

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Immaculate Heart of Mary; Knights of Columbus State Deputies

Immaculate Heart of Mary

Knights of Columbus State Deputies

New Haven, CT

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If you have ever been to Lourdes, perhaps for the international military pilgrimage in which the Knights of Columbus play such a special role - then you know that this shrine is a place rich in God's graces. Last month, in the first days of May, I had the privilege of taking part in an international pilgrimage to Lourdes, sponsored by the Order of Malta. Fr. Bianco and I travelled to Lourdes on a chartered flight out of Baltimore, a flight that numbered some 300 pilgrims, about 70 of whom were *malades*, that is to say, people suffering from significant illnesses.

It was a beautiful thing to see how lovingly the Knights and Dames of Malta cared for these people - some of whom were very young, some in the prime of life, and still others in their advancing years. Such love and care was a beautiful, real-life affirmation of all that we believe regarding the dignity of the human person, especially the vulnerable.

On the way to Lourdes, I looked forward to celebrating Mass at the Rosary Basilica. I gathered the intentions that I wanted to present to the Blessed Virgin Mary at the very spot where she appeared so many times to St. Bernadette, and revealed herself to all the world as the Immaculate Conception. I recalled how close I felt to the Blessed Mother on pilgrimages in the past and I hoped that my experience would be similar on this trip.

On this pilgrimage, I did indeed experience a closeness to Mary's heart but that closeness came to me in an unexpected way. It came to me through the hearts of the *malades* with whom I was privileged to travel. The organizers of the pilgrimage

looked after my spiritual well-being by ensuring that I would sit at every meal with a different group of *malades*. During those meals, I came to know them very well. I can tell you that those *malades* are bearing some very heavy crosses. It was a humbling experience to sit with them as they opened their hearts to me and to one another. They talked about their lives, their loved ones, their illnesses, their prognosis, and in the process a bond of love was created at the table. Amid their sufferings and challenges, there was no self-pity but rather a lot of joy. Their hearts rejoiced, like Mary's, in God their Savior. I was deeply edified.

What took me by surprise, however, was my encounter with the *malades* near the Grotto as I visited with them before they went into the baths and again after they reemerged from them. On the way in some of them were, understandably, apprehensive. I thought it was my job just to offer a word of reassurance, to say a word about Mary's loving heart and her closeness to us, her children.

When they emerged from the baths, I encountered them again, and this time it was they who offered me the look of love. They overwhelmed me with the tender love of Mary's pure and sinless heart. Almost without exception, they radiated the joy of which today's readings speak - the joy of Isaiah - "I rejoice heartily in the Lord" - the joy of the Psalmist - "My heart exalts in the Lord" - both of which point to Mary's joy when the living Word of God found in her Immaculate Heart the entry point into human history: "My spirit finds joy in God my Savior!" she said. *This* was the joy written on the faces of those *malades*, the happiness that shone in their eyes, the love that words could not express. Many of them just said, "I'll never forget this!" Like Mary, they will keep the favors of God stored carefully in their hearts.

I recount this beautiful experience that God in his mercy allowed me to have because it goes to the heart of the mystery of love the Church is celebrating in these days... and because that mystery of love is of such great importance to us as the family of the Knights of Columbus. Yesterday, we acknowledged our need for the redeeming and healing love of Jesus as we consecrated ourselves to his Most Sacred Heart. Today, our eyes of faith see in the Immaculate Heart of Mary a pure and limpid reflection of the merciful love in the heart of her Son.

And if *Jesus' heart* overflows with that merciful love we cannot do without, *Mary's*

heart overflows with a maternal love that invites us, gently yet persistently, to allow the Holy Spirit to form *in us* a heart not unlike the heart of her Son: a heart that is shaped by the Beatitudes, obedient to God in all things, a heart suffused with all the virtues, a heart redeemed and full of inner joy. As our Mother in the order of grace, Mary encourages us by prayer and example to repent, to believe, and to attain in our lives that purity of heart by which one day, God willing, we too shall see God face-to-face.

What the *malades* illustrated for me so powerfully is that humble hearts can indeed be touched with the grace and glory of Jesus Christ and warmed with Mary's tenderness . . . and that such loving, faithful hearts are more persuasive in handing on the faith than all the books and treatises on holiness that were ever written. They taught me anew that the Lord and his Mother want nothing more than that our hearts be filled each day with holiness, virtue, generosity, compassion, and joy. And when *that* happens we too become messengers of divine love; we too become messengers and instruments of charity – that charity that comes from God and works in and through us – for nothing is impossible for God!

Heart of Mary, like unto Jesus – pray for us!

Vivat Jesus!