

Little story of Faith and Light

Illustrated by Marie du Chéné





We were in Lourdes in 1968; Gérard and Camille, the parents of Loïc and Thaddée, went to present their two sons to Mary. It was their greatest desire, because they relied on the comfort, she was going to give them; Loïc and Thaddée have indeed very severely disabilities. But they were going to leave with a very heavy heart. They went alone because their parish did not want to enrol them on the diocesan pilgrimage; in Lourdes, they found it difficult to find a hotel; and within the sanctuary, the “good pilgrims” told them that their place was not there: “*With children like that, stay at home*”.



On their return, they had the grace to meet two friends of people with disabilities: Marie-Hélène and Jean. Marie-Hélène had founded the "Office Chrétien des Personnes Handicapées" (OCH) and Jean had founded l'Arche, supported and shared living. After listening to Gérard and Camille, they decided to organise a pilgrimage where families like that of Gérard and Camille would have their true place, first! On 8 December 1968 in Montmartre, the project was launched with an international team.



The message spread quickly: “Great, we are finally going to go to Lourdes!”. During this time, the organising team met with much reluctance: “Why bother? They are not going to understand anything; the parents are going to be disappointed on their return at not having seen their child cured. How will you manage security on site?” But the team hung on and Marie-Hélène had the right answer: “We are only asking for a healing of hearts!”



In order not to be lost in a large crowd, the pilgrims began to forge bonds of friendship in small groups of about 30 people with families, friends and a chaplain. The joy of the people with disabilities was very strong, they really felt that a great event was being prepared and that they were at the heart of it. On Maundy Thursday 1971, 12000 of us came from 15 countries and a joyful crowd spread across the town of Lourdes, singing, from Good Friday, the song planned for the following evening... *"Friends, let us sing our joy, Alleluia!*

Faith and Light



12 April 1971

On Easter Monday, a first assessment meeting took place before leaving. All the regional leaders said: *“It is not possible to leave it at this, we want to continue the adventure, we do not want to go back to our isolation and solitude.”* Marie-Hélène and Jean answered: *“Continue to meet in your community and we will see where the Holy Spirit wants to lead us.”*

And so, Faith and Light was born on 12 April 1971.



In 1975, a second pilgrimage was organised to Rome; it would be called the pilgrimage of the confirmation of Faith and Light, four years after the birth and baptism in Lourdes. The joyful crowd of communities invaded St Peter's Basilica, all were happy to meet Pope Paul VI. The latter arrived in the "sedia", a raised armchair. As he spoke, visibly moved, the Holy Father digressed from his speech to say, as if he was personally addressing each person: *"You are loved by God just as you are"*.



Communities grew in a lot of new countries and the number of banners for the pilgrimages to Lourdes increased with a mysterious fertility, from 1981 (300 communities in 27 countries) to 1991 (1000 communities in 60 countries). The Middle East climbed into the Faith and Light boat from Lebanon, the Eastern countries from Poland and Ukraine, Latin America from Brazil and Argentina, Asia from the Philippines, Africa from Zimbabwe and Rwanda.



Right from 1971, Faith and Light has been an ecumenical movement; all the Christian traditions joined together to tell of and proclaim the value of the most fragile. Unity was the theme of the 1991 pilgrimage to Lourdes; everyone of us sang: *"Father, make us one, that the world may trust in your love"*. On the last day of the pilgrimage, a mime showed the risen Jesus (a person with disabilities); he asked Mary Magdalene to go and find his brothers, a female Methodist pastor, an Anglican bishop, a cardinal and a Catholic bishop. They all knelt before Jesus then embraced one another and asked all the pilgrims to share the peace of Jesus.



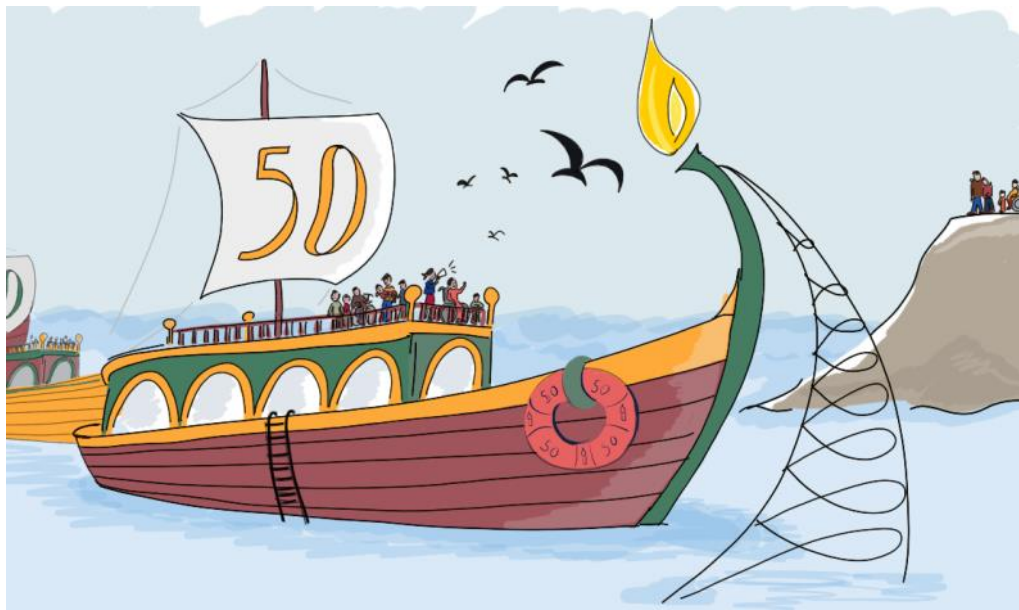
In 2001, we returned to Lourdes to come to the waters. Another pilgrimage to celebrate the 30th anniversary of Faith and Light. There were 16000 of us and that caused some concerns for the organisers; many could not enter the Basilica for the Easter Vigil... Fortunately, screens allowed everyone share in the celebration and on Easter morning, 28 liturgies were celebrated representing six traditions in fourteen languages.



In 2002, the international meeting took place in Rome and we were surprised to be received by Pope John Paul II in his residence at Castel Gandolfo. Already weakened by illness, we felt that we were before a pope with disabilities. His message was very much appreciated: *“By welcoming all these little ones affected by an intellectual disability, you have recognised in them special witnesses to the tenderness of God from whom we have a lot to learn”*.



In 2011, it was no longer possible for all the countries to gather in Lourdes and the celebrations were multiplied across the world; 40 pilgrimages to celebrate 40 years of Faith and Light, bringing together many more pilgrims than the pilgrimages to Lourdes. We were all pilgrims of joy. The communities from Madagascar, for example, were extremely touched to be responsible for preparing a pilgrimage and welcomed pilgrims from Eastern Africa and the France Sparkling East province!



In 2021, it is the great jubilee of Faith and Light throughout the whole world. We have accumulated so many treasures during this 50 years journey that we really must consider sharing it. We have to make known the secret of our joy, the spring from which we draw our energy. For this, we are going to call, call and call again. There are so many families who are still too isolated and who are waiting for us to bring them out of their isolation. Joining a Faith and Light community does so much good, lives are transformed! And after this jubilee, we will carry on tirelessly.



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A treasure to share