

LOURDES: A PLACE OF THE GOSPELS

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THERE is nothing new to say about Lourdes. The statement is not so superfluous as it seems, for in a centenary year the need is not so much to find fresh superlatives, or even to quote spectacular statistics, as to return to the simple, original fact and find its essential meaning once more. This is far from easy to do: it is as difficult indeed as it is to remember the grotto in the modern town of Lourdes. And the analogy is not inexact. What men make of the marvellous can reflect all their cupidity and stupidity, too. We should not under-estimate the effect of the horrors that surround Lourdes on those who may be anxious to discern its truth but are baffled by its setting—in the written record as well as in the piety stalls and the hotels. And the bluff apologetic of the hearty publicists—‘I really like all those shops’—is far from reassuring.

Ultimately it matters not at all, of course. The Holy Places of Palestine have, through the centuries, provided just the same trials for those who genuinely want to reach the essential *thing*. And for that matter the whole human history of the Church reflects the cardinal distinction between what is of God and what men’s imagination, passion or mere torpor, can make it sometimes seem. In Lourdes, the practice of Ignatian composition of place is of first importance. And the place to begin with is not in Lourdes at all. It is the village of Bartrès, three miles away, where Bernadette spent much of her childhood as a maid-of-all-work, as the half-adopted child of Madame Laguës. Here there is still the sense of a pastoral fitness of things that lies close to the meaning of the apparitions and to Bernadette’s part in them. It is strange, and most welcome, that in this village little is altered, and the parish church, with its gilded retable of the Baptism of Christ, and the farm where Bernadette lived, still recall an ordered, undemonstrative way of living that is a whole continent away from the tumult of the town nearby. By an exact instinct, Bartrès has been the happy inspiration of the new *Cité de St Pierre*, the admirable centre for poor pilgrims set up by the *Secours Catholique*, where simple chalets house those who cannot pay for hotels. And the

chapel is a copy of the stone barn of Bartrès, where Bernadette must often have prayed: a decent building, rooted in the earth, which seems a faithful symbol of Bernadette herself, who remained a sturdy woman of that place and time—obstinate, perhaps, but deeply devoted to the honest allegiance of her people and her land.

The second place that matters, in a reconstruction of what Lourdes should really mean, is the *Cachot*, the local lock-up where the Soubirous family was living in 1858. It was from this single, dark cell of a room that Bernadette set out for each of her eighteen visits to the grotto of Massabielle. Here her somewhat feckless father had brought his family: it was the mark of the utter poverty to which they were reduced. And still it declares, without qualification, the fact of the family's destitution. Too easily 'poverty' can seem the generality of pious legend: at the *Cachot* it is seen as hard, and yet as holy. For the Soubirous were evidently not crushed by their material misfortune: the intense self-respect of the poor is revealed in Bernadette's anger when any visitor attempted, once the *Cachot* became a place for the curious to visit, to leave some gift or other. This is not the detachment of holiness, merely: it is the instinctive reaction of a girl who resents patronage. The *Cachot* was the poorest hovel in Lourdes, no doubt: but it was a home, it had its holiness, it must not be invaded.

Finally, of course, there is the grotto itself. At the time of the apparitions, all was peaceful here—simply the river running by, and the shallow cave with its lichen and leaves. Thanks to the foresight of Mgr Laurence, who was Bishop of Tarbes at the time, all this area was bought by the Church authorities, and essentially it remains unchanged. The obvious thing to have done, in obedience to our Lady's request that a chapel should be built, was to enclose the grotto (rather in the way the Portiuncula is enclosed in the church of our Lady of the Angels at Assisi). Happily, the grotto was left as it was, open to the sky, and the series of churches was built above the cave (and now, finally, the enormous basilica of St Pius X has been built below ground, so completing a remarkable anthology of architectural ingenuity.) The grotto has of recent years been restored, as far as possible, to its original simplicity. The ornate altar has been removed, and the rather gruesome collection of crutches and splints has been discreetly taken away. It is a place where the elements of the message

of Lourdes are still plainly revealed: prayer (and that never ceases) and penance (which the presence of the sick pilgrims evokes so profoundly).

These places—Bartrès, the *Cachot* and the grotto itself—are the visible signs of the evangelical simplicity of our Lady's message at Lourdes. And it is a sad misunderstanding that even the miracles of bodily healing should be seen outside that context. In the Gospels, our Lord's miracles are *signs*: given in confirmation of his divine mission, of themselves only of meaning as the stupendous proof of God's mercy. At Lourdes, indeed, this is most plain. For the invocations for the sick, which recall so movingly the very circumstances of the Gospels, are always qualified by the essential prayer, 'Thy will be done'. And it has frequently been insisted that the great procession of the Blessed Sacrament each afternoon, which has in fact been the occasion of some of the most remarkable miracles, is a perfect illustration of our Lady's office in leading men to her Son. The work of divine mercy is wholly his, and the providence of her apparitions at Lourdes has been to bring men back to what is fundamental: to the prayer and penance that are the only means for man's reconciliation to God.

The fidelity of Bernadette to the rôle in which, so improbably, she was cast, is itself a supreme example of evangelical innocence. One uses the word advisedly, for 'innocence' alone can explain so complete an acceptance of a mission so strange. The 'messages' are the simplest statements—re-statements rather—of cardinal Christian truth. And that can mean a violent assault to the calculated prudence into which even traditional religious truth can develop. It needed, one may suppose, this extraordinarily strong and simple child—who was at the same time a rather stupid child by the standards of usual wit—to reassert the '*nisi efficiamini*', the indispensable child's trust and generosity, which is always to be our response to the huge demands of divine grace. The very symbols of Lourdes—the gestures of abasement and obedience—are certainly folly to the worldly wise. But they are profoundly evocative of the true depth of the response of faith. The water that springs from a rock: how immediately it speaks of Yahweh's work of refreshment in the desert, and, even more wonderfully, of the 'living waters' of which our Lord spoke at Jacob's well. And the strange incident of Bernadette's eating the grass (sometimes an embarrassment to the more literal of the pious commen-

tators) is a figure of that utter obedience, in terms of a radical need of the creature, to which Christ calls all those who would follow him. There is, too, the revealing instruction which Bernadette received from our Lady in making the sign of the cross. It was a lesson she never forgot, and years afterwards she would make that large, slow, defined movement which recalled so graphically the redemptive fact from which all these marvels sprang. But it is not a vague call to prayer, unspecified and interior merely, which our Lady commits to Bernadette. 'Tell the priests to build a chapel here.' 'Let people come in procession.' God is to be worshipped: sacrifice is to be offered, not only in the hidden intentions of the heart but in the one salvific sacrifice of the Mass. Lourdes means the whole work of man's return to God: in personal prayer and mortification, certainly, but no less actively related to his social function as the member of the Mystical Body of Christ.

It is the sick who are the guarantors of the real truth of Lourdes. 'A cruel deception', says the not unsympathetic Protestant witness, as he contemplates the vast army of the blind, the lame, the paralysed, those in the last stages of cancer, of whom only a tiny minority can hope for visible healing. No remark could be a more complete misconception of what Lourdes is meant to be. Anyone who knows the hospitals of Lourdes will find there, most of all, the secret of the holiness of this place. Suffering that is accepted in union with the passion of Christ, in union with its motive and its meaning, is the perfect exemplar of our Lady's message to Bernadette: 'Penance!' 'Pray for sinners!' It is in this sense that von Hügel speaks of suffering as 'the highest, purest, perhaps the only pure form of human *action*' (in a letter to Mrs Drew). It is not a negative acceptance but a positive *action*, and the vast chorus of the prayers of the sick is the tremendous assertion of faith at its noblest: disinterested, unconditional, free. And even those who cannot speak, who are in the very abyss of pain and bodily degradation, are most eloquent here. The hardest heart will melt, and that not because of emotion or the stress of great ceremony (these pass soon enough) but because at Lourdes the sick are confronted with the naked demands of faith, and their response is for the healing of us all.

There is no need to insist on the continuing importance of Lourdes in the life of the Church. The forms of pilgrimage change, and reflect, naturally enough, the shifting currents of

custom and country. Once it was Loretto or Compostella: now it is Lourdes or Fatima. But what seems specially enduring about Lourdes is the absolute identity of its message with the words and works of the Gospels themselves. Nowhere else in the world can you feel so surely the presence of Christ and of his Mother, who now, as then, says: 'Do whatever he tells you'.



OUR LADY AND HER ROSARY

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THOSE who accuse the Church of mariolatry would do well to study the history of mariology. Of our Lady more than of any other creature it can be truly said that she has had greatness thrust upon her; true, she foresaw it, and humbly stated it when she sang, 'Behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed'; but the honour, the glory, the veneration were not of her seeking, and when they came to her it was first of all as a result of defending the truth about her Son; and as they grew and grew through the ages their effect was, as she would wish, to increase men's love and understanding of her Son; while on the other hand attempts to destroy her *cultus* and deny her greatness have ended in a denial of the divinity of her Son. She began by declaring, 'Behold the handmaid—the chattel—of the Lord'; and her words summarize not only her life and personality but the story of her *cultus* as well.

If one were to ask, for instance, whether the apostles believed in what is commonly called the Immaculate Conception—the doctrine that Mary was preserved from all taint of original sin—or thought of and revered her as Queen of Angels, the answer would presumably be, no: they had had no occasion to think of her in such terms. Obviously they held her in deep veneration as the mother of their Lord; but she was still Mary of Nazareth: she became known and revered as Queen of Heaven not suddenly and *per saltum* but as a result of a long, gradual and homogeneous development, and a development which was at first not devotional but theological.