LOURDES, France – Past the teeming street and cramped tourist shops of Lourdes lie the prayerful precincts of the Domain, a gated enclosure of many acres where faith and hope reign and miracles happen.

Millions of pilgrims come here each year — many with halting steps or crutches, others lying on wheeled pallets pushed by volunteers — making their way beneath the soaring spires of the magnificent church to the grotto, where in 1858 a simple peasant girl named Bernadette Soubirous met a “beautiful lady” and received a message about prayer, penance and heaven that resounds throughout the world.

Under the direction of the Blessed Virgin, who identified herself as the “Immaculate Conception,” she unearthed an underground spring whose waters continue to heal body and soul.

The 150th anniversary of St. Bernadette’s first vision will be celebrated at the Marian Shrine, located in southern France, on Feb. 11, the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. Many thousands are expected to fill the Domain and fulfill the Blessed Virgin’s request for prayer and pilgrimages. While malades (sick or disabled persons) will come for physical healing, many more will seek spiritual healing or answers to their prayers.

“The essence of Lourdes is best expressed in this way: We are all sick and in need of healing of some sort, whether it’s body, mind or spirit,” said Joseph Metz, who has visited the shrine 21 times as an official with the Knights of Malta in New York City. The Knights sponsor an expense-paid pilgrimage with malades each year.

Dr. Richard Milone, a psychiatrist who serves as medical director of the annual Knights of Malta pilgrimage, said that during the week the malades and their families spend in Lourdes, he sees them develop a greater sense of peace, trust and acceptance of chronic and even fatal illness.

“For the most part, we don’t see physical healings,” said Dr. Milone, who is medical director of St. Vincent’s Hospital in Harrison, N.Y., a psychiatric facility. “What we see is an acceptance of their condition; a strength of spirit develops to go forward and trust in God. Sometimes a spouse will come with a sick husband or wife and be very angry, and they’re almost fighting with one
another. During the pilgrimage they will gain a level of acceptance and experience a peacefulness and calmness. That’s the miracle of Lourdes we see over and over again.”

Metz and his wife, Elissa, were in this category. After their 22-year-old son was involved in a fatal accident, they were bitter and questioning God. A friend who was a Knight of Malta urged them to join the order and assist on the pilgrimage.

“When we got to Lourdes the first time in 1996, we realized that we were just as sick as the malades we were serving. We were two parents who had lost a child,” said Metz. “We go every year now in memory of our son.”

Even secular insurance companies have recognized the healing benefits of Lourdes, sending their most seriously ill clients to the Marian shrine to help them gain a sense of acceptance and emotional strength.

An article in the Wall Street Journal last year told the story of a Dutch insurance company that sent a brain-damaged, blind young man to Lourdes. After the trip, in which he was cared for lovingly by volunteers and rubbed shoulders with hundreds of patients suffering even worse conditions, the young man said he was grateful that he could at least walk and go to work.

The jubilee year for the 150th anniversary began this past Dec. 8, feast of the Immaculate Conception, and ends on the same feast day this year. In December, Pope Benedict XVI authorized a plenary indulgence for visiting the shrine or taking part in a public or private devotion to Our Lady of Lourdes, within a prescribed timeframe and under the usual conditions for receiving a plenary indulgence, which is the remission of all temporal punishment due to sins that are forgiven.

At Lourdes, the plenary indulgence is in effect during the entire jubilee year. Bishop Jacques Perrier of Lourdes and Tarbes visited Washington, D.C., last December to invite Americans to take part in the anniversary celebrations. He described the “jubilee path” that includes the font where St. Bernadette was baptized, the room where she grew up, the chapel where she made her first Communion, and the grotto, a former garbage dump, where she received the visions of the Blessed Virgin.

He also announced that a representation of the five Luminous Mysteries would be added to the Lourdes basilica, so that the shrine “would live up to its name, as dedicated to the Rosary.” Pope John Paul II, who visited the shrine twice, the last time in 2004, a year before his death, added the Luminous Mysteries to the traditional prayer.

At Our Lady of Lourdes Cathedral in Spokane, Wash., the only U.S. diocesan cathedral named for Our Lady of Lourdes, parishioners and visitors are taking part in a novena, Feb. 3-11. “We will begin with the sacrament of the anointing of the sick on Feb. 2,” said Father Stephen Dublinski, rector of the cathedral. “Then for nine days we will recite the novena prayers after each Mass, ending with a special jubilee Mass at noon on Feb. 11, celebrated by Bishop William Skylstad.”
Miracles

Of course, the lure of Lourdes is not only spiritual. People come for miraculous physical healings, and over the years some have left crutches behind that can still be viewed in the grotto.

Over the past 150 years, the Lourdes medical board has officially recognized a total of 67 medical miracles. The last one was announced in 2005, involving Anna Santaniello, who was cured of a heart disease in 1952 after she was plunged into the frigid Lourdes waters. She was 93 when the miracle was approved three years ago.

However, many pilgrims claim healings that have not been submitted to the medical board. Metz tells of a young woman who suffered from a blood disorder when she went to Lourdes as a malade with the Knights of Malta.

“After she arrived, she immediately felt different and the symptoms went away,” Metz said. “When she got home the doctors certified that she was cured. There are other similar stories.”

Speaking as a psychiatrist, Milone said that the physical healings at Lourdes go beyond mere emotional uplift or psychological attitude.

“Of course, the mind and body are very closely related,” he said, “but the board at Lourdes is very rigorous and sensitive to the charge that the healings are just a matter of the mind. There is no other way to explain the approved healings than ‘act of God.’ They are miracles.”

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