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# Bernadette of Lourdes

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*By*  
Father Ralph, S.V. D.

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## Bernadette of Lourdes

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It seems quite fitting that 1933, which placed the diamond diadem of seventy-five years of plenteous graces and innumerable miracles on Lourdes, should also see the Church confer the crown of Sainthood on humble maid Bernadette, who was the childish instrument our Lady used to give Lourdes to humanity.

Who that met the little village maiden, Bernadette Soubirous, on that momentous day of February 11, 1858, would dream that God was going to use this lowliest implement, an unlettered child of fourteen, to manifest His love for mankind by presenting to the world His Mother, under the title of *Our Lady of Lourdes*, truly Health of the Sick and Consolation of the Afflicted!

It was a cold, dreary day in late winter. Toinette-Marie Soubirous and her little friend, Jeanne Abadie, were sent to pick up firewood to be used in the needy household of the Soubirous. After some indecision on her mother's part, Bernadette was allowed to go with them, provided she wore, besides the usual sabots of the villagers, woolen stockings, for she had a bad cold, which had caused her asthma, from which she suffered from birth, to flare up anew. Though older than either of her two companions, she was much smaller and frailer, and followed, rather than led, them.

They walked along the river Gave toward the Rock of Massabielle, which had a natural cave at its base, and above it two smaller ones, almost side by side. In front of this rock were some limbs of trees and many twigs cast up the river, a branch of which narrowed here to a shallow little stream. The children rejoiced to find so much wood conveniently near, and the two sturdier ones waded across, exclaiming at the coldness of the water. Bernadette hesitated because of her cold, but being taunted by the others, sat down on the ground and began to take off her stockings, intending to join them.

### The Lady

Suddenly Bernadette felt afraid. She seemed to feel a great wind, though the day had been calm, and even now, as she looked at the near-by trees not a leaf was stirring. Then she noticed, just below the entrance to the higher of the caves, a wild rosebush swaying, though there was no breeze, and in the cave, behind the rosebush, a wondrous light, in its midst a most beautiful lady, clad in a dazzling white veil and flowing robe, with a sash of heavenly blue, on each bare foot a golden rose, in her hands a large white rosary. She smiled most sweetly on the child, who was kneeling in awe and fear.

Bernadette herself describes it thus: "I was frightened. I wanted to call out to my two companions, but I lacked the courage. I thought I must be mistaken. I rubbed

my eyes, then I closed them, then I opened them, but the Lady was always there, smiling at me and making me understand that I was not mistaken. She made a sign for me to come nearer, but I was still so frightened, and I never had a fear which was like this before; for other times when I was afraid, I always ran away, and this time I remained just where I was, and then the thought came to me to start praying. I put my hand in my pocket and took out my rosary. I tried to make the Sign of the Cross, but I could not raise my hand to my forehead, it fell at my side. (The Lady then made the Sign of the Cross and looked at Bernadette so encouragingly that she tried to imitate her). My hands trembled, but I tried again to make the Sign of the Cross and found this time that I could, and after that I was no longer frightened. . . . I said my beads; the Lady said hers without moving her lips."

### The Lady Vanishes

Then the Lady vanished. Meantime the two other girls had gathered their wood, and turning back, saw Bernadette kneeling and tried to attract her attention, but unsuccessfully. Finally Bernadette rose, waded through the water, which felt warm to her, and spoke of this strange fact when she joined the others. Bernadette asked the girls if they had seen anything, without mentioning what she meant, and they said they had seen nothing. Only on the way home, after Jeanne

had left them, did Bernadette tell her sister what had happened, and asked her to repeat it to no one. However, Toinette-Marie told their mother, and so it soon became known in the village. All, her family included, were convinced she had been mistaken, that she had seen a white rock or some such common-sense explanation.

### Three Days Later

But Bernadette knew better. She had seen the Beautiful Lady, with her heavenly smile, and was sure that she would see her again; in fact, she could hardly remain away from the Grotto, and so three days latter, after her repeated requests to her mother for permission to go were finally granted, together with her same sister and two other girls, she went toward the Rock of Massabielle. The others were curious, but Bernadette was quite confident as she took out her rosary and began to pray. After some time her face became radiant and she cried: "Look!" for again she saw the Lady. She even pointed out the spot to them, but only she could see the Vision. Bernadette sprinkled some holy water, with which she had thoughtfully provided herself, toward the Grotto, saying: "If you are a messenger from God, come." At these words, Bernadette saw the Beautiful Lady come near the edge of the opening right over the wild rosebush. The girls could see nothing, but Bernadette said: "She is not displeased: she is nodding her

head and smiling at us all. Then Bernadette, kneeling, became enraptured, she was wholly absorbed in contemplation of the Vision.

By now, Jeanne Abadie, who had been present at the first apparition, arrived with other girls from the town. They rolled down some rocks from the hill, so as to frighten Bernadette and her companions, but Bernadette knelt on, oblivious of everything. The children, alarmed, called some of the village women, but they, too, were unable to waken Bernadette from her ecstasy. One went after her son, Nicholau, who was at the mill near by.

Years later, he thus described Bernadette's ecstasy: "She was smiling, and looked so beautiful, more beautiful than any one I had ever seen. I was sad and I was happy, all at once, and all the rest of that day I could not get over how she looked."

Nicholau, a strong young man of twenty-eight, aided the women in trying to arouse Bernadette, and finally after much effort succeeded in lifting her up, for she had become unnaturally heavy. He carried her to the mill, and there she finally came to. Questioned, she said: "I saw a Lady dressed in white. . . . Oh! but she was beautiful. . . and she was smiling at me."

Two pious women of the village went with Bernadette early in the morning of February 18. One had even brought pen, ink, and paper. The trio knelt down in front of the Grotto, and began their

beads. Bernadette's face was soon illuminated and she exclaimed: "There is the Lady!" Bernadette seemed to radiate happiness, trembling with joy, and reflecting, as it were, a heavenly glory, though she did not fall into ecstasy.

One of her companions said: "Go now, and ask the Lady to write her name and what she wants." Bernadette obeyed, went as close to the cave as possible and raised her hands with the pen, ink and paper, and said: "My Lady, if you have anything to communicate to me, would you have the kindness to write who you are and what you desire?"

Bernadette listened, and then told her companions that the Lady had said: "There is no need for me to write what I have to say to you. Will you do me the favor of returning here every day for a fortnight?" Bernadette promising to do so, the Lady continued: "I do not promise you that you will be happy in this world, but in the next."

Thus began the almost daily Apparitions until eighteen times Bernadette had seen our Lady of Lourdes. The Vision had said she desired people to come, and they came in increasing numbers, from Bernadette's own village, from the villages and towns near by, and soon the whole countryside was coming to join their prayers with Bernadette's at the Grotto.

### **Doubts and Misgivings**

Some thought Bernadette a visionary, a prey to self-deception, or to the wiles of

the Evil One; others, knowing the simple, good, truthful, unimaginaive peasant child, felt she must have seen some one from heaven, though all were as yet ignorant of the true nature of the visitant. The clergy, in particular, were skeptical, and refused to go near the Rock of Massabielle, or to encourage discussion of the strange events taking place there. The Bishop of Tarbes, Lourdes being in his diocese, said that the clergy would not even give an opinion on this matter, neither advising nor forbidding the people to go to the Grotto. In fact, it was not until four years later that this same Bishop Laurance declared the faithful "justified in believing in the reality of the apparition."

Soon the civil authorities began to be annoyed at the throngs which followed Bernadette out to the Grotto, and they instituted an inquiry. But neither now, nor later, were they able to shake the straightforward testimony of Bernadette. They could not intimidate her, even when they threatened imprisonment if she again went to Massabielle. They were helpless before the honesty, determination, frankness and simplicity of this quite ordinary, youthful peasant girl.

### **Whom To Obey?**

However, her parents were persuaded to forbid her to go again to the Grotto. Shortly after this, one day on her way home from the Sisters' school, for she was at last going to school, Bernadette seemed

to be despite herself inevitably drawn to the Grotto. What should she do? Disobey the express commands of her parents, or break her promise to the Beautiful Lady, who, she was convinced by now, must be her Heavenly Mother, though the Lady had not as yet given her name? Almost against her will she was urged inwardly to go to the Grotto, where after her usual custom she knelt and said the Rosary. Alas! no vision. Bernadette returning, said: "Today the Lady has not appeared to me."

This break in the Apparitions is very significant. It precludes the possibility of the visions being self-induced hallucinations (as some skeptics insisted), for Bernadette expected the Vision, the natural conditions were the same, she prayed as usual and the disappointment was unexpected and keenly felt. Then, too, the non-appearance of the Lady harmonized with the fact that Bernadette had committed an act of disobedience to her parents, this seemed to emphasize the celestial source of the apparition.

Such was the grave anxiety and bitter sorrow of Bernadette that after much pleading, finally her parents gave their consent to her going to the Grotto as often as she wished.

### **At the Rock of Massabielle**

The next day full of eagerness and anticipation, Bernadette went to the Rock of Massabielle — and she was not disappointed. The Beautiful Lady appeared

and seemingly to make up for the trials of the day before, showered on Bernadette heavenly smiles and said to her: "Here I am. . . . I have a secret to tell you for yourself alone and concerning yourself. . . . Do you promise me never to repeat it to anyone in the world?"

Bernadette promised, and the secret, together with two others of a like kind, despite all cunning and repeated attempts to make her tell them, went inviolate with her to the grave.

The Vision continued: "And now, my child, go and tell the priests that I want them to erect a chapel here in my memory." She went at once to the parish priest and delivered the message of the Lady. He did not yet believe in the celestial visitant, and warned Bernadette, but she said: "I do not know if she is the Holy Virgin, but I have seen her as I see you, and she speaks to me as you speak to me. And I come on her behalf to say to you that she wishes a chapel erected at the Rock of Massabielle, where she appeared to me."

### **The Skeptic Estrade**

The following day Estrade, one of the officials of Lourdes, an irreligious skeptic, went to the Grotto, and thus he relates the experience which began his conversion: "At the customary hour, toward sunrise, Bernadette arrived, I was near her. I remarked in her infantine features that character of sweetness, innocence and profound tranquillity which had struck me several days before. . . . She went down

on her knees, naturally, without ostentation or embarrassment, without confusion, or being put out by the crowd which surrounded her, absolutely as if she had been alone in church or in a lonely wood, far from the sight of men. She took out her rosary and began to pray. Soon her face appeared to receive and reflect an unknown light; her face was full of admiration, radiant with happiness, looking at the opening in the rock. . . . I saw nothing but the branches of the sweetbrier, stripped of its leaves. . . . Yes, I attest it, a Divine Being was there. Suddenly and completely transfigured, Bernadette was no longer Bernadette. She was an angel of heaven plunged into unspeakable raptures. . . . Her attitude, her slightest gestures, the manner, for instance, in which she made the Sign of the Cross, had a nobility, a dignity, a greatness more than human. . . . She smiled at the invisible Being, and all this gave a striking idea of her ecstasy and bliss. I was not less moved than other spectators. Like them, I held my breath to try to hear the discourse that was taking place between the Vision and the child. She listened with an expression of most profound awe, or rather, of most profound adoration mingled with love. Sometimes, however, a tincture of sadness passed over her countenance, but its habitual expression was that of exceeding joy."

It was during this Apparition that, as Bernadette said: "She told me to pray for sinners . . . and she cried out three times:

'Penance! penance! penance!' which I repeated." Estrade, together with many others who were near Bernadette at this time, heard her cry "Penance! penance! penance!"

## **The Miraculous Spring**

On February 25, Bernadette again saw the Lady of the Grotto, who ordered her to: "Go, drink, and wash herself in the fountain, and eat of the grass which comes forth at the side." Bernadette turned toward the river Gave, the only water visible, but the Vision again motioned her toward the corner of the Grotto, where she scratched in the earth. Soon a little muddy water appeared, and after three vain attempts to overcome her natural repugnance, the child swallowed the water, and ate some of the grass growing beside it. Slowly this tiny pool filled and overflowed; within a day or two it was a small stream, crystal clear and icy cold. Gradually it increased in size, and has continued all these years to flow abundantly at the rate of over a thousand gallons an hour.

It is in this water that so many miracles have taken place, though the shrewdest scientists have been unable to find any healing mineral or therapeutic value in the water itself.

## **The First Miraculous Cure**

The very first day this miraculous stream appeared, Louis Bouriette, blind

for twenty years from a mine explosion (Dr. Douzous of Lourdes testified he had an incurable organic lesion), bathed his eyes with the water, still dirty and sandy and his sight was restored. This was the *first* of the miraculous cures at Lourdes, which have ever since been taking place there, and at a distance, through the intercession of Our Lady of Lourdes, thus testifying the power of the Mother of God.

March 4, the last of this remarkable fortnight, there were over 20,000 people of all sorts and conditions, from near and far, gathered near the Grotto. They waited in prayerful anxiety, hoping they, too, could see the Beautiful Lady. They could all see that Bernadette was in an ecstasy, but still the Vision would not give her name. Nearly all were convinced it was our Heavenly Queen.

### **The Revelation**

Bernadette continued to go to the Grotto to pray, the spring continued to increase its flow, and miracles continued to be wrought, until, on the Feast of the Annunciation, the Vision again appeared to Bernadette. This time, having waited purposely till this most appropriate feast, in response to the thrice repeated request of Bernadette to grant her the favor of saying who she was, "the Apparition joined her hands with fervor, and her face shone with the splendor of infinite beatitude. It was Humility in its Glory! . . . She then unfolded her arms, as if to show the earth her virginal hands full of bene-

dictions. Then raising them toward heaven, rejoined her hands and looking up to heaven with an expression of unspeakable gratitude pronounced these words '*Que soy era Immaculado Conception!*' (I am the Immaculate Conception):"

Throughout all the conversations with Bernadette, our Lady had used the patois, Bearnais, of the district, for Bernadette could not understand French.

Bernadette did not grasp the meaning of the words "Immaculate Conception" and kept repeating them to herself all the way to the Pastor of Lourdes, Abbé Peyramale, lest she forget them. He at once recognized the significance of this revelation. The Vision was indeed the Mother of God! (The dogma of whose Immaculate Conception had been defined as an article of faith just four years before by Pope Pius IX). She had now given new proof of her love for mankind under the title of the greatest of her attributes, by appearing to the young shepherdess in the miraculous Grotto of Lourdes, whence flowered her stream of living water, a symbol of the stream of God's blessings flowing through her hands to earth's troubled ones.

July 16, 1858, was the last of the Apparitions. The work was completed. The Blessed Virgin's little handmaid had served her purpose, the glory of Lourdes was to shine forth through the years, growing in majesty and power, a channel of grace to all mankind, while the humble

instrument, having accomplished her Queen's bidding, retired into obscurity.

### The Cult Grows

Now began a new era for the Grotto. The people came in increasing numbers to pray at this hallowed spot. The civil authorities tried, at first, to prevent these gatherings, but soon found it impossible, since the Emperor Napoleon III ordered that the barriers be removed. Miracle after miracle was worked through the prayerful use of the precious water of Lourdes; there was a revival of religious devotion throughout the countryside, and on January 18, 1862, the Bishop of the diocese officially declared that it was indeed the Blessed Virgin who had appeared to Bernadette eighteen times; he authorized the *culte*, or devotion, under the title *Our Lady of Lourdes*, bought the property on which the Rock of Massabielle stood, together with much of the surrounding lands, and with the help of the faithful started to erect a church, in accordance with the express request of the Mother of God.

It was not until fourteen years after the Apparitions that this basilica was consecrated. Such numbers of pilgrims came, increasing yearly, that it was necessary in 1883 to begin the construction of an additional church, that of the Rosary, at the foot of the basilica. This was consecrated in 1901.

Meantime numberless miracles were being worked at the shrine of Lourdes. The

water of the Grotto seemed to be the chosen instrument of our Lady to accomplish these wonders. Even at a distance from the actual flowing stream, the Lourdes water often made miraculous cures for those who invoked the aid of the Blessed Virgin.

## The Scientists and Lourdes

Scientists of every sort came to study the phenomenon. The water was analyzed with all the exactness possible, tests of all kinds were made, but even the most skeptical was forced to admit that the water, *of itself*, had no curative properties, it had no minerals different from those found in the waters of the surrounding countryside. It had no radioactive properties, and that humanly speaking, the plunging of the sick into the pool of its icy cold waters would generally be harmful.

Such was the discussion among scientists to the efficacy of the waters, that in 1882 the *Medicales Bureau des Contestation* was established. This has been functioning without interruption ever since. It is here that the records of the physical conditions, both before and after a cure, are kept; here the miraculous nature of the cures is tested. This Bureau is open to doctors of any or no religion, of any race, and at any time. These are permitted to interview the persons cured, to examine as minutely as they desire, and to make any tests their skepticism suggests. Sometimes hundreds of doctors have sat in judgment on one cure. In no instances are

cures ever certified by this *Medicales Bureau des Contestation* until at least a year has passed, so that their permanency can be attested. Since no one cured at Lourdes is obliged to present himself at this Bureau, only a portion of the cures can be officially recorded. The cures, to be authenticated, must be of such a nature that there can be no question of their being the results of mental suggestion, due to the religious atmosphere of fervor and expectation at Lourdes — they must be beyond a shadow of doubt miraculous. Hence the most stringent of all standards!

“Here, then, in the highlight of the twentieth-century civilization, we have the striking contrast of religion and science meeting on the common ground of the shrine and the Medical Bureau of Lourdes. We have the astonishing fact of religion surrendering her cherished works of mercy, at the judgment-seat of science, to have them discussed, torn apart, cast forth as frauds or accepted as genuine, as science, and science alone, dictates. A shrine devoted to religion, a Medical Bureau devoted to science, surely Lourdes has left no stone unturned in her efforts to prove that she is neither fraud nor fake, but genuine to the core.”

### **Cures Innumerable**

In the first twenty-five years nearly 4000 cures were declared genuine. The authentic cures have yearly continued to increase in number. At first the majority of the cures took place in the *Piscines*

(pools or baths), or by drinking the water; but lately — perhaps to show the power of the Mother of God with her Son in obtaining precious favors for her trusting clients — they frequently take place during the procession of the Blessed Sacrament, when the sick are individually blessed by Jesu Hostia, or also during Mass, or just after receiving Holy Communion. In fact, the gracious kindness of our Lady knows no bounds, and, when such is God's will she restores to health her suppliant children under any and all circumstances.

The physical miracles are magnificent and awe-inspiring, but what can be said of the spiritual cures, the renewed life of the soul in those who are dead in sin, the conversion to the true Faith, the increase of spirituality, the giving to distressed souls the grace to bear their crosses, and to afflicted ones perfect resignation! This, to many, is the supreme miracle of Lourdes — that no one goes away from this shrine of our Lady in quite the same condition in which he visited it. Only in the next world will these miracles of the soul be manifest to testify that Our Lady of Lourdes is the Gate of Heaven to all who invoke her with ardent love and implicit faith.

### **Countless Pilgrims**

The processions, from the first one held on April 4, 1864, when over 50,000 persons marched in obedience to the wish of the Blessed Virgin expressed to Berna-

dette, have continued with increasing fervor to this day. They vary in sizes as the pilgrimages for which they are held, vary likewise. Thousands and tens of thousands of people, pilgrims all, come to Lourdes each year, but since they are not registered with any of the organized pilgrimages, are not counted in the total of pilgrims attending, and yet over a million pilgrims officially known as such come to Lourdes yearly.

1933, the year of the Diamond Jubilee of the Apparitions of Lourdes, saw a vast increase in the number of pilgrims. Headed by their priests and bishops they came from practically every country of the civilized world. These pilgrimages were of all varieties, from those where entire trains were given up exclusively to the sick and their necessary attendants, to the one in which nearly five thousand unemployed English workingmen were sent by public subscription! The Irish National Pilgrimage was unique in that both Church and Free State joined. The Minister of Justice, with forty officers of the Army, cared for the invalids, and the Primate of Ireland, Cardinal MacRoy, together with a bishop and many priests, led many thousands of Irish pilgrims. France alone sent over five hundred pilgrimages, ranging from small parochial ones to the stupendous national ones. Another striking pilgrimage composed exclusively of 15,000 veterans of World War I, gathered from all the dioceses of France. They were led by three hundred priests,

all of whom had received war decorations, with General de Castelnau, commander of the French Armies on the Eastern Front during the War, at their head. Solemn High Mass, celebrated by Cardinal Lienart, in open air before the Basilica of the Rosary, was sung by the entire assembly of these pilgrims. Our own country was well represented, both by numerous arranged pilgrimages, and by enormous numbers of individual visitors to Lourdes.

### **Our Lady Gracious to All**

Our Lady smiled with equal joy upon all, and scattering her gifts, spiritual and physical, with a prodigal hand, she marked the 75th birthday of her Shrine with marvelous cures, and has continued, with gracious kindness, to cure many of her suppliant children in each of the succeeding years. While history has recorded them in books, they are also written on the hearts of Mary's children the world over. Our Lady of Lourdes has become one of the dearest titles of the Mother of God.

### **What of Bernadette?**

And what of Bernadette? After doing the work assigned her by God, giving to the world the messages of His Mother, she dropped from public sight.

Bernadette, born January 7, 1844, to François Soubirous and his wife, Louise Castérot was the oldest of eight children. Though baptized Marie-Bernard, in honor of St. Bernard, the great Doctor of the

Church, noted for his ardent devotion to the Mother of God, she was, from the first, providentially, known as Bernadette.

At first her father, a miller, was in comfortable circumstances, but soon, through mismanagement, and inefficiency in making his collections, lost practically all his trade. His wife, good-humored, kind and hard-working, was much too generous for her own good, and their finances steadily grew worse, until losing the mill, they moved from one house to another, each one less desirable than the one before, and finally being dispossessed for non-payment of rent, ended up in a house, owned by a relative, which was formerly the old jail of Lourdes. Here they eked out a meager existence by the day-labor of the father. But though the family were in actual want for many years, always was there the spirit of true Christian home apparent in the little abode.

When Bernadette was thirteen years old, she was sent to the home of Marie Aravant, who had been her foster-mother and literally nursed her for fifteen months as an infant. Bartrès, where the Aravants lived, was only a few miles from Lourdes. It was here that Bernadette became the little shepherdess, and spent her time guarding their sheep on the hillsides. As a child Bernadette was not especially pious, though good and obedient, cheerful and of exquisite purity. She was ignorant in many ways, as would be expected of a peasant child who could not read or write, but she had an earnest desire to

please the Blessed Virgin, to whom she was devoted, by spending many of her days while tending sheep, reciting the Rosary. She used also to weave garlands of wild flowers to adorn the rustic altars she built of field stones. She loved to play with her lambs, but the smallest one was always her especial favorite.

"From time to time," she said once, "he would come and knock over my little shrine I had made for the Blessed Virgin; but I easily forgave him, and, instead of punishing him, gave him bread and salt, which he loved."

"But why was this one your pet?" she was asked.

"Because he was so little, and *my heart goes out to all little ones.*" What a sidelight she thus naively gives on her own character!

### As Shepherdess

As the shepherdess she was described thus: "Her large, dark eyes were full of expression, her hair was almost as black as ebony, her face plump, her mouth a trifle large, her voice full of kindness; she was always gentle, smiling and lovable."

Long before this the asthma, from which she suffered till her dying day, had made its appearance, and often it was so severe that she was almost exhausted by her attempts to breathe, yet despite the pain, she was ever cheerful and uncomplaining.

Such was the simplicity and innocence of her appearance that, when the Abbè

Ader, the priest of Bartrès, first met Bernadette, he said to a friend: "If my idea of the appearance of the children who figured in the manifestation of '*La Sallette*' be correct, this little shepherdess must resemble them." Do you suppose he recalled these quite unconsciously prophetic words when he heard of the marvelous Apparitions of Lourdes, destined to add our Lady's own confirmation to his estimation of little Bernadette?

### Her First Holy Communion

The following year Bernadette returned to Lourdes, that she might there make her First Communion. She started to school to the good Sisters of Charity and Christian Instruction of Nevers, and in the chapel of their Hospice, on June 3, 1858, on the Feast of Corpus Christi, she received her First Holy Communion. The following day the Curé of Lourdes wrote to his Bishop: "She seemed penetrated with the importance of the holy rite. During the children's retreat, her demeanor, piety, and attention left nothing to be desired. She is developing in a surprising manner."

The household devotions in the Soubirous family were generally led by Bernadette, she being the eldest child; this long before the Apparitions set her apart, and all the other children and their parents joined in pious recitation of the Rosary and other customary prayers.

At the time of the Apparitions the family of the little favorite of our Lady was

actually in dire want; yet neither then, nor at any later time, would Bernadette or her family take any money from those who wished to show their esteem. And this too, when they were literally in need of their daily bread.

According to one of her brothers: "Four strangers, two ladies and two gentlemen, arrived one day to see Bernadette and afterwards asked me to show them the way to the Grotto. I went with them carrying a can which they had brought with them, and which I filled at the miraculous spring. For my trouble they gave me a two-franc piece (about forty cents), which I bore triumphantly back to my mother thinking that it would be more than welcome, as at that time we were in absolute want. Bernadette pounced on the money and obliged me to give it back. I had no desire to do so, and in order to decide me, she boxed my ears soundly, whereupon I yielded, much against my will. By my reluctance to disgorge, I had aroused her suspicions, and when I returned home, she went through my pockets to assure herself that I had not brought back the offending coin. At the same time she gave me forcibly to understand that in the future I was to accept nothing from anybody."

### **Crowds Besiege Her**

Shortly after making her First Communion Bernadette had left the school conducted for poor children by the Sisters of Charity, following the custom of the

neighborhood, and soon after the family moved to a mill, almost hidden in a ravine, but even there the crowds found her. They longed to hear from her own lips an account of what she saw at the Grotto, and Bernadette, with her usual simplicity and candor, delighted in speaking of the beauty of the Virgin Mother.

“Her accents carried such conviction, her words were so concise, luminous and appropriate, her answers to impromptu objections so swift and shrewd, the influence of the supernatural so evident in all she said, that all but the most prejudiced, upon leaving her, were already won to the cause of the Madonna of Massabielle, convinced that Heaven was speaking by the mouth of this humble child.”

### **An Illustrious Sculptor Speaks**

The illustrious sculptor, Monsieur Fabisch, of Lyons, who had been appointed to make a marble statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, to be placed in the Grotto, said of Bernadette:

“I have never seen anything more thrilling than her attitude when I asked her to show me the Blessed Virgin’s expression at the moment when she exclaimed: ‘I am the Immaculate Conception!’ She rose with the most perfect artlessness, joined her hands together and looked up to heaven. Not even Fra Angelico, Pérungino or Raphael have ever imagined anything so ethereal and at the same time so fathomless as the gaze of

this unsophisticated girl. As long as I live I shall remember her enraptured mien. I am familiar with the masterpieces of the greatest of painters in Italy and other countries, who have sought to depict the transports of divine love and ecstasy; in none of them have I found such unearthliness and angelic bliss. Whenever I asked Bernadette to assume this pose, the same expression would transfigure, illumine and glorify her features, so that involuntarily my eyes filled with tears."

### With the Sisters of Charity

Such were the throngs who came to view this favorite child of our Lady, that the priest thought it wiser to protect Bernadette's native humility and naturalness by putting her in care of the Sisters of Charity at Lourdes. Here she lived for almost two years, following her studies with the regular pupils, though much of her time was broken into by callers of every degree. They all wanted to talk to her, and she was ever willing to speak of the wonders of the Beautiful Lady.

Once, when Bernadette was so ill with an inflammation of the lungs that she was anointed, "at the moment when she was apparently about to draw her last breath, she suddenly asked to be given some of the water from the Grotto to drink, and no sooner had she done so, than she found herself completely cured. In her own words. "I felt as if a mountain had been lifted off my chest.' "

## She Enters the Convent

Evidently our Lady wanted to claim her more completely for her own, for several years later, when eventually her health improved sufficiently for her to realize her ardent longing to become a nun, Bernadette, on July 7, 1866, entered the Order of the Sisters of Charity and Christian Instruction at their motherhouse at Nevers, and thus this event was noted in the records of the Novitiate: "At last our desires are fulfilled! Bernadette is one of us! How our hearts, filled as they are with pious devotion to Mary, have longed to claim for her own this privileged child of the Grotto of Lourdes! She is exactly as common report has described her, humble in the midst of her triumphs, simple and modest, though everything up to the present has been calculated to excite her pride and force her into publicity; smiling and quietly happy in spite of the disease which for years past has been slowly undermining her frail and delicate constitution. Therein we recognize the seal of sanctity the suffering which invariably accompanies celestial favors."

Perhaps a slight digression here, giving a short outline of her order which was privileged to have Bernadette, as its most illustrious member, may be of interest to the reader.

### The Sisters of Charity

It was in 1680 that the first two members, Marie De Marchangy and Anne Le Geay, under the direction of Dom

Jean-Baptiste de Laveyne, a Benedictine monk of great spiritual discernment, began their novitiate at Saint-Saulge, France. Two years later they took the vows of religion, thus officially beginning the order which was to combine the two-fold apostolate of caring for the poor (which also embraced orphanages, homes for the aged, hospitals) and teaching.

For many years this pious priest had contemplated founding an order which would combine the active and the contemplative life, so far as practical, so that the members were "to find Carmel in the midst of the distractions inseparable from a life of active service." The motherhouse was in 1685 moved to Nevers, and henceforth the order was known as the Congregation of Sisters of Charity and Christian Instruction of Nevers. Its houses gradually spread over France, and after the expulsion of religious from that country at the beginning of the twentieth century, extended its work to England, other European countries, and even Japan and Africa.

Among some of the most distinguished of the early members of the order were Marcelline Pauper, known for an intensive spiritual life joined to an exceedingly active one, and who was honored with the Stigmata. The first Superior General, Marie Scholastique de Marchangy, like Mother Marcelline Pauper, "was visibly invested with the power of working miracles. The touch of her virginal hands and her prayers sufficed to heal the sick,

even such as were despaired of and given over by their physicians and surgeons."

The Sisters of this Congregation gave heroic examples of courage, devotion and sacrifice during the Revolution. Many were imprisoned, some even actually on the way to the scaffold, though prevented from receiving the martyr's crown by the turn of events; but still, despite all trials and persecutions, they continued to look after the poor and afflicted as best they could, until peace again came to France, and they could revive their Congregation in all its pristine vigor.

When Bernadette entered this her providentially chosen order, it was blessed with having at its head the Reverend Mother Josephine Imbert, "who was distinguished by her elevation of mind, her remarkable wisdom and uncommon energy, which enabled her to fulfill her duties in the midst of the incessant sufferings, her winning qualities, her great, strong and tender heart. It has been recorded of her that she was one of the most highly endowed Superiors that Heaven had vouchsafed to the Institute.' "

### **The Mistress of Novices**

Mother Marie-Thérèse Vauzou was the Mistress of Novices and had the delicate and responsible task of guiding a soul who had been previously instructed by the Mother of God herself. Mother Thérèse, because of her own heroic nature, ennobled by her burning love of God and for His sake of souls, realized fully that "a

treasure had been confided to her, and with her unerring tact she recognize that immersion in the hidden life, silence, humiliations, and mortifications of every nature were necessary safeguards for Bernadette's vocation."

## The Ways of Divine Providence

Looking back through the perspective of time, it often seems that Divine Providence had somehow blinded the authorities charged with the development of such chosen souls, eventually to be raised to the altar, so that they seemed unable in these particular instances to recognize the hidden work of grace going on, and thus it was in Bernadette's case.

"Must it be said? . . . Either because the postulant's shyness made her uneasy in her relation with her Novice Mistress, or because our Lady, by the three secrets she had confided to Bernadette, had reserved to herself the intimate regions of this soul, Mother Mary Theresa, usually so clear-sighted in reading the hearts of her daughters, never understood the riches of the supernatural life of this particular novice's soul. . . . Mother Mary Theresa, with her passion for souls, used her chisel with especial care on those whom the Divine Master seemed most to have favored, so greatly did she fear lest self-love and vainglory should prove snares. How could she have failed to work relentlessly on the soul of one who had been a friend of our Lady? This was the reason of the incessant humiliations and mortifications,

which never brought a murmur to the humble novice's lips."

### **Sister Marie-Bernard**

When she received the habit, she was given her own baptismal name, and henceforth was known as Sister Marie-Bernard. All during the important days of novitiate, she tried even more and more to grow closer to our Lord, to lose herself in Him, to imitate yet more perfectly His humility, and thus be found worthy to be admitted to be His virgin-spouse. But she never lost that certain childlike candor and simplicity, generally concomitant with true humility, and often rather surprised the older Sisters with her quaintness and naiveté. She startled them once, shortly after she entered, by inquiring if the novices ever skipped rope. When told they had other means of amusing themselves during recreation, she replied: "Ah, I asked because I love turning the rope for the others to skip."

### **"The Corner... My Proper Place"**

After entering the Convent she never liked even to refer to Lourdes, for she wanted to be like the other religious in all matters, and only mentioned it when obliged to do so through obedience. Once when one of her fellow-novices was in the infirmary, she showed Sister Mary Bernard a picture of the Grotto, and thus she speaks of the reaction to even so little a thing: "Whilst she was looking at it, I

allowed my eyes to dwell on her with an expression of veneration. Possibly she was conscious of this, for immediately after she said: 'What do you use a broom for?' 'What a question,' said I. 'Why, to sweep with, of course!' 'And when you have finished with it?' 'I put it back in its place.' 'Where is that?' 'Why, in the corner, behind the door.' Exactly! that is just my case; the Blessed Virgin made use of me, and when my work was done, put me away in a corner. It is the proper place for me. I am happy in it, and there I shall stay.' "

### Seriously Ill

During her novitiate she was taken violently ill, her asthma caused such coughing that she could barely breathe, she was practically at the point of death, and all the fervent prayers of the rest of the novices, who pleaded with the Blessed Virgin to cure her favorite child, seemed to be in vain. The Last Sacraments were administered, and with a dispensation obtained from the Bishop, she was permitted to make her vows on her deathbed. But it seemed that God wished to reward her for thus giving herself completely and irretrievably to Him, for she at once began to regain her usual health.

Later when asked how she was, she replied, in her own quaint way: "am better, God would have none of me. I got as far as the door and He said: 'Go away! It is too soon.

Sister Marie-Bernard was again able to follow the regular life of the novitiate, and gloried in once more being "like everybody else again," as she put it.

There was an innocent gaiety, a cheerfulness, an unaffected piety about this little Sister that endeared her to all, and she was the joy of the other novices, though she was the last one ever to suspect that. She was greatly amused at knowing "that her portrait was on daily sale at Lourdes for the sum of 10 centimes (two cents), and used to say it was *as much as she was worth!*"

### Example of Humility

When the rest of her companions in the novitiate made their profession, she made her formal one, too. It was October 30, 1867. On that day she was to give an example of perfect humility that shows how far she had advanced in the Science of the Saints. It happened thus. The evening of the profession day, all the religious of the motherhouse, together with many gathered there for a general retreat, were assembled while the letters of obedience (appointing each newly professed Sister to her allotted task and Convent) were publicly given out by the Bishop, Msgr. Forcade. By a previous arrangement between the Bishop and the Superior, this humiliation was caused Bernadette to further protect her from temptations of self-esteem.

"All the letters of obedience were distributed in their turn, hers alone was

missing. 'And Sister Marie-Bernard?' asked Msgr. Forcade. 'Monseigneur,' replied the Reverend Mother General, we are at a loss to know what to do with her: *she is absolutely good for nothing.*' Well, what is to be done?' If Your Lordship consents, we will, as a favor, try to make some use of her here to help in the infirmary; it is the only thing she is capable of doing.' The Bishop approved and gave his blessing to the young religious, who was deeply sensible to this humiliation, inflicted, as it was, in public (she confessed as much at a later period), but she never allowed her emotions to appear, and at recreation her companions found her as amiable and expansive as ever."

### Her Active Life

So now she began her active life as a religious by tenderly nursing the sick, looking after their wants so carefully and exactly that the doctor, who regularly attended the nuns, once wrote of her: "She is in her twenty-seventh year, small and frail in appearance. Calm and gentle by nature, she tends the sick with real intelligence and scrupulous obedience to instructions. She exercises a real authority over her patients, and I place entire confidence in her." He also attributed to her a "quiet, unsophisticated and equitable character." The religious consider it a rare privilege to have such a one as Sister Marie-Bernard take care of them when ill, for the very presence of this chosen soul seemed to bring the Blessed Virgin closer to them.

Frequently Bernadette was more ill than her patients, yet she pursued her duties diligently and uncomplainingly, and delighted in having these added tokens of self-sacrifice to offer her Heavenly Mother. She was infirmarian for many years, until, in 1874 these duties became too much for her frail body, though not for her valiant spirit, and she was appointed sacristan, which post she filled until her final illness.

### An Affectionate Soul

Bernadette was always ardently devoted to her family, and she felt keenly both the death of her beloved mother on December 8, 1866, and that of her dear father on March 4, 1871. Affectionate and dutiful, she was always a joy to her parents (it was a great sacrifice for them when she became a nun) and after their death, being the eldest of the children, felt an added interest and responsibility as to the temporal and spiritual welfare of her brothers and sisters. Some of her few remaining letters to them (the majority of her letters to her family were burned at her express request) show how wise was the advice she gave and how much she was interested in all that concerned them.

“God had given her a heart as loving as it was pure and delicate, upright and simple, humble and courageous, but created things were incapable of fixing its affections. She tolerated reluctantly any too pronounced exhibitions of natural affections, and on her part did nothing to provoke them. Her soul was as transparent

as crystal; her nature essentially upright; she was incapable of tolerating a subterfuge, but, nevertheless, endowed with the greatest prudence and discretion. She spoke with sobriety and brevity, but whatever she said bore the mark of good sense and judgment. No matter what question was put to her, she was never at a loss for an appropriate answer."

### **Fidelity to Her Rule**

Like all true religious, Bernadette realized that for her the ideal of religious life lay in the faultless and minute observation of her Rule. It required a heroic spirit of self-sacrifice to accomplish this to perfection, and for this she strove all her life. She never asked to be dispensed from any of its requirements, even when so ill, and if unable to attend the Community exercises, because of being confined to bed, she would follow them in spirit, making her meditations, etc., in accordance with the notifying bell. One of her greatest deprivations was the inability, toward the end, of hearing Mass, and she felt this keenly, yet was present in spirit at the Masses the world over.

Desiring to be ever more closely united to her Divine Spouse, she resolved: "Always to do what cost her the most. Never to give way to discouragement, always to recognize the holy will of God in whatever might befall her; to thank Him for everything, knowing that it was for her good that all things were permitted; to strive to be indifferent to whatever her

companions or Superiors might think of her; to cultivate detachment from all things, in order to seek to please God and save her soul; continually to bear in mind that God alone is good and that it was from Him only she hoped for her reward."

### **Suffers from Her Superiors**

Like many of the saints, Bernadette had to suffer much from the treatment of her superiors, all good and excellent nuns. but with such a high conception of their responsibilities, especially in the care of this chosen soul, that they went to great lengths, seemingly unnecessarily severe and ruthless, to preserve her from the contamination of pride and self-esteem. Affectionate by nature, Bernadette had to feel the crushing displeasure of the Novice Mistress, and later her Superior, for every little deviation, which in others would have been charitably overlooked. Coldness and aloofness were added crosses, but this heroic treatment preserved untouched her native humility and detachment; which were, of course, constantly endangered by the interest which outsiders, both cleric and lay, took in the Little Sister, who as a child had seen the Blessed Virgin so many times at the Grotto.

### **Welcomes All Crosses**

But Bernadette joyously welcomed all the crosses which were sent her, whether through the instrumentality of her fellow-religious, or through illness, or through unavoidable contact with the

world, for she had become a little victim — for the conversion of sinners, since even as long as the Apparitions our Lady had urged her to pray for sinners, and cried: “Penance! penance! penance!” Recognizing that self-sacrifice and mortification added wings to prayer, Bernadette strove ever to embrace each opportunity for such a sacrifice.

But before Bernadette was called to her reward, she had to earn it by further trials of the spirit and of the body. She had violent attacks of asthma, and to a Sister who sympathized with her, Bernadette said: “Yes, certainly it is very painful not to be able to breathe, but it is much worse to be tortured by spiritual sufferings. That is terrible!”

She suffered temptations by Satan, but was able to rout him, as she herself said, by the use of the name of Jesus. Her bodily sufferings increased, as in addition to her difficulty in breathing, hemorrhages, and a frightful abscess on her right knee, an enormous tumor appeared. Everything possible was done to alleviate the excruciating pain, but unsuccessfully, yet continually Bernadette exclaimed: “My God, I offer it to Thee, I love Thee.”

On September 22, 1878, nearing the end as she was, she was more closely united to her Divine Spouse by pronouncing her perpetual vows. From then on she suffered still more for the welfare of sinners, with a generosity truly Christlike.

## Famous Last Words

Seated in an armchair in the infirmary, struggling for breath, she exclaimed: "My God, I love Thee with all my heart, with all my soul, and with all my strength" . . . asked forgiveness for all the troubles she had caused . . . murmured: "Holy Mary, Mother of God pray for me a poor sinner . . . a poor sinner," and died — April 16, 1879.

Surely, God wanted to emphasize His pleasure in the handmaid of His Mother. when from the beginning He allowed countless favors, spiritual and temporal, to be granted through the intercession of Bernadette. She was beatified June 14, 1925, and the Church raised this humble French maiden to the dignity of the altar when on December 8, 1933, in the Diamond Jubilee of the Apparitions at Lourdes, the Holy Father intoned, *Saint Bernadette, pray for us!*



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