

The Magnificat, Cantic of Hope (Lourdes a place of healing and hope)



The Apparitions in 1858

Thursday 11th February 1858: the first meeting

Accompanied by her sister and a friend, Bernadette went to Massabielle on the banks of the Gave to collect bones and dead wood. Removing her socks in order to cross the stream, she heard a noise like a gust of wind, she looked up towards the Grotto: **"I SAW A LADY DRESSED IN WHITE, SHE WORE A WHITE DRESS, AN EQUALLY WHITE VEIL, A BLUE BELT AND A YELLOW ROSE ON EACH FOOT."**

" Bernadette made the Sign of the Cross and said the Rosary with the lady. When the prayer ended the Lady suddenly vanished.

Sunday 14th February: Holy Water

Bernadette felt an inner force drawing her to the Grotto in spite of the fact that she was forbidden to go there by her parents. At her insistence, her mother allowed her; after the first decade of the Rosary, she saw the same lady appearing. She sprinkled holy water at her. The lady smiled and bent her head. When the Rosary ended she disappeared.



Thursday 18th February: the lady speaks

For the first time, the Lady spoke. Bernadette held out a pen and paper asking her to write her name.

She replied; "It is not necessary" and she added: "I do not promise to make you happy in this world but in the other. Would you be kind enough to come here for a fortnight?"

Friday 19th February: short and silent Apparition

Bernadette came to the Grotto with a lighted blessed candle. This is the origin of carrying candles and lighting them in front of the Grotto.

Saturday 20th February: In silence

The lady taught her a personal prayer. At the end of the vision Bernadette is overcome with a great sadness.

Sunday 21st February: "Aquéro"

The Lady appeared to Bernadette very early in the morning. About one hundred people were present.

Afterwards the Police Commissioner, Jacomet, questioned her. He wanted Bernadette to tell what she saw. Bernadette would only speak of "AQUÉRO" ("that thing" in local dialect)

Tuesday 23^d February: The secret.

Surrounded by 150 persons, Bernadette arrived at the Grotto. The Apparition reveals to her a secret "only for her alone".

Wednesday 24th February: Penance.

The message of the Lady: "Penance! Penance! Penance! Pray to God for sinners. Kiss the ground as an act of penance for sinners!"

Thursday 25th February: The spring.

Three hundred people were present. Bernadette relates; "She told me to go, drink of the spring (...) I only found a little muddy water. At the fourth attempt I was able to drink. She also made me eat the bitter herbs that were found near the spring, and then the vision left and went away." In front of the crowd that was asking "Do you think that she is mad doing things like that?" she replied; "It is for sinners."



Saturday 27th February: Silence

Eight hundred people were present. The Apparition was silent. Bernadette drank the water from the spring and carried out her usual acts of penance.

Sunday 28th February: Penance

Over one thousand people were present at the ecstasy. Bernadette prayed, kissed the ground and moved on her knees as a sign of penance. She was then taken to the house of Judge Ribes who threatened to put her in prison.

Monday 1st March: The First Miracle

Over one thousand five hundred people assembled and among them, for the first time, a priest. In the night, Catherine Latapie, a friend from Lourdes, went to the Grotto, she plunged her dislocated arm into the water of the Spring: her arm and her hand regained their movement.

Tuesday 2nd March: Message to the priests.

The crowd becomes larger and larger. The Lady asked her: "Go, tell the priests to come here in procession and to build a chapel here." Bernadette spoke of this to Fr. Peyramale, the Parish Priest of Lourdes. He wanted to know only one thing: the Lady's name. He demanded another test; to see the wild rose bush flower at the Grotto in the middle of winter.

Wednesday 3rd March: A smile

From 7 o'clock in the morning, in the presence of three thousand people, Bernadette arrived at the Grotto, but the vision did not appear! After school, she heard the inner invitation of the Lady. She went to the Grotto and asked her again for her name. The response was a smile. The Parish Priest told her again: "If the Lady really wishes that a chapel be built, then she must tell us her name and make the rose bush bloom at the Grotto."

Thursday 4th March: The day all were waiting for!

The ever-greater crowd (about eight thousand people) waited for a miracle at the end of the fortnight.

The vision was silent. Fr. Peyramale stuck to his position. For twenty days Bernadette did not go to the Grotto, she no longer felt the irresistible invitation.

Thursday 25th March: The name they awaited for!

The vision finally revealed her name, but the wild rose bush, on which she stood during the Apparitions, did not bloom. Bernadette recounted; "She lifted up her eyes to heaven, joined her hands as though in prayer, that were held out and open towards the ground and said to me: Que soy era Immaculada Concepciou (I am the Immaculate Conception) ." The young visionary left and, running all the way, repeated continuously the words that she did not understand. These words troubled the brave Parish Priest. Bernadette was ignorant of the fact that this theological expression was assigned to the Blessed Virgin. Four years earlier, in 1854, Pope Pius IX declared this a truth of the Catholic Faith (a dogma)

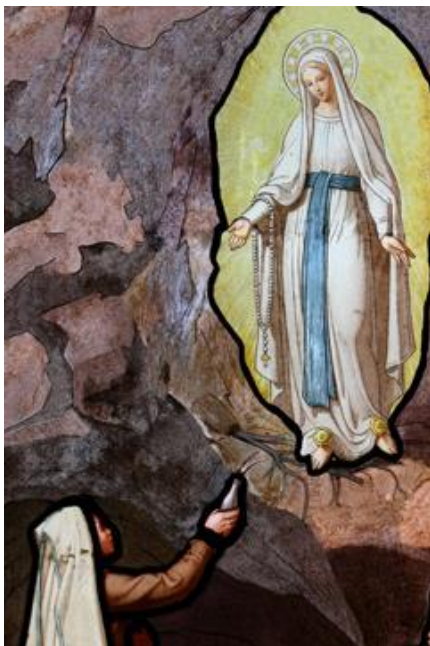
Wednesday 7th April: The miracle of the candle



During this Apparition, Bernadette had to keep her candle alight. The flame licked along her hand without burning it. A medical doctor, Dr. Douzous, immediately witnessed this fact.

Thursday 16th July: The Final Apparition.

Bernadette received the mysterious call to the Grotto, but her way was blocked and closed off by a barrier. She thus, arrived across from the Grotto to the other side of the Gave. "I felt that I was in front of the Grotto, at the same distance as before, I saw only the Blessed Virgin, and she was more beautiful than ever!



The Message of Lourdes

We call «Message of Lourdes» the gestures and words that were exchanged between Virgin Mary and Bernadette Soubirous, at the Grotto of Massabielle, during the time of the eighteen apparitions. This message can be heard as: God is love and he loves us as we are.

Lourdes in the 19th. Century was one of the main places in the district with more than 4,000 inhabitants including nobles, notaries, advocates, doctors, officers as well as manual workers, tradesmen, slate workers, small artisans such as millers. Mills were plentiful; many were dotted around outside the town, along one of the streams that flowed into the Gave - the Lapacca. Bernadette Soubirous was born in one of these, the Boly Mill, on 7th. January 1844. The bankrupt family were living in the Cachot.

On 11th. February 1858 Bernadette, her sister Toinette and a friend of theirs, Jeanne, went looking for wood on the meadows and led towards "the place where the canal rejoins the River Gave". They were in front of the Grotto of Massabielle. Toinette and Jeanne crossed the icy water, crying out with the cold; Bernadette hesitated to do this because of her chronic asthma. She heard "a noise like a gust of wind", but "none of the trees were moving". "Raising her head, she saw, in a hollow of the rock a small young lady, who looked at her and who smiled at her. This was the first Apparition of the Virgin Mary.

At the time of Bernadette, the Grotto was a dirty, hidden, damp and cold place. The Grotto was called the "pigs' shelter" because that was where the pigs feeding in the area usually took shelter. It was there that the Virgin Mary, dressed in white, a sign of total purity, the sign of the Love of God, in other words, the sign of what God wishes to accomplish in each of us, deigned to appear. There is a contrast between this damp and obscure Grotto and the presence of the Virgin Mary, "the Immaculate Conception". It reminds us of the Gospel: the meeting of the wealth of the goodness of God and the poverty of the human person. "Jesus goes to sit at the table of sinners", "because he came to search out that which was lost".

At Lourdes, the fact that Mary had appeared in a dirty and obscure Grotto, in the place called Massabielle, the Old Rock, tells us that God comes to join us where we are, in the midst of our poverty and failures. The Grotto is not only a place where something happened - a geographical place - it is also a place where God gives us a sign by revealing his heart and our heart.

It is a place where God leaves us a message, a message that is nothing other than that of the Gospel. **God comes to tell us that he loves us, - this is the heart of the Message of Lourdes, and he loves us as we are with all our successes but also with all our wounds, our weaknesses and our limitations**

ON 18TH FEBRUARY 1858: SOME EXTRAORDINARY WORDS

During the third Apparition on 18th. February, The Virgin Mary spoke for the first time. Bernadette held out a sheet of paper and a pencil so that she might write down her name, but the Lady replied: **"what I have to say to you does not have to be written down"**. This was an extraordinary statement. It meant that the Virgin Mary wanted to enter into a relationship which is of the order of love, at the level of the heart. The heart, in the Bible, signifies the very center of the person, that which is the depth of the person.

Bernadette was right away invited to open the depths of her heart to this Message of Love. At the second statement of the Virgin Mary: **"Would you do me the kindness of coming here for 15 days?"** Bernadette was overwhelmed.

It was the first time that anyone had addressed her in a formal way. Bernadette describes these words by saying that the Virgin looked at her 'as one person looks at another person'. Human beings, created in the image and likeness of God, are persons. Bernadette felt that she was also respected and loved, she also had the experience of being a person. We are all worthy of our dignity in the eyes of God. Because each of us is loved by God.

The third statement of the Virgin was: **"I do not promise to make you happy in this world but in the other."** We know a world of violence, lies, sensuality, profit, and war. But we know also a world of charity, solidarity, and justice. These two worlds exist on our earth. When Jesus, in the Gospel, invites us to discover the Kingdom of Heaven, he invites us to discover in our world, as it is, "another world". Wherever love exists, God is present.



GOD IS LOVE

To experience God is nothing other than to experience love in this world. To whoever knows how to discover this, Jesus makes the following promise: **"You are not far from the Kingdom of God.** That is: "you have known how to discover here below this Kingdom and you have lived out your life in this Love." This is the promise of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette. "I promise that you will discover here below another world". And, in spite of her poverty, her illness and her lack of education, Bernadette is always deeply happy. That is the Kingdom of God, the world of real Love.

During the seven first Apparitions of the Virgin Mary, Bernadette has a face radiant with joy, happiness and light. **Between the eighth and twelfth Apparitions all changed: the face of Bernadette became hard, sad and sorrowful, and moreover, Bernadette does incomprehensible things.** She moves on her knees to the back of the Grotto. She kisses the dirty disgusting ground of the Grotto. She eats some bitter grass. She scrapes the ground three times trying to drink

the muddy water, at the back of the Grotto, she tries sucking in a little and then throwing it away, she takes mud in her hands and she smears her face. Then the young girl turns to the crowd with her hands apart. They all say: "She's mad!" During four Apparitions, she carried out the same actions. What is happening? Nobody understands! We are at the heart of the "Message of Lourdes".

THE BIBLICAL MEANING OF THE APPARITIONS

These actions are biblical actions. Because "the Lady" asked her, Bernadette acts out the Incarnation, the Passion and the death of Christ. **Moving on her knees at the back of the Grotto: this action recalls the Incarnation, God lowers himself to become human.** Bernadette kisses the ground showing us that this act of humility is an action of the love God has for his people. **Eating bitter grass at the back of the Grotto:** when the Jews in the Old Testament wanted to show that God had taken on himself all the bitterness and all the sins of the world, they killed a lamb, cleaned it out and filled it with bitter herbs and then made the following prayer over the lamb "This is the Lamb of God who takes away, who takes on himself, all the bitterness and all the sins of the world. **"Smearing her face with mud:** when the prophet Isaiah wanted to speak to us about the Messiah he called him "the suffering servant". "Because he carried on himself all our sins his face no longer appeared human. "He was" Isaiah specifies, "like a lamb led to the slaughter, and on his way the crowd mocked him". At the Grotto, mud disfigures Bernadette and the crowd cries out "she has gone mad".

GROTTO'S TREASURE

The actions that Bernadette carried out were the actions of freeing something. The Grotto was choked with grass and mud. But why does she free this Grotto? Because it hides an immense treasure, which must be brought out into the open. Thus, at the ninth Apparition, "the Lady" asked Bernadette to scrape the ground, at the back of this "pigs' shelter", saying to her: **"Go to the spring, drink of it and wash yourself there"**. There is only a little muddy water to begin with, enough for Bernadette to drink. At first this water is muddy and dirty then, little by little, it becomes clear.

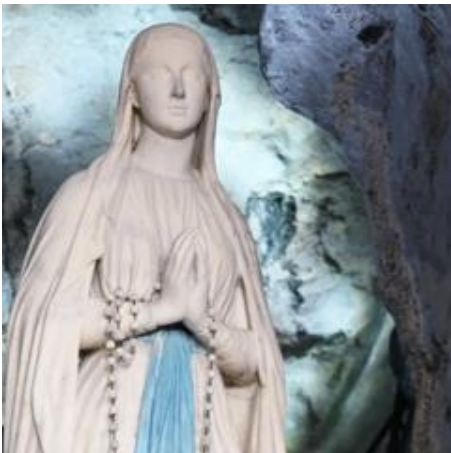
By these actions, the mystery of the heart of Jesus is revealed for us: "A soldier pierced his heart with his lance and there immediately flowed out blood and water." It is, as well, the depths of the mystery of the heart of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God: **"The water that I shall give you will become, in you, a spring welling up to eternal life"**. The grass and the mud signify the human heart, wounded by sin. But in the bottom of this heart, there is the life of God, as signified by the spring.

Bernadette was asked: 'Did the Lady say something to you?' She replied: 'Yes, now and again she would say: "Penance, penance, penance, pray for sinners". By penance we understand conversion. Conversion in the Church, as we learn from Christ, involves turning our heart towards God and towards others. "Pray for sinners". Praying brings us to the Spirit of God. Thus we understand that sin does not make us happy. We must understand that sin is something that is contrary to the love of God that is revealed to us through the Gospel.

On 25th March 1858, the day of the sixteenth apparition, Bernadette goes to the Grotto where, at the request of Abbé Peyramale, Curé of Lourdes, she asks the 'Lady' to give her name. Bernadette asks her three times without receiving a reply. At the fourth request, the 'Lady' replies in the local dialect, "Que soy era Immaculada Counceptiou", meaning "I am the Immaculate Conception". Bernadette did not immediately understand the meaning of these words. According to Church teachings, the Immaculate Conception means that 'Mary was conceived without sin by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race' (definition of the dogma promulgated in 1854). Bernadette immediately goes to see the Curé to give him the name of the 'Lady'. He realizes then that it is the Mother of God who is appearing at the Grotto. Later on, the Bishop of Tarbes, Mgr Laurence, will confirm this revelation.

THE LADY SAYS HER NAME: "QUE SOY ERA IMMACULADA COUNCEPTIU"

During the thirteenth Apparition Our Lady said to Bernadette: **"Go, tell the priests to come here in procession and build a chapel here."** "Come here in procession" means always moving, in this life, towards others. "Build a chapel here." In Lourdes, chapels were built to receive the crowds that came here. But these chapels are only the signs of the communion based on the love to which we are called. The chapel is the "Church" that we want to build where we are, in our family, at our place of work, in our parish, in our diocese. All Christians spend their lives building the Church, living in communion with others.





St. Bernadette Soubirous

Facts

Feast Day: April 16

Patron of illness, people ridiculed for their piety, poverty, shepherds, shepherdesses, and Lourdes, France

Birth: January 7, 1844

Death: April 16, 1879

Beatified By: 1925

Canonized By: by Pope Pius XI on December 1933

St. Bernadette was born in Lourdes, France on January 7, 1844. Her parents were very poor and she was the first of nine children. She was baptized at St. Pierre's, the local parish church, on January 9. As a toddler, Bernadette contracted cholera and suffered extreme asthma. Unfortunately, she lived the rest of her life in poor health.

On Thursday, February 11, 1858, fourteen-year-old Bernadette was sent with her younger sister and a friend to gather firewood, when a very beautiful lady appeared to her above a rose bush in a grotto called Massabielle (Tuta de Massavielha).

The woman wore blue and white and smiled at Bernadette before making the sign of the cross with a rosary of ivory and gold. Bernadette fell to her knees, took out her own rosary and began to pray. Bernadette later described the woman as "uo petito damizelo," meaning "a small young lady. Though her sister and friend claimed they were unable to see her, Bernadette knew what she saw was real.

Three days later, Bernadette, her sister Marie, and other girls returned to the grotto, where Bernadette immediately knelt, saying she could see "aquero" again. She fell into a trance and one girl threw holy water at the niche and another threw a rock that shattered on the ground. It was then that the apparition disappeared.

On February 18, Bernadette said "the vision" asked her to return to the grotto each day for a fortnight. With each visit, Bernadette saw the Virgin Mary and the period of daily visions became known as "la Quinzaine sacrée," meaning "holy fortnight."

When Bernadette began to visit the grotto, her parents were embarrassed and attempted to stop her, but were unable to do so. On February 25, Bernadette claimed to have had a life-changing vision.

The vision had told her "to drink of the water of the spring, to wash in it and to eat the herb that grew there" as an act of penance. The next day, the grotto's muddy waters had been cleared and fresh clear water flowed.

On March 2, at the thirteenth of the apparitions, Bernadette told her family the lady said "a chapel should be built and a procession formed."

During her sixteenth vision, which Bernadette claims to have experienced for over an hour, was on March 25. Bernadette claimed she had asked the woman her name, but her question was only met with a smile. Bernadette asked again, three more times, and finally the woman said, "I am the Immaculate Conception."

Though many townspeople believed she had indeed been seeing the Holy Virgin, Bernadette's story created a division in her town. Many believed she was telling the truth, while others believed she had a mental illness and demanded she be put in a mental asylum. Some believed Bernadette's visions meant she needed to pray for penance.

Church authorities and the French government rigorously interviewed the girl, and by 1862 they confirmed she spoke truth. Since Bernadette first caused the spring to produce clean water, 69 cures have been verified by the Lourdes Medical Bureau, and after what the Church claimed were "extremely rigorous scientific and medical examinations," no one was able to explain what caused the cures.

The Lourdes Commission that initially examined Bernadette, ran an analysis on the water but were only able to determine it contained a high mineral content. Bernadette believed it was faith and prayer that was responsible for curing the sick.

Bernadette asked the local priest to build a chapel at the site of her visions and the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes is now one of the major Catholic pilgrimage sites in the world. Many other chapels and churches has been built around it, including the Basilica of St. Pius X, which can accommodate 25,000 people and was dedicated by the future Pope John XXIII when he was the Papal Nuncio to France.

Following the miracles and constructions, Bernadette decided she did not like the attention she was getting and went to the hospice school run by the Sisters of Charity of Nevers, where she was taught to read and write. Though she considered joining the Carmelites, her health was too fragile.



On July 29, 1866, Bernadette took the religious habit of a postulant and joined the Sisters of Charity at their motherhouse at Nevers. Her Mistress of Novices was Sister Marie Therese Vauzou and the Mother Superior at the time named her Marie-Bernarde, in honor of her grandmother.

Bernadette spent the rest of her life there working as an infirmiry assistant, and later a sacristan. People admired her humility and spirit of sacrifice. Once a nun asked her if she had temptations of pride because she was favored by the Blessed Mother. "How can I?" she answered quickly. "The Blessed Virgin chose me only because I was the most ignorant."

Unfortunately, she was diagnosed with tuberculosis of the bone in her right knee and was unable to take part in convent life. She died in the Sainte Croix (Holy Cross) Infirmary of the Convent of Saint-Gildard at the age of 35 on April 16, 1879, while praying the holy rosary.

Even on her deathbed Bernadette suffered severe pain and, keeping with the Virgin Mary's admonition of "Penance, Penance, Penance," she proclaimed "all this is good for Heaven!" Bernadette's last words were, "Blessed Mary, Mother of God, pray for me. A poor sinner, a poor sinner."

The nuns of Saint-Gildard, with the support of the bishop of Nevers, applied to the civil authorities for permission to bury Bernadette's body in a small chapel dedicated to Saint Joseph, which was within the confines of the convent. Permission was granted on April 25, 1879, and on April 30, the local Prefect pronounced his approval of the choice of the site for burial. On May 30, 1879, Bernadette's coffin was transferred to the crypt of the chapel of Saint Joseph, where a very simple ceremony was held to commemorate the event.

Thirty years later, on September 22, two doctors and a sister of the community exhumed her body. They claimed the crucifix and rosary she carried had been oxidized but her body remained incorrupt. The incorruption was cited as one of the miracles supporting her canonization.

The group washed and redressed Bernadette's body then buried it in a new double casket. The Church exhumed her body again on April 3, 1919, and the doctor who examined her said, "The body is practically mummified, covered with patches of mildew and quite a notable layer of salts, which appear to be calcium salts ... The skin has disappeared in some places, but it is still present on most parts of the body."

In 1925, Bernadette's body was exhumed yet again. This time relics were sent to Rome and an imprint of her face was molded, which was used to create a wax mask to be placed on her body.

There were also imprints of her hands to be used for the presentation of her body, which was placed in a gold and crystal reliquary in the Chapel of Saint Bernadette at the mother house in Nevers.

In 1928, Doctor Comte published a report on Bernadette's exhumation in the second issue of the *Bulletin de l'Association medicale de Notre-Dame de Lourdes*, where he wrote:

"I would have liked to open the left side of the thorax to take the ribs as relics and then remove the heart which I am certain must have survived. However, as the trunk was slightly supported on the left arm, it would have been rather difficult to try and get at the heart without doing too much noticeable damage.

"As the Mother Superior had expressed a desire for the Saint's heart to be kept together with the whole body, and as Monsignor the Bishop did not insist, I gave up the idea of opening the left-hand side of the thorax and contented myself with removing the two right ribs which were more accessible.

"What struck me during this examination, of course, was the state of perfect preservation of the skeleton, the fibrous tissues of the muscles (still supple and firm), of the ligaments, and of the skin, and above all the totally unexpected state of the liver after 46 years. One would have thought that this organ, which is basically soft and inclined to crumble, would have decomposed very rapidly or would have hardened to a chalky consistency. Yet, when it was cut it was soft and almost normal in consistency. I pointed this out to those present, remarking that this did not seem to be a natural phenomenon."

Saint Bernadette is often depicted in prayer with a rosary or appealing to the Holy Virgin. She was beatified in 1925 and canonized by Pope Pius XI in December 1933. Saint Bernadette is the patroness of illness, people ridiculed for their piety, poverty, shepherds, shepherdesses, and Lourdes, France.



The intact body in Nevers

30 years after her death, the cause of the Beatification of Bernadette required that her body be exhumed.

When it was exhumed in September 1909, April 1919 and again in April 1925 it was found intact. Since 3rd August 1925 the body of Bernadette is preserved in a shrine in the chapel of what was known as the Convent of St. Gildard of Nevers. It is now known as "Espace Bernadette Soubirous – Nevers".

The body of Bernadette is, according to doctors, "mummified". Only a few relics have been removed. A very thin film of wax has been laid on her face and hands and molded directly onto her features.

Coming to reflect before the body of Bernadette, the pilgrim sees, to-day, the face that 18 times looked on the Virgin Mary, the hands that, at the request of the Blessed Virgin, had scraped the ground and allowed the spring to flow at the back of the

Grotto, the lips that related the words of the Immaculate Virgin and the Message of Lourdes.



THEME LOURDES 2017

“THE ALMIGHTY HAS DONE GREAT THINGS FOR ME!”

In 2017 the Sanctuary of Lourdes invites pilgrims to follow the path opened by the 25th World Day of the Sick celebrated in a special way in Lourdes this year for the anniversary of its first celebration on 11th February 1993.

We are invited to look at suffering through the eyes of Mary. From the first moments of the Gospel, in Cana, she knows how to make known to Jesus the needs of men, and she knows how

to make known to men the path of Jesus (1). Throughout the ministry of Jesus, She remains the one who accompanies Him in faith, a faith which is manifested in her willing presence at the foot of the cross: she then receives the disciple as her son (Jn 19:26). The hour of Jesus is also the hour of the woman (Jn 16:21). For her, every suffering becomes the pain of childbirth. She is "the mother" who welcomes and passes on the gift of love of the crucified Christ.

It is she who reveals herself to Bernadette, deep inside the dark recess of a Pyrenean rock. Bernadette is facing a dead end. She can see in front of her "a real abundance of wood and bone," precisely what she came for, but this is made inaccessible to her by the cold water of the stream. That moment sums up her existence, fated by illness, poor harvests and mismanagement, unable to attend school and catechism lessons. At 14, she is an outcast, on the periphery of Lourdes. She could disappear from Lourdes without anybody caring...

But someone has seen her in the depths of her void. A girl "as young and as small as me," she says. Someone similar to her, someone who was insignificant like her in the eyes of men, but whom God saw in the depths of her lowly house in Nazareth. "God does not see as man sees: for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart". (1 Sam 16:7)

Through her eyes and her smile Mary shares with Bernadette the joy of the Magnificat, the fruitfulness of a life that allows itself to be touched by God. Mary shares with the Church the joy of hearing again "a sound like a gust of wind," the breath of Pentecost, the breath of new beginnings. "She looked at me as one person talking to another person". I exist for someone! It is the joy experienced by little children, the same joy of the Trinity of Divine Persons who exist one for the other!

(1) We can read the commentary on the Gospel of Cana in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* of John Paul II (25th March 1987), §21: "Mary places herself between her Son and mankind in the reality of their wants, needs and sufferings. She puts herself "in the middle," that is to say she acts as a mediatrix not as an outsider, but in her position as mother [...] Another essential element of Mary's maternal task is found in her words to the servants: "Do whatever he tells you." The Mother of Christ presents herself as the spokeswoman of her Son's will.

"I thank you for wonder of my being, for the wonders of all your creation" Ps 138:14

"You knit me together in my mother's womb" Ps 138:13

"When my strength fails, do not forsake me" Ps 70:9

"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." Mt 25:40

In Lourdes especially, as throughout the Gospel and the history of the Church, the face and presence of the little ones are shown to us. When Mary eventually tells Bernadette her name, she refers to herself as the Immaculate Conception, the most radiant one with a brightness that is not hers, but that is given to her from above, from the very heart of the God of love. I am she who places no barrier to love, to the point He can be comfortable in me, He can become flesh in me. Mary gave her name on 25th March, the day on which Jesus was conceived deep in her womb. She is not alone in the Grotto. A 'spiritual ultrasound' allow us to be one with Jesus present in her womb.



Mary invites us to free ourselves from focusing on appearances in order to find, in the secrets of the heart, the omnipotence of a love that gives of itself. She invites us to scrape off the thick shell of our pride and our fears to let the spring gush forth, and to surrender to this little One who gives us life and leads us into the Kingdom. The poor have come to Lourdes, those with ailing bodies and thirsting hearts, to immerse themselves in mercy.

Mary Salus Infirmorum (Health of the Sick)

Mary Refugium peccatorum (Refuge of Sinners)

Mary Consolatrix afflictorum (Comforter of the Afflicted)

In Mary Immaculate, the Lord shows us a being completely free from the stain of sin. She opens to Bernadette, scarred by all kinds of disadvantage, the path to grace.

Lourdes becomes a place of healing for the sick, a place of conversion for hearts hardened by sin, a place of hope and renewal for a life called to spread the word.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, a gentle Father and the God of all consolation, who comforts us in all our sorrows, so that we can offer others, in their sorrows, the consolation that we have received from God ourselves" (2 Co 1:3-4).

With Mary, we receive the Breath of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter.

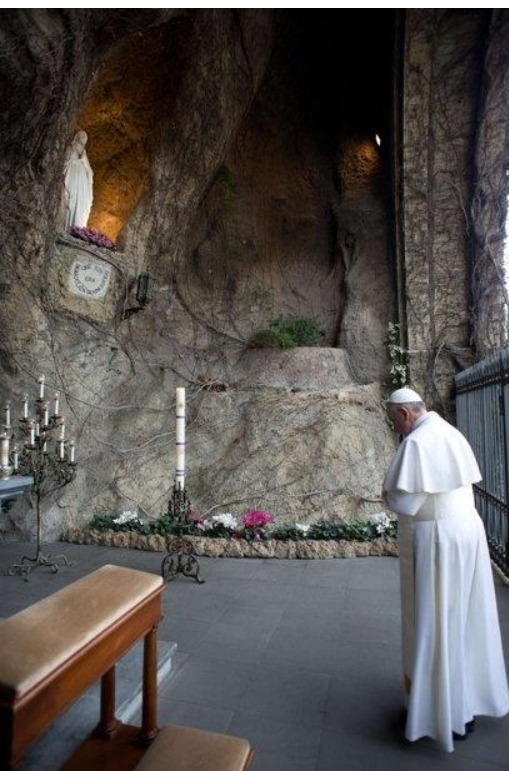
In the *Magnificat*, Mary gives thanks for the gift of life that is born within her. It is our God who shapes himself in this tiny baby, *"My spirit rejoices in God my Savior"* (My Jesus). From our mother's womb until old age, life is a miracle, a gift from God!

Throughout the Gospel and the history of the Church, the Lord acts to heal the sick. And He shows them His compassion in particular through the face of Mary, the mother who gives birth and always opens a path to the foot of the cross where, through her actions, she encapsulates the whole faith of the Church. She is 'Salus infirmorum', the health of the sick. She is the one who receives and transmits the gift of God, the gift of life. This is demonstrated especially through the healings in Lourdes since the time of the apparitions.

Likewise, in Lourdes, Mary 'refugium peccatorum' asks Bernadette to pray "for sinners", to do penance, to eat grass, to sink to the level of an animal, a savage, to the status of a sinner. But even in the depths of the dirt and mud, springs forth a hidden source, the source of baptism that the Lord has never refuted and which He comes to renew: the source of forgiveness and mercy. Lourdes is this oasis of mercy that every part of the Church must become, this place where hearts are healed through the power of forgiveness. Penance is the expression of this solidarity on the path of renewal of hearts and minds.

Finally, Mary, 'Consolatrix afflictorum' is given to us as the finest fruit of the Holy Spirit, the favored envoy of the Paraclete, the Comforter. She lights the way of the apostles who are called to communicate the power of this consolation which they have personally experienced, and who are called, too, to become comforters themselves. They join those who weep over the troubles of the creation that God wanted to be so beautiful, and that was not recognized at the time of the visitation from God! (Lk 19: 44) But these tears express the pain of a childbirth that still endures. As Saint Paul says, the pilgrim of Consolation becomes the carrier of a new life (2 Cor 1:3-4).

Lourdes is that unique place where we see 'exposed' the most wretched, the suffering whom we usually hide away and do not want to see because they show us our frailties, our weaknesses, our disabilities ... But here these scars become doors to light through the grace of a look that does not judge but rather loves. The fruit of our pilgrimage should be a new way of looking, learning to love others and giving their life a meaning. The 'Bernadettes' of today convey to us the sparkle of Mary's smile: the poorest, the most fragile, 'familiarize' us with the Life of God brought to us in Jesus Christ.



We would suggest that, in your own time, you reread chapters 8 and 9 of the Gospel according to Matthew. Jesus comes down from the mountain where He proclaimed the new law, not a law different from the Law of Moses, but this same Law, finally accomplished by the gift of His love, the breath of His Spirit. Jesus then heals the sick to give the people a taste of the best wine He can offer, the joy of forgiveness, which enables the publican Matthew to be cured of the worst possible disease – that of money. He said to him, “Follow me”. The man got up and followed Him. “Those who are healthy have no need for a physician, but those who are sick do. But you go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ for I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” (Mt 9:12-13)

With Mary and Bernadette, we give thanks for this place and time of Mercy. Our bodies and hearts make themselves available for God's work, the work of healing and forgiveness, which is entrusted to us to be proclaimed and spread far and wide.

“Jesus went about all the cities and the villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the Good News of the Kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness among the people. But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were

harassed and scattered, like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, ‘The harvest indeed is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Pray therefore that the Lord of the harvest will send out laborers into his harvest’.” (Mt 9:35-38)

The Magnificat Path of healing, forgiveness and mission

• Man looks at appearances, God looks at the heart.

What wonders might I find in my own existence, in my own life story, and all around me, if only I opened the eyes of my heart?

• Where are the ‘Bernadettes’ of today, for me?

How do I behave when I find myself among the weakest and smallest in society?

How do I view the child yet to be born or the person in the throes of death?

• Mary, Health of the Sick

Health in body, health in mind... What does it mean to be in good health?

Perhaps I have healings to ask for?

• Mary, Refuge of Sinners

What deference to violence, to death can I identify in my heart?

What path to forgiveness would I want to see opening?

What act of penance, in relation to the original offence, might I be invited to make?

• Mary, Consoler of the Afflicted

Do I know how to receive the consolation offered to me when things are difficult?

What joy of rebirth is offered to me?

• "The Miracle of Lourdes is a heart that changes."

What comfort, what source of renewal am I called to share?

What mission is now entrusted to me?

“The Magnificat, it is the song of hope, it is the song of the People of God walking through history. [...] The Church too sings this in every part of the world. This song is particularly strong in places where the Body of Christ is suffering the Passion. For us Christians, wherever the Cross is, there is hope, always. If there is no hope, we are not Christian. That is why I like to say: do not allow yourselves to be robbed of hope. May we not be robbed of hope, because this strength is a grace, a gift from God which carries us forward with our eyes fixed on heaven. And Mary is always there, near those communities, our brothers and sisters, she accompanies them, suffers with them, and sings the Magnificat of hope with them.”

(Pope Francis, Homily 15th August 2013)



The Magnificat Mary's Own Prayer

We have many reasons to give due consideration and prayerful reflection to the Magnificat.

It is the longest discourse recorded of Mary in Divine Revelation. Many are the stories written telling about the heart of Mary as shown in that beautiful prayer. Certainly inspired, it was pronounced by Mary herself when she was carrying the Divine Child in her womb. It is the perfect act of humility and of profound humble adoration. It is part of the Church's liturgy and has been such since the very first centuries. It has been recited or sung daily by ancient monks and hermits and other Religious who have consecrated themselves to God. It is indeed the prayer of consecrated souls and all clients of Mary.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, because He has regarded the lowliness of His handmaid; for behold henceforth all generations will call me blessed because He Who is mighty has done

great things for me, and holy is His Name; and His Mercy is from generation to generation to those who fear Him. He has shown might with His Arm, He has scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart. He has put down the mighty from their thrones and has exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty. He has given help to Israel, His servant, mindful of His mercy - even as He Spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to His posterity forever." (Luke 1:46-55)

All the great biblical masters of the ages have affirmed that there are four parts to the Magnificat. In the first strophe, Mary expresses her gratitude to God; in the second, she praises God for his power, His holiness and His mercy; in the third, she compares how differently God deals with the proud and the humble; in the fourth, she recalls that all the ancient prophecies to the Jews are now being fulfilled in the Messiah, Who was at that moment present in her womb.

Mary's Gratitude to God

Taking out some of the salient features of the Magnificat, we begin with Mary's gratitude, "My soul magnifies the Lord." My soul adores, praises, and honors the Lord. The stress is always on 'the Lord.'

What a contrast between Mary's attitude and that of so many people over the centuries, including our own day. Think of all the honor medals and statues dedicated to human beings, who are sadly undeserving of praise, but rather often condemnation.

Who were the great heroes about whom we read and whose exploits we memorized; the men who ran roughshod over human beings, and who destroyed empires in order to achieve their ambitions. We all know about Napoleon and how few remember the Pope he forced into exile. How strange that we should be so ready to praise weak human flesh that dying soon decays. Let us examine our consciences on how seldom we praise God. Yet faith tells us that prayers of praise and adoration are the most important form of prayer. For, unless this form of prayer is at



least implicit, we are not even praying. Unless we praise God, magnifying Him, we are not acknowledging God for Who He is and ourselves for what we are. How God longs for us to tell Him: "How great Thou art, O Lord, how great Thou art!" And by contrast, how unimportant, how trifling is everything and everyone else. Having said, "My soul magnifies the Lord," Mary immediately adds, "And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Joy follows on praising God.

God really wants us to be happy. He wants us to rejoice in Him, but on His conditions: in doing His Will and not the worlds or the evil spirit's or as our natural inclinations urge. What a lie to think that joy is found in our self-will. Hell was born of that myth. Not even speaking of Heaven, there is no other true joy on earth except in God, with God, and because God became man, like God. Mary had a clear idea of who she was, that she was the Mother of the Messiah, even as Elizabeth had told her she was the 'mother of the Lord Who made her.' Mary also knew by whose favor she was thus blessed. Compare the two phrases "lowliness of His handmaid" and "He that is mighty has done great things for me." God did do great things for Mary because in her own estimation she was His lowly servant. This is all God asks us to tell Him: "You alone are mighty and I, except for You, am nothing; and the moment my conscience tells me You have spoken, I don't for a second wish to hesitate doing what you ask." The only reason why Mary became, under God, the Mother of God is because she

was so profoundly aware of being the servant of the Lord. So ends the first part of the Magnificat.

Mary Praises God for His Power, Holiness and Mercy

The second strophe is Mary's praise of God. As reason and faith tell us, God does not need our poor prayers, but He wants them and wants us to recognize Him for what He is. According to Mary, He is Power, He is Holiness and Mercy. How is God Power? He is Power because He can do whatever He wills. Perhaps the clearest sign of our being just creatures, is the distance that separates what we want to do from what we can do. Not so with God. He had only to will our souls into existence and we were made, existing only because God wills it. Withdrawing His Will, we would be absolutely nothing again. In our day when power is the watchword inspiring fear into people's hearts, we have to keep our balance. I am not to be impressed by human power nor do I fear what any human being can do to me.

The One I adore is the only One I fear, God Almighty. As long as He is with me, who can do me harm? He will be with me as long as I am with Him. We have infinity at our disposal, provided we have humility and the honesty to acknowledge that God alone has the right to tell us what to do. No wonder the saints were so powerful; they had Almighty power at their disposal. How is God Holiness? He is Holiness because He is Wholly Other. He alone must be; He alone cannot not be. Everything else, including ourselves, need not be. What do we mean by “growing in holiness?” We mean that we are to grow more and more like God. What in the last analysis makes God Holy? He is utterly unworldly. God does not need the world, even though there would be no world without Him. Let us ask our Lord to enlighten us as to what it means to be unworldly.

When I am among people who make a profession of pursuing sanctity, I tell them, “In God’s Name don’t be worldly!” I do not have to tell you what worldly means. Look at the values the world respects and considers important. The unworldly are not preoccupied with things of time and space, but have their minds and hearts on eternity. Such persons are not enamored of this world, because they know this world and all its vanities will soon pass away.

How is God Mercy? God is Merciful for He loves the sinner even as He hates the sin. His mercy is boundless and His kindness towards the weak and fallen is proverbial. Let us remember that though we have sinned deeply and often, God loves us still. His love is greater than our sin. He wants us to become holy, more holy because we have sinned. He wants us to become more humble, more patient, more prayerful than we would have been had we not always sinned. Nowadays, many books of spiritual counsel warn us not to be so conscious of our sins, but to keep thinking of God’s Love.



Truly we cannot think of God’s Love too much, but not to look at our sins is nonsense! It is precisely that combination of Divine Love and our sins that brings us to God’s Mercy. That is what mercy implies. The Eternal Infinite Love of the Trinity became Divine Mercy only when man had sinned and when God’s Love could exercise its benevolence and forgiveness towards the sinner. Unless we keep contraposing God’s Love with our sins, we are living in a dream world, because the principal object of God’s Love is His Mercy shown to sinners.

Mary Compares the Lot of the Humble and the Proud

Next, Mary compares the lot of the humble and the proud. Compare these statements: “He has scattered the proud”, “He has put down the mighty”, “He has sent the rich away empty”, versus “He has exalted the lowly”, “He has filled the hungry with good things.” It is not so much Mary telling us these things, but Jesus in her womb is speaking through His Mother’s lips. When He was older and began His public ministry, this is almost the theme of His Gospels. God exalts the humble; He humbles the proud. We are inclined to take this too mechanically and mistakenly suppose that this reward of the humble and retribution of the proud always takes place regularly in our lives. Dear friends, I wish it did. Sadly but obviously the proud get prouder and are exalted. Who make the headlines? Who are honored and praised and who are ignored in this world? But no matter!

The span of human life on earth, even the longest life, is short compared to eternity. That is why my faith in Heaven and Hell is strengthened when I read the Magnificat, and I am assured of what God eventually does. Heaven is the glorification of humility, and hell is the humiliation of pride. Thank God that Heaven and Hell are both real.



Mary Tells Us that God Keeps His Promises

Lastly, Mary tells us that God keeps His promises. His faithfulness in the face of the disloyalty of the Jewish people over the centuries before Christ is hardly credible. We reread the Old Testament. It tells of one dreary failure after another of their failure to live up to the Covenant that Yahweh had made with them; they constantly relapsed into idolatry and resisted God's commands. Yet, after their infidelity, murdering their Prophets, ignoring Yahweh's laws and resisting His Will, there was nevertheless a Covenant between Yahweh and His people. They had failed Him miserably and sadly, but as Mary says, God does not fail. How well have we, with whom God has entered into a New Covenant, kept our part of this covenant? Our Sinai is the "Sermon on the Mount", and our Decalogue is the "Beatitudes." Read them and weep! God, however, does not fail us even when we fail Him. How we need this reassurance, that in spite of our infidelities, God will not abandon us. We must remain serene and calm and never allow ourselves to be discouraged. God, our God, is a faithful God.

Prayer

Mother of Jesus and Mother of God, teach us something of your quiet peacefulness and childlike confidence in your Son. Help us to trust Him, especially when things seem to go wrong. Help us to believe in Him as you did, that the promises He makes to us He will fulfill. Help us never to worry or be sad but always rejoice like you, in God, your Savior and ours, your beloved Son and our dearest Lord. Amen.

Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J.

