to bring down from the hotels the sick who are to bathe in the miraculous water, or wait in front of the Rosary Church for the Blessed Sacrament procession. At the "Hospitalite" the headquarters of the brancardiers where our names were entered we were given our "bretelles" or straps for the shoulders. I being a priest had one of leather, for it is a badge of long and honourable service in this wonderful organisation of men of every nation and rank who come to do what they can for Our Lady's sick at Lourdes. One of our companions in arms is a Belgium Baron who spends his two vacations annually in this glorious work. Another gentleman is from Chile who thinks little of making the long journey from his native country each year to wear his "bretelle". I felt quite proud of mine. Though in looking after my patient I had not to use it, except to show those at the Piscinas that I had authority to enter, not only in the railed in space in front of the Bathing places but even the Piscinas themselves.

My next concern was to secure an invalid's bath chair from a hospital in Lourdes. He brought this to the Hotel Moderne where we were staying and had it at the door of the lift, so that when we brought the Bishop down his chair was ready. When the time for the bathing of the sick came we wheeled him down the street into the grounds in front of the Grotto. Many other individuals were being brought there in preparation for entering the baths. When the time came we brought the Bishop to the door of the Piscines and helped him in. Inside, the bathing places are curtained off and the actual baths are simply rectangular concrete structures. Our brancardiers undressed the Bishop and then unaided he went into the icy water. All the time we kept repeating the invocations which, printed in many languages, hung on cards on the walls. The Bishop had immersed himself twice. We dressed him, not drying him as is the Lourdes custom, and getting him into his chair we made way for the next sufferer. As the time for the afternoon procession of the Blessed Sacrament was near, we brought the Bishop back in front of the Rosary Church, where the sick in their chairs are arranged around a hollow square while their friends fill all the outside space. The Procession of the Blessed Sacrament began at the Grotto and was joined in by all the pilgrims, thousands in number. Only the Bishop who was carrying the Blessed Sacrament and the Deacons and subdeacons entered the square formed by the sick, and then walking from one sufferer to another, he raised over him the Monstrance in blessing. This is the time when Our Lady chooses to work a miracle. The air vibrates with the prayers of the friends in response to those of a couple of priests who lead the invocations "Lord, he whom thou lovest is sick" "Lord we believe, increase our faith" "Lord that I may see" "Lord that I may walk" "Lord that I may hear".

Today there was no visible miracle, but our Bishop gave a grand demonstration of faith, for when the Blessed Sacrament reached him, he suddenly left his chair, and before we knew what had happened he was kneeling on the ground before the Monstrance. Such an effort might easily have proved fatal, but Our Lady of Lourdes who had sustained him when he plunged into the icy water of the piscines now gave him strength. When the Blessed Sacrament had passed, we assisted him back to his chair and afterwards wheeled him to the Hotel. That night, again the candlelight procession in which we all joined.