

COMMENTARY

THE CENTENARY OF LOURDES. It is never easy to recover the essential meaning of any event in history which later generations have thought to be marvellous or miraculous. Fame will magnify and perhaps mislead. Among the millions who will be going to Lourdes this year, many will be impressed no doubt by the mere grandiosity of the world's most famous place of pilgrimage. And that impression will be enhanced by the extraordinary basilica of St Pius X, built to celebrate the centenary. It all seems a far call from the poverty and simplicity of the days of 1858, when a girl who was poor and ill was to bear a message which is as authentic as the Gospels themselves.

But it is unnecessary to be fascinated, or, for that matter, to be shocked. Lourdes essentially retains the simple truth of the apparitions, with their forthright appeal for a return to God; and for the prayer and penance which are the indispensable means by which it may be achieved. Beneath the façade of vulgarity and noise, the evangelical theme remains intact. The difficulty of course is to see it, to hear it, when so much seems, with whatever good intentions, designed to distract and even to destroy.

In this number of BLACKFRIARS our intention is not to recall the glories of Lourdes, or to stress its unique position in the contemporary life of the Church. Plenty of publicity is sure to be given to the external splendour of the pilgrimages. What is harder to describe is the reality itself, the theological truth (for such it is) which was so providentially entrusted to Bernadette. It is within this context that the question of miracles must be seen. Here, most of all, the sensational can obscure the single and abiding truth. And Bernadette herself must not be forgotten, for her own life is the most revealing commentary on the hard truths that it was her vocation to transmit to men.

But Lourdes, despite all that has been done to vulgarize and exaggerate its essential message, is uniquely a place of prayer. And, however mixed their motives may sometimes be, the millions who go there in pilgrimage reassert by their very presence the need to find in Mary the perfect exemplar of the Christian

vocation. She, who is the Mother of the Incarnate Word, continues her work of drawing men to her Son.

The truth about Lourdes can never be ultimately told, for it is a record of grace uncovenanted and infinite. But in this year of rejoicing it is good to return to the source, of which the living water from the rock is so true and lifegiving a symbol. Lourdes is simply the renewing, in time and place, of what the Incarnation must mean: that men and women are made by God for himself and re-made now through the redeeming work of his Son. And Mary remains, as at the beginning, to show the way, to lead us home at last.
