**Tour of St Bernadette's relics 'exceeds expectations' of clergy across the country.**

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A candlelight procession snaked its way around the grounds of the historical Holy Cross Abbey in Tipperary, the long queue making it look like a respectful group of mourners waiting to extend their sympathies to a grief-stricken family.

But instead, there was a joy to be felt in the congregation as those waiting to get inside the door of the church felt that every step was one closer to coming close to the relics of St Bernadette, the Lourdes visionary.

It was not the only candlelight procession during the two-month visit of the relics to each of the 26 dioceses across Ireland, as organisers of the relics’ visit sought to bring those who cannot travel to the Marian shrine in Lourdes a chance to be part of some of the pilgrimage experience at home. As well as candlelight processions, healing ceremonies for the sick were also held.

On Tuesday afternoon, the relics of the popular saint left the Diocese of Elphin to be returned to Lourdes, after a farewell ceremony in Kiltoom, Co Roscommon. Tens of thousands of people turned out in the country’s 26 dioceses to welcome the relics of the saint beloved by Irish people.

St Bernadette, who was a shepherdess, experienced eighteen visions of the Virgin Mary in Lourdes, France in 1858 and went on to become canonised by the Catholic church.

The visit to Ireland is not the first time the relics have left Lourdes, having previously been taken around France, to the UK, Spain, Germany, Netherlands, Brazil, and America.

The relics’ arrival in the Ireland West airport at Knock in early September came after they were handed over at the grotto in Lourdes to Bishop Kevin Doran and pilgrims from the Diocese of Elphin. During the two-month visit, the relics were taken to Ireland’s own Marian shrine in Knock, where hundreds of pilgrims attended Masses in the church on the site of the apparition of Mary in 1879.

Young people wearing school uniforms turned out at churches across several dioceses, along with some families, and large numbers of older generations. Many touched the glass enshrining the relics, while others kissed it.

One of the organisers, Fr Gerard Fox, said: “It has certainly exceeded our expectations. People’s response has been wonderful. We have all taken a breath and said ‘wow’. The response that we have had back from the different host venues everywhere have had more people coming than they anticipated or planned.

“In some places, the queues were more than an hour and another thing people have commented on is the good humour. People weren’t annoyed that they had to wait.”

We have had a real cross section. There have been school groups, families coming. It has been right across the age range. It was noticeable to see the number of families who came.

The scenes around the country replicated those of visits of relics of other saints over the past two decades. For example, an estimated three million people turned out for the 11-week visit of the relics of St Therese of Lisieux in 2001, while tours in 2009 and 2012 were also popular.

The relics of St Anthony of Padua were in Ireland for a week in 2013 during which Catholics flocked to venues in Cork, Limerick, Wexford, Galway, Dublin, and Belfast. And once again, the faithful turned out in large numbers in Kerry in January 2023 when a glove which belonged to St Pio was handed over to the parish of Castleisland in Kerry.

Fr Fox said the visit of Bernadette’s relics are proof that people still have faith, even though “they might not express it regularly in terms of Mass attendance on a Sunday, but it is still part and parcel of who they are”.

He continued: “Something like Lourdes as well is inter-generational. Almost every house in Ireland has a bottle of Lourdes water that somebody’s granny brought back, or a rosary. It is there in the religious sensibility and this event just touched into that.

“St Bernadette’s connection to Our Lady of Lourdes is something that people have a love of, or an appreciation of but also Bernadette herself is what you would call a modern saint almost. Not contemporary but she is of an era where we have photographs of her. She was a poor young woman which makes her very accessible as well.

She is not some sort of far-distant character. People could appreciate she was a young girl who was sick who lived in poverty who had a life that touches into the reality of some people’s lives.

According to academic Dr Niamh Wycherley of Maynooth University, the reactions of Irish people to the visit of relics is not new, neither is it confined to the Catholic faith.

She has previously written on the cult of relics, which included reference to a visit to Ireland of relics of “holy martyrs” from Rome in the 7th century.

She says: “Essentially I would say that the Catholic veneration of saints taps into a need that seems to be common to many individuals and communities and from different backgrounds and faiths and historical eras, right up to the present day.”

She elaborates: “There are a couple of different things going on because there is a difference between organised religion and faith and religious beliefs. Sometimes they come together and sometimes they don’t. People today may feel very estranged from the Vatican and the Catholic Church but they might still have their own personal faith where they go to Mass every Sunday and pray to the Virgin Mary and subscribe to a Catholic ethos.

"But the veneration of saints' relics is kind of unaffected by that because it is doing a few things – it taps into something that is essentially human. It is the physical proximity of the saint’s relics, and you can nurture this intimacy and relationship with the saint in a way that you can’t do with God perhaps.”

She continued: “You can see echoes of this in the cult of the celebrity too — for example visiting the grave of Elvis. There seems to be this human thing that if you go to someone’s grave or you touch an item that they held in their lifetime, it makes you more connected with them.”

Fr Fox says it is now hoped that the visit will not just boost people's faith but will also lead them to visit Lourdes, explaining that pilgrimages to the French shrine are “heavily reliant” on volunteers to help take care of sick pilgrims.

He said: “The group of people who organised this from the Irish perspective are all pilgrimage directors, so we all have a connection with Lourdes and that is part of getting the message of Lourdes out to people.”