

**HOSPITALITÉ NOTRE DAME DE LOURDES****SERVICE SAINTE BERNADETTE****FORMATION****MODULE -1-*****THE MESSAGE OF LOURDES IN THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL :  
A GRACE FOR OUR TIME*****FOREWORD: WHO IS BERNADETTE?**

The 19th century was marked by the upheaval caused by several revolutions. The philosophy of the Enlightenment, which prioritised reason at the expense of faith, seemed triumphant. Liberalism, which aimed to establish itself as a system wherein man no longer needs God, wanted to be seen as the sole reference point for society. The industrial revolution, which had made nonsense of all traditional economic systems - and the place occupied by humankind - had permanently swung the balance towards the secular.

In France, the Church was recovering slowly from the revolution of 1789 and the Empire, looking outwards with great missionary zeal which led many of its children to proclaim the Gospel on the five continents.

In Lourdes, as elsewhere, a new social class, made up of the "petty bourgeoisie" was growing richer whilst in the more disadvantaged sectors of the population, many were falling victim to the abolition of the old system, hitherto considered unchangeable...

Meanwhile, the Bishop of Tarbes, Monsignor Sévère Laurence, was implementing a pastoral project based on the reacquisition and restoration of the Marian sanctuaries of his diocese, the evangelisation of the faithful in parish missions and the creation of new schools.

In the lower town of Lourdes, the Soubirous family were facing head-on the economic shock and in a few years, had lost most of their property - and also their dignity. This family experienced every type of poverty each heaped upon the next, notably unemployment and homelessness, long-term poverty and hunger. From now on they would be overlooked, marginalized and excluded.

However, the life of the Soubirous was supported by two strong pillars. Indeed, what enabled them to survive was, on the one hand, love, marriage and family and, on the other, a simple faith, marked by unwavering trust in the goodness of God and nourished by daily prayer. It was on January 7<sup>th</sup> 1844 that Bernadette was born in the Boly Mill of Lourdes, the eldest child of François Soubirous and Louise Castérot. A miller's daughter (and granddaughter on her mother's side) she enjoyed a quiet life until the age of ten, punctuated by work & family celebrations as the family took its perfectly normal place in society and in the life of the parish.

However for the Soubirous family all of that began to crumble in 1854. Bankruptcy forced them to leave the family mill and thus began a journey whose outcome would be dramatic. Indeed, after moving from mill to mill, each smaller and cheaper than the last, and then from one place of temporary rented accommodation ever more precariously to another, the Soubirous found themselves on the street. They were then housed free of charge by a cousin, who offered them a single room measuring 5 m x 4 m called the Cachot ("the Dungeon"). This was an old prison cell, no longer used by the police because it had been deemed unhealthy.

This is where the Soubirous parents and their four children now had to live. The father and the mother found it increasingly difficult to find employment - even odd jobs from day to day, despite their availability and their willingness to try anything. And, indeed, the economic crisis had ravaged all of France, making all work harder to come by. Added to this, there had been several years in a row of catastrophic harvests, which had considerably pushed up the price of wheat, and thus, bread. But without work, there was no money and without money, it was not possible to buy bread.

Bernadette herself had worked since childhood. At home, she helped her mother or deputised for her, both in household chores and in caring for her younger brothers. Outside, she would do housework for different families. Very quickly, however, due to the economic crisis which caused her too to lose her jobs, Bernadette and her sister Toinette became scavengers. They would pick up whatever they could find - scrap metal, paper and cardboard - to get some money which they could convert straightaway into bread. When there was nothing to pick up in Lourdes, their need would push them both further and further outside the town in search of twigs of dead wood, which they could bundle together up and sell to buy bread.

Bernadette did all this, despite her fragile health. She was prone to asthma and marked by the legacy of cholera which, at the age of twelve, had nearly killed her..

In 1858 Bernadette was fourteen but, having hardly ever been to school, like her parents she could not read or write. And in the Soubirous family nobody spoke French. Their language was the local dialect or "patois" of Lourdes. Her ignorance of French prevented Bernadette from learning the Catechism. Ignorant therefore of almost everything to do with religion, despite her great desire, she was not allowed to make her First Communion. For her religion revolved around praying the Rosary and going to Mass on Sunday. Bernadette knew by heart in French, a foreign language for her, the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Glory Be to the Father and the invocation "O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you". These allowed her to pray, alone or with the family, and to prepare for Sunday Mass.

On February 11<sup>th</sup>, 1858, in the morning, as in the worst days, Bernadette went to scavenge for wood at the grotto of Lourdes. A 'Lady' about big as her, but entirely made of light appeared to her. This mysterious visitor, mysterious in the sense that she did not yet recognize her as the Virgin Mary, immediately brought her light which would illuminate all her life. During the eighteen Apparitions that took place between February 11<sup>th</sup> 1858 and July 16<sup>th</sup> of the same year, the Blessed

Virgin became a Catechist so that Bernadette could meet Christ, receive him, love him and serve him.

Whether you are in Lourdes, present in the cave Grotto among the pilgrims, whether you are alone or with others, in a country near or far, I invite you to enter the story of the Apparitions by listening, meditation and prayer. So, can you make fully your own that which was the experience of Bernadette. Just like her, and following on from her, by welcoming Mary, by living with her, you will encounter Him who is her son and whom she gives to you : Jesus Christ.

## 1/WHAT HAPPENED ON FEBRUARY 11th 1858 ?

### Narrative

February 11th 1858 was as catastrophic as the previous day. It was cold and raining on that day but especially in the Cachot - the hovel where the Soubirous were living - life was miserable. They had no more money, no more food. The parents and their four children were hungry. In the morning, Bernadette (14 years), her sister Toinette (12 years) and their friend, Jeanne Abadie (13 years), went out of the town in search of wood to collect and sell so they could scrape together, and the sooner the better, a little money to buy bread. Arriving opposite the cave at Massabielle, as it was called, Toinette and Jeanne took off their shoes to wade across the small channel (which no longer exists) and get into the cave. Bernadette could not do likewise because her mother had told her in no uncertain terms not to get her feet wet, which would prevent another asthma attack. After trying to throw a few pebbles into the water, in a failed attempt to make a pathway of stepping stones, she resolved to remove her shoes and wade through the water herself. Let us listen now as Bernadette tell us what happened next ...

"I began to take off my shoes. I heard a noise like a gust of wind. So I turned my head towards the meadow, but could see that the trees were quiet, so I continued taking off my shoes. I heard the same noise, I raised my head and looked up into the cave: I saw a Lady dressed in white, wearing a white robe, a white veil, a blue belt, carrying a long Rosary in one hand and with a yellow rose on each foot. She motioned me to get close, but I couldn't move.

I thought I was mistaken. I rubbed my eyes, I looked again and I still saw the same Lady. Then I put my hand in my pocket to take out my Rosary. I wanted to make the sign of the cross, I could not, my hand fell. Then, fear seized me. Then, the Lady took the Rosary that she held in her hands and she made the sign of the cross; then I was no longer afraid. I took my Rosary again, I was able to make the sign of the cross ; then I tried a second time to do it and again I could. As soon as I had made the sign of the cross, the great shock that I felt disappeared; from that moment I was perfectly at ease.

I got on my knees and I said the Rosary, in the presence of this beautiful Lady. After saying the Rosary, she motioned me to approach, but I dared not. Then, she disappeared. I set about crossing back over the channel to rejoin my companions."

### Commentary

First of all, Bernadette tells us: "I heard a sound like a gust of wind". The wind in the Bible,

is the presence of the spirit of God and in the opening lines of *Genesis* we are told that God's spirit was blowing on the waters. The Holy Spirit is the one who removes the distance between us and God. It makes us internalize the presence of God. Mary is the one on whom the Holy Spirit has descended, as it says in the story of the Annunciation: "the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most high will cover you with its shadow " (Lk 1-35)

"I rubbed my eyes". Astonished by the presence of this mysterious Lady, she rubbed her eyes believing herself to be in front of an illusion. In the account of the Annunciation, the Virgin, after the greeting of the Angel, was also surprised and troubled.

Why was Bernadette troubled? Why was Mary also troubled? Quite simply, because we are not used to God. God is first and foremost for us The Other - an "other-worldly" being, inaccessible. And we are more used to dealing with each other, not The Other. It is only in Christ, the God made man, that we acknowledge the closeness of God in our lives. In fact, the story of the Incarnation, as well as the story of the first apparition, both speak to us of God bursting into the life of a person.

Bernadette continues: "Then fear seized me" Scared, Bernadette took her Rosary, she wanted to make the sign of the cross and her hand fell. "Then, the Lady took the Rosary she was holding in her own hands and she made the sign of the cross; then I was no longer afraid." Why did Bernadette wants to make this first sign of the cross? Simply to protect herself! But then the Lady, who had no need to protect herself also made the sign of the cross! What for? We learn that she, the Immaculate, is the fruit of the Cross of her son. The Church tells us in its dogma when it teaches that Mary is Immaculate thanks to the merit of her son.

To start with, these lines from the story of the first apparition lead us to contemplate two people. Firstly, Bernadette in all her misery, who symbolizes our wounded humanity and then, in the hollow of the rock, Mary, who is not a goddess but who represents our humanity, shaped by God.

In this first encounter, the first gesture of Mary was to plant the cross between herself and Bernadette. It is a very instructive way of teaching us that our passage from a humanity that is injured to a humanity shaped by God takes place through the mystery of the cross. From now on, Mary introduces Bernadette to the very heart of the Good News, the announcement of the Death and the Resurrection of Christ, the Paschal mystery.

Bernadette makes us understand that, starting with the sign of the cross, she entered a new reality. "As soon as I had made the sign of the cross, the great shock that I felt disappeared; from that moment there I was perfectly calm."

The sign of the cross that Bernadette received at the Grotto was for her quite simply a preparation for a pilgrimage that the lady would invite her to make through the course of the eighteen apparitions. And that pilgrimage has a name : her conversion.

## 2/ THE FIRST WORDS : THE THIRD APPARITION

## Narrative

On Thursday, February 18<sup>th</sup> 1858, Bernadette went for the third time to the Grotto, which was quite unexpected for her. Indeed, as a result of the second apparition, which took place on Sunday, February 14<sup>th</sup>, Bernadette had received a formal ban from her parents, that she never imagined being able to disobey. However, an unexpected happening brought things to a head. Driven by curiosity, Madame Millet, a lady for whom Bernadette's mother did the laundry as a way of earning a little money, asked the Soubirous to let her go to the Grotto with the child.

So it was that, accompanied by Jeanne-Marie Millet and Antoinette Peyret, Bernadette went to meet the Lady at the early hour of 5:30 in the morning. Everything was organized to the last detail. They arrived carrying a candle, but also with ink and paper, and they even remembered to teach Bernadette a little sentence in dialect so she could ask the Lady about her identity. Because that was the real purpose of this veritable expedition : to find out just who this mysterious visitor was. As soon as they arrived, Bernadette knelt down, made the sign of the cross with great reverence, as she had learnt to do it, and began praying the Rosary. Soon after, she said: "She is here." and continues her prayers as if nothing had happened. At the end of her meditation, Bernadette arose. Madame Millet and Madame Peyret understood that the moment had come. So they handed Bernadette the paper and the pen that they had just dipped into inkwell. The child knew what she had to do because everything had been rehearsed. Bernadette offered the writing material to the Lady, saying the words she had learned by heart and which she had some difficulty remembering : "Madam, would have the goodness to kindly write your name?" In response the Lady smiled, but very sweetly. Then, with a wave of the hand, she invited Bernadette to enter the Grotto.

Immediately upon entering the cavity of the rock, Bernadette saw that the Lady had moved ahead of her and greeted her again with her sweet smile. Then, with a disconcerting simplicity, here is what she said to Bernadette: "It is not necessary." After the apparition the two women asked their messenger if their presence was to blame were responsible for this failure. The child immediately reassured them by saying: "No! The lady was looking at you as well."

## Commentary

The expedition organized by Madame Millet and Antoinette Peyret was motivated by curiosity. They wanted to know the name of the Lady. Their ingenuity led them to prepare for every eventuality. Nothing should escape them.

God's plan is different. The Lord wants us to join him in a relationship of trust. And it is through listening that he wishes us to get to know him. This enables us to understand the meaning of the Lady's reply to Bernadette: what I have to tell you "It is not necessary" to put in writing.

Mary insists firstly on the importance of the spoken word. In their humanity, Mary and Bernadette are called upon to start building a relationship based primarily on the word. Indeed, it is always words given and words received that create dialogue between two people. But this exchange of words refers to a dialogue more deep and decisive, that of the creator and his creature. It is indeed through his Word that God created everything. That is why the first commandment of God is that we listen.

In this light, and by a wonderful catechesis, Mary suggests therefore that she has not come to add to or take away from what is in the Scriptures, the Word of God, the Gospel. Mary makes her heart a kind of jewellery-box, in which she welcomes, keeps and meditates on the Word. She who had said to the Angel: "let it be done to me according to your Word." (Lk 1-38)

However, Mary not only keeps the Word in her heart, she transmits it to Bernadette, who is thus made a participant in a very concrete way in the experience of the first of the believers. By the word thus received, Bernadette is invited to take a new path. Firstly to let the Other into her life, by his word. In the Gospel, when Jesus is faced with hardened hearts, he cannot speak. Welcoming and receiving the Word implies a beginning of conversion.

For Bernadette, who could neither read nor write, the fact that dialogue can take place, at the level of the spoken word, was already liberating. Indeed, the Lady knows how to recognize and address Bernadette's strengths. And therefore Bernadette can give the best of herself in response, which is the confidence that she accords to the Lady.

Often, our own projects are based on our insecurities, our little calculations, our vain ambitions. And very soon, we are disappointed when what we undertake fails. Like Mary and Bernadette, we are called upon to listen to the word of God so that it may light up and give a new meaning to our existence. It is in this attitude of trust, which sometimes may seem painful, that we can come out of ourselves and to open ourselves to a real encounter with God and our brothers, thus made possible by the forgetting of oneself.

## Récit

Bernadette had just heard for the first time the voice of the Lady confiding to her that what had to say "**It is not necessary**" to put it in writing. But now the conversation continued and this time, it was the lady who took the initiative, asking Bernadette: "**will you do me the honour of coming here for a fortnight?**" Following Bernadette's answer, the Lady went further, saying "**I don't promise you happiness in this world but in the other world.**" And so these are the three successive statements that Mary made on the day of the third apparition, during her initial dialogue with Bernadette.

## Commentary

Mary's request of Mary to "**come here for a fortnight**", is at the level of trust. Indeed, she gives no details, no programme, and she herself does not commit to coming to the appointment she suggests. One cannot help but think of the call made to Abraham, the father of believers, to whom the Lord said only : "leave your country, your people and your father's house and go to the land I will show you." (Gen, 12-1). Abraham left, as the Lord had told him (Gen, 12-4). These words are more explicit in the Gospel, in the summons Jesus gives to his first disciples: "Come and see" (Jn, 1-39). They mean, therefore, entering a relationship of trust, which characterises that of the disciple, and which is the prerequisite for the experience of faith.

What is asked of Bernadette is not difficult, but needs to be put into practice in order to be fully understood. Indeed, it is something simple but mysterious, which can only be achieved by a positive response. After all, Bernadette was not called on the day of the first apparition but on the day of their third meeting. She was not ready to hear this word. She therefore needed to take an initial step in trust & confidence before being able to do so.

For ourselves, the calls which come from the Lord are always addressed to our freedom. They therefore require a response from us, expressing in concrete terms our choice. Our response then takes us into God's plan for us and the grace he gives us to make the best choice.

Just as for Bernadette, there is a plan for us which fits into a precise place and period,, whether it be marriage, celibacy, or the religious life or the priesthood. By answering one or other of these calls, each of us receives the necessary grace, sometimes in the form of a sacrament, to enable us to carry out that plan to its full realisation in harmony with God.

However, this does not happen without difficulty. Each of us, indeed, must carry our cross. Thus it was that Mary did not promise Bernadette that she would appear for a fortnight, but simply asked her to come for a fortnight. And in fact, on two of those days Mary would not appear to Bernadette.

But even on the days when there was an apparition, it would be just as difficult for Bernadette to respond. Many times, indeed, there would be obstacles to overcome, essentially bans and prohibitions - firstly from her own family, then the authorities, making it difficult to go to the Grotto "as she promised". However, each time, an unexpected event would turn things about again, enabling Bernadette after all to be faithful to her word.

Mary's request to Bernadette, to do her the grace of coming to the Grotto for a fortnight becomes a promise thanks to the positive response of Bernadette: "I do not promise you happiness in this world but in the other world." But what kind of happiness is that?

Every human being aspires to happiness. And happiness can be encountered at different levels. However, the happiness of this world is ephemeral whereas that proposed by Mary to Bernadette, the happiness of the other world, is related to that proposed by Jesus in the Gospel.

This happiness is the fruit of the gift that we make of our own lives. Who can remove the joy of raising children, parents giving their lives for them in perseverance and loyalty throughout the years? Who can take away the happiness of someone who has given his life to serve the poor, the sick and all those who are in distress? Who can remove the joy and faithfulness to a word that has been given and lived out right down to its ultimate consequences? Who can steal the deep satisfaction that one gets from good work done in transparency, in generosity and with expertise? No one can remove this peace, this joy, this happiness.

When a Christian makes a gift of his life, he enters, like Bernadette, into the joy of another world. Thus he tastes the Kingdom of heaven that Jesus introduces us to in the Gospel through parables, always about something essential, which is of the order of love - without which all the

rest is useless.

### 3/THE SPRING AND PENANCE

#### Narrative

After the third apparition and until their eighth meeting, no more words were exchanged. Bernadette went more deeply into that experience of prayer, of silence, of contemplation. Mary, like Bernadette, internalized and deepened their initial dialogue. It was almost as if, during this phase, they were getting to know each other.

But then, quite unexpectedly, everything changed between the eighth and eleventh apparitions. Bernadette performed some shocking gestures, incomprehensible to those who had flocked to the Grotto to watch, and her face was marked by sadness, suffering and pain. What were those gestures?

She moved around on her knees and kissed the ground.

She ate grass.

She smeared her face with some mud and then showed it to the crowd.

Bernadette would carry out these actions repeatedly during four consecutive apparitions. Essentially, they all took place in a very specific location, deep in the Grotto and slightly on the left. That is where Bernadette knelt and, looking downwards, scraped the ground with her fingers. Soon she discovered some mud, which she scooped up and smeared over her face, already marked by pain. All watching were deeply shocked. Bernadette continued these actions and then, on finally discovering a little muddy water, she drank it, though only after first rejecting it three times. Around her, all were in dismay. However, Bernadette continued scraping the ground. And then, after the muddy water, there appeared a little pure, clear, spring water. What did Bernadette do next? She puts into practice the words that the Lady continued to repeat to her : "Go to the spring, drink and wash yourself there" While she was performing these gestures, Bernadette was heard to say « Penace, penance, penance ! » but also *" Pray to God for sinners"*.

\*These last words will be developed in module n° 3 of Hospitalité formation.

#### Commentary

All three actions carried out by Bernadette at the request of the Lady are Biblical gestures. And all three have a precise goal : to liberate and "declutter" the Grotto in a symbolic way.

Firstly, moving around on ones knees and kissing the ground is a gesture of closeness and tenderness which takes back us to the parable of the good Samaritan (LK, 10: 29-37). It reminds us that God is close to every man in the person of Christ. It is he, the son of God made man, who comes in search of the sick and sinners.

Eating grass indicates that this gesture should be understood in the light of the Passover.



In the book of Exodus, it is written: "On the night of the Passover, you will eat the Lamb, roasted on a fire, with some unleavened bread and bitter herbs (Ex 12: 8)." Christ is the Lamb who takes upon himself the sins of the world, represented by the bitter herbs.

The third gesture, smearing her face with mud, refers us to the person of Christ, who took upon himself the sins of the world ("... ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried" : Is. 53: 4-5). Christ is the suffering servant who has no human face ("so disfigured did he look that he seemed no longer human" : Is. 52, 14). And so Bernadette, disfigured by the mud, represents all of mankind, disfigured by sin : man who has lost his status as a creature in the image of God.

But why did she have to go inside the Grotto and liberate it from the grass and the mud? Because within it lies an immense treasure. At the ninth apparition, the Lady said to Bernadette: "Go to the spring, drink and wash yourself there. And three times Bernadette turned round and headed back towards the river Gave, because there, of course, there was water. But three times the Lady made her come back. And on the fourth occasion she pointed out a specific place where Bernadette scratched around and from which, in due course, a spring of clear water came gushing out.

So what is the Lady is trying to reveal to us? First of all, through the discovery of this spring, we think of the water that flowed from the pierced side of Christ, when he gave the gift of his life on the cross (Jn 19: 34). But at the same time, this water reminds us of our personal lives, we, who were created in the image and likeness of God, and who carry this dignity made of love, charity, service and self-giving. This water is the virtue of charity, rooted deep within ourselves - and for which brothers are thirsting. We who are already cleansed of sin by the water of baptism, we still need to continually return to the source / spring of the sacraments to be purified. But we also need to find the spring that the Lord has put at the bottom of our hearts. And, just as the spring in the Grotto was blocked and hidden by mud, similarly the spring within our heart is hidden by our sins. And just like for Bernadette at the Grotto, we can only find that spring when it is pointed out to us by someone else. "Whenever you did this to one of these little ones, you also did it for me" (Mt. 25: 40) . And thus we can quench the thirst of our brothers, the sick, the poor, by our charity.

And in the same way in the life of a couple, the husband receives the capacity and the mission to bring out the source of charity which is in the heart of his wife. The wife receives exactly the same mission: to bring out the source of charity which is in the heart of her husband. But this is not limited to the relationship of couples. Indeed, in every human relationship we are called upon by our creator to enter this dimension of charity so that all men and women may be truly in the image and likeness of God. So, to sum up, we are all thirsting for the charity from each other.

This is the profound meaning of pilgrimage. That is to say, we are not called to meet on a superficial level , or in other words to stay on the outside of the Grotto, We are called by charity to look inside our own hearts and our brothers' hearts to give the best of ourselves and, in return, to receive the best.

#### **4 / SENT INTO MISSION : « Go and tell the priests to have a chapel built here and for people to come here in procession.» (13<sup>th</sup> apparition, Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> March)**

##### **Narrative**

During the first seven apparitions Bernadette was happy. The Joyful Mysteries. But then, during the next four apparitions, from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> Bernadette entered a phase in which she experienced suffering while discovering the spring. The Sorrowful Mysteries. Then, during the last seven apparitions, Bernadette was filled with happiness of an altogether different order. The Glorious Mysteries. For example, on the day of the thirteenth appearance, Bernadette went down to the Grotto as usual, i.e. around 5:30 in the morning. She knelt down straight away, reverently traced an ample sign of the cross and began to pray the Rosary.

Shortly after, her face lit up, and although she remained motionless, all those who were present understood that the Lady was there. Later, putting her rosary back into her pocket, Bernadette went inside the Grotto and up close to the rock, on the right-hand side.. The Lady had just given her a signal to approach. Mary welcomed Bernadette and, like a mother and daughter, they experienced a moment of togetherness, heart to heart.

Then, this intimacy having made their meeting possible, at last came the time of catechesis, teaching and even mission.

So it was that, on that Tuesday, March 2<sup>nd</sup> 1858, Bernadette was entrusted by the Lady with a task : **"Go and tell the priests to have a chapel built here and for people to come in procession"**. After the apparition, Bernadette followed her usual route back from the Grotto, but this time she did not go straight back to the Cachot to see her parents. Instead, accompanied by two of her aunts, Bernadette went to the Lourdes presbytery, the home of the Parish Priest, Father Peyramale.

It was a difficult moment for her. Firstly because it was the first time she had met this man of impressive stature. But also, because the welcome that the priest extended to aunt Bernarde, aunt Basile and Bernadette, was hardly warm. Impressed to the point of intimidation, Bernadette lost some of her usual presence of mind. To the extent that, on leaving Fr Peyramale's house, she realised that she had forgotten some of the Lady's request. In order to be able to see the priest again Bernadette did not ask her aunts to accompany her but instead went to the parish sacristan, Dominiquette Carrier, to ask her to arrange another appointment with the priest.

So, that afternoon, Bernadette met Father Peyramale for the second time and passed on the request that the Lady had given her. Coming out of the presbytery, radiant, Bernadette confided to Dominiquette: "I'm happy, I have done my errand."

##### **Commentary**

"Go to my brethren and tell them" (John 20: 17). These are the first words of the risen Jesus to a woman, Mary Magdalene.

"Go and tell ..." are the words of Mary, the mother of Jesus to another woman - Bernadette

Soubirous.

Women have always had a major role in the transmission of the good news. Mary's request "Go and tell the priests to have a chapel built here and for people to come in procession" seems quite trivial when you hear it from the standpoint of the Lourdes of today. But if we enter into the context of 1858, what today seems normal had to overcome many obstacles in order to be accomplished.

These very precise words were addressed to "the priests" and for Bernadette that meant, first and foremost, the Parish Priest of Lourdes, Father Dominique Peyramale. So going to find this priest, whom she had never actually met or spoken to, and who for his part had only heard of her as a result of the events at the Grotto, represented a serious challenge for her. Bernadette was illiterate, ignorant of religion, and had not yet made her First Holy Communion, and there she was carrying a message which was not going to be easy to implement. Building a chapel when there was already a parish church in the town and going in procession to a cave which lay outside the city - it all made no sense! There was more than enough in that message to discourage the young girl who had been given the responsibility of passing it on.

The Prophet Jeremiah cried to God: "Lord, really, I do not know how to speak, for I am a child". But then the Lord answered him: "Do not be afraid, because I am with you to protect you .... There! I am putting my words into your mouth" (Jer 1: 6-9)

That may well have happened to us too, We may have had to say difficult words, in connection with the testimony of faith, but also others may have approached us witnessing to the faith of the Church, while it was perhaps difficult for them. Also think about the Virgin Mary welcoming the mission received from the Angel in words which were difficult for her to understand. The Angel reassured her saying: "Nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1: 37).

So what is involved in building a chapel? The first question we might ask is this : Why build a chapel out of town when Lourdes already had its own church? The chapel we are talking about is not just a building, but the Church itself that is the people of God, the body of Christ, Temple of the spirit. 'You too .... may be living stones making a spiritual house" (1 Peter, 2, 5).

Every baptised person is called to build a community based on the living presence of Christ by his spirit and where the common bond is that of charity with ones brothers. Think of our parishes, our movements & organisations, our families, our Hospitality.

Why this Chapel outside the city? It is also the practical implementation of the Gospel. The Risen Jesus, through a messenger, Mary Magdalene, makes an appointment with his disciples, not in Jerusalem but in Galilee (Mt 28-7). Why there? Because Galilee was the crossroads of nations. This is a way of telling us that the Church is not called to stay put in the centre of the city but is always sent to the peripheries. Sent out to proclaim the Gospel around the world. That is our mission in its essence and purpose.

The second part of Mary's request to Bernadette concerns the procession. If you are in Lourdes, you can see and even participate in large processions twice a day. It may be that there

are also sometimes processions where you live. These processions have a purpose. They remind us that we are a people set in motion by the *Gospel*, seeking an encounter with God

These processions are ultimately only a pale image of the great procession of each of our lives. They signify to us that we can encounter with God through our encounters with others and in concrete gestures of charity. Indeed, "Whenever you did this to one of these little ones, you also did it for me "(Mt. 25: 40). And from this we can understand Mary's insistence on the procession, i.e. she wants us to gather together, bound together by love, and walk together.

This request to build a chapel and to go in procession is in connection with the discovery of the spring, for it is only possible for us to do it if we are able to dig deep inside ourselves and seek out in each other's hearts the love that the Lord has poured into our hearts (Rom 5: 5).

## **5 / SENT INTO MISSION : « I am the Immaculate Conception » (16<sup>th</sup> Apparition, Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> March 1858)**

### **Narrative**

Bernadette had not met the Lady for three weeks when, in the middle of the night, on March 25<sup>th</sup> 1858, she woke up and exclaimed: "I must go to the Grotto." So it was not even 5 a.m. when, accompanied by the youngest of her aunts, Lucile Castérot, Bernadette reached the rendezvous. After one decade of the Rosary, she was joined by the Lady and when her prayers were over she signalled to her to come into the Grotto. Bernadette dared to ask "Would you be so kind as to tell me your name?" After asking this question three times, it was at the fourth time of asking that, Bernadette tells us, the Lady "moved her rosary onto her right arm, stretched out her hands (which had been joined together), extended them towards the ground and then, in the same long movement, joined her hands together up to her breast, looked up to the sky and said "Qué soy era Immaculada Counceptiou". It was a source of great happiness for Bernadette to know the Lady's name and in particular she thought that the priest would be pleased. Indeed, as a result of the request for the chapel to be built, and immediately aware of the costs that this could generate, the priest had demanded to know the identity of this woman who had been visiting Bernadette Soubirous.

Bernadette arrived at the presbytery, entered without knocking, and immediately shouted at the priest, who was standing in front of her: "Qué soy era Immaculada Counceptiou!" To the astonishment of Father Peyramale, Bernadette continued "The Lady told me "Qué soy era Immaculada Counceptiou!". "A lady cannot be called that" the priest instantly retorted and went on: "You're wrong, you don't know what that means." Bernadette did not reply but the priest added: "How can you say things that you don't understand ?" "I repeated it all along the way here," Bernadette then insisted. It was too much for the priest, who could no longer contain himself. He was on the verge of tears. Indeed, there was such innocence and such great grace in the words of Bernadette that he was so overcome as to be on the point of sobbing. So he dismissed the girl quite bluntly: "Go home, I'll see you another day!" Bernadette left the presbytery and went to her confessor, Father Bernard-Marie Pomian.

It was to him that she had spoken about her first meeting with the Lady, two days after

February 11<sup>th</sup>. Now she was able to tell him her name. The fact that she did not understand the meaning of these words was of little concern to Bernadette. Indeed, she did not care about the name of the Lady, only about being with her.

### Commentary

On December 8<sup>th</sup> 1854, the Church had defined the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary as a dogma. Bernadette, knowing almost nothing about religion, was unaware of this dogma - indeed, she did not even know its name and knew even less about the significance of those words, even though the Lady had said them to her in her own language, the dialect of Lourdes. However this name is very important, and this for two reasons :-

- (1) because it gave Bernadette a concrete answer to the request of the priest, and
- (2) because it is the name of a person who loves her and she loves.

For Bernadette, the transmission of this name was therefore not based on the understanding that she could have, but on the joy that it gave her and which she radiated, thus demonstrating something of its content.

People who are in love will know that : for them the significance of words can rest not so much on meaning or concepts, as much as on the experiences and memories which they reflect. But what is the meaning of those five words which Bernadette hears from Mary's lips?

**"I am "**. Referring us to his divinity, Jesus said: "I am the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14: 6) "I am the resurrection" (Jn 11, 25) "I am the light of the world" (Jn 8: 12) "I am the bread of life" ( Jn 6,35). Mary therefore introduces herself in the manner of Jesus, referring to her link with God and her relationship with his son.

**"The Immaculate"**. This is not an adjective but a name, which refers not only to an attribute, a characteristic, but a reality, that of initial creation and moreso to the ultimate creation. With the Immaculate, it is the fulfilment of our humanity which is revealed to us as Mary is the first sign of it. The Immaculate one is the human being who participates fully, without any hindrance, without any restraint, in what God is. (« ... who chose us to be holy and spotless and to live through love in his presence ..." Eph 1: 3-5).

**"Conception"**. Conception is linked to life. It is, in fact, when we receive life at the moment we are conceived. And it is also the fact of transmitting life when conceiving it. Conception is therefore, both a fruit which is received, and a fruit which is given. It is a fruit that gives fruit. Mary is relative to God from whom she receives life and to whom she gives life. Mary receives everything from God and gives away what she receives from God. Receiving God, she gives God.

To contemplate the one who said to Bernadette "I am the Immaculate Conception", is to contemplate the new humanity, recreated by the cross of Christ. By saying to Bernadette "I am the Immaculate Conception" Mary sends around the earth a huge cry of hope. Evil and death do not have the last word, since, by the will of God, "however great the number of sins committed, grace was even greater" (Rm 5-20).

Hearing the words "I am the Immaculate Conception", made it clear to Bernadette that this Lady who appeared to her was somehow, the other world, representing it so fully without any

distortion, without limitation, with nothing hidden. It is moreover what led one of the first chaplains in Lourdes, Father Dubo , one of the *Garaison* fathers, to make this magnificent statement: "The future of Lourdes, is the Immaculate Conception". That is true, but we must go all the way and say "The future of humanity is the Immaculate Conception".

This must enable all those who have been baptised, each person who accesses the Treasury received by Bernadette to look positively, with optimism and confidence on their future and the future of humanity. Indeed, having not created evil, God does not want and he triumphed over evil for ever with the cross of his son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, from then onwards, the meaning of all Christian life is to associate ourselves as intimately as possible to Christ, Conqueror over Evil.

This should lead every baptised person to make concrete commitments, in line with the one who said: "I am the Immaculate Conception". For Christians, fighting against evil in all its forms, is not an option but a duty, an obligation, a need is incumbent upon us all. We must fight against injustice, violence, misery. We must commit ourselves in favour of life. We must protect our environment. We must be peacemakers. We must work for mankind, for the dignity of every human person. We must work to reduce evil, sickness, misfortune. Everyone can find his own appropriate field of action. And we can all remember each other and the commitments we have made in prayer. Thus we will all be united with Christ in contemplation of the one who says: "I am the Immaculate Conception".

Lourdes, 11th February 2017.

## Calendar of apparitions

Mysteries	Apparition	Date		(Feast day) Number of utterances	Utterances of the Virgin Mary	
<b>JOYFUL</b>	1	Thursday 11th February			<p><b>Thursday 18th February</b></p> <p>That is not necessary</p> <p>Will you do me the grace of coming here for a fortnight ?</p> <p>I do not promise you happiness in this world but in the other world..</p>	
	2	Sunday 14th February				
				Ash Wednesday		
	3	Thursday 18th February		<b>3 utterances</b>		
	4	Friday 19th February				
	5	Saturday 20th February				
	6	Sunday 21st February				
	Day without apparition					
7	Tuesday 23rd February					
<b>SORROWFUL</b>	8	Wednesday 24th February	<b>F O R T N I G H T  O F  A P P A R I T I O N S</b>	<b>5 utterances</b>	<p><b>24th – 28th February</b></p> <p>Pray to God for the conversion of sinners</p> <p>Kiss the ground as a sign of penance for sinners.</p> <p>Penitence ! Penitence ! Penitence !</p> <p>Go to the spring. Drink and wash yourself in it.</p> <p>You will eat some of that grass which is there.</p>	
	9	Thursday 25th February				
	Day without apparition					
	10	Saturday 27th February				
	11	Sunday 28th February				
<b>GLORIOUS</b>	12	Monday 1st March				<b>Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> March</b>
	13	Tuesday 2 <sup>nd</sup> March			<b>1 utterance</b>	Go and tell the priests to have a chapel built here and for people to come in procession.
	14	Wednesday 3rd March				
	15	Thursday 4th March				
	16	Thursday 26th March			(Annunciation) <b>1 utterance</b>	<b>Jeudi 25 mars</b>
	17	Wednesday 7th April		Easter Wednesday	I am the Immaculate Conception	
	18	Friday 16th July		Our Lady of Mount Carmel		