St. Bernadette

The visionary Bernadette entered the Sisters of Notre Dame at Nevers in 1866 and was given the name of Sister Mary Bernarda or Sister Marie Bernard. She worked there as sacristan until she died on April 16, 1879 at the young age of 35 after a prolonged and painful illness.

After thirty years undisturbed in the tomb, Sister Marie Bernard's body was exhumed for examination. The cause for sainthood had begun. The wooden coffin was unscrewed and the lead coffin cut open to reveal the body in a state of perfect preservation. There was not the slightest trace of an unpleasant smell. The Sisters who had buried her thirty years earlier noted only that her hands had fallen slightly to the left. "The coffin was opened in the presence of the Bishop of Nevers, the mayor of the town, his principal deputy, several canons and ourselves. We noticed no smell. ... The hands, which were crossed on her breast, were perfectly preserved, as were the nails. The hands still held a rusting rosary. ... the ears were in a state of perfect preservation..."

In witness of which we have duly drawn up this present statement in which all is truthfully recorded. Nevers, September 22, 1909, Drs. Ch. David, A. Jourdan.

The nuns washed the body, and placed it in a new coffin that was lined with zinc and padded with white silk.

The fact that a body was perfectly preserved is not necessarily miraculous. It is well known that corpses decompose to varying degrees in certain kinds of soil and may gradually mummify. However, in the case of Bernadette this mummification is quite astounding. Her illnesses, the state of her body at the time of death, the humidity in the vault in the chapel of Saint Joseph (the habit was damp, the rosary rusty and the crucifix had turned green), would all seem to be conducive to the decay of the flesh.

Ten years later, another identification of the body of the venerable Bernadette was mandated. Everything was just the same as at the first exhumation. "When the coffin was opened the body appeared to be absolutely intact and odorless ... nor has any decomposition of the cadaver set in, although this would be expected and normal after such a long period in a vault hollowed out of the earth." Nevers, April 3, 1919, Dr. Comte

In 1925, the third and final exhumation of the body was conducted. "What struck me during this examination, of course, was the state of perfect preservation of the skeleton, the fibrous tissues of the muscles (still supple and firm), of the ligaments, and of the skin, and above all the totally unexpected state of the liver after 46 years. ... I pointed this out to those present, remarking that this did not seem to be a natural phenomenon."

A crystal coffin was made for Saint Bernadette's body. She was placed in a chapel in the Church of St. Gildard at the convent in Nevers where she lived for thirteen years. She has remained undisturbed and on view in this chapel since August 3, 1925.

She was beatified in 1925 by Pope Pius XI and canonized by him on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1933. She appears in the church records as St. Mary Bernarda, but in the hearts of the faithful she is affectionately remembered as St. Bernadette.

Our Lady of Lourdes

Of all the events surrounding these apparitions, the most striking involves the self-identification of "Aquero" – "the Lady" to Bernadette during the apparition of March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation. The lady had requested previously that a chapel be built and the parish priest insisted on knowing who "the lady" was. And so, Bernadette was pressed to ask "the Lady" again and again, "Who was she?"

"... At my third request her face took on a serious expression, and at the same time an expression of deep humility ... Joining her palms as if for prayer, she raised them to the height of her breast ... She looked up to heaven ... then slowly opening her hands and bending down towards me, she said to me in a voice in which one could sense a slight trembling, "I am the Immaculate Conception."

Reflect on Mary's deep humility and the seriousness of her expression while identifying herself. Mary's own voice expressed a "slight trembling" upon her self-identification as the Immaculate Conception. St Maximilian Kolbe contemplated that Mary did not respond to Bernadette "I am immaculately conceived" or "I am the one who was immaculately conceived." Rather, Mary said: "I am the Immaculate Conception." Our Lady's identification of herself as "the" Immaculate Conception is something which goes beyond mere title: it is, rather, a state of being.

Bernadette does not understand the meaning of these words. She repeats them to herself over and over again so that she will not say them incorrectly. Upon hearing the title the parish priests and the Bishop are in wonder for they know that Bernadette has no concept of their meaning and has never heard the words before.

Mary, referred to as “Full of Grace" by the Archangel Gabriel, has been believed to have always been without sin from the moment of conception from Apostolic times. St. Bernadette’s visions were a confirmation of something the Church had already held for centuries - but still some questioned. In the East, the Church has commemorated a Feast in honor of the conception of Our Lady since the 7th century, and in the West since the 9th century. By the 16th century, when the Council of Trent (1545-1563) excluded Mary from Original Sin, the doctrine had become the common teaching of all theologians. Nearly thirty years before Lourdes, Our Lady appeared to St. Catherine Laboure giving her the prayer, “O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you.” In 1854, some four years before the apparitions of Our Lady to young Bernadette, Pope Pius IX solemnly defined the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception which stated that “the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of Original Sin” (Ineffabilis Deus, 29).
The liturgical feast of Our Lady of Lourdes was established for February 11, the date of the first apparition in Lourdes in 1858.

On that Thursday, a poor, sickly, unlettered peasant girl of Lourdes, France went with her sister and another girl to fetch sticks for desperately needed firewood. Bernadette Soubirous, age 14, who knew little of her catechism, experienced her first apparition of a lovely Lady at the Grotto of Massabielle. Upon seeing "Aquero" the Lady, who had a rosary draped over her right arm, Bernadette began praying the Rosary. Bernadette did not know who the Lady was at this time. This is Bernadette's description of the Lady at that first apparition: “While I was saying the Rosary, I was watching as hard as I could. She was wearing a white dress reaching down to her feet, of which only the toes appeared. The dress was gathered very high at the neck by a hem from which hung a white cord. A white veil covered her head and came down over her shoulders and arms almost to the bottom of her dress. On each foot I saw a yellow rose. The sash of the dress was blue, and hung down below her knees. The chain of the rosary was yellow; the beads white, big and widely spaced.”

Thus began a series of 18 apparitions of “the Lady” to Bernadette at the Grotto. Word soon spread about the apparitions. More and more people accompanied Bernadette to the Grotto, but only Bernadette could see the Lady. “The Lady repeatedly told Bernadette to “Pray to God for sinners”.

The Apparitions

At the 9th apparition, in the presence of 350 spectators, Mary pointed to a rock saying to Bernadette “Go to the spring, drink of it and wash yourself there.” At first there was only mud and the observers mocked her as being insane for washing in mud. But the next day, the water began flowing strongly from the spring and the first miracles renewed the faith of the followers.

On Tuesday, March 2nd during the 13th apparition, “the Lady” told her, “Go tell the priests to come here in procession and build a chapel here.” The word procession, in Lourdes dialect, means a pilgrimage outside of one’s parish into other parishes to meet with the people of God on their journey through life. It wasn’t an easy task as the parish priest was not enthusiastic about all the commotion the apparitions were causing and Bernadette had yet been able to answer the question, “What is the lady’s name?"

During the 16th apparition on March 25th, the feast of the Annunciation, Mary finally answers the question with “I am the Immaculate Conception.”

One time in rapture, Bernadette’s candle burned down, leaving the flame dancing on her hand for 15 minutes, miraculously without burning her hand. This was timed and examined by a Doctor, skeptic turned ardent believer.

The message of Our Lady of Lourdes is not only about the healing Mercy of God, but also about the need for prayer and penance.

Bernadette was asked what the lady said to her. She replied, “Now and again she would say, ‘penance, penance, penance, pray for sinners.’ ” St. Bernadette testified to this call of Our Lady of Lourdes by living the rest of her life in humble prayer and suffering in a convent in France.

The Apparitions - Genuine or Fake

During the 3 ½ years of the investigation of the validity of the apparitions by the Church, the steady flow of pilgrims transformed the Grotto into a center of religious fervor. Finally, in 1862, the apparitions were proclaimed authentic - after consideration of the many miracles (7 of which were, without dispute, a direct connection with the apparitions in 1858), after every witness was interrogated and countless reports made, and, undoubtedly, upon the wake of mass conversions - “truly, the Virgin did appear to Bernadette.”

It is important to understand the difference between the feasts of the Annunciation (Our Lord’s conception by a virgin) and the Immaculate Conception (Our Lady’s conception without sin).

On the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25th, we celebrate God’s mercy as he sends His Archangel Gabriel to announce to Mary that she will be “overshadowed” by the Holy Spirit and will conceive of Our Lord Jesus – God becomes flesh. In His Mercy, we too are made heirs to purity through the sacraments of Baptism and Reconciliation – both Sacraments instituted by Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception on December 8th is a day of celebration for Mary’s privilege and for our realization that Mary wasn’t just “chosen” - she was “created to be” the spouse of the Holy Spirit and the Mother of Our Lord Jesus. There is no greater honor.

Yet, some do not understand devotion to Mary.

No matter what we do to honor Mary we can’t even come close to what God has done. Does the teaching of the Immaculate Conception imply that Mary is divine, or that she at least possesses some element of divinity? No. It would be blasphemous to believe so. Mary, indeed, is human; she came forth as other children of this earth, having a real human father and mother. She is our model of love, obedience, and humility, “Be it done to me according to Thy will”, and of faith, “Do as He tells you”, and every virtue. We see in her our hope to be forever with God. Devotion to Mary is always done in the light of her motherhood of Jesus and our adoration of Him as Our Lord and Savior.

Millions of pilgrims venture every year to Lourdes.

Some are miraculously healed - currently over 60 undisputed. But many more are not healed of their affliction but receive the great and precious grace of lovingly embracing and carrying the cross Our Lord has given them as reparation for sin.

“I am the Immaculate Conception.”

From this title, it is obvious that we are endowed with our soul from the moment of fertilization. Together with the biological fact that the embryo is a human being, how could anyone who believes in the Immaculate Conception, believe that it is a right to take a child’s life in the womb or that it is justified to pursue cloning and embryonic stem cell research. What better testimony can there be to the sanctity of life from the moment of conception? 