

St. Bernadette of Lourdes

(France) 1844-1879, Incorrupt

*Served as an “intern au pair” at the Hospice de Lourdes
run by the Sisters of Charity of Nevers.*

*As a novice, cared for the sick, was head of the infirmary,
sacristan and most often was the patient herself.¹*

*It was noted that her sympathetic manner made her a favorite
with sick people. Her very presence brought comfort.*

Mystic receiving 18 apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Lourdes



Bernadette Soubirous was born on January 7, 1844, in Lourdes, Hautes-Pyrenees, France to Francois Soubirous and Louise Casterot. Bernadette was baptized on January 9—her parent’s first wedding anniversary by Father Dominique Forgue in the parish church in Lourdes. As an infant, Bernadette was sent to the neighboring mountain hamlet of Bartres to be nursed by Marie Lagues who had lost an infant. Bernadette referred to Marie as her “foster mother.” Bernadette was eldest of nine children and was followed by six brothers and two sisters, only three of whom lived beyond the age of ten. Her brother Justin died in 1865 at the age of 9 and four others died as infants. Her father was a miller and operated a mill that had been in his wife’s family. Her childhood was initially comfortable.

However, the work of water mills began to disappear with the beginning of industrialization resulting in debt and loss of the mill. Both Francois and Louise then pursued odd jobs. Louise helped support the family doing laundry and other jobs for wealthy families and assisting with harvesting. Bernadette was once seen by one of her relatives bringing an infant to her mother, who was working in the field, to be nursed. When Bernadette was ten, in 1854, a cholera epidemic scourged Lourdes and she almost died. She was left with asthma and palpitations of the heart. That same year, the family of six had to leave the Boly mill. They change homes several times, eventually living free of charge in the single dark and unsanitary room in the city’s former prison, the Cachot. In 1856 famine gripped the countryside and many starved.

In 1857, when she was thirteen years old, she was again sent to Bartres, 5 km from home where Marie Lagues promised to teach her the catechism so that Bernadette could make her First Holy Communion. There she helped Marie Lagues in the home, in the fields and tended a small flock of sheep. Unfortunately the catechism was in French and Marie could barely read or write and Bernadette spoke only patois, a local dialect. In addition, after all day in the fields tending the sheep Bernadette was too tired to understand a word. Three weeks before her fourteenth birthday she walked back to Lourdes never to go back to Bartres. There, Father Peyramale had promised that he would prepare her for her First Holy Communion.

Back in Lourdes, Bernadette attended school taught by the Sisters of Charity of Nevers, a teaching and nursing order whose mother-house was in Nevers, south of Paris. The sisters operated a hospice, day school and boarding school in Lourdes and were unusually well trained. Under Abbot Peyramale, Bernadette prepared for her First Holy Communion. Her family now lived in Le Cachot which had previously been the local jail and was now their home.

Soon after Bernadette had turned 14, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to her on February 11, 1858, at the grotto of Massabielle on the Gave River. Our Lady would appear to Bernadette eighteen times in 1858, the last appearance on July 16, 1858. A brief summary of these visits is as follows:

Thursday 11th February 1858: the first meeting. Accompanied by her sister, Toinette, age eleven, and a friend, Jeanne Abadie, Bernadette went to gather firewood for her mother. Her companions crossed the river while she sat down to take off her stockings. Bernadette heard a noise like the sound of a storm. She looked at the trees near the river, but nothing was moving. She was frightened, and stood up straight. Bewildered, she looked across the mill-stream to a niche above a cave in the rock of Massabielle. A rosebush on the edge of the niche was swaying in the wind. It was all that moved. All else was still. In Bernadette's own words:

A golden cloud came out of the cave and flooded the niche with radiance. Then a lady, young and beautiful, exceedingly beautiful, the like of whom I had never seen, stood on the edge of the niche. She smiled and smiled at me, beckoning me to come closer as though she was my mother, and she gave me to understand in my soul that I was not mistaken. The Lady was dressed in white, with a white veil on her head, and a blue sash at her waist. A Rosary of white beads on a golden chain was on her right arm. On that cold winter's day, her feet were bare, but on each foot was a golden rose radiant with the warmth of summer. I went upon my knees and took my Rosary from my pocket. The Lady took the Rosary from her arm and I began to cross myself. My arm could not move until the Lady herself made a beautiful Sign of the Cross. The Lady let me pray the Rosary on my own. She passed the beads through her fingers, she did not say the words. She signed for me to come closer but I did not dare. She smiled at me, she bowed to me. She disappeared into the niche, the golden cloud faded and I was alone.²

Sunday 14th February 1858: 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 1858: 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 1858: the first candle. 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 1858: in silence. The Lady taught her a personal prayer. At the end of the vision Bernadette is overcome with a great sadness.

Sunday 21th February 1858: "Aquero". The Lady appeared to Bernadette very early in the morning. About one hundred people were present. Afterwards 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 23th February 1858: 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 1858: "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 1858: 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 1858: 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 1858: the ecstasy. 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 1858: 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 woman from Loubajac, 7 kilometer away, 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 1858: message to the priests. The crowd becomes larger and larger. The Lady asked her: "Go and tell the priests that people are 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 1858: 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 1858: 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 1858: the name they waited 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 extended her arms towards the ground, then joined them as though in prayer and said, '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 1858: 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.

On June 3, 1858, Bernadette received her First Holy Communion on the Feast of Corpus Christi (the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ). When Bernadette was asked, "What made you happier, Bernadette, First Holy Communion or the Apparitions?" She answered, *"The two go together. They cannot be compared. I only know I was happy on both occasions. Years later I would write in my prayer book in Nevers, 'I was nothing, and of this nothing God made something great. In Holy Communion I am heart to heart with Jesus. How sublime is my destiny.'"*²

Friday 16th July 1858: 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 River. *"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!"*

For privacy and to protect Bernadette from the town officials, in 1861, Father Peyramale sent her to live with of the Sisters of Charity of Nevers where she was welcomed as an "intern au pair" at the Hospice de Lourdes. There she slowly learned to write and speak French, to sew and embroider. She helped tend to the poor and sick stating in her memoirs, "I love the poor very much. I like caring for the sick, I will stay with the Sisters of Nevers."² In April 1862 she collapsed and was anointed. The hospice doctor prescribed medicine but instead, Bernadette requested water from the grotto. She reported that moments after sipping it, she had felt as though a mountain were lifted off her chest.²

On July 3, 1866, Bernadette went one last time to the grotto. She said goodbye, turned away and did not look back. Now she would begin her life as a Sister of Charity in Nevers. She crossed the threshold of the Mother House, called Saint-Gillard, in Nevers with two other young girls on July 7, 1866. The day after her arrival at the Mother House, in her Pyrenean costume, Bernadette told the story of the apparitions for the last time in front of the 300 sisters gathered to listen to her. She was told it would be the first and last time she would speak of them. And then she began the period of formation for religious life. Her health remained fragile, and she was given the last sacraments within four months of her arrival. At this time the bishop anointed her and received her Religious Profession. However, when she did not die, the Superior General was angry and stated,

“You are nothing but a little fool. If you are not dead by morning, I will remove your Profession veil and send you back to the Novitiate.”² Bernadette recovered. Back in the novitiate she was informed that her mother died peacefully on December 8, 1866.

On October 30, 1867, with 43 novices, she professed her vow, taking the name of Sister Marie-Bernard. Despite having received the visits from the Blessed Virgin Mary nine years earlier, Bernadette was not vain or self-important. When treated harshly by the novice-mistress, she responded with perfect humility. The sisters, disappointed by the simplicity of this child of nature made the peasant girl feel bitterly the scant esteem in which they held her; and even her superiors, with the aim of protecting the visionary of Lourdes from the sin of pride, were not sparing in humiliations. With the excuse that she was “stupid, good-for-nothing little thing,” her final profession was continually delayed. “God gave to the despised creature, who was punished for 13 years because of her visions, the strength to say: *‘You see, my story is quite simple. The Virgin made use of me, then I was put into a corner. That is now my place. There I am happy and there I remain.’*”³



Sister Marie-Bernard

Though she would have liked to serve in a community outside of the Mother House taking care of the sick and the poor, her ill health did not allow this. She remained at the Mother House. During her 13 years at Saint-Gildard, Bernadette cared for the sick in the infirmary, was head of the infirmary, sacristan and most often the patient herself. Her life was simple and ordinary. Bernadette had a cheerful character and was available for what was asked of her stating, “*I won’t live a moment that I don’t spend loving it.*”⁷ It was noted that her sympathetic manner made her a favorite with sick people. “Her step and touch were light, and her very presence brought comfort.”⁴ As sacristan she embroidered sacred vestments beautifully which she was able to continue as she became bedridden. Bernadette’s father died on March 4, 1871, at the age of 64. Father Peyramale, who had begun the procession at Lourdes and built the chapel, died on September 8, 1877, in Lourdes on the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

During the last two years of her life (1877-1879), she developed a tumor on one knee which affected the bone causing excruciating pain. She also developed pulmonary tuberculosis which caused much suffering. Sister Marie-Bernard took no part in the consecration of the basilica in Lourdes in 1876. Sister Marie-Bernard made her perpetual and final vows in September 1878, seven months prior to her death.

On Easter Sunday, Sister Marie-Bernard said, “*This morning after Holy Communion, I asked Our Lord for a respite to talk to Him in comfort. He would not give it. My sufferings will last till death.*”

On Easter Monday, Bernadette said goodbye to her dear friend Sister Bernard Dalas. “Not that,” Sister Bernard had remarked twelve years ago. “*Just that*” said Bernadette as she took her hand. Bernadette took her hand again and said, “Goodbye, Bernard, this time it is the last.”

On Easter Tuesday, the chaplain suggested she make the sacrifice of her life. *“What sacrifice?”* Bernadette answered, *“It is no sacrifice to leave this life, where it is so difficult to belong to God.”*

On Easter Wednesday, she requested her crucifix to be tied to her, lest her weakening fingers be unable to hold it. She gazed at the statue of Our Blessed Lady and said, *“I have seen her. How beautiful she is, and how I long to go to her.”* Sister Nathalie Portat came in about three o’clock, and Bernadette requested, *“Help me to thank to the end.”* Taking the crucifix, she prayed, *“My God I love You, with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my strength.”* Sister Nathalie began the Hail Mary. Bernadette answered clearly, *“Mother of God, pray for me, poor sinner, poor sinner.”* Now was the hour of her death, and like Jesus on the cross, she said, *“I am thirsty.”* The Sister brought some water. Bernadette for the last time made the Sign of the Cross as her Lady had taught her in the grotto. Silently she sipped a little water. Peacefully she bowed her head. Gently she surrendered her soul. A sister put the crucifix in her hands and the Rosary through her fingers. Bernadette Soubirous, after thirty-five years on earth, had gone to her God.”⁵

Bernadette died on Easter Wednesday, April 16, 1879, at the age of 35 at the Mother House in Nevers, France. In 1909, Mother Josephine Forrester inaugurated Bernadette’s cause of canonization. As part of the formal proceedings, Bernadette’s coffin was opened after thirty years in the grave. Her Rosary had rusted, her habit had frayed, but Bernadette was perfectly and beautifully incorrupt. It was as though she had just fallen asleep. Her coffin was opened again in 1919 and 1925, each time the body was discovered incorrupt. In 1925, her body was placed in a reliquary in the Saint Joseph Chapel on 34 rue St. Gildard, in the middle of the garden.

Bernadette was declared venerable with the promulgation of the decree of heroic virtues on November 18, 1923, beatified on June 14, 1925, and canonized on December 8, 1933,⁶ all by Pope Pius XI. Bernadette was not canonized for her visions but for the humble simplicity and religious trust that characterized her whole life. She is considered the patron saint of shepherds. Website: Some give her two more days: February 18, the day Our Lady promised to make her happy, not in this life, but in the next and February 11th the day the Blessed Virgin Mary first appeared to her which is also the Feast Day of Our Lady of Lourdes).(Memorial per the Vatican Congregation for the Causes of Saints is the day of her death: April 16)



*“I love the poor very much.
I like caring for the sick,
I will stay with the Sisters of Nevers”*

*“Jesus alone for master, Jesus alone for wealth,
Jesus alone for friend”*

“God speaks to the heart without any sound of speech”⁷

The Medical Bureau at Lourdes:

In 1883, at the request of Father Remi Sempe, Father of Garaison, the first Rector of the Sanctuary of Lourdes, Dr. Georges-Fernand Dunot de Saint-Maclou established the Bureau des Constations Medicales, so that no one, who thought he had been “cured”, would leave Lourdes without having submitted the story of his cure to a rigorous and collegiate medical assessment. And thus formed the Medical Bureau of the Sanctuary. Dr. Auguste Vallet, President of the Bureau from 1927 to 1947, shortly after arrival transformed the bureau into an international multidisciplinary association: Association Medicale Internationale de Lourdes (A.M.I.L.). AMIL

includes physicians, pharmacists, dentists, healthcare workers and nurses.⁸ Though thousands of miraculous cures have been attributed to the Lourdes water or the Eucharistic procession, as of 11 February 2018, seventy were officially listed.⁹ The criteria is stringent and the process arduous to be classified as a miraculous healing. The medical committee must first deem that there is no medical explanation for the cure and this review is conducted over 5 years with annual visits to Lourdes. Subsequently the local bishop of the person cured must approve the report prior to it being submitted to the Vatican.

Our Lady of Lourdes Hospitality, North American Volunteers

The North American Lourdes Volunteers (NALV), staffed with registered nurses, physicians, and lay volunteers, accompanies the sick and suffering, who would otherwise be unable to travel across the Atlantic Ocean on Special Needs pilgrimages to Lourdes.¹⁰

References:

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Note: This biography is for all desiring to grow in holiness and follow His Holiness Pope Pius XI address to 2000 nurses assembled at Castel Gondolfo on August 27, 1935 for the II World Congress of Catholic Nurses (www.ciciams.org / www.nacn-usa.org): *to first and foremost bring the Christian supernatural, Christ to our patients, bring salvation to souls*. May it also help nursing students with your Nursing History course. Source: Diana L. Ruzicka (2022). *The Book of Nurse Saints*. Available at www.lulu.com/spotlight/Ruzicka