

Pastoral theme 2017

“The Almighty has done great things for me!”

The Magnificat of Hope

In 2017 the Sanctuary of Lourdes invites pilgrims to follow the path opened by the 25th World Day of the Sick celebrated in a special way in Lourdes this year for the anniversary of its first celebration on 11th February 1993.

We are invited to look at suffering through the eyes of Mary. From the first moments of the Gospel, in Cana, she knows how to make known to Jesus the needs of men, and she knows how to make known to men the path of Jesus¹. Throughout the ministry of Jesus, She remains the one who accompanies Him in faith, a faith which is manifested in her willing presence at the foot of the cross: she then receives the disciple as her son (Jn 19:26). The hour of Jesus is also the hour of the woman (Jn 16:21). For her, every suffering becomes the pain of childbirth. She is "*the mother*" who welcomes and passes on the gift of love of the crucified Christ.

It is she who reveals herself to Bernadette, deep inside the dark recess of a Pyrenean rock. Bernadette is facing a dead end. She can see in front of her "*a real abundance of wood and bone,*" precisely what she came for, but this is made inaccessible to her by the cold water of the stream. That moment sums up her existence, fated by illness, poor harvests and mismanagement, unable to attend school and catechism lessons. At 14, she is an outcast, on the periphery of Lourdes. She could disappear from Lourdes without anybody caring...

But someone has seen her in the depths of her void. A girl "*as young and as small as me,*" she says. Someone similar to her, someone who was insignificant like her in the eyes of men, but whom God saw in the depths of her lowly house in Nazareth. "*God does not see as man sees: for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart*". (1 Sam 16:7)

Through her eyes and her smile Mary shares with Bernadette the joy of the Magnificat, the fruitfulness of a life that allows itself to be touched by God. Mary shares with the Church the joy of hearing again "*a sound like a gust of wind,*" the breath of Pentecost, the breath of new beginnings. "*She looked at me as one person talking to another person*". I exist for someone! It is the joy experienced by little children, the same joy of the Trinity of Divine Persons who exist one for the other!

1 We can read the commentary on the Gospel of Cana in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* of John Paul II (25th March 1987), §21: "Mary places herself between her Son and mankind in the reality of their wants, needs and sufferings. She puts herself "in the middle," that is to say she acts as a mediatrix not as an outsider, but in her position as mother [...] Another essential element of Mary's maternal task is found in her words to the servants: "Do whatever he tells you." The Mother of Christ presents herself as the spokeswoman of her Son's will.

"I thank you for wonder of my being, for the wonders of all your creation" Ps 138:14

"You knit me together in my mother's womb" Ps 138:13

"When my strength fails, do not forsake me" Ps 70:9

"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."
Mt 25:40

In Lourdes especially, as throughout the Gospel and the history of the Church, the face and presence of the little ones are shown to us. When Mary eventually tells Bernadette her name, she refers to herself as the *Immaculate Conception*, the most radiant one with a brightness that is not hers, but that is given to her from above, from the very heart of the God of love. I am she who places no barrier to love, to the point He can be comfortable in me, He can become flesh in me. Mary gave her name on 25th March, the day on which Jesus was conceived deep in her womb. She is not alone in the Grotto. A 'spiritual ultrasound' allows us to be one with Jesus present in her womb.

Mary invites us to free ourselves from focusing on appearances in order to find, in the secrets of the heart, the omnipotence of a love that gives of itself. She invites us to scrape off the thick shell of our pride and our fears to let the spring gush forth, and to surrender to this little One who gives us life and leads us into the Kingdom.

The poor have come to Lourdes, those with ailing bodies and thirsting hearts, to immerse themselves in mercy.

Mary Salus Infirmorum (Health of the Sick)

Mary Refugium peccatorum (Refuge of Sinners)

Mary Consolatrix afflictorum (Comforter of the Afflicted)

In Mary Immaculate, the Lord shows us a being completely free from the stain of sin. She opens to Bernadette, scarred by all kinds of disadvantage, the path to grace.

Lourdes becomes a place of healing for the sick,
a place of conversion for hearts hardened by sin,
a place of hope and renewal for a life called to spread the word.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, a gentle Father and the God of all consolation, who comforts us in all our sorrows, so that we can offer others, in their sorrows, the consolation that we have received from God ourselves" (2 Co 1:3-4).

With Mary, we receive the Breath of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter.

In the Magnificat, Mary gives thanks for the gift of life that is born within her. It is our God who shapes himself in this tiny baby, *"My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour" (My Jesus)*. From our mother's womb until old age, life is a miracle, a gift from God!

Throughout the Gospel and the history of the Church, the Lord acts to heal the sick. And He shows them His compassion in particular through the face of Mary, the mother who gives birth and always opens a path to the foot of the cross where, through her actions, she encapsulates the whole faith of the Church. She is '*Salus infirmorum*', the health of the sick. She is the one who receives and transmits the gift of God, the gift of life. This is demonstrated especially through the healings in Lourdes since the time of the apparitions.

Likewise, in Lourdes, Mary '*refugium peccatorum*' asks Bernadette to pray "*for sinners*", to do penance, to eat grass, to sink to the level of an animal, a savage, to the status of a sinner. But even in the depths of the dirt and mud, springs forth a hidden source, the source of baptism that the Lord has never refuted and which He comes to renew: the source of forgiveness and mercy. Lourdes is this *oasis of mercy* that every part of the Church must become, this place where hearts are healed through the power of forgiveness. Penance is the expression of this solidarity on the path of renewal of hearts and minds.

Finally, Mary, '*Consolatrix afflictorum*' is given to us as the finest fruit of the Holy Spirit, the favoured envoy of the Paraclete, the Comforter. She lights the way of the apostles who are called to communicate the power of this consolation which they have personally experienced, and who are called, too, to become comforters themselves. They join those who weep over the troubles of the creation that God wanted to be so beautiful, and that was not recognised at the time of the visitation from God! (Lk 19: 44) But these tears express the pain of a childbirth that still endures. As Saint Paul says, the pilgrim of Consolation becomes the carrier of a new life (2 Cor 1:3-4).

Lourdes is that unique place where we see '*exposed*' the most wretched, the suffering whom we usually hide away and do not want to see because they show us our frailties, our weaknesses, our disabilities ... But here these scars become doors to light through the grace of a look that does not judge but rather loves. The fruit of our pilgrimage should be a new way of looking, learning to love others and giving their life a meaning. The '*Bernadettes*' of today convey to us the sparkle of Mary's smile: the poorest, the most fragile, '*familiarize*' us with the Life of God brought to us in Jesus Christ.

We would suggest that, in your own time, you reread chapters 8 and 9 of the Gospel according to Matthew. Jesus comes down from the mountain where He proclaimed the new law, not a law different from the Law of Moses, but this same Law, finally accomplished by the gift of His love, the breath of His Spirit. Jesus then heals the sick to give the people a taste of the best wine He can offer, the joy of forgiveness, which enables the publican Matthew to be cured of the worst possible disease – that of money. He said to him, "*Follow me*". The man got up and followed Him. "*Those who are healthy have no need for a physician, but those who are sick do. But you go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' for I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.*" (Mt 9:12-13)

With Mary and Bernadette, we give thanks for this place and time of Mercy. Our bodies and hearts make themselves available for God's work, the work of healing and forgiveness, which is entrusted to us to be proclaimed and spread far and wide.

"Jesus went about all the cities and the villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the Good News of the Kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness among the people.

But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were harassed and scattered, like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, *'The harvest indeed is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Pray therefore that the Lord of the harvest will send out labourers into his harvest.'* (Mt 9:35-38)

The Magnificat Path

of healing, forgiveness and mission

- Man looks at appearances, God looks at the heart.
What wonders might I find in my own existence, in my own life story, and all around me, if only I opened the eyes of my heart?
- Where are the 'Bernadettes' of today, for me?
How do I behave when I find myself among the weakest and smallest in society?
How do I view the child yet to be born or the person in the throes of death?
- Mary, *Health of the Sick*
Health in body, health in mind... What does it mean to be in good health?
Perhaps I have healings to ask for?
- Mary, *Refuge of Sinners*
What deference to violence, to death can I identify in my heart?
What path to forgiveness would I want to see opening?
What act of penance, in relation to the original offence, might I be invited to make?
- Mary, *Consoler of the Afflicted*
Do I know how to receive the consolation offered to me when things are difficult?
What joy of rebirth is offered to me?
- *"The Miracle of Lourdes is a heart that changes."*
What comfort, what source of renewal am I called to share?
What mission is now entrusted to me?

"It is not surprising that Mary, Mother and model of the Church, is invoked and venerated as 'Salus infirmorum, Health of the sick'. As the first and perfect disciple of her Son, in guiding the Church on her journey she has always shown special solicitude for the suffering. ... On the Memorial of the apparitions in Lourdes, where Mary chose to manifest her maternal solicitude for the sick, the Liturgy appropriately echoes the Magnificat...which is not the canticle of one upon whom fortune smiles, rather it is the thanksgiving of one who knows the hardships of life but trusts in God's redemptive work....The Church, like Mary, preserves within her the tragedies of humankind and the

consolation of God, she keeps them together on the pilgrimage through history....Suffering, when accepted and offered up, and solidarity, when sincere and selfless: are these not perhaps miracles of love?" (Benedict XVI, 11th February 2010)

"The Magnificat, it is the song of hope, it is the song of the People of God walking through history. [...] The Church too sings this in every part of the world. This song is particularly strong in places where the Body of Christ is suffering the Passion. For us Christians, wherever the Cross is, there is hope, always. If there is no hope, we are not Christian. That is why I like to say: do not allow yourselves to be robbed of hope. May we not be robbed of hope, because this strength is a grace, a gift from God which carries us forward with our eyes fixed on heaven. And Mary is always there, near those communities, our brothers and sisters, she accompanies them, suffers with them, and sings the Magnificat of hope with them." (Pope Francis, Homily 15th August 2013)