

## Our Lady of Lourdes

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SAINT OF THE DAY

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On February 11, 1858, at the Massabielle cave in Lourdes, the Blessed Virgin appeared to the 14-year-old Bernadette Soubirous, an illiterate peasant, poor and sickly, who on that day had gone to collect wood along the gravel bank of the Gave de Pau. It was the first of a series of eighteen Marian apparitions, which would end on July 16th. They contained a strong call to conversion, anticipating the Mariophany to the three little shepherds of Fatima. "I saw a lady dressed in white. She wore a white dress, a white veil, a blue belt and a yellow rose on each foot": so Bernadette described her first vision.

Seeing the lady make the sign of the cross, the astonished girl recited the rosary. The Virgin, who still hadn't revealed her identity, then made a beckoning sign but Bernadette dared not come closer and saw her vanish.

**Overcoming her parents' initial disapproval**, the girl returned to the cave three days later and threw holy water towards the vision: the lady smiled and bowed her head. On the third apparition, the lady spoke for the first time: "I do not promise to make you happy in this world, but in the next". And she added: "Do you want the grace to be able to come here for fifteen days?" Meanwhile, the news of the apparitions spread and the number of people who accompanied Bernadette to the cave increased. On February 21st the girl was questioned harshly by Commissioner Jacomet, to whom she replied that she had seen *Aqueró*, "That one there." On the eighth apparition, the lady entrusted her with a crucial message: "Penance! Penance! Penance! Pray to God for sinners! Go and kiss the earth in penance for sinners".

**On February 25th**, at the request of the woman in white, Bernadette dug with her hands into the muddy ground. After some effort, she found a water source. "Go and drink at the source and wash", the lady had said to her, inviting her to eat the grass at the source as an act of penance for sinners. Many in the crowd thought Bernadette was mad, and three days later Judge Ribes threatened to imprison her, but the crowds present at the apparitions kept growing; on the 13th meeting came another other-worldly request: "Tell the priests to come here in procession and build a chapel". Bernadette reported the words to the parish priest of Lourdes, Dominique Peyramale, who was sceptical about the visions and told the girl that he needed a precise sign and that he wanted to know the lady's name. Another 23 days went by, and the priest was still adamant in his request.

**On March 25th, the day of the Annunciation**, the lady joined her hands in prayer, raised her eyes to heaven and, in Gascon dialect, the only language familiar to Bernadette, she said to her: "I am the Immaculate Conception". It was the title that the Church had dogmatically defined just four years earlier, and was completely unknown to the young peasant. For fear of forgetting those words, Bernadette ran to the parish priest and along the way she repeated them continuously to herself. "I am the Immaculate Conception," she repeated at last before Peyramale. Considering that the girl had not learnt the Catechism at all and couldn't possibly know that theological definition, that gruff priest was impressed. Soon he became a fervent supporter of the truthfulness of the apparitions which, following the careful investigation of the diocesan commission were officially recognised in 1862 by a pastoral letter signed by the bishop

of Tarbes.

**In the meantime, some miraculous healings had taken place** and countless conversions had occurred, such as the one on April 7th, during the penultimate apparition, known for the miracle of the candle: the sceptical Doctor Dozous, intrigued by the amazed reaction of the crowd, observed that the flame of the candle held by Bernadette in her hand enveloped her skin without burning it. He timed the event for about ten minutes and at the end of the ecstasy he found that the girl had no burn marks. The doctor believed. Yet, as with any authentic divine manifestations, scepticism was rife. Many secular newspapers and intellectuals mocked the events of Lourdes, false accusations were made to discredit the apparitions: it was the milieu of Positivism, a movement that excluded any reflection on the supernatural, advocating a materialistic vision of man.

**Yet, God** confounds the worldly wise and raises the humble, such as Bernadette, who from the age of 22 until her death lived in Nevers in the convent of the Sisters of Charity. The flow of divine grace to the pilgrims who go to Lourdes has never stopped. To date, of the over 7,000 healings declared, more than 2,000 have been judged inexplicable and 70 have been recognised by the Church as miraculous: these miracles are recognised only after careful evaluation, that follows the in-depth analyses and documents provided by the *Bureau Médical*, that is, the Office of Medical Findings (the last sudden healing considered miraculous, which took place on 11 July 2008 and was officially announced on 11 February 2018, concerns Sister Bernadette Moriau, who for decades had been suffering from a severe paralysis as a result of the ponytail syndrome).

**However, the greatest grace is conversion of the soul.** Let's recall what happened to the previously agnostic Alexis Carrel, future Nobel Prize for medicine. In 1903, he traveled to Lourdes as a doctor assisting a train of sick people, having replaced a colleague. Carrel witnessed the healing of Maria Bailly, suffering from tuberculous peritonitis at its final stage. "As I would like to believe, with all these unfortunate people, that you are not just an elected source created by our brains, o Virgin Mary. Please, heal this young girl, she has suffered too much. Let her live a little, let me believe", the scientist had written shortly before in his diary: he converted and later recounted his experience in the book *Journey to Lourdes*. The ultimate destination of Lourdes is heaven.