



### **In Lourdes with a Group of Pilgrims from Belgium**

**LOURDES, France** - From 14 to 20 July, I guided a group of pilgrims to Lourdes. A total of 25 people attended the pilgrimage, and it was a mixed group coming from the different provinces of Flanders. These days, almost all dioceses in Belgium organize pilgrimage to Lourdes in the summer. They usually come in big groups and were accompanied by many volunteers. These dioceses take their pilgrims in special trains that travels directly to Lourdes. In this manner, pilgrims need not to worry about changing trains or shifting their baggages from one train to another. These dioceses take also sick, bed-ridden, and wheelchair-bound pilgrims in the trains. The pilgrimage is well-organized, and many young volunteers are extremely happy to accompany these vulnerable people.

We, Montfortians, traveled with these dioceses in the same train and they were kind enough to allot us a few seats. Since pilgrims came from different provinces, we arranged a bus to pick them up in different places and to bring them to the railway station. We all met at the entrance of the railway station and then I took charge of guiding the group to the platform and the compartment. With the blessing of God this year, we had a fruitful pilgrimage devoid of difficulties which arise often because of the hot or rainy weather. In fact, the pilgrims were cooperative and showed much interest in learning about our spirituality and the life history of Montfort.

Right at the beginning of our pilgrimage, we provided them books that contain Montfortian spiritual elements that lead them to experience the grace-filled moments experienced by Saint Bernadette in Lourdes. Our daily programme was planned in such a way to help the pilgrims experience God's presence in this holy place, embedded in the apparition of Our Mother. I, as a guide, helped them to experience a moment of peace, grace, and communion rooted in

Montfortian Spirituality. I let them know why organizing pilgrimage is integral to Montfortian charism and mission. Our faith journey for five days in Lourdes and the two-day travel in the train became moments of great opportunity for us to initiate the pilgrims into our rich spirituality.

Furthermore, my talks and spiritual guidance highlighted the significance of Mother Mary in our Christian life and for growing in holiness. I explained to them why Mary can be a trustful means in knowing Jesus and for uniting ourselves with Jesus, the Eternal Incarnate Wisdom. I was really satisfied with the response of the people when we reached the last day in which I exhorted the importance of renewing our baptismal promises to reconcile ourselves with God in Jesus and to restore our relationship with God in the Marian pilgrimage place of Lourdes. When I asked them whether they were willing to sign a contract with God after reading the baptismal promises with full awareness and understanding, all of them said yes.

Likewise, my explanation of the importance of renewing the baptismal promises struck many of them and are willing to do that every year. With excitement, they even asked for the dates of the pilgrimage next year. On the last day, I preached a short sermon on why Mary must be venerated and how this veneration is faithful to the message of the Gospel. The pilgrims appreciated my sermon and a few people who saw it online sent me a word of appreciation for explaining the significance of Mary in the words of Montfort. In my view, pilgrimages offer us opportune occasions for teaching people the importance of the renewal of the baptismal promises and the consecration to Jesus through Mary.

*Fr. Nepolean JAMES RAJ, SMM*