

Diary Report from Sr Eileen McGrath, Pax Christi member from London writes of her volunteer with experience with Pax Christi , Lourdes, August 2008

What a wonderful opportunity to experience thousands of Catholics from all over the world gathered together in one small place - Lourdes, for the 150 Anniversary of the Apparitions of Mary to Bernadette. There were Chinese, Vietnamese, Koreans, Japanese, Sri Lankans, Africans, Americans and people from all the European countries.

Pax Christi founded by a French woman and now international in 50 countries, has a beautiful room very near the grotto but situated among other pavilions i.e. Legion of Mary, Travellers, Mission Program, Priestly / Religious Vocation, and Pastoral Care of Families. As I sit here writing about my experience I gaze from the open door to the Basilica of Lourdes.

This place is called the "House of Peace". I work with Claire Touzard from Paris who has already helped with the previous week because the person fell ill. Claire is an artist and does beautiful calligraphy to illustrate manuscripts. We complement each other and work very well together. We work from 9.00 am to 12 am and 14 to 18 (2.00 - 6.00). We have a small kettle to make tea so I tell Claire we welcome people with a cup of tea.

As we are off the beaten track and most of the organised pilgrimages are following their own programs we make the most of callers who come for a variety of reasons.

13th August

I arrive at Pau airport and had to make my way to Lourdes by taxi to "Ave Maria" Hotel. It is not a hotel as such but clean basic accommodation for all the volunteers and those of modest means. I am given tickets for the meals for the week and I am very warmly received. As it is now lunch time I queue for a very substantial lunch. Then I make my way to the Pax Christi pavilion.

I attend a meeting organised by the "Pastoral Care of families" which was organised during our lunch time. The speaker shared about what goes on in prisons and the terrible effect this has on families who are in "prison" themselves. I shared how I write to a prisoner in Nth Ireland for the past 12 years and how this can give great support to prisoners. Then after a brief rest I arrived at our "House of Peace" and met Claire for the first time. She did not speak English and was very happy to have someone to speak English to our visitors. I speak French. A French man called Bernard came to visit us and tried to practice his English with me but as Claire did not understand I asked him to speak in French for Claire's sake. He came to visit us on 3 occasions and enjoyed our cup of tea but Claire was able to help him with his problems.

People drop in for all sorts of reasons i.e. to phone for a taxi for an elderly American priest who came to speak in the church next door about the Joy of Mary. I used this occasion to speak about Pax Christi and to give those with him literature in English. As he came to speak 3 times we became friends with some of the American people and they came in to say goodbye, thank you, and to embrace and bless me. Hopefully a seed for Peace was sown.

14th August

A mother and her autistic daughter from Toulouse come by and we pray for peace together. The mother is aware of the work of Pax Christi and confirms how peace is so necessary in our world. A young nurse from Paris drops in and together we pray for peace. Two people from the Caribbean call in and we give them information about our work. A young woman from the Philippines who lives in Paris with an American family tells of her longing to become a religious sister. She needs to talk and to be listened to in her search. A couple come and share about peace, one of them is a Muslim.

A mother comes with her daughter Karla who will be 3 on the 15th August. Karla draws a picture puts it in front of the small statue of Mary, kisses the statue and we pray for her new sister who is due to arrive in September. A French couple come looking for more information about Pax Christi and before they leave I invite them to pray and they call their daughter who was outside, we pray together and they tell us that she is entering the Benedictines on the 15th August. This was a very enjoyable first day. The Pax Christi priest in Lourdes, Fr Michael, came to welcome me warmly, he already knew Claire, and he bought us a bag of sweets!

15th August feast of the Assumption

This is a National Holiday in France. The Cardinal of Paris came to Lourdes to concelebrate the Mass as it was the National French Pilgrimage. There were thousands in the large park at the other side of the grotto. The weather was mixed with showers, sunshine, a rainbow and more sun. We attended this open air Mass. Two sisters from Central Africa drop in for information about something else but I invite them to sit down and write something about Peace. This is what they wrote:

No to violence. No to war. No to genocide. No to racism. No to bomb attacks.
Yes to fraternity. Yes to sharing. Yes to humility
I SAY YES TO PEACE. *Jo Kirby age 15*

Peace is something universal. The slogan "Peace and Love" is not a slogan
for fun but it means the love we have for others. *Iwada age 12*

We put them on the wall. They are wonderful.

A woman comes in and asks us to pray for her nephew Damien who is autistic. She comes to Lourdes to pray for him and cries as she tells us about him. She works for *Catholic Action for Children* and recently visited Madagascar. She takes some of our literature about Peace. A mother with her two year old child from the Ivory Coast asks if we can heat the bottle for her child. We are delighted to be able to oblige. She tells us that she came to France because of the war in her country and hopes to begin Pax Christi in her parish in Paris. She showed us how she puts her baby on her back. An Italian family, father, mother in a wheel chair and son Mark 15 come asking for a cup to have water so the mother can take her tablets. It is another occasion to share about peace and they promise to pray.

Two young people from Belgium come looking for the ping pong table. Of course I take the opportunity to speak about peace. Pierre age 19 points at the large poster of the wall in Palestine and he tells us that his father is a doctor and has been out to help the Palestinian people and said it is terrible the way they are being treated. He also is studying to become a doctor and wanted to go with his father in November when he returns to Palestine but his mother cried and begged him not to go as it is too dangerous. It was wonderful to speak and listen to these two young people about the need to work for Peace.

16th August

3 people from Brussels come and have a great chat about the need for peace. A woman from Ukraine begs us to pray for peace between Georgia and Russia and of course her country. A young woman from Lyon comes in for a chat. I notice she is wearing two hearing aids and I tell her about the Jesuit Fr. Paul Fletcher in Stamford Hill, London, who like her was born deaf and how he celebrates Mass using sign language. She was very touched by this and cried. She stays a long while and tells us that she is going to begin her studies in medicine and will study for 11 years to be able to work with children who are deaf and dumb. She was helping the sick children in Lourdes. It was a real privilege meeting her and she promised to pray for peace.

17th August

Bishop Thomas Valentino coordinator of Pax Christi in Italy calls to say hello and we ask him to send literature in Italian to us. He promised to do so.

A young man calls in and shared about his suffering with his colleagues at work. He went away happy and promised to become a peacemaker. A young boy comes in looking for a bin to put his rubbish. I seize the moment and we have a wonderful conversation about peace. God can make use of a wastepaper basket!

18th August

Today the weather is warm and sunny, I have not mentioned that last week it was very cold, wet and windy. I am so happy for all the pilgrims who have arrived, there are thousands of them. It is a wonderful place to be this year - year of the Jubilee.

Two women from Strasburg come in and speak about the horror of the wall in Bethlehem. They intend to work for peace
Several others come in and ask for prayers for a mother who has abandoned her 3 children. She asks for peace in this family which is divided.

The very tall archbishop of Strasbourg calls in to say hello, he tells us he was a former chaplain of Pax Christi. He was going to lead a penitential service for his people in the church of Notre Dame which is beside us.

19 August

It is our last day in Lourdes. During these days we visited the pavilions of those near us and supported each other. We had a wonderful dialogue with the deacon beside us who works all year round with the travellers. A Spanish traveller was beatified by Pope John Paul 10 years ago, his story has not yet been translated into English and they are hoping to do this soon. We had the great joy of welcoming Josie Campbell, from Basildon who worked for Pax Christi in England. She also spoke to the deacon as she has spoken up for the travellers in her area.

During our lunch breaks I attended two conferences organised by the families. A sister spoke about her experience in Cameroon and how she was reconciled with two men in prison who attacked her at gun point. She said it was the most difficult thing to do. A deacon shared about the oppression in Vietnam by the Communists.

A French doctor and his wife shared about their experience in Mali trying to improve the maternity service there. A sister from Laos spoke about the communists in her country and another sister shared the very moving story of the Martyrdom of the Ugandan martyrs.

Today Madame Françoise Boneu the Pax Christi delegate in Lourdes came to visit us, we were delighted to welcome her with a cup of tea and to share some of our experiences with her. While she was with us a troubled young man with disabilities came to share his story with us and when I asked him what peace meant to him he took my hand and said he had to leave and make peace with those who caused him suffering. It was very moving. As you can see this was a very rich experience for both of us.

We attended Mass at the Grotto early in the morning and managed to make our pilgrimage by visiting the home of Bernadette, the parish church where she was baptised and the hospital where she made her first communion and the grotto of course. One evening I attended the international youth Mass which was a truly wonderful experience. A young man in a wheel chair from L'Arche carried the book of the Gospel and he was radiant. A large white cloth was carried shoulder high by the boy scouts and placed on the altar so that it came down the steps of the altar like an invitation to a heavenly banquet. Three young women from Italy, Spain and Germany carried large jars for the wedding feast of Cana. A young man carried a large jug and poured water into the jars. It was a truly beautiful experience.

Our last evening we attended a conference entitled "Peace in the great lakes of Africa". Burundi, Congo, Rwanda. A priest called Father Gaston from Goma spoke as a member of Pax Christi who suffered in Rwanda. The room was packed and the Bishop of Lourdes attended with a wonderful French priest who lives in the City Saint Pierre with the homeless and poor people. We were hoping to meet Fleur who had a group of young people and is doing the same work as Pat Gaffney but unfortunately we did not meet her. Instead we watched a wonderful video of her work in France.

20th August

We both left Lourdes thankful to have had the joy of working with Pax Christi. Both Claire and I were very far from being 18+ but we were young at heart and felt passionate about the work of Pax Christi and above all we were faced with the challenge of being Peacemakers and having this peace of Christ in our hearts. Thank you Pax Christi France for inviting us and hopefully you will have volunteers from Italy next year.

Pax, Peace Pace, Paix to all. Sr. Eileen Mc Grath