

She ran all the way back to her parish priest saying “immaculada concepciou” over and over, words she did not understand. March 25, of course, is the Feast of the Annunciation, when Our Lady conceived Jesus in her womb. At Lourdes, Mary confirmed the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which prepared her to receive God into her womb. Bernadette went into “ecstasy” during the apparitions, completely focused and absorbed in the things of heaven. On Easter Sunday, April 7, her examining doctor stated that Bernadette, in ecstasy, was observed to have held her hands over a lit candle without sustaining harm. The apparitions continued, and on July 16, Bernadette saw Our Lady for the last time. “I have never seen her so beautiful before,” she recalled.



Our parish pilgrimage to Lourdes, 2017

The Healing Waters

Lourdes is most famous for its healing waters. Over 7000 cases of medically-unexplained cures have been reported, 70 of which have been recognized by the Church as *miraculous*. “This water,” Bernadette said, “is being taken as medicine... One must have faith, one must pray: this water would have no virtue without faith!” The greatest sickness a man can have is “atheism:” **loss of faith** in a Father who created him, loves him, and provides for him. Many are physically cured at Lourdes, but the bodily healing principally serves to restore our faith in God. Lourdes is given to heal us of our doubt as we study Bernadette’s life, learn to trust God again, and return to prayer. Bernadette herself suffered illnesses all her life, especially after she became a Sister of Charity. The waters at Lourdes never healed Bernadette, but instead she learned to suffer in purity of heart so that others might live, imitating the Immaculate Conception herself.

Rock, Water, Light

At Lourdes, our Lady appeared in a **Rock**, as our Lord had been born in a cave and buried in a rock tomb, a man of the earth. The great sign of Lourdes is **Water**, in which Our Lord Himself was baptized. In the beginning God said “Let there be **Light**,” and candles have burned at Lourdes since Bernadette brought a lit candle to the grotto on the third day. Our Lady asked her to leave the candle burning in the grotto, and so have millions since then.

Recommended reading

The official website of the shrine at Lourdes is quite good, www.lourdes-france.org. A classic book on Lourdes, however, is *The Song of Bernadette* by the Jewish novelist Franz Werfel, newly republished by Ignatius Press.

Our Lady of Lourdes Historical Facts and Essential Messages of Our Lady in 1858



Welcome to Our Lady’s Shrine here in San Francisco. In this pamphlet, prepared by our pastor, Fr. Joseph Illo, you will learn the basic facts and message of this apparition. You are encouraged to spend some time in quiet prayer and perhaps go to confession. Please keep a reverent silence in the Church, especially when the Blessed Sacrament is exposed.

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What: 18 Apparitions of Our Lady

Where: Lourdes, France

When: February 11-April 7, 1858

To Whom: Bernadette Soubirous (age 14)

Our Lady appeared to the poorest child in Lourdes 18 times, bringing a message of purity, penance, and hope. Lourdes is most famous for its healing waters, but the essential message of Lourdes is the “Immaculate Conception”: Our Lady is all-pure, by the grace of God, and she calls her children to regain their purity and their joy through holy penitence and simplicity.



St. Bernadette

Bernadette was the first of nine children born to Francois and Louise Soubirous. The family was just about the poorest in Lourdes, and five of her eight siblings died in childhood. Mr.

Soubirous had a drinking problem and lost his milling business when Bernadette was 7 years old. The family moved into the town *cachot* (“dungeon”), abandoned by the city because it was so cold and damp. Bernadette suffered asthma and stomach ailments all her life from cholera. Her aunt Bernarde treated her, as the oldest girl, cruelly. Bernadette said that “if there had been a girl who was poorer and more ignorant than she was, then the Blessed Virgin would have chosen to appear to that girl instead of her.”



The “*cachot*” or one room of the former jail where the entire Soubirous family of eleven lived while Bernadette was growing up. It is now a shrine in Lourdes.

On February 11, 1858, Bernadette and her sister, Toinette, and a friend named Jeanne went down to the River Gave (which runs through Lourdes) to collect sticks for firewood. The other two waded across the river, which was quite cold in February, but Bernadette, because of her asthma, stayed on the riverbank by a rock outcropping called the *Massabielle*. She looked up when she heard a gust of wind, but the trees were not moving. She heard another gust and looked toward the cliff above her. From a grotto in the rockface “came a dazzling light, and a white figure.” This was the first of 18 apparitions of what she described in her Occitan dialect as *uo petito damizelo*, “a small young lady.” For the first 14 apparitions, however, she simply referred to the figure as *aquerò*, “that.” Bernadette didn’t know how to describe her, nor the unearthly peace and joy she felt in her presence. The “small young lady” only revealed her name on the 16th visit.

***La Quinzaine Sacrée*, “The Holy Fortnight”**

On February 14, Bernadette returned to the grotto with some friends armed with holy water. She sprinkled the water towards the Lady, saying “that if she came from God she was to stay, but if not, she must go. She started to smile, and bowed...” Bernadette returned February 18, at which the Lady asked her “Would you be so kind as to come here for fifteen days?” These almost daily apparitions came to be known as the “Holy Fortnight.”

“She also told me,” Bernadette reported, “that she did not promise to make me happy in this world, but in the next.” No one else could see the Lady but each day more and more people came to see the heavenly expression on Bernadette’s face during the apparitions. Mary said little but did ask that a church be built in that place where people could come in procession. She also asked Bernadette to pray for sinners. During five of the eighteen apparitions, Our Lady became sad and repeated the words “penitence, penitence, penitence.”

On February 25, the Lady asked Bernadette to dig into the ground and “to drink of the water of the spring, to wash in it and to eat the herb that grew there,” as an act of penance. At first the water was muddy, but Bernadette obeyed, getting mud on her face and eating the grass like an animal, which made the onlookers think she had either lost her mind or become possessed. The next day, however, the spring had begun to flow freely and clearly, and it is in these waters that so many have been cured over the years.

The Immaculate Conception

News of the apparitions became a sensation in France, drawing immense crowds, such that the government fenced off the area. Her pastor, Fr. Peyramale, demanded to know the name of the Lady, so on March 25, Bernadette asked the Lady her name three times. Our Lady smiled, looked up and then down, and said *que soi era immaculada concepciou* (“I am the Immaculate Conception”). Pope Pius IX had declared the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception just four years before, but the illiterate Bernadette had never heard of the term.