



The ancient village of Lourdes in the southwest corner of France is one of the most important shrines in the Christian world. Set in a valley in the Pyrenees Mountains along the border with Spain it is a sanctuary that has become famous as a place where the sick are healed.

Each year over 6 million people come to Lourdes and they come from all over the world. As a holy site, Lourdes is relatively new. It was recognized by the Church in 1862, but since then thousands of cures have been examined and documented.

Sick people of many different faiths come to Lourdes in the hope of curing their ailments or assisting in the cures of others.

Most people come to be in a holy atmosphere and feel close to God, to reconcile different elements and conflicts in their lives, to renew friendships and to find strength.

THE VISION IN WHITE

On February 11th 1858, Bernadette Soubirous, her sister and a friend, set out to gather wood for a cooking fire. They had to avoid any place where they might be accused of stealing the wood, so they walked along the local riverbed which was considered to be common property. Bernadette sat down on a sandy area near an outcropping of rocks. At the base was a small grotto. She heard the wind but saw nothing. Then from a corner of the grotto she saw a soft light that surrounded a beautiful young lady in white. The lady smiled at Bernadette and motioned her to come near. Bernadette instinctively reached for her rosary, but was unable to grasp it until the lady produced her own and made the sign of the cross. Nothing was said by Bernadette or the young lady. This was the first of eighteen apparitions of the Virgin Mary that the fourteen-year-old Bernadette would see over the next five months.

At each visit to the grotto, Bernadette was accompanied by a growing number of witnesses. During the tenth apparition over 800 people from the surrounding villages came to the site and on March 3rd the crowd had grown to over 7,000.

The apparitions were bringing all ranks of society together in one place and creating a collective sense of spirituality.

Historically visions had occurred in places that were private without any witnesses. But Bernadette's experience was completely different. Though she was the only one to see the vision in white, thousands of people saw her during the



encounter.

Something about the way she was standing, the sincerity of her tears, the quality of the experience, convinced people that what she was seeing was true.

During Bernadette's ninth vision at the grotto, the lady in white showed Bernadette a hidden stream that was to become an essential element for the pilgrims traveling to Lourdes. At first, there was only a trickle of muddy water in a place where there had never been any. Today the fountain pours out millions of gallons of water a year. Water that is considered to have the ability to heal the devout.

THE GROTTTO

The vision also sent Bernadette to the local priests with a request that they come to the grotto in procession and build a chapel. Today the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes is made up of the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary, the Crypt, the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, the Basilica of Saint Pius X, the church of St. Bernadette and the Grotto.

Each morning a Mass is held at the Grotto.

Behind the altar is a box where you can leave your written prayer or request. Pilgrims touch the rock as they pass through the grotto. It's a sign of their belief that only God is the rock on which they can build their lives. The white marble statue of the Virgin Mary was made in 1864 and set in the same place where Bernadette first saw the vision. The precise spot where Bernadette was standing when she saw the vision is marked by a plaque in the pavement.

At the back of the Grotto is the spring that was discovered by Bernadette. Its water is piped to the taps to the left of the Grotto. To drink some of the water or take some home is a sign of your faith in the power of God. Pilgrims wash their faces and ask God to purify their hearts.

Just to the side of the taps is an area where candles are sold. The candles remind pilgrims that at one point Bernadette came to meet the vision with a lighted candle in her hand and each year millions of pilgrims repeat Bernadette's activities. From time to time there is a lack of space and you will not be able to immediately offer your lighted candle. "Candlemen" may invite you to hold your lighted candle while you make your prayer, then extinguish it and place it into a box near the



grotto. During the winter months, when there are fewer pilgrims, these candles will be relit and your prayer prolonged during your absence. The candle is also a reminder that Jesus once described himself as, "The light of the world."

THE CHURCHES

The sanctuary of the basilica was built directly over the place where Bernadette saw the vision. It was opened in 1871. Above the entrance is the medallion of Pius IX, who was the Pope during the years that Bernadette lived in Lourdes. His proclamation that the Virgin Mary was "conceived without original sin" played an important role in the early acceptance of Bernadette's story. The stained glass windows in the side chapels illustrate the history of Our Lady of Lourdes. The windows above the nave illustrate the biblical history of Eve and Mary.



The Crypt under the basilica was blessed on the day of Pentecost in 1866. That was the day that official pilgrimages to Lourdes got started. It houses the relics of St. Bernadette.

The Rosary Basilica was built at the beginning of the 20th century. It commemorates St. Dominic who is credited with introducing the Rosary. The church has 15 small chapels decorated with mosaics that follow the story of the Rosary. There is also a series of mosaics that present the most important people in the story of Bernadette's apparitions.

TOURING THE SHRINE

Facing the upper basilica is the entrance to the way of the Cross which winds up the hill and consists of 15 stations. Each station represents an event that took place over 2,000 years ago as Christ made his journey up to Calvary. The first station marks the moment that Jesus was condemned to death. The last station celebrates his resurrection from the dead. As you walk around the shrine you will see young people and adults dressed in white uniforms. They have given a week or two of their time to help pilgrims who have come to Lourdes.

Each day at 5 o'clock in the afternoon, from Easter through All Saints Day, which is November 1st, there is a Eucharistic procession and a blessing of the sick. The procession moves around the Esplanade and the Blessed Sacrament is presented to the sick in front of the Rosary Basilica. The celebration concludes with a hymn and a blessing.

Every day from Easter through November 1st there is also a torch light procession. People meet at the Grotto at 8:45 with candles and walk through the darkness of the night singing the Ave Maria.

WHY LOURDES

For thousands of years the inhabitants of the area were mountain people isolated from their neighbors and living in close touch with nature and the supernatural world.

Many people believed that the Virgin Mary chose to appear to Bernadette because she represented a world that was pure—unspoiled by a desire for material objects and the secularism

of the government. The fact that she lived in the mountains of the Pyrenees only enhanced her story.

The town was right next to the roads used by pilgrims to get to Santiago de Compostela in Spain and since the Middle Ages the locals were well aware of the Virgin Mary and her special relationship to miracles. The spiritual world was very much part of their life and there had been a long tradition of specific trees, bushes and rivers being able to intercede with the Christian Saints.

That Bernadette was walking along the bank of a river when she discovered the grotto and was shown the secret of a spring underlined the ancient relationship of water, the supernatural and the rite of baptism.

THE VISION VS THE REPUBLIC

The French Revolution had stripped the Church of much of its wealth and power and the French nation itself was seen as a center of anti-religious sentiment. The 19th century was considered to be a time when secular beliefs, science and logic tried to reject the influence of religion.

But that was not the case in the small villages of the Pyrenees Mountains. Even though the area was part of France it had little to do with the central government in Paris and was always distrustful and in conflict with national policy.

For centuries there had been sightings of the Virgin Mary along the mountain roads. She had become central to the religious activities of the villagers.

On March 25th Bernadette went to the grotto and asked the vision to identify herself. The girl in white said, "I am the Immaculate Conception."

And that was quite astonishing. The idea of the Immaculate Conception as a basic part of the Catholic faith was quite new and not something that Bernadette would have known about. For the vision to identify herself as "the Immaculate Conception" was astonishing.

The vision of Lourdes united the simple beliefs of a rural Catholic community with the words of the Pope. It set Lourdes apart from every other site in the world that honored the Virgin Mary. Lourdes became a great source of comfort to a church that was under siege.

Young girls and women were the first worshipers at Lourdes and from the very beginning they were valued for their contributions. In addition to everything else, Lourdes became important for the role it offered women.

COMMUNITY

Pilgrimages were organized and became an important way for French Catholics to show their allegiance to the church and their own importance within the nation. They developed a sense that they belonged to a special group that was different from all other groups. They have a sense of camaraderie, of group unity. Everyone is equal and all have been marked by the sacred ground.

At Lourdes people have a sense of group no matter where they came from. You can feel it during the great singing processions that take place by torchlight. You can feel it in the groups that are at the grotto. But you can also see it in the

The Shrine at Lourdes

small cafes along the streets of the town. The people sitting at the tables drinking coffee or sipping beer evidence that same sense of "special group." Something of Bernadette is everywhere and colors the entire atmosphere of the area. Her cheerful simplicity, total commitment and basic honesty have become part of the community.

EX-VOTOS

The walls of the three churches at Lourdes are covered with plaques which are expressions of thanks to Our Lady of Lourdes for her intercession — they are called Ex-voto meaning "according to the vow or promise." It's the name given to some tangible object that is left by a pilgrim at a holy site. Ex-votos which are also called votives usually fall into one of three categories.



The first is a gift given in anticipation of some favor that is expected to be received in the future. It can be the simple gift of a small donation and the lighting of a votive candle or it can be a jewel worth thousands of dollars.

The second is to thank the divine power for something that has been received in the past. Once again it can be simple and inexpensive or extremely valuable and elaborate. Lech Walesa, the first president of Poland after it was freed of Soviet domination, left his 1983 Nobel Prize medal at Our Lady of Czestochowa in the Jasna Gora Monastery near Krakow.

The third is to literally advertise the power of the site. These ex-votos are prominently displayed as evidence of the interventions. At the shrine of Guadalupe near Mexico City there are hundreds of painted tin plaques that illustrate the stories of the miracles that took place in relation to the shrine.

When it comes to ex-votos, Lourdes is probably the most

famous holy site in the western world. There are thousands of ex-votos at Lourdes and each is there to mark a successful intervention on behalf of a pilgrim.

MEDICAL MIRACLES

In 1883, the Medical Bureau of Lourdes was established. The objective was to use modern medical techniques to distinguish between real cures and false claims. The Bureau investigates each report in order to establish the true facts. It records the details of all cures. The doctors here have no interest in confirming the success of the supernatural.

But it is clear that people have been recovering from their illnesses without medical attention. Since 1858, there have been over 5,000 documented healings and 66 cures that have been recognized as miracles.

Dr. Patrick Theiller is the head of the medical bureau and was in charge of the investigation concerning Jean-Pierre Bely:

Bely was a nurse at a major French hospital. In 1972 he began to suffer the symptoms of multiple sclerosis. By 1987 he was bedridden and considered by his doctors to be an invalid. During a visit to Lourdes he received the Sacrament of the Sick. The next day during the Mass in the Rosary Square he was overcome with a sense of freedom and peace that he had never felt before. That same day he began to sit up for the first time in years. That night he began walking. When he returned home his doctors looked at him and could find no signs of his previous illness. A few months later, the medical bureau at Lourdes began to study his case and continued its investigation for over seven years. His cure has remained for over 20 years. The church recognized the cure as the 66th miracle to take place at Lourdes.

BELIEF IN RECOVERY

Scientists are now fully aware of the fact that our brains have the ability to control the chemistry of our bodies and these changes can be essential for a person's well-being and a patient's recovery.

The central element here is that if you believe that you are going to recover then the chances of recovery are considerably greater. Scientists have proven this with the use of medicines and placebos.



They have also shown that your mind can exercise its power over your body without some tangible tool like medicine.

But what if the belief in your recovery is not based on a pill or your relationship to a doctor but on your belief in the power of God?

What scientists have found is that the same chemical changes that are induced by your belief in your doctor or your medicine, are virtually the same chemical changes that can be produced by your belief in the power of God acting within you in answer to your prayers.

You can take a look at the history of the people who have been cured at Lourdes and the millions of visitors who come here each year and think—miracles produce faith, but in fact it is just the opposite—faith produces miracles.

TO LEARN MORE . . .

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