

The following was written by an young stagiaire after her experience in service at Lourdes.



10 Reasons I Do Stage

I have been to Lourdes many times since I was a little but three years ago I went to do a “stage” with Hospitalité Notre Dame de Lourdes (HNDL) and it had quite an effect on me!

So I thought, as it is the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, I would share with you 10 reasons why I love “stage” in the hope that you might be encouraged to try it. They aren’t in any particular order and they are reflections from my own personal experience but here goes:

1) I am responding to an invitation from Mary



One thing I have been told since I was a little girl is that no one ends up in Lourdes of their own accord. A pilgrimage to Lourdes is a direct response to an invitation to Mary—she calls and gathers her children here. This is no different when it comes to Stage. We respond to her call to serve her children in Lourdes, especially those who are sick or disabled. This is a great comfort when it comes to working in the baths—some days the shifts can be incredibly stressful—however when you remember that she is in command of your service and you are her little broom, as St Bernadette used to say, you can relax and leave it in her hands. She has called you here and this is her work.

Mary always knows what is best for her children and she always leads them to her Son, Jesus. Each time Mary calls us on stage, she desires to lead us closer to Jesus and stage can be an incredibly profound encounter with Christ if you open both your eyes and heart to what Mary desires to show you.

2) I encounter Jesus in a profound way

One thing that never ceases to take my breath away, is the awesome encounter with Christ you have when you work in the baths. When you realise that every single person is an invitation to meet Christ and to serve Christ and you can choose to accept or reject that invitation in your heart—well, that is just too awesome for words. This realisation changes EVERYTHING. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis talks about how we can be “tempted to be the kind of Christian who keeps the Lord’s wounds at arm’s length” (EG.270). This was definitely me on my first stage but I soon learned that “Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others” and this requires me to step outside of my little bubble and enter into the reality of that person’s life—because that reality was Christ’s too. On my last stage, I was asked to do “Chemise” on several shifts and as you stand and pray with that woman, I had a profound sense that I was holding the Lord in my arms. What an honour.

3) I am evangelised

I’m not sure how to put this except as blunt as this: you think you have faith and then you go and work in the baths. You briefly share in the lives and stories of the many pilgrims who pass through your cabine in a standard shift and very quickly you realise how tiny your faith is. I never cease to be inspired, uplifted and encouraged by the fierce faith I encounter in the baths. This encourages me to step out, to pray with the same holy boldness the pilgrims come with and to ask the Lord to increase my faith. In Lourdes—you learn that you are in constant need of evangelisation and that is another reason I keep going back for it is here that I am evangelised.

4) I witness miracles



So there are 69 miracles of Lourdes which the Church officially recognises. Every day on stage you witness many, many miracles that are never publicised.

From the stories of faith the pilgrims share with you, the miracle that some pilgrims you serve actually made it to Lourdes at all, the pilgrim with mental disabilities who suddenly comes to life when you place the Madonna in their hand and even to the absolute miracle that the Hospitalité works as amazingly as it does....

Service Saint Jean Baptiste

5) I experience the depths of the bonds of baptism and what it means to be part of the Universal Church

My baptism means I belong to the Body of Christ, I am part of His mystical body and linked to Christians on heaven and on earth. I have never quite felt how deep this bond of baptism ran until I did a stage.

Firstly, through welcoming the pilgrims into the baths, somehow you manage to enter into their pain or whatever troubles are on their heart. They become yours for a moment and when they enter the waters—even though you don't know what is on their heart, you wholeheartedly pray that God will grant them the graces that they are seeking.

Secondly, it really is an awesome gift to live for a week as part of the HNDL family. Mary calls her children from all walks of life, all countries, all ages and asks them to serve together in Lourdes. How on earth does that work except through the grace of baptism? I am not working alongside volunteers, no we are not an NGO, this is the Body of Christ and my fellow hospitaliers are truly my brothers and sisters in Christ.



You are welcomed as “one of the family” because that is exactly what you are...

6) I learn how to love as God loves

My first stage I realised very quickly how shallow my love for other people was, how limited my outlook was but the Lord very gently took my heart and stretched it a little. I love #274 in Evangelii Gaudium as it seems to explain this point so perfectly:

“If we are to share our lives with others and generously give of ourselves, we also have to realize that every person is worthy of our giving. Not for their physical appearance, their abilities, their language, their way of thinking, or for any satisfaction that we might receive, but rather because they are God’s handiwork, his creation. God created that person in his image, and he or she reflects something of God’s glory. Every human being is the object of God’s infinite tenderness, and He Himself is present in their lives. Jesus offered his precious blood on the cross for that person. Appearances notwithstanding, every person is immensely holy and deserves our love.

Consequently, if I can help at least one person to have a better life, that already justifies the offering of my life. It is a wonderful thing to be God’s faithful people. We achieve fulfilment when we break down walls and our heart is filled with faces and names!” —Pope Francis

This is my vocation: to learn to love as the Father loves and that starts with learning to see what the Father sees in other people. Each year I learn a little more of what this means and I return home with my heart a little more stretched, as it is filled with more faces and the names of those I have served and worked with this year.

7) I get to work with saints

So being young, being new and doing stage on your own can be very, very daunting but God blessed me with some amazing people who very kindly took me under their wing, have buckets of patience and so much love. These holy women, are the kind of role models every young Catholic woman needs in her life. From the big team of Northerners on my stage week, to the Conseillers and the many French/Italian nonnas... So many women have taught me something beautiful about God's love and how we are called to be this love to others.

8) I learn the importance of prayer in mission



One of my favourite sayings is from one of the HNDL chaplains; "You have two hands—one for praying and one for serving" and how true is this??

I remember learning the importance of this very quickly on my first stage. In the baths, you are asked to arrive 45 minutes before your shift starts in order to pray the rosary (in every language of the sanctuary). At the start of the week I was thinking "ugh, what's the point? I'd rather have the extra time in bed. In fact that extra 45 minutes in bed would probably make me a better stagiaire". Once I began working in the baths, I quickly realised how important this prayer was and by the end of the week I treasured that time spent in prayer. Without this prayer, our mission is fruitless as Pope Francis reminds us.

This motto is something I have taken to heart and taken home with me and it has been a great blessing to my personal apostolate at home.

9) I am reminded of my own fragility and vulnerability

So many times in life, we are tempted to think we are "fine", we have got it all sorted and we can do this without God. But in Lourdes, I come face to face with my own woundedness and brokenness in quite a profound way. I am His work of art, but there is still much work that needs to be done and in Lourdes I am reminded of my constant need of God's Grace and healing power in my life. How many times have I gone to Lourdes, thinking I was doing the noble thing in helping others? I very quickly learned that it is I, who is need of help—I need healing too. Through the witness of the pilgrims I serve, I am also encouraged to step out in holy boldness to ask for the many graces that God desires to give me.

10) I learn how to "live" Lourdes at home

I never really understood this as a normal pilgrim, Lourdes was a one-off event in my life each year. Stage changed this. I have learned and experienced so much that it cannot fail to be part of my everyday life. At home, I am involved in a lot of evangelisation and in this for me, the Hospitalité experience has been invaluable. From the importance of prayer, a smile, a gesture – there are many moments, when I can bring what Our Lady has taught me in Lourdes alive. Among my Catholic friends, I encourage the praying of the rosary, Marian novenas and various other Marian devotions—sharing my confident trust in her maternal intercession.

Lourdes is a 365 experience, thanks to Stage.