

## LOURDES 2008

When Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher visited Pope John XXIII in 1960, the first visit of its kind since the Reformation, he was apparently rather astonished when the Pope's initial remarks included a warm commendation for the revival of the shrine at Walsingham. Fisher was no Anglo-Catholic, but even where the Oxford Movement had made rather more progress than it had in his headmasterly mind, anything other than the most subdued Marian devotion has generally been seen by most Anglicans as impossibly exotic and potentially superstitious. And of course the culture of Marian devotion in the Roman Catholic Church appeared to lend justification to this suspicion: apparently detached from any firm scriptural moorings, it built binding dogma on tradition defined by Papal decree, and then surrounded the ensuing theological superstructure with a visionary, often apocalyptic piety. Not for nothing has the ARCIC process struggled most to find consensus in the area of Mariology.

So when Dr Fisher's successor the current Archbishop of Canterbury agreed to join the pilgrimage organized by the Society of Mary and the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham to Lourdes in this one hundred and fiftieth anniversary year of the Marian apparitions there, he was committing himself to a bold ecumenical act. For Lourdes is not a sanctuary which can be taken moderately: it is pre-eminently the shrine at which Mary is honoured as the Immaculate Conception, the title by which Our Lady revealed herself to the peasant girl Bernadette at the rubbish dump of a small Pyrenean town in 1858, only four years after Pope Pius IX had defined Mary's freedom from Original Sin as part of the deposit of faith. Indeed, the pen with which he carried out this act of magisterial machismo is preserved in the treasury of the shrine.

There is of course just enough Anglican theological hay with which to make bricks here: Thomas Ken writes of Mary as *cleansed from congenial, kept from mortal guilt*, and Jane Shaw has shown us more recently how the miraculous was rather more prominent than we once thought in post-Reformation England. But this pilgrimage led by the Archbishop and in which eight bishops, seventy priests and five hundred laity took part was not looking to be tentative. It was looking to come to the place where pre-eminently for millions of souls over the past one hundred and fifty years prayer has been valid, and to bring our own penitence and intercession to the grotto of the apparitions which has been called the 'ear' of the Catholic church.

The boldness of this gesture was matched by the generosity of the welcome we received. The Archbishop's banner flew over the shrine grounds for the duration of the pilgrimage. At the great International Mass at the heart of the pilgrimage, twenty thousand people heard the Archbishop preach, while one of our deacons

read the gospel in English and our ordinands served. In his homily, the Archbishop related Bernadette's encounter with Mary to that of Elizabeth in the gospel of Luke: to both, Mary comes as a missionary of the Christ she bears in her womb, passing on this joyful truth not by *the communication of rational information from one speaker to another, but a primitive current of spiritual electricity*. At Lourdes, Mary calls to Bernadette as one unlettered virgin peasant girl to another, and the message which she brings is what the Archbishop called *our 'Elizabeth' moments -when life stirs inside, heralding some future with Christ that we can't yet get our minds around*. The Archbishop developed this theme subsequently in the ecumenical colloquium which took place with Cardinal Kaspar: the physicality of Mary's Godbearing elucidates both the grounding of the Gospel in history and the way in which that history finds its continuation in the sacramental life of the Body of Christ.

What did the pilgrimage achieve? Cardinal Kaspar described it as a little miracle of ecumenism and there were many powerful, moving images to bear this out: the Guardians of the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham taking part in the torch-light Procession; the Archbishop walking bare-headed behind the Blessed Sacrament as the desperately sick were blessed; his meditation and prayer in the grotto of the apparitions. And for us as individual pilgrims there was the opportunity to fulfil our own intentions: to receive reconciliation and forgiveness for our sins, and for the sick to pray for healing of body and soul. The success of the pilgrimage as an ecumenical event owed everything to the willingness of inspired individuals to transcend old differences: the perseverance of Fr Graeme Rowlands who for thirty years has been bringing Anglicans to Lourdes and the willingness of the Archbishop to express through pilgrimage the eirenic search for common ground which has been the inspiration of the ARCIC process. And as Anglicans committed to the Catholic character of our inheritance we were left with a hard question: what justifies our continued separation from those with whom we share so much?

*The Revd Canon Dr Robin Ward  
Principal of St Stephen's House, Oxford*

