

A Time and Place set Aside for Christ and Our Lady:

The Annual Diocesan Pilgrimage

In 2019, the Archdiocese of St. Boniface decreed that the Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, in St. Malo, would be a diocesan sanctuary and the site of the Annual diocesan pilgrimage. On August 18, 2024, all are invited to attend this faith-filled event. A conversation with Archbishop Albert LeGatt of St. Boniface on the importance of pilgrimages for our Catholic faith.



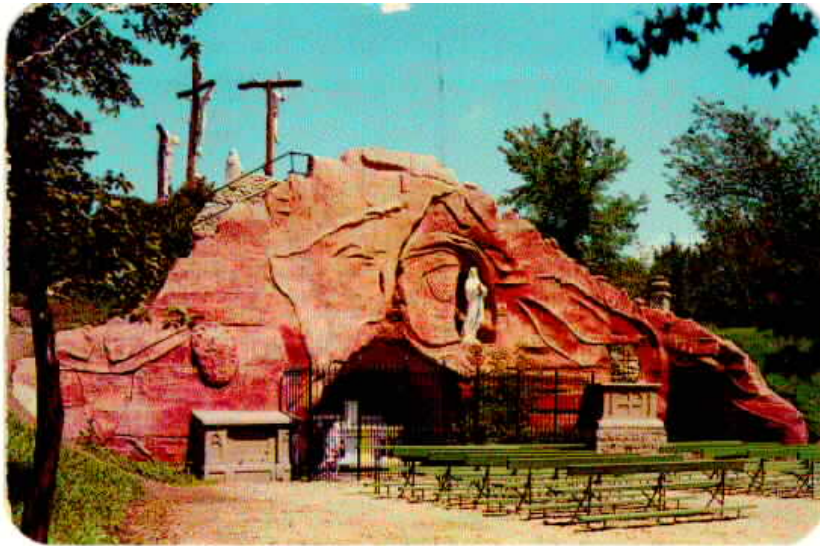
The Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes in St. Malo was a popular shrine even before the Archdiocese declared it a place of regional pilgrimage in 1951 in the Acts of the Second Synod of St. Boniface. Photo: St. Boniface Historical Society.

The Grotto in St. Malo has long been, and remains, a popular pilgrimage site.

It's true. The shrine was a place of regional pilgrimage even before the 1951 decree emanating from the second diocesan synod, which formalized it as a site for regional pilgrimages. The faithful of the surrounding parishes frequently went to St. Malo, especially for the Feast of the Assumption of Mary, held on August 15.

Other parishes organized regional pilgrimages dedicated to the Virgin Mary. In 1951, the Archdiocese recognized not only that of St. Malo, but those of the parishes of Sainte-Anne-des-Chênes in St. Anne, Saint-Viateur in St. Joseph, Notre-Dame-du-Laus in Powerview, Notre-Dame-de-la-Salette in Beauséjour and the Sacred Heart of the Belgians in St. Boniface.

These pilgrimages go back further, of course. I imagine they were born as these parishes developed a devotion to the Virgin Mary, or



The Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes of the Sacred Heart of the Belgians.

if a priest had a plan to create a Marian sanctuary, like the one at the Sacred Heart of the Belgians. In the 1930s, Father Damas Van Dyck, a Capuchin, had an exact replica of the grotto of Lourdes erected. It was an important place of pilgrimage until the parish closed in the 1990s.

Over the years, most regional pilgrimages became local parish celebrations or were simply no longer celebrated. However, the one in Saint-Malo has endured...

Indeed. A few decades ago, things were in decline. Now there's an upsurge in participation among Francophones and a marked increase in participation among Anglophones. People are coming back.

A Story of Love, Devotion and Healing

It was the Marian devotion of the second parish priest of St. Malo, Father Ernest-Abel Noret, that spurred him and his flock to create the Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes.

A native of Saint-Privé, France, Father Noret was born on February 20, 1867. A kind-hearted man, he had a reputation for being an excellent preacher and a man of great generosity. Shortly after his arrival in the parish on November 5, 1895, he opened a school at his own expense. He even bought a residence for the teacher. Later, in 1901, Fr. Noret took chisels in hand to build the altar for the new church, and for the chapel of the local convent.



Father Ernest-Abel Noret
(Photo: St. Boniface Historical Society)

Not surprisingly, he built a small Marian shrine on the north bank of the Rat River in July 1896. At the time of his ordination in France on May 30, 1890, Fr. Noret had made a promise to the Blessed Virgin during his clerical studies, when his precarious health made him fear that the road to the priesthood would be closed to him.

Why do you think that is?

The upswing, in my opinion, can be explained on the one hand by better communication throughout the diocese. The faithful from all over the diocese are more aware of the pilgrimage. And that this is not just the Francophone event that it was for many years.

In addition, many newcomers are now attending – Vietnamese, Eritreans, Hispanics. In their respective cultures, there is a strong tradition of Marian devotion. When they arrived in Manitoba, these groups realized that there was a pilgrimage, and wanted to participate. *Let's rent a bus and let's go!*

It seems that there is a new appreciation for Marian devotions...

Overall, yes. There's an uplift of interest throughout the Church, and a re-reading of the place of Mary in our faith. The Second Vatican Council put a greater emphasis on Christ and the Paschal mystery, and rightly so since they are at the heart of our faith. The adjustment was necessary. Before, there were so many devotions to the saints and so much devotion to Mary that in the end the focus on Christ and the Paschal mystery was diminished.

In the half-century since the Council, a new balance has been established. We appreciate Mary and the saints, but with a new perspective. The saints and we all form a great family. And we all have our eyes set towards Christ.

A Story of Love, Devotion and Healing (continued)

With the support and help of the parishioners, the site where the Grotto now stands was cleaned and prepared. Before long, parishioners were flocking to the spot, where a small chapel had been erected, to pray to Our Lady of Lourdes.

Thus was born the annual parish pilgrimage, which took place every September 8, the Feast of the Nativity of Mary. In 1902, the small chapel at the bottom of the hill was replaced by a stone grotto, and this marked the beginning of more substantial work on the site over the next few years, and decades.

That same year, the parish began construction of a larger chapel at the top of the hill. Fr. Noret himself carved the altar. On June 5, 1906, Archbishop Adélarde Langevin solemnly blessed the chapel and presided over the pilgrimage.

It was with the encouragement of Saint-Malo's third parish priest, Father Isidore Macaire, that the pilgrimage took off. An avid walker, Fr. Macaire visited the Grotto every day. His devotion to the Virgin Mary was well known, and despite failing health in the 1930s, Fr. Macaire visited the Grotto as often as possible. Thus, with the support of vicar-administrator Massicote, the parish pilgrimage had grown to become a regional event. In fact, by September 1939, there were some 7,000 pilgrims. And six masses had to be organized to satisfy the devotion of all these people!

By the 1930s, numerous ex-votos - objects indicating the fulfillment of a promise granted, or a favor bestowed by the Virgin - decorated the Grotto chapel.



Marian devotions to the Oblate novitiate of St. Norbert in 1952.
Photo: St. Boniface Historical Society.

So, the great family of the Church of St. Boniface will meet in Saint-Malo on August 13...

That's right! Pilgrimage is an integral part of the faith life of our diocese. And that is why we came to a formal decree in 2019. The idea was initially proposed by a couple of people. I then invited the Diocesan Council of Priests to discuss it, to find out whether or not there was a need. The priests then discussed the issue in their respective deaneries. The conclusion was that an official diocesan pilgrimage could enhance our faith, our spiritual life and Mary's place in our collective and individual Christian commitment.

I then drafted the official decree with the support of the Diocesan College of Consultors, the senior college within the diocese. It is now official and a law for the life of the diocese.

What changed with the official decree of 2019?

The pilgrimage is now a highlight in the life of the diocese, such as the Feast of Saint Boniface on June 5, or the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on December 8. Since 2019, especially

A Story of Love, Devotion and Healing (continued)

Indeed, over the years, pilgrims have reported healings. The *Livre de Saint-Malo*, published in 1940, notes that a David Morin, bedridden for three months, was taken to the Grotto and left cured. One lady, Anna Desrosiers, suffering from eczema since birth, declared herself cured following a pilgrimage.

During the summer, pilgrims always came in small groups to the Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes. But it was especially during the Feast of the Assumption of Mary, celebrated on August 15, that people from all over Manitoba began to arrive. In 1951, the second diocesan synod decreed that the site would be a regional pilgrimage site. And in 2019, Bishop Albert LeGatt decreed that the Grotto would be a diocesan shrine and an annual diocesan pilgrimage site.

Information from the *Livre de Saint-Malo* and *Saint-Malo : les paroissiens racontent...*

now in the post-pandemic era, all diocesan priests invite their parishioners to the pilgrimage in a more proactive way. They encourage participation and facilitate participation, which increases interest in the pilgrimage and encourages even more of the faithful to attend.

As well, instead of simply announcing the event in the parish bulletin, priests are invited and encouraged to cancel one of their parish masses so as to give their flock the chance to go to St. Malo. This also makes the priests available to concelebrate the Eucharist, and very importantly, hear confessions.

Reconciliation is a key element of a pilgrimage...

Indeed. At pilgrimages in Saskatchewan, I saw many people lining up to confess. This was even though there were many priests available. In the context of a pilgrimage, the sacrament of Reconciliation is seen as an invitation and opportunity for ongoing conversion. We ask forgiveness of the Lord and then, through the Eucharist, we reaffirm our faith in Him.

It's an ancient Christian tradition, which goes back to the Church of the first centuries, to link pilgrimage and reconciliation, yes?

Definitely. In Brittany, in France, a pilgrimage is even called a Pardon! I'd go even further than that. In all the great spiritual traditions, we see a similar ritual being enacted. During the summer, when the Church of St. Boniface has its pilgrimage to St. Malo, Indigenous people will be organizing many powwows.

There is a very strong need in humans to leave home, to get out of their usual routine, to go and do something special in a space set apart. The Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes is a place set apart for the Lord. A place for the Lord and the Virgin Mary, at a time set apart for prayer, for conversion and for meeting the Lord.

And, a place and time to get together as a family of believers. At World Youth Day, surrounded by a throng of other young believers, a young person can say, *Well I'm not alone. There are millions more!*

The same thing can occur at the diocesan level. So, a pilgrimage is a family meeting, a gathering of the whole diocese around the Virgin Mary and Jesus. As a Church, we gather around what we all care most about – our devotion to Mary as we all look to Christ.