

Lourdes Spiritual Orientation 2026

An orientation gives you the framework you need to enter into what comes next. You need to know the schedule, where the bathrooms are, that the second floor back home is called the first floor here, that C on the faucet doesn't mean cold but actually stands for hot, etc.

The spiritual framework is just as essential in order to receive from this trip what God wants to give you.

“Orient” literally means to find the east. Before the invention of the compass, it was always easiest to find the east and then work the rest out. Look for the rising sun and then you know where the rest of the directions are.

In a similar way, we need to look for Jesus the Son of God in order to work out the rest of the spiritual realm. There is no mechanical compass to help us.

Let's get into the right mindset for pilgrimage by defining some basic terms about the spiritual life.

This may require a reset on assumptions you have made about God. There are things we learned as children that were the best way to explain deep spiritual realities to little kids but fail us as adults. Who here was taught by sisters? [raise hands] They gave us basic concepts but now we need to progress to an adult understanding.

First term: pilgrimage

Pilgrimage doesn't mean a vacation! Have you noticed? Nor is it a trip to France. Wait—did we take the wrong plane? This isn't France??? Yes, but our destination is not geographical but spiritual. A pilgrimage is simply put a journey made in order to grow closer to God.

Some of you might be silently objecting: I came on this luxury voyage to seek physical healing, not spiritual growth. Can I break it to you: you may have been tricked—not by the order of Malta, but by the Big Guy. (And I don't mean Cardinal Dolan!) God often has things in store for us that we didn't expect.

You may have a physical diagnosis that you think is the most pressing issue in your life. God may disagree! He, the divine physician, may be saying there is some spiritual healing that He wants to bring you.

Be open to that! Pilgrimage is about openness to God's work in our hearts.

Second term: God!

God is not the divine clockmaker. He didn't set everything into motion and then say "have a nice life!"

Nor is God the almighty general in the sky barking out marching orders to His minions below. "Soldier, take that hill!" If He simply wanted stuff done, He would have ordered the angels to do it. No offense—they would do it faster and better. They don't even need snazzy polyester uniforms to accomplish it!

God is your loving father who created you, who continually blesses you, and who wants to guide you to discover how to become the person He created you to be. He is also the goal of our lives. The journey of life ends for all of us. He is our destination for the pilgrimage of life just as He is for the pilgrimage to Lourdes.

So much frustration in life starts with a misunderstanding here. I keep encountering difficulties trying to become who I want to be. Sometimes it is because I'm not paying attention to who He wants me to be. I get thwarted in my path because I'm not following His path.

I wonder why God doesn't make certain things happen in my life, but I never ask if He wants those things to happen.

The other part of this frustration often comes from our sense of fatherhood. Jesus taught us to pray to Our Father. What does it mean for God to be father?

All of us had imperfect fathers. Some of us had wonderful fathers with a few rough edges. Others just had rough fathers. Harsh and demanding Dads can poison our notion of God.

If you have pain in your life because of a tough relationship with your earthly father, please ask for healing from that wound on this pilgrimage. Ask to be able to forgive your father and to grow to see God's fatherhood not as a copy of the ugliness you experienced as a child but as it really is. God is tender, patient, forgiving, and generous. Be open to discovering the beauty of God's fatherhood in your life.

For those with the vocation of fatherhood, please remember that your top priority is always and everywhere simply to image the love of God the Father to your children. It isn't enough to be right or in charge. Fathers must lead in love.

Third term: Mary

This woman has a lot of names for Catholics. Blessed mother, our lady of Lourdes, blessed virgin, etc.

On a plane to DC once, a man next to me said he would be a Catholic if it wasn't for what we believe about Mary. I asked what he meant. He said Catholics think she is the fourth person of the trinity whom we worship!

The DC chiropractors' association owes me big time. I spent the next two hours explaining what we really believe about Mary. I then noticed that every neck in the three rows ahead and behind us was craned trying to eavesdrop!

We don't have two hours now for that discussion, so let's focus on one fundamental aspect of who Mary is. From the cross, Jesus said seven "last words." These seven phrases are not frivolous. His last teachings from the pulpit of the cross echo through the centuries to guide us.

One of those last words was: "behold your mother!" Simply put, Mary is our spiritual mother. Jesus loves us and shares His own mom with us.

Just as when I'd drop by my best friend's house after school and he would say "hi mom" and I would repeat "hi mom"! Closeness with the son necessarily brings us into closeness with the mother.

Christianity is about discovering the reality of a great spiritual family to which we all belong. God is our Father. We are all brothers and sisters. Mary is our mother. She isn't equal to God in any way, but He invited her to a special role in His plan.

When we were little and skinned our elbows or cut our fingers, we would go running to mom. We might even say "kiss the boo-boo and make it feel better!" Our eminently qualified medical team will tell you that a mom's kiss actually possesses no property of physical healing.

However, don't we remember always feeling better being in her arms and receiving that kiss? The pain was still there. The greater reality of her love made us able to endure that pain.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta used to say a short prayer in the midst of whatever challenges she was facing. "Mary, be a mother to me now." That's a good prayer for each of us.

Let the Virgin Mary hold you in her motherly embrace and kiss you here at Lourdes. We may still have pain in our bodies or emotions, but there is something greater than that pain which can enter our hearts and help us endure whatever must be endured.

Forth term: Miracle

Miracles! Isn't that what Lourdes is renowned for? Isn't that the first thing you heard about? Isn't that why someone thought to nominate our dear malades? In case you might receive a miracle here!

Let's start by saying what a miracle isn't. A miracle isn't a show of whether God loves you or not. We can say to ourselves: "If I'm worthy of His love, maybe He will cure this illness for me." Wrong!

God's love is already there to begin with. In fact, He loves us even when we are unworthy. That's what we pray at Mass each day: "Lord, I am not worthy..."

A miracle is not the result of having passed a test. It isn't a show of divine approval. All of the saints suffered greatly. Their suffering wasn't punishment but simply a result of the world's brokenness. Jesus endured His suffering on the Cross so that we would know we are not alone when we suffer.

Let's be clear that God created a world that was in perfect harmony and had no sickness nor death. God isn't in heaven zapping us with suffering. He weeps over how we have wrecked His creation. The effects of original sin are not just spiritual, but also quite present in the physical world.

That seems strange to us. How could something spiritual also be physical. It's simple. I have one life. It has a spiritual side but also a

physical side. It's all part of the same one life. There is a profound connectedness in our lives where we usually think in silos.

Doctors will tell you. The various parts of our lives are connected. For example, if you're depressed, then it will also have effects on your physical health. There is an intrinsic connection between our emotions, our intellect, our bodies, and our souls. When one aspect gets messed up, then there will be fallout in the rest. Conversely, when things are going right in our spiritual lives, the rest of our lives benefit.

The spiritual alienation of humanity from God brought by the sin of our first parents Adam and Eve created waves on the big picture in every aspect of human life. That includes our physical wellbeing. Suffering on all levels enters the picture for us.

Back to miracles! Now that I know that I'm not suffering because God zapped me and that a miracle isn't the litmus test for Him loving me, what else do I need to know?

My last parish had a grade school. Every year the children would give me prayer intentions to bring on this pilgrimage. They would also eagerly ask on my return: "were there any miracles?" My answer was always "yes!"

In fact, there have been a number of physical cures I have seen over the years, but my answer to the children was about more than those healings.

Each year I see a plane full of people who need healing. I said a plane "full"! Every single one of us needs healing.

We all come with a share in the world's brokenness. Some of us have interior wounds that can't be seen. Some of us are also able to better hide our hurts than others. We all need healing and I see it happen!

Miracles can be discovered all around us. It often happens in little ways. I see people who normally wear Armani suits strutting around without shame in polyester uniforms for a whole week. I see people who complain if the Beaujolais wine is not up to snuff at a fancy New York restaurant eating cafeteria food here and joking about it.

We can discover a freedom here from the things that can consume us in daily life back home. Things we cling to back home and which distract us from the Gospel way of life can fade away. That's not the product of jetlag but of God's grace.

I see people who too often get caught up in trying to prove themselves to the world and get to the top all of a sudden become "forgetful of self" and focus on serving others, even strangers.

I see people worried about their loved ones and exhausted with the stress of healthcare advocacy discover peace. I see people suffering all sorts of bodily illnesses be reminded and take to heart that life is about far more than the body with its aches and pains.

God's favorites aren't revealed by miracles. We are all His favorites!

Physical cures are temporary. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Where is Lazarus now? He died again! Physical cures are important only because they point to spiritual realities.

Miracles are attention getters. God sometimes has to shout to make Himself heard. Far better if we listen to Him without the need for dramatic signs. The Cross of Jesus and the words of the Gospel should teach us everything we need to know.

The truth is that being loved outweighs everything else. I see people let that truth penetrate their hearts for the first time or return to the top of their consciousness after being buried under the stress or distractions of everything else.

Those are the greatest miracles in my book.

Fifth and last term: Grace

Grace is not simply gas for the soul. We too often think about prayer and the sacraments as: I'm running low on spiritual fuel and need to get a fill-up. Grace is divine life. Grace is a share in Christ's life which has overcome sin and death.

God is love. Thus, to share His life is to be filled with love.

Grace is God's power and His power is love. Love is the greatest power in the world.

Love conquers selfishness and greed. We discover it truly brings more joy to give than to receive.

Love frees us from the slavery of lust which disguises itself as love but can't fulfill us. The heart hungers for intimacy that the body can't deliver.

Love conquers hate. Forgiveness opens the heart to healing and disrupts the cycle of hurt.

Love heals our sadness. This world's brokenness is passing away but love remains forever. I can endure anything as long as I'm wrapped in the arms of love.

Most of all, love heals us of pride. This is the miracle we all need to seek constantly.

I need to be freed from the me-centered universe that is my default setting. It is daily reinforced by the world around me. I need a force from outside this world to deliver me.

Even in people of faith, we can see prayer as an exercise in convincing God to do things my way. But Jesus taught us to pray: “Thy Will be done!”

God’s Love reminds me that I don’t need to be self-reliant. I am cared for! I don’t need to carve out and force my own way in order to find happiness.

Rather, I simply need to discover His way. He loves me more than I love myself. His eyesight is better than mine. I can only guess at what will make me happy—He knows!

Love convinces me to trust. His love has proven more reliable than my knowledge or power time after time. I need to recognize my own limits and God’s reliability. Trust brings peace.

Sickness makes me discover my limits. I can’t pretend or escape. That’s not a bad thing. It leads to surrender.

Surrender isn’t defeat, but a share in Christ’s victory. I am His. He shares His life with me. His life has overcome death.

In God’s love, I am freed from the selfishness of sin. Sin isn’t breaking a rule, but failing to love as I should.

In His love, I learn how to love those around me. I can become His blessing to them by sharing the love I have received.

PILGRIMAGE THEME: “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee”

To be full of grace means to be full of love. I hope that you discover or rediscover God’s love for you on this pilgrimage.

May He touch your heart through the experience of this holy place given for the consolation of the sick and the gift of Mary the mother of Jesus to be our own spiritual mother.

I also hope that our malades and caregivers can see that the love showered on you by the knights and dames is simply another way of God manifesting His love to you.

I hope that we members of the order of Malta will be blessed in these days as well. By practicing love of neighbor here on pilgrimage, may we become more intentional in the way we love every day and everywhere.

The funny thing is, by traveling halfway around the world to come close to God, you can discover how to stay closer to Him back at home.

The love you find here won't fit in your carry-on luggage. It is too big to even unpack in your hotel room. It will take all of eternity to unfold it because it is an infinite love.

God's love is our way. His love is our destination. His love is our happiness. His love is our true home forever. His love is what we have been seeking our entire lives without perhaps recognizing it.

The Lord is with you. He is with you here. He will be with you there. He will be with you in sickness and in health. He will be with you always. He loves us and will lead us, if we let ourselves be led.

Whether sickness or service has brought us here, let's shake loose the limits on how we have been seeing life. Let's orient ourselves to the rising of the Son! His resurrection reveals the power of His love and the defeat of death.

Let's open our hearts to be full of grace with Mary and come close to the Lord who comes close to us!