

PILGRIMAGE TO LOURDES
SAINT BERNADETTE SOUBIROUS, VIRGIN, PATRONESS OF LOURDES
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1. INTRODUCTION

This article is about the French pilgrimage place Lourdes. This town, which is the joint seat of the diocese of Tarbes-et-Lourdes, was originally a small typical market town lying in the foothills of the Pyrenees. Following the apparitions of Our Lady of Lourdes to Bernadette Soubirous in 1858, Lourdes has developed into a major place of pilgrimage (the importance can be measured from the fact that Lourdes has the second largest number of hotels in France after Paris with about 270 establishments!).



On land bordered by a loop of the river Gave de Pau is an outcrop of rock called Massabielle, (from *masse vieille*: "old mass"). On the northern aspect of this rock, near the riverbank, is a naturally occurring, irregularly shaped shallow cave or grotto, in which the apparitions took place in 1858.

Lourdes lies 497 miles south of Paris in the foothills of the Pyrenees Mountains. The small town of only 17,000 inhabitants receives more than five million pilgrims and tourists each year. The town's location makes it a perfect base for exploring the Pyrenees.

2. HISTORY

Up until 1858, Lourdes was a quiet modest sleepy county-town with a population of only some 4,000 inhabitants. At that time the most prominent feature was the fortified castle which rises up from the centre of the town on a rocky escarpment, which was occupied by an infantry garrison.

During the 8th century, Lourdes and its fortress became the focus of skirmishes between Mirat, the local Moor leader and Charlemagne, King of the Franks. Despite the long siege laid by Charlemagne, Mirat adamantly refused to surrender. According to legend, an eagle appeared all of a sudden and dropped an enormous trout at the feet of Mirat. It was seen as such a bad omen, Mirat was persuaded to surrender to the Queen of the Sky by the local bishop. Mirat visited the Black Virgin of Puy to offer gifts, so he could make sure this was the best course of action and astounded by its exceptional beauty he



Fortified Castle of Lourdes

decided to surrender the fort, and convert to Christianity. On the day of his baptism, Mirat took on the name of Lorus, which was given to the town, now known as Lourdes.

Note: Lourdes (pronounced either "Lourde" or "Lourdz") is a small town in the Hautes-Pyrénées département in southwest France. It is the largest Catholic pilgrimage destination in France, and one of the most popular Catholic sacred sites in the world.

A virtual pilgrimage to Lourdes explores the life of Saint Bernadette Soubirous; this great saint of poverty and penance is the saint of Lourdes. Visionary and messenger of the Immaculate Conception, she told us the very words of the Virgin Mary, spoken in the native Basque tongue of Southern France and Northern Spain. She spoke words teaching the merits of prayer, penance, poverty and church. In the first and most widely recognized Marian apparition of modern times, a personal message was also delivered to Bernadette: she would not find happiness in this world, but only in the next.



Blessed Virgin Mary
Queen of Heaven

3. OUR LADY THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

There are compelling realities in the journey of Christian faith, vehicles of inspiration that encourage us to follow Jesus and Mary. Signs are evident that God watches carefully over His Earth. We need not search far. Overwhelming evidence is before our eyes in the eternal presence of Angels, the witness of the holy Saints and their extraordinary lives, and now more than ever before the miraculous apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary herself...

There are many paths of inspiration for the soul. Our diversity of culture and personality leads us to divergent interests. Yet, we are all moving rapidly toward the same conclusion in our lives on Earth. Jesus Christ is the light that shines through the window separating this tangible world from eternity. So, what path of spiritual inspiration will lead us to walk most directly in this beam of light?

The answer is that the Church, with its whole body of teachings, offers many vehicles of inspiration, perhaps one to suit every personality or taste. All we need to do is search. Pilgrimage is often a journey – a quest for what is unknown. In scripture, the few references to "pilgrims" were of those who journeyed in foreign lands. In unfamiliar territory, they followed a promise and forged their faith in strange domains. Today, pilgrims journey on foot and in the air. They search on mountaintops, in sanctuaries, and in the pages of books.

The blessed Virgin has made her very real presence known time and again throughout history. Her miraculous apparitions have taken place in far more locations worldwide than is commonly known and with greater frequency in modern times. She is delivering a message – one of love, hope, and forgiveness; are the mankind listening?

The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes incorporates 52 hectares of property and 22 places of worship, including the sacred grotto, two basilicas, and a variety of buildings for pilgrims and the sick.



Exterior view of the Basilica in Lourdes

Of all the saints of Christianity, Mary is the first and foremost, human in creation and yet glorified by God because of her heroic trust and conformance to His will. We are inspired by her life example and continuing intercession with her Son on our behalf. So, may we also be drawn to the examples of many other saints who lived in the centuries afterward.

4. BERNADETTE SOUBIROUS

Bernadette was born on January 7, 1844, and baptised the next day by Abbé Forgues in the old parish church, being given the name Marie Bernarde. Because of her small stature, she was always referred to by the diminutive form of the name, Bernadette. Bernadette was the first child of François and Louise Soubirous. At the time of her birth, François was a miller, operating the mill which belonged to his wife's family. He was a friendly, easy-going man, with little ability for carrying on a business, and before many years the mill had been forfeited for debt. During most of Bernadette's childhood he was an odd job man, picking up a day's work as opportunity offered, and, from time to time, escaping from his problems and responsibilities by turning to the delusive comfort of alcohol. His wife and children, naturally, were the main sufferers from his ineffectualness. Louise was a hard working, affectionate, and extremely spiritual housewife. Within a short span of time many children were born to her; only five survived. After Bernadette, there was another girl, Toinette Marie, and three boys. To help feed and clothe them it was often necessary for their harassed mother to go out to work by the day, and on one occasion, at least, helping to harvest in the field. A peasant woman of the region has vouched seeing little Bernadette, then about twelve, carrying the youngest baby to Louise in the field, to be nursed during the mid-day rest. As a child, Bernadette not only did more than might be expected of her, but also assisted in their moral and religious training.



François and Louise Soubirous

Bernadette was physically weak and frail; from the age of six she showed symptoms of respiratory problems that later became chronic. When Bernadette was thirteen she was sent to the neighbouring mountain hamlet of Bartres, to the home of one Marie Arevant, her foster mother. It was here that Bernadette had been taken for a few months when she was still a child to be nursed by Madame Arevant, who had just lost a baby. The woman had a large family and the little Bernadette made herself useful in the house and in the fields. One of her duties was to tend a small flock of sheep that grazed on a hillside nearby; it is this brief phase of her childhood that has inspired artists to portray her as a shepherdess. Her life was lonely; she was overworked and homesick while she remained with this peasant family. She sent word to her parents that she wished to come back home. In particular, one thing disturbed her at this time: Although she was fourteen, she had not made yet her First Communion!

Marie-Bernarde Soubirous
(*7.1.1844 †16.4. 879)

When Bernadette went back to Lourdes, it made her very happy to be admitted to the day school conducted by the *Sisters of Charity and Christian Instruction*. This was a teaching and nursing order whose mother-house was at Nevers in central France. A hospice, a day school, and a boarding school were maintained at Lourdes by these devout nuns, who were, as a group, unusually well trained. Thus Bernadette at last began her secular education, and, under Abbé Pomian, started to prepare for her First

Although she was fourteen, she had not made yet her First Communion!

Le Cachot was an old jail abandoned
in 1824 for sanitav reasons

Communion. She also started learning French, for up to this time she spoke only the local dialect. The nuns discovered that beneath a quiet, modest exterior, Bernadette had a winning personality and a lively sense of humour.

After moving from one poor location to another, the Soubirous family was now living in a single room of a dilapidated structure in the Rue des Petits Fosses; this damp, unpleasant place had once served as a jail and was known as *Le Cachot*, the Dungeon. Above loomed an ancient fortress, and the narrow cobbled street had once been a part of the moat. The town of Lourdes, itself very old, is situated in one of the most picturesque parts of France, lying in the extreme southwest, near the Spanish border, where the Pyrenees Mountains rose sharply above the plains. From the craggy, wooded heights, several valleys descended to converge at this site, and the little river Gave rushed through the town, its turbulent current turning the wheels of many mills. There are escarpments of rock in and around Lourdes, the most famous being the Massabielle, a great mound jutting out from the base of a plateau. On the side facing the river it had an arch-shaped opening which led into a sizeable grotto - a grotto that was soon destined to become famous in every part of the world. At this time the Massabielle had, if not exactly an air of evil, a touch of the sinister. According to legend, it had been sacred to the pagans of prehistoric times; now it served as a shelter for fishermen or herdsman caught by sudden storms.

It was a very cold day on February 11, 1858, the day that was to mark the beginning of an extraordinary series of events at the rock of Massabielle. When Bernadette returned from school her mother gave her permission to go down by the river to pick up driftwood and fallen branches. Toinette Marie, aged nine, and Marie Abadie, aged twelve, a neighbour's child, went with her. When the three girls reached the Massabielle, the two younger ones took off their wooden shoes to wade across an icy mill-stream which joined here the river. Bernadette, more sensitive, hung behind. Standing alone beside the river, she had started to remove her stockings when she heard a noise like a sudden rush of wind. Looking up towards the grotto she saw some movement among the branches, and then there floated out of the opening a golden cloud, and in the midst of which was the figure of a beautiful young woman who placed herself in a small niche in the rock, at one side of the opening and slightly above it. Bernadette, staring in fascination, saw that the luminous apparition was dressed in a soft white robe, with a broad girdle of blue, and a long white veil that partially covered her hair. Her eyes were blue and gentle. Golden roses gleamed on her bare feet. When the vision smiled and beckoned to Bernadette, the girl's fear vanished away and she came closer, and then sank reverently on her knees. She drew her rosary from her pocket, for, in moments of stress, she habitually said the beads. The mysterious being also had a rosary, of large white beads, and to quote Bernadette's own account: *"The Lady let me pray alone; she passed the beads of the rosary between her fingers, but said nothing; only at the end of each decade did she say the Gloria with me."* When the recitation was



finished, the Lady vanished into the cave and the golden mist disappeared with her. This experience affected Bernadette so powerfully that, when the other girls turned back to look for her, she was still kneeling, a rapt, faraway look on her face. They chided her, thinking she had passed the time praying to escape the task of gathering firewood. Tying up their twigs and branches into faggots, they started for home. Too full of her vision to keep quiet about it, before they had gone far Bernadette burst out with the whole wondrous story; she asked the girls to say nothing at home. But Toinette told

Madame Soubirous that same evening, and soon the news spread further. Bernadette wished to go back to the Massabielle the next day, but her mother, after talking the matter with a sister, refused permission.

Bernadette now showed the independence of spirit that became one of her outstanding traits. When she told her confessor of the apparition, Abbé Pomian made light of it, thinking the girl suffered from hallucinations. Nevertheless, on the following Sunday Bernadette asked if she might go to the grotto and her father told her she might go if she took a flask

of holy water with her, to exorcise the apparition, should it prove to be a demon. Bernadette, advancing ahead of several little friends who accompanied her, knelt before the grotto and soon the vision appeared as before. On their return the excited girls, although they had seen nothing, naturally began to tell their versions of the story, and soon the town buzzed with varying reports and rumours. On the next market day the peasants heard of these strange happenings. The story reached the Mother Superior of the convent, who took a firm stand: she announced to the class preparing for Communion, comprising Bernadette's friends and companions for the most part, that they must stop talking and thinking of this matter. Bernadette's teacher, Sister Marie Therese Vauzous, was even hostile.

The apparition was manifest to Bernadette for the third time on Thursday, February 18, when she went to the grotto accompanied by two women of Lourdes who thought the "damiezelo," as Bernadette called her, was the returning spirit of a young woman, one of their dear friends, who had died a few months before. On this occasion the same little figure appeared to Bernadette, smiled warmly, and spoke, asking Bernadette to come daily for fifteen days. Bernadette promised to come, provided she was given permission to do so. Since neither her god-mother, who was her mother's sister, nor the priest actually forbade it, Bernadette's parents offered no objection. On the following day her mother and aunt went with her, and on subsequent visits great crowds of people gathered on the Massabielle, or down by the river, hoping to see or hear something miraculous. During these two weeks the excitement increased to such a pitch that the civil authorities felt obliged to take action. The police took Bernadette to the local police station for questioning and try to make her admit that it was all an elaborate hoax. Bernadette emerged from this and many other ordeals somewhat shaken but unyielding. The authorities continued to discredit her. They even offered her money to report that the whole matter had been thought up by Bernadette's poverty-stricken parents to derive advantage from it. François and Louise Soubirous, initially uncertain, had now come to believe in the supernatural character of their daughter's experience and stood by her. Now, pious, well-meaning people brought them gifts in the form of money and food, sometimes asking for a token from Bernadette. These offerings were declined; even Bernadette's small brothers were cautioned not to accept anything. The girl herself was adamant in her determination to have no part in any kind of trafficking. People began to gather at the grotto in the middle of the night, awaiting her appearance. It was rumoured that she had a miraculous, healing touch; several cures were attributed to her.

On Sunday, February 21, a number of people went with her to the grotto, including those who had been highly sceptical. On this occasion, Bernadette reported later, the apparition said to her: "You will pray to God for sinners." On February 26, while she was in a state of trance, which lasted as long as she saw the vision, Bernadette crawled inside the grotto, and, at the Lady's bidding, uncovered with her bare hands a little trickle of water from which she drank and with which she washed her face at the Lady's instruction. This tiny spring continued to well up and by next day was flowing steadily down into the river: to this day it has never ceased to gush forth from the grotto.

On March 2, Bernadette saw the apparition for the thirteenth time. It was on this day that the Lady bade Bernadette to tell the priest that "a chapel should be built and a procession formed." Bernadette had no thought but to obey, in spite of the open hostility of the local clergy. Parish priest Fr. Dominique Peyramale, an imposing man of outstanding family, reprimanded Bernadette harshly, asking her to find out the name of her visitant, and to tell her she must perform a real miracle, such as making the eglantine bloom out of season, to prove herself. During the preceding weeks he had ordered the priests to have nothing to do with the grotto, for it was the general practice of the clergy to discourage or ignore religious



The only known photograph of Bernadette at the grotto in 1862, three years after the apparitions

visionaries. Very often such persons were ill-balanced or suffering from delusions. As a matter of fact, Bernadette's experiences were proving contagious, and before long many others, young and old, were claiming to have had supernatural visions at the grotto and elsewhere. Fr. Peyramale's adamant opposition was based on the necessity to restore order in the parish.

On March 25, Lady Day, Bernadette started for the grotto at dawn. When the vision appeared to her, Bernadette said: "Would you kindly tell me who you are?" When the girl had repeated the question, the Lady replied in the local dialect: "***Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou***" ("I am the Immaculate Conception"); I want a chapel here." This answer, when reported by Bernadette, caused the local excitement to rise to a still



Abbé Dominique Peyramale

higher pitch and the feeling grew that Bernadette's visitor was the Blessed Virgin. Only four years before the dogma of the Immaculate Conception had been promulgated. The seventeenth apparition took place on April 7, and the final one, more than three months later on July 16. By that time, the grotto, which the people were trying to make into a sanctuary and place of worship, had been barricaded by the town authorities to discourage worshipers and curiosity-seekers from congregating there. During the twenty-one years that she was to remain on earth, Bernadette never again saw the vision. The accounts of what she had seen and heard, which she was obliged to repeat so often, never varied in any significant detail.

Days following the final apparition on July 28, 1858 Bishop Bertrand-Sévère Laurence of Tarbes appointed a commission to investigate the entire issue. Influential bishops from Soissons and Montpellier had already visited Lourdes and met Bernadette. Impressed by her simplicity and strength of character, they pressed Bishop Laurence to initiate the investigation. Vuillot, a famous reporter from the newspaper *l'Univers* published a sensational account on the apparitions. When asked if she was affected by this, Bernadette simply replied "I hardly know how to read."

The commission worked and studied for three and half years. Bernadette was first officially questioned on November 17, 1858. Every witness was interrogated and countless reports made. Inexplicable cures were examined. A team of doctors, under the supervision of Professor Vergez of the Faculty of Medicine of Montpellier, confirmed thirty-five cases of mysterious healing. These miracles, combined with Bernadette's unwavering and indisputable credibility, ultimately convinced Bishop Laurence of the truth of the Virgin Mary's apparitions. He declared in a Pastoral Letter dated January 18, 1862 that "truly, the Virgin did appear to Bernadette."



Mgr. Laurence, Bishop of Tarbes & Lourdes. 1844-1870

During the three and half years of the commission (1858-1862) many believers complained that harsh police measures only added to the unrest in Lourdes. Emperor Napoleon III intervened, and ordered the barricades removed from the Grotto. Peace and order restored, the Grotto of Apparitions soon grew into the center of pilgrimage that it continues to be today.

5. THE DECLARATION OF THE CHURCH ON LOURDES

The testimony of the young girl presents all the guarantees we can desire. First of all, her sincerity cannot be called into question. Who, when he meets with her, can doubt but admire the simplicity, the candour, the modesty of this child? While all around her talk about the marvels revealed to her, she alone keeps silent; she speaks only when questioned and then she relates everything without affectation and with a touching simplicity; and to the numerous questions she is plied with, she answers, without hesitation, clearly, precisely, aptly, in words stamped with a strong conviction ... She is always in agreement

with her own statements, she has always maintained what she has said without adding or suppressing any fact during different interrogations to which she has been subjected ...



Grotto of Massabielle

But if Bernadette has not wished to deceive, could she not have been the subject of self-deception? Has she not believed that she has seen and listened to what she has neither perceived nor heard? Has she not been the subject of hallucinations? How could we believe such a thing of her? The wisdom of her replies testifies to the upright character of this child, her unruffled imagination, a good sense surpassing her age. Religious sentiments have never presented in her an over-excited disposition. We have never established in the nature of this young girl any intellectual disorder or impaired judgment, or singularity of character, nor morbid affection, which could predispose her to imaginary creations...

We judge that Mary Immaculate, Mother of God, really appeared to Bernadette on the 11th February, 1858 and on following days to the number of 18 days in all in the Grotto of Massabielle, near the town of Lourdes, that this apparition is endowed with all the characters of truth and that the faithful are justified in believing in it with certainty.

Meanwhile the news of the phenomenal happenings at Lourdes had reached the very highest ecclesiastical and government circles: the bishop, the prefect, even Emperor Napoleon III and his pious wife Eugenie, became actors in the drama. On October 5, the mayor of Lourdes, on orders from above, had the grotto reopened. It was thought that the empress herself had had a voice in this decision. At all events, it seemed to be the only appropriate response to the overwhelming demand of the people for a shrine Bernadette's visions, the new spring, and the cures that were being reported, all had taken a profound hold on the popular imagination.

Due to a lucky turn, Bernadette's family was now more comfortably situated, and, to escape visitors, Bernadette went to live at the convent. Even there, intrusions upon her privacy were allowed; these she bore as patiently as she could. While her fame not only continued but steadily grew, Bernadette herself withdrew more and more. At the age of twenty she decided to take the veil. Since the condition of her health precluded the more ascetic orders, it was considered best for her to join the Sisters who had taught and sheltered her. At twenty-two, therefore, she travelled to the mother-house of the convent. Her novitiate was full of trials and sorrows.

Acting under the quite unfounded notion that Bernadette's visions and all the attendant publicity might have made the young woman vain or self-important, Sister Marie Therese Vauzous, now novice-mistress at Nevers was very severe with her former pupil. Although she made life difficult for Bernadette, the little novice met all tests with perfect humility. She cheerfully performed the menial tasks assigned to her, at first in the convent kitchen,



Bernadette in death – April 1879

although this must have taxed her strength. Later, when it was noted that her sympathetic manner made her a favourite with sick people, she was appointed assistant infirmarian. Her step and touch were light, and her very presence brought comfort. During these years, however, Bernadette was suffering from the chronic disease which was slowly draining her life away. She was finally given work in the sacristy, where her talent with needlework made her admired! She displayed real gift for design and colour in embroidering the sacred vestments. To all tasks she brought pure grace of spirit as well as utter willingness to serve.

In September 1878, Bernadette made her perpetual and final vows. Her strength was ebbing away, but even when she was confined to wheel chair or bed, she went on with the fine embroidery work. And now she had more time for prayer and meditation. There is little outward drama in the life of a nun, but in Bernadette's case there was steady activity, steady growth, in things of the spirit. She had been told by her vision that she would not attain happiness in this world. Her childhood had been sad, and maturity had brought no easing of the burden she must carry. During the last two years of her life a tumour developed on one knee, which was followed by caries of the bone. She suffered excruciating pain. One day, when one superior came to visit her and asked, "What are you doing on bed, you lazy little thing?" Bernadette simply replied, "I am doing my stint; I must be a victim." She felt that such was the Divine plan for her.



Pope Pius X

The nuns, the novice mistress, and the Superior had all long since come to regard her as the vessel of Divine Grace and to believe in the reality of those visitations of her youth. She still suffered from the curiosity of visiting strangers. Not only did nuns and priests come to Nevers but celebrities from Paris and other parts of France came to see for themselves the now famous Bernadette. Disliking publicity as she did, yet not wishing to remain isolated and aloof if a glimpse of her could help or inspire any other human soul, she met this test too - and sometimes with a native intelligence. Once a visitor stopped her as she was passing down the corridor and asked where she could get a glimpse of Sister Bernadette. The little nun said, "Just watch that doorway and presently you will see her go through." And she slipped away through the door. Such was the reputation her presence gave to the order that many young women now joined it.

On her deathbed, in a spasm of pain, Bernadette pressed the crucifix closer to her, and cried, "All this is good for Heaven!" That afternoon, as the nuns of the convent knelt around her bed to repeat the prayers for the dying, they heard her say in a low voice, "Blessed Mary, Mother of God, pray for me; a poor sinner, a poor sinner." She could not finish the prayer. The day was Wednesday, April 16, 1879. She died in the Sainte Croix (Holy Cross) Infirmary of the Convent of Saint-Gildard in Nevers at about 3.15 in the afternoon at the age of thirty-five; her body was buried in a small chapel dedicated to Saint Joseph which was within the confines of the convent.

As soon as the news spread, people came streaming towards the convent chanting, "The Saint is dead! The Saint is dead!" Bernadette's body was placed in a casket which was sealed, then buried near the chapel of St. Joseph in the convent grounds. When the body was exhumed in 1908 by the commission formed to forward the examination of Bernadette's life and character, it was found to be intact and uncorrupted.

On 13 August 1913, Pope Pius X authorised the introduction of the Cause for Canonisation - Bernadette could now be given the title 'Venerable'. This meant that body had to be exhumed once again. This process was interrupted by the war, and the body was not re-exhumed until 3 April 1919. The process was the same as before - as were the results. The body remained intact.



Pope Pius XI

On 14 June 1925, Pope Pius XI declared Bernadette 'Blessed' (the ceremony of beatification) - her relics could now be exposed for public veneration.

Pope Pius XI canonized Bernadette as a saint in Rome on December 8, 1933 on the occasion of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception amidst a brilliant setting and the fanfare of silver trumpets. Since then, her body, reposing in a handsome glass reliquary, lies in the convent chapel, guarded above by a statue of the Blessed Virgin, and by the nuns who keep vigil.

This little nun, humble, unlettered, honest, and obedient, is venerated by the great host of worshipers throughout the world. Tens of thousands of them journey every year to the glorious shrine at Lourdes. The story of Lourdes as a pilgrimage centre forms a strange contrast to Bernadette's retired life of prayer and service. Its growth from a sleepy country town to its present status as the most popular pilgrimage centre in Christendom has been phenomenal. A railroad line from Pau was built, facilitating the influx of visitors who, from the very first year, were drawn to Lourdes.

Fr. Peyramale and his superior, the bishop of Pau, who at first had scoffed, came to believe most ardently; it was the aged Father who found the money for raising the great basilica to Our Lady, which was completed in 1876. Participating in the ceremony were thirty-five prelates, one cardinal, and three thousand priests. Sister Bernadette had no share in these rites. Another church at the base of the basilica was erected and consecrated in 1901. The entire district has been enhanced by architecture and landscaping to make it an impressive sanctuary, with a background of great natural beauty.



Here is the incorrupt body of St. Bernadette of Lourdes. Very fine wax masks were laid over the face and hands in 1925 to disguise the sunken eyes and nose and the blackish tinge to the face and hands. During the first exhumation (1909) the face had been "a dull white" and the hands "perfectly preserved" but the nose was already "dilated and shrunken". The eyes were not noted as having yet sunk.

Of the cures at Lourdes it can be said that even non-believers have observed something here that medical science cannot explain. The commission of physicians, known as the Bureau of Constataions, who examine evidence and report on their findings, operate with great caution and circumspection. The supposed cure must be immediate and permanent to be regarded as a miracle. Medical records prior to the pilgrimage as well as the patient's subsequent medical history are studied. The patient may himself be a witness, and it is most moving to hear the words, "I was sick and now I am well," which give such comfort and

hope to others who are ailing. Only a few cures each year stand up against these rigid tests, but those few are enough. The thousands - the lame, the blind - continue to come, to be washed in the waters of the spring, to share in the processions, the singing, the prayers, the impressive rites, and breathe the pure air of faith. The Canticle of Bernadette hovers in that air and even those persons who go to Lourdes simply searching for a renewal of faith find themselves amply rewarded, for the spirit of the Saint Bernadette is still a potent inspiration.

While she took with her the knowledge of certain secrets the Virgin gave her, one secret remained hidden in our presence. The most spectacular of all the incorrupt, Bernadette's miraculously preserved body remained buried in a damp grave for thirty years until the cause for beatification was taken up. To this day, the body of Bernadette is a profound source of inspiration and of mystery surrounding the ways of the Lord. The face of

Bernadette is one of surreal beauty, and will remain for us always the face that gazed into the eyes of the Mother of God.

6. CONCLUSION

It was a noble experience to enjoy the benefits of this pilgrimage. The organisers, Rasmi - an Independent Publication of Overseas Malayalees - proved again their organising skills. Augustin Elanjipilly and his wife Pushpa did a wonderful work by painstakingly going into each and every details to make the twenty or more hours of bus journey with food, wine and other refreshments.

A big thank-you to the sisters of the *Communauté Saint Joseph de Vizens in Lourdes*, belonging to the *Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of St. Marc (SJSM)*; its Mother Soeur Marie Marc and other Sisters Rosy, Clementa, Tessy, Gerlinde, Leocadie - it was an amazing occurrence to profit from their hospitality!

It was also an intense feeling devoutly assisting Fr. Bertin (C.M.I.) at the Holy Mass at the Crypt in the Basilica solemnised according to the Syro-Malabar rite, and more so to help him (as a lay Orthodox Member!) at the Sanctuary to render the greatest homage possible to the Sacred Humanity of Our Lord.

In addition, it was a wonderful feeling to sing the "Ave, Ave, Ave, Maria" standing on the high steps of the Basilica facing the Candle Procession attended by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims in a graceful manner.

Solitude and boredom didn't affect anyone through their lively participation during the lengthy drive by singing and prayers as well as sharing gags.

We hope and pray to join the 150th jubilee celebrations of the Apparition in 2008 lasting one year to sing again:

Ave Maria, gratia plena
 Maria, gratia plena
 Maria, gratia plena
 Ave Ave Dominus Dominus tecum
 In mulieribus
 Et benedictus et benedictus fructus ventris
 Ventris tui Jésus
 Ave Maria

Ave Maria Sancta Maria
 Maria Mater Dei
 Maria Mater Dei
 Ora Ora pro nobis peccatoribus
 Nunc et nunc et in hora
 Nunc et in hora mortis
 Nunc et in hora mortis nostrae
 In hora mortis nostrae
 Ave Maria



Side View of the Basilica