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# THE MEDICAL BUREAU AT LOURDES

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A PILGRIMAGE to Lourdes has a very special meaning for the physician who registers at the Medical Bureau and becomes a member of the A.M.I.L. (Association Medicale Internationale de Notre Dame de Lourdes). This past fall it was my great privilege to visit the town of Lourdes and the Domain of the Grotto where the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin took place. The President of the Medical Bureau, Dr. Pelissier, and the staff doctors of the Medical Bureau personally welcomed, regardless of race or creed, each of the physicians who registered with the Bureau and invited each one to feel perfectly free to examine all records, to visit any department of the hospital, and to participate in any of the discussions that took place. We were encouraged to investigate on our own the validity of the past miracles and to take part in the examination and discussion of the present cures.

When I registered with the Association I noticed the paucity of United States registrants. There are a number of readily apparent reasons for this condition; first, the distance between the United States and Lourdes is most inconvenient for the American doctor; second, once in Europe, Lourdes is rather inaccessible;<sup>1</sup> and finally,

most American doctors visiting Lourdes are not aware of the great privilege extended them by merely reporting to the Medical Bureau and each presenting evidence to them that he is a recognized Doctor of Medicine. It is for this last reason that I am specifically writing this paper. Prior to my visit to Lourdes, I had no knowledge of the importance of registering at the Bureau, and only through a chance meeting with a Catholic priest from Belfast, Ireland, did I realize the privilege and experiences that were to follow.

The Medical Bureau operates independently of the Church Authorities and receives no subsidies from the Church. The specific function of the Medical Bureau is to examine and authenticate all alleged cures that may occur. No treatment is carried out at Lourdes and only a few of the pilgrims who request it are examined upon their arrival.

Most of the pilgrims arrive in well organized diocesan groups and are accompanied by a pilgrim-

<sup>1</sup>In the fall of 1956, besides the railroad travel, there were two scheduled air flights a week from Brussels, Belgium and about ten scheduled flights a week from Dublin. The air field is being developed and enlarged and it is anticipated that by the Centennial year of 1958, many more major airlines will have scheduled flights to Lourdes.

age doctor who usually has the records from their attending physicians. The great majority of the pilgrims admitted to the hospitals represent illnesses that have been long standing in character and have been given up as incurable by many doctors and clinics. It would, therefore, be very easy to authenticate any of their illnesses since these patients have already built up an extensive record which includes many x-ray and laboratory reports from different hospitals and clinics where they have been treated. For this reason preliminary examinations at Lourdes are not necessary.

The real work at the Medical Bureau begins with a pilgrim presenting himself as having been cured of a serious illness. At this time the Medical Bureau starts its investigation of the case. Members of the Bureau first examine the records the pilgrimage doctor has brought with him, if available. Then they begin to extract a detailed history from the patient and conclude with a physical examination to ascertain whether a cure of the affliction as previously described, has occurred. Nervous or functional illnesses are not acceptable for further inquiry. If the case represents a serious organic illness and a cure is apparent which cannot be explained naturally, the patient is asked to return one year from the date of his cure. At this time a very extensive inquiry and examination is made by the doctors present at the Medical Bureau on that day. During the course of the year, the records of the individual have been obtained from the dif-

ferent hospitals and clinics that the patient has visited. All x-ray and laboratory reports are sought and verified, as well as statements from the attending physicians. Dr. Smiley Blanton, a non-Catholic American doctor who led the discussion of the inquiry of a recent cure at Lourdes, reported in *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, Vol. IX: 348-362 as follows: "For that it is a healing I am myself convinced. The records seem adequate to support this conclusion, and they were made by well trained and reputable physicians. . . . We must lay aside as untenable the accusation that these cases are in any way 'fixed, or the histories doctored'."

During the course of this examination the assembled doctors examine all the evidence of the case. They personally examine and question the patient to ascertain for themselves the answers to these very important questions:

1. Did the described disease exist certainly at the time of the pilgrimage to Lourdes?
2. Was it suddenly modified in its evolution when there was no tendency to bettering?
3. Has there been a cure without the use of medicine in Lourdes, when all the treatment established before was useless?
4. Can any medical or scientific explanation explain this cure?
5. Is it beyond nature's laws?
6. Is there any reason to postpone the conclusions?

If the above questions can be answered satisfactorily by the

members of the Medical Bureau the case is recognized as an unexplainable cure. The documents are then referred to the Bishop of Lourdes who in turn assigns them for further study by a medical committee composed of some twenty-five members who are experts in different fields of medicine and surgery. This committee studies the documents, examines the patient, and may ask help of other experts. If the case is accepted by the medical committee, the Bishop of Lourdes sends the documents to the diocese in which the patient lives, asking the Bishop to create a canonical commission to determine whether the cure had supernatural favor. This commission studies the case and proclaims whether or not the cure is a miracle. Up to this time the word miracle is not used.

The Medical Bureau is very well organized and numbers some 7,000 members as of October 1956. These members elect their own officers and are responsible for the maintenance of the affairs of the Medical Bureau. Their diagnostic equipment (electro-cardiographic and x-ray) leaves much to be desired by American standards,<sup>2</sup> but the doctors themselves represent some of the best talent of European clinics and medical schools. With improved transportation facilities and an increased participation of American physicians, I feel sure that the Bureau will benefit from technical advancements of American medicine and the American physicians will benefit from association with one of the greatest spiritual centers in the world.

Of the many privileges that are

extended to the physician at Lourdes, none can be more rewarding than the participation in the Blessed Sacrament Procession which occurs each afternoon during the pilgrimage season. During this procession the Bishop, carrying the Blessed Sacrament in a gold monstrance, blesses the sick as they are placed around the square in front of the Basilica. The doctors have the unique privilege of walking in this procession directly behind the Bishop as the sick are blessed. It is during this procession, as well as in front of the Grotto or at the Baths, that many famous cures have occurred. What a great emotional experience it must be for a doctor to witness such an occurrence . . . what a wonderful opportunity a doctor has at Lourdes to be the first to know that a miracle has taken place. The registered physician has special privileges at the Baths and a special place at the Grotto, in the first seats before the altar where Mass is offered . . . the very ground where St. Bernadette knelt as she spoke to the Blessed Virgin.

In summary, the American doctor who plans a European trip should make the extra effort that is required to visit the town of Lourdes. He will be richly rewarded for the spiritual graces that he will receive and he will long remember his participation in the Medical Bureau.

<sup>2</sup>The Medical Bureau is entirely dependent on donations from its members and from their doctor friends. One of the purposes of the A.M.I.L. is to support the Medical Bureau. Financial support for the Medical Bureau may be mailed to Dr. Pelissier, Lourdes, France.