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The Cathedral Church of St John the Evangelist, Salford

Design for a new image of Our Lady of Lourdes

*Submitted on 1st May 2026 to
Fr Gerard Fieldhouse-Byrne; Rev Canon Michael Jones, Cathedral Dean;
and Christopher Cotton RIBA SCA, Cathedral Architect.*

Overview

This new icon has been commissioned to mark the centenary of the Diocese of Salford's pilgrimages to Lourdes (1924–2024). After a review of the Cathedral's interior, the Lady Chapel has been chosen as its permanent home. The intention is for the image to create a place of encounter—something that sits naturally within the chapel's original fabric and recent restoration, especially in dialogue with the radiant east window.

Scope of the Design

The design presented here establishes the overall composition, panel form, and theological narrative of the image. It is not a proposal for every finished detail; those elements are best resolved prayerfully on the full-scale panel.

The project architect, Chris Cotton, is separately developing a design for a wrought-iron frame to support and complement the installation.



Design

The proportions of the icon follow loosely an initial sketch by Chris Cotton. The panel adopts a cusped arched head that mirrors both the carved stone screen of the Lady Chapel and the framing of the figures in the east window. This upright, portrait format is well chosen: it supports an image ordered toward personal encounter rather than a narrative scene.

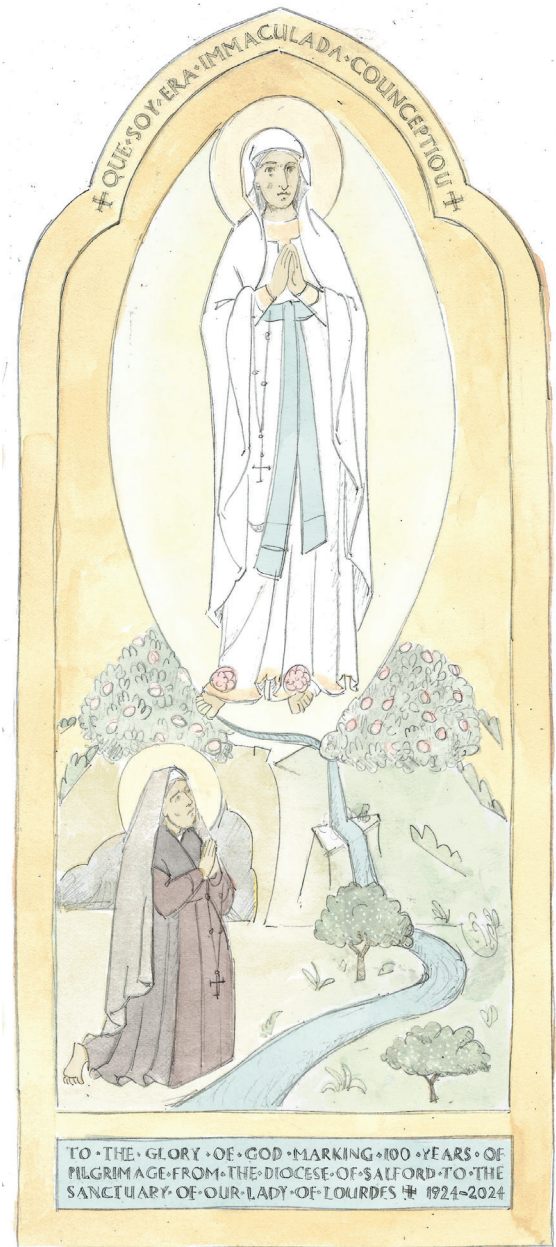
The central concept of the design is rooted in St Bernadette's own testimony. She consistently described the apparition not as part of the surrounding grotto but as a presence that eclipsed it:

"I saw a lady dressed in white... she was surrounded by a light that was not like the light of the sun, nor like that of a lamp... it was something else."

Reflecting this, Our Lady is shown within a radiant mandorla of light. The rocky ground beneath her feet is faithful to the setting, while the surrounding space opens into a field of burnished gold, emphasising the heavenly nature of the encounter. With some artistic license (I think the bush was not in bloom during the vision) wild roses bloom at her feet.

Beneath the visionary realm, the earthly landscape unfolds with symbolic intent:

- The Miraculous Spring: From beneath Our Lady's feet, the spring emerges and flows outward as a fertile river.
- Growth and Penance: The terrain shifts gradually from ochre to green, with increasing vegetation and flowers on the right-hand side contrasting with Bernadette's muted clothing. This is intended to reflect the message of penance and renewal associated with Lourdes.
- St Bernadette: She is shown in the simple garments of her time, based on contemporary photographs and in the posture recorded by witnesses during her visions.



The inscriptions are arranged according to their differing levels of significance. At the top, the Virgin's self-revelation appears in the original Occitan: *Que soy era Immaculada Counceptiou* ("I am the Immaculate Conception"). At the base, a formal inscription marks the centenary of the Diocese of Salford's pilgrimages to Lourdes (1924–2024).

Materials and technique

The icon will be painted in egg tempera with water gilding on a gessoed poplar panel.

The final dimensions are still to be confirmed, but if the image were approximately 150 cm in height, the panel would need to be around 38 mm thick. Stabilising oak or ash battens would be fixed into dovetailed grooves across the back, projecting roughly 20 mm beyond the rear surface.

Particular care is required in the method of mounting the panel to the proposed wrought steel frame. The panel must be allowed to expand and contract freely across the grain; restricting this movement would quickly lead to warping and splitting.

Colour will be built up in many thin, translucent layers of egg tempera over polished gesso, aiming for luminosity throughout. The gold background and halos will be applied using traditional water gilding, with two layers of 23.5 ct gold leaf laid over red clay bole.

The detail of a recently completed work below gives a good indication of the intended colour saturation of the finished paint surface. On the following page, I have also included Fra Angelico's *Transfiguration* fresco in the convent of San Marco, Florence (c. 1440s), which has influenced the overall palette and atmosphere of the design.



Detail from the *Cumbrian Saints Altarpiece* (2024), Christ the Good Shepherd Parish, Workington, UK



Fra Angelico, *The Transfiguration*, fresco, Convent of San Marco, Florence, c. 1440s