

On a cold winter day, the 11th of February 1858, 13-year-old Bernadette went down to the river to collect wood for the home fire. A strange wind made a sound that caught her attention. She noticed a cave near the riverbank filled with golden light. Although she did not explain who she was, Mary the mother of Jesus appeared to Bernadette “dressed in a pure white robe with a blue sash, a veil over her head, a rosary clasped in her hands and yellow roses at her feet. Bernadette rubbed her eyes. What a beautiful lady!” Who is she? Where did she come from?

Mary asked Bernadette to pray the rosary. In quiet obedience, she bowed her head and looked up at the end of the rosary. Mary had vanished. Drawn by the holy encounter, Bernadette returned to see the Blessed Mother the following Sunday and the Sunday after that. With the third visit to the grotto, the beautiful lady asked Bernadette to come every day for fifteen days until the 4th of March. She was also instructed to tell the priests to build a chapel there, to drink water from the stream, and pray for the conversion of sinners.

Bernadette was confused as there was no stream. “She began to scratch the loose gravel off the ground which encircled her. As she did so, she noticed that the ground beneath her was moist, and that a little pool was forming and bubbles were rising from it.” A spring rose from the ground and to this day still provides 27,000 gallons of water each day.

Initially, Bernadette’s visions were viewed by others with great skepticism. “Bernadette’s daily visits to the grotto caused quite a stir in the countryside. Crowds of people began to gather and watch Bernadette as she examined the cave and obediently did the things the lady asked of her. Bernadette understood she must be obedient to the beautiful lady even as skeptics warned her against returning to the grotto.

On the 4th of March, 20,000 people gathered hoping to see a glimpse of the apparition. “The crowd was disappointed and disillusioned. They had seen Bernadette transfigured with a strange radiance, but they had hoped to also share her vision, to hear the same voice that she did. [They did not.] ... Bernadette told the crowd that she would continue coming to the grotto because the beautiful lady had said nothing in the form of a farewell.”

On the 25th of March, the Memorial of the Annunciation, the beautiful lady finally revealed her name as Mary, the mother of Jesus by saying “I am the Immaculate Conception.” She wanted Bernadette to continue to pray for sinners.

Mary appeared to Bernadette for the 17th time on April 7, 1858. As she witnessed Mary, Bernadette accidentally placed one of her hands over the flame of a candle. Onlookers, who could only see Bernadette, were horrified to see the flame burn through her fingers. Bernadette was deep in prayer and totally unaware. “She emerged quietly from prayer unscathed. Then Dr. Dozous took another candle and, without warning, touched the flame to her hand. Bernadette immediately cried out in pain.”

On July 16th, 1858, the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Bernadette returned to the grotto and knelt down to pray. Our Lady of Lourdes appeared to Bernadette for the final time. 9 years later, at the age of 22, Bernadette became a nun and devoted her life to praying for the conversion of sinners. 14 years later, the Lord called her home to eternity. Bernadette died on April 16th, 1879, at the young age of 36.

In time, and with numerous of miracles of healing, the chapel was built, and pilgrims began to come to Lourdes, France in great numbers. People often return home with a little bottle of the sacred Lourdes water which heals all!

Each year on the Memorial of Our Lady of Lourdes, the church celebrates a day of prayer for the sick and those who care for them, whether they be doctors and nurses or family members. It is also a time for each of us to pause and reflect on how we can be more responsive to the sick.

“Before the needs of our brothers and sisters, Jesus asks us to ... stop and listen, to establish a direct and personal relationship with others, to feel empathy and compassion, and to let their suffering become our own as we seek to serve them.”ⁱⁱ

In his message for this year’s World Day of the Sick, Pope Francis reminds us to care for our neighbors:

“Serving means caring ... for the vulnerable of our families, our society, our people... [In this outreach, all are] called to set aside their own wishes and desires, their pursuit of power, before the concrete gaze of those who are most vulnerable... Service always looks to their faces, touches their flesh, senses their closeness and even, in some cases, ‘suffers’ that closeness and tries to help them.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Dear brothers and sisters, the commandment of love that Jesus left to his disciples is also kept in our relationship with the sick. A society is all the more human to the degree that it cares effectively for its most frail and suffering members, in a spirit of fraternal love. Let us strive to achieve this goal, so that no one will feel alone, excluded or abandoned.^{iv}

ⁱ Catholicnewsagency.com/resources/mary/popular-marian-devotions/our-lady-of-lourdes (Same source fall all quotes from the story of Bernadette)

ⁱⁱ vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/sick/documents/papa-francesco_20201220_giornata-malato.html

ⁱⁱⁱ vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150920_cuba-omelia-la-habana.html

^{iv} Ibid ⁱⁱ