

The Lourdes Pilgrimage – A Path to Spirituality

Lourdes is a special place to so many, including Knights and Dames of the Order of Malta. As we begin to explore the spirituality of Lourdes, let us consider Bernadette Soubirous, a simple peasant girl was picked out by Mary of the Immaculate Conception to give our world this place of miracles. Bernadette was born to François and Louise, who named their baby Marie Bernarde, and whom they fondly called Bernadette. François worked as a miller at Boly. He and Louise were illiterate and didn't have the financial resources to make their business flourish.

Sadly, because of a variety of reasons, Bernadette's parents lost both the business and their money and were forced to rent a basement room called "le cachot," meaning dungeon. The family lived in this damp and dreary space for many years. Bernadette became ill due to her damp living conditions and was given the job of shepherdess at Bartres. She worked long arduous hours but grew healthier in the fresh air. The aunt for whom she worked refused to give her proper religious education and so she returned home to le cachot.

The family remained impoverished and one day Bernadette went with a group of friends to the rock at Massabielle by the River Gave to collect firewood. While there, she heard the sound like a gust of wind and a beautiful lady appeared to her. The lady appeared young, wore a white dress with a blue sash, and a long white veil.

The lady told her to dig with her hands in the rock and mud; to Bernadette's amazement, a spring of water came forth. Bernadette, a simple peasant girl with a basic education, was filled with awe and asked the lady who she was and what she wanted of her. In response, Bernadette was told the following:

- I am the Immaculate Conception
- Do Penance
- Drink the waters
- Ask the priest to build a chapel

The Curate of Lourdes (the parish priest), Fr. Peyramale knew Bernadette very well. He knew her to be a young woman of honesty, humility, and great virtue. He examined her closely about all she had seen at the rock. He interviewed all who had witnessed the apparitions. Having completed his investigation in November of 1858, he asked his bishop to further investigate to see if the apparitions were true. The bishop was deeply touched by Bernadette. On January

18, 1862 the bishop issued a pastoral letter in which he recognized the authenticity of the apparitions of Lourdes.

Bernadette's life before, during, and after the apparitions was a life dependent on the mercy of God. She really experienced ill health, poverty, loneliness and understood full well that true happiness would only be found in heaven.

As we make a pilgrimage to Lourdes we leave behind our familiar lives. Those of us who are healthy walk in companionship with those who are ill or dying. Those who are ill or dying seek the strength and wisdom to carry their cross with courage and to be strengthened by the love and compassion of Mary who points to her Son Jesus as strength-giver and comforter.

The path of spirituality through Lourdes is the same today as it was when Bernadette first met our Blessed Mother. It will be the same until the end of time.

- As we receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we receive the grace in union with Christ to accept the sorrows and difficulties of life with great courage.
- As we drink the miraculous waters of Lourdes, we rid ourselves of personal internal obstacles which separate us from Jesus Christ, our living water.
- As we come together in the "Chapel" or one of the beautiful churches or basilica, we understand ourselves to be an authentic member of the Church, sometimes wounded in body but always filled with the Spirit of Christ.
- As we walk in procession, we see the many coming together from all nations and expressing the same unique faith.

From time to time, we should ponder and pray upon the liturgies of Lourdes which can fill our hearts with courage and peace.

- In the bathing of the cold miraculous waters, we allow ourselves to be lowered into the deep stone Baths and immersed in the life giving waters sanctified by Mary our Mother. All at once, we gasp at the cold waters and are amazed by the warmth we feel inside our bodies and how quickly and easily we dry when we step out of the waters.
- Upon leaving the Baths, as we line up for the Sacrament of Confession, we join many humble penitents, prepared to confess in their native language to the priest who, as Persona Christi (the Person of Christ), forgives and redeems us.

- As we walk in procession with the Blessed Sacrament, we see the multitude in their wheelchairs covered with a blue canopy. We see peace and joy reflected in their faces, tended to by kind and sensitive hands.
- As we walk in the nighttime procession, our group is led by the people carrying the Cabuchet Statue, a replica of the first statue of Our Lady of Lourdes. As we pray the Rosary in many languages, we're all united in the singing of the Ave Maria. The dark night sky is lit by more than a thousand candles aglow and reflective of our hope in Christ.
- As we walk in procession, praying the Stations of the Cross, we join Christ in His pain and suffering and seek to be united with Him in His glory.

Bernadette herself learned the lesson of Lourdes - we too open ourselves to this lesson. As Mary described herself as the Immaculate Conception, she showed herself without the Child Jesus. We strive to follow Mary's message and we repeat the words of St. Paul "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me." This is what we have truly become through Baptism, Holy Eucharist and the other sacraments.

With its millions of pilgrims from all nations, races, and walks of life, Lourdes is more like "A city church where people united in the Body of Christ become temporary citizens of the pilgrim city of Mary. They experience conversion, understand and love the Church more deeply and return home with a new resolve to live the joy of self giving love through Christ." Each pilgrim, when returning home, contributes, whether in action or suffering, towards building up the worldwide Church. Yes, with Mary as our model, we can live at the heart of the Church for the good of humankind.

This essay was written by Fr. Owen B. Moran, Ch.D., Order of Malta, pastor of St. Rose of Lima Church, East Hanover, New Jersey. Father Moran has been to Lourdes many times but only once representing the Order of Malta. In April 2016, he will again serve as a chaplain on this great pilgrimage of faith.