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THE MEANING OF LOURDES

C.B. Daly, D.D., M.A.

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About the article and its author . . .

"The Meaning of Lourdes" was first printed in Mother of the Redeemer, a collection of lectures by several speakers that Gill of Dublin published in 1959. We thank the publisher for allowing us to reprint the extracts that have been chosen from this paper.

The author, Father C.B. Daly, was born in 1917 in County Antrim, Ireland. His studies, begun at St. Malachy’s College and Queen’s University in Belfast, were continued at the famed St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth, and completed at the Institut Catholique and the Sorbonne in Paris. During these years he did extensive work in the ancient classics and in both patristic history and patristic theology. His special field was the theology of Penance, Baptism and the Church as elaborated by Tertullian and St. Cyprian, his doctoral dissertation being entitled Tertullian the Puritan and His Influence. Since 1946 he has turned his attention to philosophy and is now reader in Scholastic philosophy at Queen’s University. In particular he has addressed himself to metaphysics and ethics especially in the dialogue between Thomist philosophy and logical positivism and contemporary British linguistic analysis on the one hand and existentialism on the other. He has authored many articles on these topics as well as on patristic themes. Two of his works published last year were a book, Morals, Law and Life, and a sermon, “A Sign Which Shall Be Contradicted,” included in a collection entitled Sermons for Sundays. In addition to his activities as teacher and writer, Father also holds the chairmanship of Christus Rex, the society of Irish priests for social study and action.

While Lourdes and its apparitions add nothing to the Church’s dogmas, they do deepen our appreciation of her teachings and enliven our response to them. The need for prayer and penance, an awareness of Jesus truly present in the Eucharist, the duty of fraternal charity—all this has ever been part of Christian life. At Lourdes, however, we are confronted with these things anew. Mary there shows us their importance as a mother would, by making them more actual, one might even say tangible. By bringing us face to face with human weakness and misery in the pilgrims who come to that shrine, she pleads that we make prayer and penance, love of Jesus and charity for others the very fabric of our daily existence. It is here that she lets us see the significance of her Immaculate Conception and know the extent of her Coredemption. The first privilege kept her free from sin and therefore empowered her to love both God and man perfectly. The other gave her the responsibility to aid us, her children, in working towards that same freedom and attaining that same love. Mary’s concern at Lourdes is, then, to help us bear witness to the realities that lie hidden in the truths of faith.
THE MEANING OF LOURDES

C.B. Daly, D.D., M.A.

Introductory Note on Sources Used

For the historical facts of Lourdes, the author of the present paper relies mainly on the monumental three-volume work of the Jesuit L.-J.-M. Cros published in Paris in 1925-6. The full title is Histoire de Notre Dame de Lourdes d’après les documents et les témoins; t.I, Les Apparitions; t.II, Les Luttes; t.III, La Chapelle et Bernadette. This work is cited as “Cros I,II,III.” Impressive proof of Father Cros’s refusal to be satisfied with anything less than rigorous historical demonstration was provided by the publication, for the Lourdes centenary, of the greater part of his collection of accounts of the events of Lourdes written, at his request, by all the accessible eye-witnesses, and of their replies to his minute and reiterated questions. This has been edited by M. Olphe-Gaillard, S.J., and published as Lourdes 1858: Témoins de l’événement, Paris, 1957. This dossier is cited as Cros Témoins. The historian’s event of the centenary was the massive publication, Lourdes. Documents authentiques, Paris, 1957, in which Father Laurentin, joined as co-editor from vol. 3 on by Dom Bernard Billet, reproduces and annotates all the contemporary documents and descriptions and newspaper articles bearing upon Lourdes. The volumes are cited as “Laurentin, D.A. I,II,III,IV.” A further addition to Lourdes historical writing is Msgr. F. Trochu’s Sainte Bernadette Soubirous, Paris, 1954. It is cited as “Trochu.”

We should add here that the Lourdes. Documents authentiques published by Frs. Laurentin and Billet was completed in six volumes in 1961. Father Laurentin is now at work on a six-volume history of Lourdes, Lourdes. Histoire authentique. Three volumes have appeared thus far.

LOURDES AND REVELATION

In investigating the meaning of Lourdes, one has to begin by eliminating some mistaken hypotheses. We know, for example, from general theological principles, that Lourdes cannot be intended to teach us any new truth about Mary or about the divine plan of salvation. No apparition or private revelation, however approved by the Church, could reveal to us any new truth of faith or morals, or add any truth to what is to be believed by Catholic faith. Pope Benedict XIV, as Cardinal Lambertini, in his classic work on The Beatification and Canonization of the Servants of God, says, speaking of private revelations:

Such an ecclesiastical approbation is nothing else than a permission to publish (a narrative) after mature examination, in view of the instruction and utility of the faithful. . . . The assent of Catholic Faith to revelations thus approved is not merely not obligatory, but is not possible; (such revelations) demand only an assent of human
credence comformably with the rules of human prudence which represents them as probable and piously credible.¹

Jean Guitton, speaking of mariophanies and places of Marian pilgrimage, has well said:

The veneration of the faithful is not directed to the place itself, but to the mystery that is conceived to be connected with the place. . . . It may happen that the seer of the vision is canonized; if so, it is not for his visions alone, but for the heroic virtues of his life. . . . Suppose the worst: imagine facts come to light which throw serious doubt on the genuineness of the vision. . . . That would take nothing at all from the truths this particular vision represented. These would not depend on any new vision; the Church already possessed them in her deposit of faith. Nor would it detract from the graces received where the vision occurred.²

These statements only repeat fundamental theses of the theology of faith and of revelation. In their light it is evident that it is only with qualifications that we can speak of Lourdes as having been intended by God as a miraculous confirmation of the truth of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception defined four years earlier by Pope Pius IX. This is indeed a very natural way to speak and it contains important truth. The episcopal document whereby Mgr. Laurence in 1862 gave official ecclesiastical recognition to the apparition already pointed out that, by appearing at Lourdes, and calling for a sanctuary to be built there, Our Lady seemed herself to have wished "to consecrate by a monument the infallible pronouncement of the successor of St. Peter."³

The popes themselves have spoken in this way. Pope St. Pius X, in his encyclical for the fiftieth anniversary of the Definition of 1854, wrote:

Pope Pius IX had hardly defined as of Catholic faith the truth that Mary was from her conception exempt from sin, when there began at Lourdes the marvellous manifestations of Our Lady.⁴

Pope Pius XII in his encyclical for the centenary of Lourdes recalled a statement from his earlier encyclical, Fulgens Corona, that

the Blessed Virgin Mary herself wished, it would seem, to confirm by a marvellous event the definition which the Vicar on earth of her Son had a short time before proclaimed.

However, the Pope in the same centenary encyclical noted that

the infallible word of the Roman Pontiff, authentic interpreter of revealed truth, needed no heavenly confirmation in order to command the belief of the faithful.

But yet, he continued:

With what emotion and what gratitude the Christian people and its pastors received from the lips of Bernadette the reply coming from heaven, "I am the Immaculate Conception."⁵
These words of Pope Pius XII are the most accurate expression of the matter. In one sense Lourdes cannot confirm the truth of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, because we are more sure of the truth of the dogma than we are of the reality of the apparitions. For the former we have divine authority; for the latter we have strictly only human credibility. Yet, in the concrete case, these distinctions seem somewhat academic and unreal. Lourdes does not add any new ground of objective certitude to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception; but it does confirm our personal apprehension of that truth. Perhaps we might use Newman’s formula, and say that Lourdes helps to change our attitude towards the dogma from a notional into a real assent. Mary’s mission at Lourdes was not to reveal new truths, but to give us a deeper realization of the truths once for all time revealed by her Son, the truths she kept while on earth and pondered in her heart.

It is, therefore, theologically inexact and inadvisable to speak of Lourdes and the other great Marian manifestations of modern times as marking a new and Marian epoch in the economy of redemption. Preachers sometimes speak of this as the Age of Mary and develop their theme by suggesting that God first sent His Son to draw mankind to His love; and when men refused to come to His Son, He in the last times sends them Mary. Implicated with this theme frequently is another and probably more serious aberration which crept into certain mariological expressions and images since the sixteenth century. This trend of thought would have it that, as between Jesus and Mary, Mary provides the pity and the pleas to Jesus for mercy, and Jesus the rigour of divine justice and wrath towards sinners. Such language and imagery are, of course, devotional rather than theological, and it is perhaps unfair to assess them by rigorous theological criteria. Rightly interpreted, the apparitions at Lourdes and a century of Lourdes devotion stand opposed to these aberrant concepts and constitute a recall to the traditional and true theology of Our Lady.

“I AM THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION”

It is natural to look for some centre of unity amid the diversity of facts and words associated with Lourdes. There can be no doubt that this centre was provided by Our Lady herself when on 25 March 1858 she at last spoke the word that all had been waiting for, praying and hoping for. She spoke her name. She said: “I am the Immaculate Conception.” The doctrinal soundness and the supernatural origin of the apparitions are attested by nothing more surely than by these words. Bernadette did not know what they meant. Her cousin, Jeanne Védère, who had the story directly from Bernadette at the time, describes how Bernadette had to repeat the words over and over again on her way to tell them to the Curé for fear of forgetting them; and that when M. Peyramale asked her what the words meant, she confessed that she did not know.6

This apparition was always the climax of Bernadette’s narration of the events of Massabielle. She accompanied her narration with a re-
enactment of the gestures of Our Lady as she spoke the words. Our Lady had had her hands joined, with the Rosary hanging from her right arm. In response to Bernadette's thrice-repeated appeal to her to declare her name she smiled, then extended her arms downwards in the attitude of the Virgin of the Miraculous Medal, so that the Rosary slipped towards her wrist; then joined her hands again upon her breast and with eyes raised towards heaven, spoke with indescribable humility and tenderness the words, "I am the Immaculate Conception." Bernadette's repetition of these gestures and words made an unforgettable impression on all who witnessed it. The sculptor, M. Fabisch, who had already executed the statuary of La Salette, and was chosen to make the first statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, came in 1863 to hear from Bernadette herself the description of the Lady of her visions. He asked her to describe the scene of the Lady's self-revelation. He later wrote:

The girl stood up with perfect simplicity. She joined her hands and raised her eyes towards heaven. . . . But neither Fra Angelico, nor Perugino, nor Raphael has ever created anything so gentle, and at the same time so profound as the look of that little girl. . . . I shall never forget, as long as I live, the beauty of that expression. 7

There is no doubt, then, that the sixteenth apparition, and Our Lady's words on that occasion, are the heart of Lourdes and the key to its whole meaning. Bernadette herself, who deplored the fact that too many people skim over the surface of things, remarked: "I would like to see emphasis placed on the apparition in which the Blessed Virgin declared her identity." 8 Everything in the story of Lourdes is related to and made meaningful by the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

The grammar of Our Lady's words is strange and cannot be accidental. The authenticity of the words has been questioned on theological grounds: how could Our Lady be her Immaculate Conception? 9 But the construction surely invites juxtaposition with two sentences from the New Testament. The first is that in which St. Paul says of Our Lord: "Him who knew no sin (God) hath made sin for us, that we might be made the justice of God in him" (2 Cor. v:21). The second is that in which Our Lady herself says, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord"; in other words, "I am the slave of the Lord; I am nothing but the fulfiller of His will." St. Paul says that God made Christ sin, that we might be made the justice of God in Christ. But in Mary and in her alone the divine plan of redemption is already and fully and finally realized. Through Christ, her Son, she is already made "the justice of God." She is the justice of God accomplished. She is the Immaculate Conception, in whom through Christ sin is totally defeated. Christ was made sin that she might be sinless. Christ was made sin for us; she is made "anti-sin" 10 in order that she may be the model and the mediatrix of the sinlessness that we, poor sinners, must painfully, penitentially labor to achieve in Christ. But Mary's sinlessness is not merely a state which she passively receives. It is also a total, dedicated disposition of will which she actively lives and
is. In this sense also she is her Immaculate Conception; that is to say, she is the justice of God; she is the complete fulfiller of all the justice of His just will. "I am the Immaculate Conception" was Our Lady's repetition, on the Feast of the Annunciation, 1858, of the words she spoke at the Annunciation itself: "I am the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to Thy word."

**LOURDES AND Penance**

Historically there is no doubt that penance and prayer for sinners was the essence of Our Lady's message to Bernadette, and through her to our time. On Sunday, 21 February, which was the first Sunday of Lent, at the sixth apparition, Bernadette herself described how the Lady suddenly looked sad, fixing her gaze beyond Bernadette; and when the child asked her why she was sad, she said: "You will pray to God for sinners." On Wednesday, 24 February, Bernadette seemed overcome with a pitiful sorrow, and in her ecstasy rose from her knees, and with joined hands seemed to implore the crowd, saying, "Penance, penance, penance." On Thursday, 25 February, Bernadette was to show before a disconcerted and even scandalized crowd what this penance might mean. It was on this day that the Lady ordered her to drink of the spring, which was not yet visible, and Bernadette had to scrape the clay till the water came, and then overcome her natural repugnance to drink the muddy water. She tried three times before she could bring herself to drink it; later she said to some pharisaical critic: "But it was very dirty." Then she was told to eat some grass. Symbolic meaning has been sought for this action, but it is most unlikely that any was intended. It was a humiliating act for Bernadette; its whole meaning was penitential. Penance indeed it was, for when the crowd saw their child of grace, her face soiled with mud, chewing blades of grass, they could not but think that the poor girl was crazed, and they went home dejected, in sad or angry disillusionment.

An important part of the teaching of Lourdes is conveyed by the extreme poverty out of which Our Lady called Bernadette to the vision of her heavenly beauty. Father Laurentin has recently reduced the message of Lourdes to three themes: poverty, prayer, conversion of heart. He shows how poverty fitted Bernadette to be chosen by Our Lady who in her *Magnificat* places herself among the humble, the little, the hungry, the weak of the earth. Bernadette's poverty and ignorance, and the fact that the first believers at the grotto were all from "the lower classes," were some of the chief stumbling-blocks to acceptance of the apparitions. There were many who could not help saying: "Is it possible that Our Lady could appear to a little tramp like that?" Lourdes meant an overturning of the values of the world, a confounding of worldly wisdom. But it was not Bernadette's physical poverty itself which must have endeared her to Our Lady; but rather that she was poor in spirit, humble...
of heart. She accepted the verdict of others that she was "good for nothing."\textsuperscript{17} She said that Our Lady used her as one might use a brush for sweeping, and then, when she had done with her, put her away again behind the door.\textsuperscript{18} Hiddenness, silence, humility were the chief characteristics of her sanctity. They were her way of imitating Mary and carrying out the lessons Mary taught her at the Grotto.\textsuperscript{19}

Indeed it has become more and more clearly recognized in recent years that the best commentary on the meaning of Lourdes is the subsequent life of Bernadette. In that life penance and reparation for sinners are the dominant themes. Father Febvre, chaplain of the Convent of St. Gildard at Nevers, records his

very definite conviction that Sister Marie-Bernard had received the mission of living at the Mother House the instructions given her by the lips of Mary Immaculate at Lourdes: to do penance, to pray, to mortify herself, to suffer for sinners.\textsuperscript{20}

In her personal \textit{carnet intime}, or spiritual note-book, in which she wrote her own thoughts or copied notes from spiritual books or from retreats, she wrote this prayer:

O Mary, Mother of Sorrows, at the foot of the Cross you received the title of our Mother. I am the child of your sorrows, the child of Calvary. O Mary, my tender Mother, here is your child, at the very end of her strength. Have pity on me. Grant that one day I may be in heaven with you... May I stay with you at the foot of the Cross, if such is the pleasure of your divine Son. May I begin here on earth, my soul united to your soul, to glorify the Savior by the perpetual homage of perfect submission.\textsuperscript{21}

The last word of Lourdes is there. For us, as for Bernadette, Lourdes means saying "yes," "fiat," to Mary, with Mary, who is herself "Yes and Amen" to the salvific will of God.

\textbf{THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AND SINNERS}

It is only the theology of the Immaculate Conception and of Mary's role as associate of Our Redeemer which will enable us to glimpse the full meaning of Our Lady of Lourdes's concern for sinners. Nowhere more than at Lourdes do we \textit{experience} what Catholic theology teaches, that she is Mother of sinners, mediatrix of redemption.

Mary's Immaculate Conception was not a personal privilege only but humanity's response, in Mary, to God's offer of grace. Grace is our union in body and soul, mind and heart and will with Christ in God. For us, fallen creatures, it is only by struggle and effort, pain and self-denial, that this union can be effected, against the weight of resistance of our self-opinionated minds and egoistic hearts and defiant wills. How can Our Lady inspire or console us sinners, she who knew not sin nor the wearying drag towards sin of fallen flesh?
But Mary's Immaculate Conception, as it does not exempt Mary from the human condition of needing redemption, so it does not remove her from the human way of achieving union with God's will, in which is salvation and sanctity. Mary, though sinless, accepted pain and sorrow which are the results of sin; accepted them, not for herself but for us sinners. Her union with her Son's suffering for us began with her Son's conception in her womb for us. When Mary said, "Be it done to me according to thy word," she was speaking from a mind and heart and will completely united with her Son, who at that same instant coming into the world said: "Behold I come to do thy Will, O God" (cf. Heb. x:7). For Jesus that Will meant the oblation of His body for us sinners on the Cross. For Mary it would mean standing by the Cross of Jesus, uniting her mind and heart and will with His self-oblation. As we are sons of God, brothers of Christ, through Christ's Blood, so we are sons of Mary through Mary's tears. The Lady who looked in pity and sorrow beyond Bernadette towards the sinners of the world, is the same Lady who looked from Calvary over us all, as Jesus said to her: "Woman, behold thy son." From then on Mary accepted responsibility for sinners, as a mother feels responsible for, anxious about, concerned over, involved with her children. It is a Mother of sinners who said to Bernadette, "You will pray with me for sinners; weep with me for sinners; suffer with me for sinners."22

But Mary did not merely suffer for our salvation; she showed us in her life the way to work out our salvation. For us sinners the way of salvation must be primarily penitential; but it would seem that penance could have no place in the personal holiness of Mary. If, however, we reflect on the completed essence of penance we will see that Mary realized it truly, but in a higher way. Penance is above all metanoia, a voluntary, resolved change of mind, a turning of mind and will away from creatures and a uniting of them wholly, determinedly, with the holy mind and will of God. The perfection of penance is in faith, which believes God's word and lives by it, despite all that creatures can suggest of doubt or darkness; in hope, which trusts God's faithfulness despite the contrary appearances, the dangers and our weaknesses; in charity, which eagerly and resolutely chooses God and whatever God wants, and refuses to be deflected from that choice by any creature. It is by faith, hope and charity that penance, metanoia, is made effective throughout our whole being. The Immaculate Conception is faith, hope and charity completely fulfilled, penance made perfect. In Mary there are no walls separating her from God. As Father Bouyer has said:

The Immaculate Conception is the grace of putting no obstacle to the inflow of grace.23

MARY THE PILGRIM

Faith, hope and charity, in imitation of Mary, are the great end and fruit of pilgrimage to Lourdes, as they are the end and purposes of our
lives. And is not pilgrimage a picture of our lives on earth? “We have not here a lasting city”; we are on the road towards “one that is to come” (Heb. xiii:14). We must confess “that (we) are pilgrims and strangers on the earth” ... for we “desire a better, that is to say, a heavenly country” (Heb. xi:15). The time we have to spend here is short: “it remaineth ... (that) they that use this world (should be) as if they used it not: for the fashion of this world passeth away” (I Cor. vii: 29-31).

St. Paul’s praise of the heroes of Israel’s faith applies to nobody more than to Mary, through whom at last Israel’s long waiting was rewarded and the great promise fulfilled. She more than Abraham “went out, not knowing whither (she) went.” She infinitely more than Sara “received strength to conceive a seed ... because she believed that He was faithful who had promised” (Heb. xi:8, 11).

It is because Mary was a pilgrim of faith and hope and love that we can come to Lourdes with hope that cannot be confounded. We can “lift up the hands that hang down and the feeble knees”; for “we are come to Mount Sion and to the city of the living God ... and to Jesus, the Mediator of the New Testament, and to the sprinkling of blood that speaketh better than that of Abel” (Heb. xii: 12, 22, 24).

LOURDES AND THE SICK

Lourdes cannot be thought of without the constant, massive presence of the sick. Lourdes cannot be discussed without reference to its miraculous cures. But at Lourdes sickness is put into its true context – that of its supernatural significance; and miracles are put into their true perspective as signs of the mighty healing power of God’s grace. There may be a certain truth in Pascal’s sombre words: “Miracles are not sent to convert, but to condemn.” Must we not at Lourdes take home to ourselves what Our Lord said in awful warning to “the cities wherein were done the most of his miracles, for that they had not done penance” (Matt. xi:20). For the miracles of Lourdes were surely wrought primarily that we might know that the Son of Man, who can cure men’s bodies, has power also to forgive sins (Matt. ix:6).24 There is little doubt but that the spring of water, so prominent a feature of Lourdes, is a symbol of cleansing of soul and body from sin and the ravages of sin; a symbol of baptism renewed in faith and penance at Lourdes; a symbol of the renewal of the face of our lives by the Spirit who hovered over the waters at the beginning of the creation and who overshadowed the Virgin when she consented to be the Mother of the Redeemer, the author of the new creation.

Sickness of the body is itself an effect of original sin and a symbol of the sinfulness of our souls. The sick of Lourdes, with their noble souls smiling bravely through twisted bodies, remind us that we are the people whose company on earth can be tolerated only by God’s great mercy and Mary’s pity. To the exact extent that the message of Lourdes is ignored, to that extent pity shall perish from the lives of men; and it shall be again, as it was before the Gospel of Christ, that men will be “without
affection, without fidelity, without mercy” (Rom. i:31). Pope Pius XII has impressed on us that one great fruit of the Lourdes centenary should be the renunciation of materialism by our people. 

LOURDES AND THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

Mary is always showing us Jesus, the blessed fruit of her womb. Catholic devotion to Mary is always a finding of the Child with Mary His Mother. Nowhere is this more true than at Lourdes. The centre of all devotion at Lourdes is the Blessed Eucharist: Mass, Holy Communion, Blessed Sacrament procession, blessing of the sick with the Sacred Host, Real Presence on the altar. Pope St. Pius X wrote in 1911:

The unique glory of the sanctuary of Lourdes lies in the fact that pilgrims from all parts are drawn there by Mary to the adoration of Jesus Christ in the august Sacrament; so that this sanctuary seems to surpass in glory all others in the Catholic world both as the centre of Marian devotion and as the throne of the Eucharistic mystery.

Nowhere is the relation of Mary to the Blessed Eucharist so clearly grasped as at Lourdes. When the priest says Mass there, especially if he has the privilege of saying Mass at the Grotto, he knows that Mary is there, as she was on Calvary, offering her son. At Lourdes we feel that Jesus is saying to her again: “Woman, these — the sick, the blind, the deaf, the paralyzed, the cancerous, the sinners — these are your children.” And Mary is saying to Him again: “Son, they have no health, no strength, no courage, no confidence, no hope.” And she is saying to us: “Whatever He shall say to you, do ye.”

At Lourdes, as always, Mary is the Servant of the Lord. This, her chosen title, itself marks her as the associate of the Suffering Servant, our Redeemer. Her association with the Eucharistic Presence at Lourdes is a continuance of this role. It is her Son as the sacrificial Victim that she shows to sick and suffering and sinner. A primary feature of Lourdes is the presence of the sick around the Eucharistic Victim. But Our Lord is present among and moves through the sick and suffering, not just as one dispensing words of consolation, but as one who, like themselves, had no beauty nor comeliness, who was a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with infirmity, whose appearance was that of a leper, whose body was bruised with infirmity (Isaias liii). Christ has worn the hidden and despised look of suffering in order that for ever suffering may be able to conform us to His image. Simone Weil said that Christianity does not explain suffering; it uses it. Our Lady of Lourdes points to her Son in our midst as one that serves and has suffered, to show us how we can use suffering or rather offer it to Him to be used with His own. Lacordaire said that “to obtain something on behalf of another, one must become that person’s own particular Christ.” The sick, and those who serve them, at Lourdes may be the “particular Christs” of multitudes who are without Christ, without hope and without God in the modern world.
At Lourdes we feel too Mary’s association with Holy Communion. Mary’s function always is to give us Jesus. The Pseudo-Epiphanius praised Mary for having “given us the Christ, the Heavenly Bread for the remission of sins.” At Lourdes we can feel that Mary through the priest gives us Jesus, as once she placed Him in the arms of Simeon; and like Simeon we can say Nunc Dimittis. St. Augustine said that the Blessed Eucharist is Bread seeking for hunger: at Lourdes Mary gives us that hunger, she who hungered for the Messias to be born and who sang at His coming: “He hath filled the hungry with good things” (Luke i:53).

LOURDES AND PRAYER

How we are to give glory to God in prayer is surely also one of the things she wishes to teach us at Lourdes. At the first apparition Bernadette tried to make the sign of the Cross to begin her Rosary; she could not do so until the Lady had first made the sign of the Cross on herself. Bernadette made it after her, like her, and the reverence and seriousness with which Bernadette always made the sign of the Cross in imitation of Mary were remarked all her life. Bernadette noted that at each apparition while she said the Rosary the Lady passed her beads through her fingers, but her lips did not move, until Bernadette came to the Gloria Patri. Then the Lady bowed with exquisite reverence and said the Gloria Patri with her. The child imitated her movement, and onlookers declared that they never saw such gracious gestures as those of this poor slum child. The prayer asked for by word and by her own heavenly example by Our Lady of Lourdes was the Rosary. What new fervour we could bring to it, if we envisaged Our Lady as following us bead by bead, and joining with us in giving “Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost.”

At Lourdes Mary reminds us that she prays with us as well as for us, prays in our place as well as on our behalf. One permissible additional meaning of “Pray for us sinners,” is “Pray in place of us who know not how to pray.” Mary’s prayer is above all glory and praise and reparation to God. It is Magnificat. At Lourdes in that tremendous gesture with which she spoke her name she is saying: “See what He who is mighty hath made me; come to Him that He may do great things for you too, being mindful of His mercy.” Mary’s Magnificat was not spoken for herself alone but also for the whole people of God, for us. With us, for us, in us, she magnifies the Lord and rejoices in God. St. Ambrose wrote:

Let there be in each of us the soul of Mary, that it may magnify the Lord; let there be in each of us the spirit of Mary, that it may rejoice in God.

Most of the sick who come to Lourdes return home with no change in the clinical picture. But few there are who return home without a complete change in their whole experience of their sickness. If they have persevered in prayer with Mary, they will have been taught by their
Mother to say along with her “Yes and Amen” to God's will. Our Lady will have whispered to them, as to Bernadette: “I do not promise to make you happy in this world, but in the next.” Mary will have helped them to see reality and life and death through her eyes, the eyes of the Virgin of faith, who looked “not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. iv:18).

MARY AND THE WAY OF SPIRITUAL CHILDHOOD

I have left for the end one puzzling aspect of the history of the apparitions, and that is Bernadette’s description of the Lady as a “little girl” or a “little young lady,” not bigger than herself. Bernadette was aged fourteen at the time, and was small for her age. How is Our Lady’s child-like appearance to be explained? Bernanos coined the unfortunate phrase, the Virgin “younger than sin.” Commentators on Lourdes have kept repeating and endorsing it since. Some have appealed to such distinctions as Blake’s, of innocence from experience; and have said that Our Lady of Lourdes is Our Lady before experience, Our Lady before sin. The whole idea is mistaken and unfortunate; as if growing up, or experience, means necessarily a fall from grace; as if innocence were infantilism.

The true explanation of Our Lady of Lourdes’ child-like appearance is, we suggest, to be found in the Marian teaching of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Mary appears as a child because, as a recent study of St. Thérèse puts it, she “had become, as it were, spiritual childhood personified: ‘Behold the handmaid’.”

“Behold the handmaid,”; more exactly, “Behold the slave-girl of the Lord”; here is the spiritual childhood which St. Thérèse copied and made her own. There is no better commentary on Lourdes than St. Thérèse’s thoughts about Our Lady:

What does me good, when I think of the Holy Family, is to think of their life as quite an ordinary one. . . . Everything in their life was just like our own. . . . For a sermon on Our Lady to bear fruit, it should show her real life, as the Gospel presents it, and not her imaginary life; . . . Preachers should say that she lived by faith, as we do; and show this from the Gospels, where we are told that “they understood not what He said to them”; and again, that “His father and mother were wondering at the things that were said about Him.” Wonder means a certain astonishment, does it not? . . . If, on hearing a sermon on Our Lady, we are compelled from beginning to end to say Oh! . . . Ah! we are discouraged; and that does not conduce to love and imitation. The unique privilege of the Blessed Virgin is to have been exempt from original sin and to be the Mother of God. But even in the latter respect Jesus has said to us: “He who doth the will of my Father who is in heaven, he is my brother and sister and mother.”
In her poem, “Why I love you Mary,” St. Thérèse calls Mary “the model of the soul who seeks Jesus in the night of faith”; the example for “those who walk in the common way.” “I have suffered with you,” she ends, “and now I wish only to sit on your knee and to sing how I love you and to keep telling you for ever that I am your child.”

Much of the grace of Lourdes, much of the feeling of a pilgrim before the Grotto, is expressed in these words of St. Thérèse. Claudel, too, spoke what the pilgrim feels when he visited a shrine of Our Lady at mid-day and said:

Mother of Jesus Christ, I come for nothing else, but just to look at you. Only to look at you and to cry for happiness, just because you are there and just because I am your son. Just to be with you, Mary, in this place where you are. Not to speak; just to look into your face; just to let my heart say without words what it feels but cannot speak. Because you are all beautiful. Because you are Immaculate, Woman at last restored in grace; the creature of God as it was in its first radiance and will be in its final glory. Because you are Immaculate ineffably, as the Mother of Jesus Christ, who in your arms is the Truth and the only Hope and the sole Fruit. Because I am someone you have looked on lovingly. Because we are here and it is today. Because you are there always; just because you are Mary; just because you exist, Mother of God, I thank you.

NOTES

3. Cros III, 49. Father Cros was himself deeply impressed by this aspect of Lourdes. See Cros Témoins, 10, Cros I, 1 and III, 273ff.
6. Bernadette et Jeanne Védère. Notes intimes sur Bernadette et les apparitions, Paris, 1933, 27. Compare Cros Témoins, 171-210, where we find a careful appreciation of the unique value of Jeanne Védère’s testimony. The earliest written record of Our Lady’s words to Bernadette has been published by Father Laurentin. It is in the account written on the basis of interviews with Bernadette in June or July 1858, by a young barrister of Dijon; see Laurentin, D.A. III, 235-240; see also Cros I, 451ff., 459, 462; Trochu, 231-3; Cros Témoins, 302. Bernadette reiterated that she did not understand the words in her letter to Pope Pius IX; see Trochu, 528. The unusual and unexpected nature of the formula in the eyes of contemporaries is evidenced by the fact that even witnesses who believed that Bernadette indeed saw Our Lady invariably altered the words into a more conventional form of speech, such as, “I am Mary Immaculate,” or “I am the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception”; see Laurentin, D.A. I, 285; II, 241; Cros Témoins, 246, 249, 259. Even Estrade in his earliest memoir gave the words as: “I am Mary, the Immaculate Conception”; see Laurentin, D.A. III, 325. Father Peyramale’s immediate reaction, according to Bernadette’s Aunt Basile, who accompanied the child at the interview, was that “The Lady could not have that name;” see Cros Témoins, 165.
11. Cros I, 188; Trochu, 120. The form of words is that accepted as accurate by Father Laurentin; see *Meaning of Lourdes*, Annexe A, 4, p. 94.
12. Trochu, 162; cf. Cros I, 295; Laurentin, op. cit., 26. For similar references to Bernadette’s sadness during certain phases of the apparitions see *Cros Témoins*, 38 (the Clarens Memoir), 74, 271.
13. Cros I, 255, 259, 260-1; Trochu, 164f. Later as a nun Bernadette said she had been “stubborn” even with Our Lady on this occasion: see Trochu, 450. Compare *Cros Témoins*, 101ff., 266.
16. So the Lourdes police-officer d’Angla. See Cros I, 214; cf. 263. Compare *Cros Témoins*, 61-71. The family was generally “written off” by respectable Lourdais as “no good,” just because of their poverty.
24. Compare Pope Pius XII’s centenary encyclical, in *Our Lady*, par. 812: “The cure of physical diseases is still, at Lourdes, as it was for the crowds who pressed around Jesus during His life on earth, not only a manifestation of God’s mercy, but the proof of the power of the Son of Man to forgive sins.” Compare also Dr. René Biot, *Dix Prières du pèlerin à Notre Dame de Lourdes*, Paris, 1940, 25-6; and Laurentin, *D.A.* II, 99-109.
26. Quoted by Pope Pius XII in his centenary encyclical: see *Our Lady*, par. 804.
29. Trochu, 84. Estrade reported Bernadette herself as having described this, already in his 1878 text, written for Father Cros: see *Cros Témoins*, 320, 323. Father Cros in footnotes rejects this statement entirely. But Estrade in further replies to questions from Father Cros wrote: “My sister and I both have the impression that we heard the detail about the Glo...: from Bernadette in person....”
30. Cros I, 184, 186; Trochu, 111, 114-5. Compare *Cros Témoins*, 111, 114, 121-2, 168, 175ff., 271, 284 — it seems to have been a foremost impression of all eye-witnesses.