

## ***Introduction to the Lourdes February Days 2019***

**« Happy are the poor... »**

**(Luke 6, 20-26)**

***With Bernadette, a cure for the soul***

*"O Poverty, source of wealth,*

*Jesus, give us a poor heart. "*

This chant from Taizé can help us walk in the footsteps of Bernadette, to take advantage of the theme of this year's pilgrimages, as we remember the jubilee of her birth on earth 175 years ago, and her birth to true life 140 years ago. Poverty scares us, and with good reason, because it is impossible to face it alone. But poverty takes the face of Bernadette and Jesus himself, it lights our own path, it brings us closer to our brother and sister pilgrims of humanity. So, yes, poverty becomes a source of wealth. And it is almost certainly one of those mysterious secrets that Mary confided to Bernadette, and that she never repeated: she simply let it shape her life.

To introduce our pilgrimage path in 2019, I would like to explore with you the heart of Bernadette, which, I believe, wants to reveal itself to us. Bernadette's message suggests we consider three stages, which will help us heal our sick hearts, and perhaps help us become those soul doctors that our tired world so badly needs.

- I want to stay poor

- For sinners!

- Just love!

Three very simple proposals, perhaps not easy to implement: these will allow us to organise our pilgrimage following in the footsteps of Bernadette, supported by its three secrets.

### ***I want to stay poor***

The insistence with which Bernadette refuses any help, not only for her, but also for her family who badly needed it, remind us that she is answering a call. It's stronger than she is!

A foreign lady, with distinguished manners, came knocking on our door asking to see [Bernadette] ... We let her into the house. She was effusive in her thanks, encouraged [the seer] to speak and remained hanging on her every word for more than an hour. When the stranger started to leave, with the delicacy of those who know how to give, she kissed the child and slipped a roll of coins carefully under the folds of her apron. As if a coal had fallen on her, Bernadette jumped up and dropped the lady's present. Confused by her movement, she picked up the roll of coins and gently handed it to the charitable stranger. No entreaty could persuade her to take this treasure.

Bernadette's mother admitted, "We would be well off if my daughter had wanted to accept the gold coins that were offered to her, often and repeatedly. To a bishop who wished to give her his golden rosary, and to receive hers in exchange, she replied, "The Blessed Virgin does not like vanity. A

journalist says the same, "She presents itself with neither shyness nor boastfulness, and the curiosity of which she is the object does not seem to embarrass her in the least. 'It seems,' I said to her, 'that you are attracting much attention around the country. I heard about you at Bagnères, did you know?'

I was told. - ... 'Does makes you happy? I do not care' ... I tried to impress her by the prospect of wealth. 'Listen, Bernadette ... You have to come to Paris with me and in three weeks you will be rich ... I will take charge of your fortune.' 'Oh! No, no. I want to stay poor.'"

If we want Bernadette to be truly alive in our pilgrimages, we have to choose this road of poverty, and to ensure we are on the right track, take the hand of those poorer than us. This is how Father Pierre recruited his first companion to Emmaus. He was a young man who wanted to commit suicide. The abbot replied, "Come, first help me to carry this mattress to a poor person." Looking higher leads us to envy assets that we do not have; looking lower invites us to open our hearts.

The pilgrimages of Lourdes were successful from the moment they became "encumbered", to use an odd expression, by the sick and needy who found it difficult to keep up. They could not keep up, so they went in front, they opened a new way, the path of service and joy.

A pilgrimage to Lourdes has to invite the poor picked up from the back streets: the sick, elderly, disabled, but also the homeless, the unemployed - those who have lost hope. Not only do they find it again, but they overflow with it and share it with us: the organisers also come to realise that they are poor in love and in the Gospel, and they receive an unexpected joy.

It is the joy of the jubilee. We are slaves of material things, obsessed with pleasure or success, efficiency and profitability. And we become indifferent to those close to us. The jubilee year is an opening to heaven, to that happiness of the other world promised to Bernadette, to those who realise that happiness does not come from themselves but that they rather receive it from God, to those who wish to allow God to freely lead their families on the path of life. Locked in by our possessions, our certainties, we suffocate. Poverty liberates us when it is nourished by love.

The jubilee year does not mean impoverishing the rich nor keep the poor in a state of need, but to bring them together in the grace of a birth, of a life that we first receive, and then that we share.

Being poor is not attractive: all the poor share this opinion. What is attractive is to possess the Kingdom of Heaven, but only the poor have this privilege. So do not think that joy can be found in spending our days unloading our hands, our heads, our hearts. Our joy is found in spending our days digging in our hands, our heads, our hearts, a place for the kingdom of Heaven.

Because it is amazing to realise it is so close, to know God is so close to us, it is extraordinary to feel his incredible love so far in us and on us. And then not to open this unique and simple door to him, the door of poverty of spirit ...

When you lose everything at God's discretion, do not speak of poverty but of wealth. Like a blind man brought back to his native land, without being able to see, then breathes the climate of the Kingdom, warms himself under its invisible sun, feels its firm ground under your feet.

Do not say, "I have lost everything." Say, "I have gained everything".

Do not say, "I have given everything". Say, "I have received everything".

Madeleine Delbr el leads us to a place of unexpected joy, that of the Gospel, which is characterised by the announcement of the Good News to the poor, the announcement of a year of grace from the Lord, which is addressed to the vulnerable, the sick and the sinners.

We rejoice at the birth of Bernadette, because we are ready to rejoice in the gift given to a life that had such a poor beginning. "What will this child be?" (Luke 1:66) The door is open to the unknown, our hearts take a chance on hope. We hear a word, "You are my beloved child ..." (Luke 3:22) On you rests my Spirit, my breath of life, which will never abandon you.

To remain poor with Bernadette, means accepting that we are not the masters of what we do, and choosing to entrust to God the organisation of my journey. The pilgrim must shed his burden in order to be able to walk and prepare, in exchange, to open his eyes to new riches. As a pilgrimage organiser, or a hospitality president, I must accept to lead a brotherhood of "broken arms", to seek those people that Mary wants to invite and meet, as she was visited by the Angel, as she called Bernadette.

In staying poor with Bernadette, we rediscover the initial mystery of our pilgrimages, which we are reminded of by the members of the Christian Office for Handicapped People (OCH), located just at the entrance of the sanctuary, at the St Michael gate. A visit to them helps us taste a bit of the presence of Jesus among the crowds of the Gospel needing to be healed, to be simply loved. Let's prepare our approach in this spirit.

In a society where fear, the search for protection, warnings prevail, Lourdes opens our hearts to the Gospel, the religion of faces. We must be wary of pickpockets, and predators of all kinds, but we must first learn to see in the strangers we meet here the look of Jesus himself, to let emerge in everyone the wonder of grace that entrusted to him. Our pilgrimages must invite ordinary visitors to join us on the road. The sick, the sinners are those of primary importance to Lourdes and the Gospel.

### ***"Penance ... for sinners! "***

*"Happy are the poor!"* Happy those who beg for forgiveness and mercy. Bernadette is invited to drink and wash at the spring. She had to plunge her hands into the mud, she smeared her face, she had trouble swallowing this dirty water. The water of Lourdes does not flow completely clear from the start. Forgiveness, the perfect gift of God, must break through the misery of our refusal to love. The light of new life, reborn, must first face the darkness of death.

If we truly want to experience the grace of the invitation and the meeting in our pilgrimages, if we accept into our groups those people whom we would rather leave aside, if, in Lourdes, we agree to meet with those whom the Virgin invited here, we are ready then to let ourselves be guided by grace, our pilgrimages will be brought to life from within by the Breath of the Spirit. He revives what was dead.

This year we are proposing a somewhat surprising approach, in which we are simply repeating the actions of Bernadette: plunging our hands in the mud with her and letting our brothers and sisters then wash and wipe these hands for us. It is the gesture of the sacrament of reconciliation, when we receive, from a sinner brother like us, the grace of God's forgiveness. For this to happen we must pass through the mud of our sins: they no longer discourage us but allow us to rediscover the grace of baptism. We hear *"I forgive you"* as we heard *"I baptise you"*.

IF we make changes in our personal lives, it is also then our society, our world, that is set to rights again. Lourdes is a place of redemption for our life together. The story of Bernadette, a story hidden from the eyes of the world, confronts universal history and renews it, and enriches us from within. The story of the 'little ones' allows ordinary history to reach its truth.

She was born four years before Karl Marx published his famous Manifesto ... this family is living in abject poverty! ... Bernadette says she saw a young girl dressed in white in the hollow of the rock ... Then when she had said what she had to say, she worked to earn the family's daily bread, she helped at home, she answered questions in as few words as possible. She was silent ... She was of that breed who undertook to do whatever circumstances, or God, dictated. Then she was silent. Why do we need to tell her story over and over again? ... Because this story puts the world back on its feet. The privileged ones in the Gospel are seldom the beautiful, the attractive, the intelligent, the well-born. In the time of Christ, as today, it is the Bernadettes, thankfully. Bernadette was "a good-for-nothing." But in Lourdes, it is she who reminds us of the Gospel. How do we look at these people today? That's how we will be judged.

Bernadette died saying, "Pray for me, poor sinner". She wasn't acting. She opened her heart. She was preparing to enter Life. Hope is despair that has been overcome. The truth of life is in the triumph over the forces of death. Lourdes is the encounter with weakness, disability, the service of the sick and the incredible healing of bodies, the rehabilitation of our physical existence; Lourdes is where we plunge into the tenderness of the heart of our God. Thanks to the presence of the 'little ones' we are encouraged to follow a path of Mercy that, from the Breton Cross at the entrance to the sanctuary, leads us to the chapel of confessions, through the Christian Office for Handicapped People (OCH), via the Hospitality Bureau and the Office of Medical Findings, to this place where we hear the Lord Himself tell us through the mouth of a priest, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace! "

"Brother of our God", wrote John Paul II about the holy Brother Albert, this great artist who abandoned his art to live in the company of the poor. In the same way, the future pope also abandoned his passion for the theatre to follow the steps of Christ, in the company of forgiven sinners. Bernadette, following Mary, the first disciple of Jesus, did not hesitate to bear "all the misery of the world": she did not feel resigned to it, she did not rebel, she testified, to a world that was looking for a better standard of living, personal fulfilment, that happiness was already there, in the opening of one's eyes and one's heart, when we enter into an exchange of love.

Bernadette reveals the true story of our world and our lives, which neither textbooks nor the media tell. Bernadette brings us into this country of the soul and the land of the poor whom, as we are already discovering, can show us a little corner of heaven, a little of the face and heart of our God. Only the realism of concrete love can discover this country inside the heart, through daily life that is motivated to love what cannot be seen. Let's not wait for the story of an astonishing mystical experience: the anecdote reported by Julie Garros, a former companion of Bernadette in Lourdes, who like returned to Nevers, helps us to discover heaven in the hollows of the earth.

One day, Bernadette instructed me to walk with Mother Anne-Marie Lescure, who was blind. She said to me, *"You will take care of her as if she were the good God Himself. I answered, "Ah! There is a difference."* I asked her why this patient was not wearing her religious habit. She said to me, *"You will come and see her tonight."* I went there and saw the patient's wound full of worms that Bernadette was putting in a dish. I could not stand to watch. Bernadette said to me, *"What kind of Sister of Charity you will make! You have little faith."*

We might then guess where this mysterious joy comes from when our hearts become open to the spectacle of weakness and destitution. This spectacle prompts us to enlarge our soul to the very dimensions of the heart of this God who creates from nothing, and who loves what is not loveable, who gives himself to those who refuse him. We participate in the birth of new life.

Thus, it is in the very composition of our pilgrimage, the choice or finding of our fellow travellers, that we experience the first secret given to Bernadette, *"I want to stay poor."* The pilgrimage is the face of the Church, a flawed and suffering people who rely on each other. It is the Lord who takes us by the hand and leads into the grace of the second secret, *"Penance ... for sinners!"* The effort to open our hearts leads to a reversal of priorities: the profitability of our ventures is no longer how we measure our success, but the descent into the depths of our souls marked by egoism and fear. Through the mud that dirties us while protecting us, this shell which hardens, we let flow a spring of forgiveness and new life. Our very society is set to rights, from these oases of mercy that the company of the poor invites us to create.

### ***"Just love! "***

This third secret of Bernadette, chosen to be the title of a film, expresses well what she wrote in her personal notebook, *"I will not live for a moment that is not spent in loving."* To build a chapel and come there in procession is the mission confided to Bernadette and destined for the priests. The procession of broken souls that we lead to Massabielle, the realistic vision of our poor humanity, is the image of the mission entrusted to the Church, a family made up of the vulnerable, the sick and the sinners, healed and forgiven.

The improbable grouping of a procession on the march, an exodus from Israel, a people only just rescued from slavery and then prompt to return there, this is the truth of a society constantly forced to surrender to the place of love which is always there for us. *"A poor church for the poor"* was Pope Francis' desire after his election.

It was the Cachot, from which Bernadette's father was taken to prison, accused of stealing two sacks of flour. The event was dismissed from court in the end. *"It was his miserable state,"* the prosecutor acknowledged, *"that made me believe he could be responsible for this robbery."* But the memory of the trial remains, and Bernadette, who went to collect wood on 11<sup>th</sup> February 1858, did not want to stop in Mr. Lafitte's meadow. *"He might think we're thieves!"* Who could make sense of these events? Perhaps the one who was waiting for her at Massabielle: *"What if we went to look where the stream joins the Gave? "*

We risk leaving at the side of the road those who might be crucial to us in showing the direction we should take. In his first encyclical letter, Pope Benedict XVI warned us. *"Charity, for the Church, is not a kind of welfare activity that we might leave to others, but is a art of her nature, it is the expression of her very essence, which it cannot abdicate."* A Church for the poor is not about giving assistance, but rather a family ready to listen to the murmur of those hearts where God has hidden. He has no interest in the administration of Pilate or for the great sacrifices at the Temple of Caiaphas, he is "elsewhere", among those we no longer see, as they have become so much part of the scenery.

And what if we had to sacrifice our desires, our plans? It could be an opportunity to discover in ourselves the need for healing, if we fail to welcome everyone else as a brother or sister. Think of this diocesan president of Secours Catholique who acknowledged, *"I had an extraordinary experience. I left for a week with a whole group of people who were in all kinds of difficulty. When I left, I was "president", when I came back, I was a brother to these men and women."* Is this not a first-rate cure?

During these days, we will be invited to discover the "Orientation Stands", these places in Lourdes that help us to plan our route, starting from figures or signs which renew our perspectives. Among other things, we will get acquainted with the pilgrim beggar that was Benedict Joseph Labre, who died, like Bernadette, at the age of 35, after having travelled thousands of kms in search of the Lord. He became the patron of the Hospitality of Our Lady of Lourdes. It is a pilgrimage to the essence of Lourdes that is being proposed, if we allow ourselves to be invited by these communities that refresh the soul: the three Accueils, the City St-Pierre, the Cenacolo, various places which lead our steps towards this "other world" where Jesus reveals himself in the face of the vulnerable, of the stranger.

These places do not give us the opportunity to give financial support, to give a bit of help and then move on. *"Do not subcontract brotherhood."* They offer us a model, a mould of life in the Church, which can inspire our pilgrimages and the follow-up afterwards at home. Bernadette, "good for nothing" except peeling carrots in the Lourdes hospice, and who takes on the care of the sick in Nevers and daily prayer, in fact awakens us to the "happiness of the other world" which has been promised to us, as an offer for us, if we want to engage in "a collective effort of Christian renewal of society", as Pope Pius XII requested on the Centenary of the apparitions.

Bernadette did not explain, she simply attracted. She felt loved at the Grotto, and she radiated the light and love she received. At the same time, though, she knocks us off balance. The people of Nazareth, in the Gospel, did not recognise Jesus as a prophet. *"Is not he the carpenter's son? We know his father and his mother ... Where does this wisdom come from?"* The power of God belongs to a different order from order than that of man. God is not a superman; he is a man, a true man, unlike us sinners. He does not deny that he belongs to our kind, and he restores it in his truth.

And this is Bernadette, whose inscrutability escapes her superior, *"I do not understand why the Blessed Virgin has shown herself to Bernadette. There are so many other souls so, in a word, refined and so eminent!"* Her simplicity is, in fact, much more useful to her testimony than surprising phrases or way of behaving that might astonish us but do not touch our hearts.

And the Church, who loves what Jesus loved, cannot be at rest until she gathers all those who know about rejection, exclusion and who do not mean anything to anyone. You are at the heart of the Church, you allow us to meet Jesus, because you speak of him, not so much in your words, but by your whole life. And you testify to the importance of small gestures, within everyone's reach, that help to build peace, reminding us that we are brothers, and that God is a Father to everyone.

Pope Francis said the following, again warning the leaders of a delegate group visiting Rome for the World Day of the Poor:

Abstract theories lead to ideologies, and ideologies lead us to deny that God made himself flesh, one of us! Because it is a life shared with the poor, which transforms and converts us. And think about that! Not only are you going to meet them - even those who are ashamed and hiding - not only are you walking with them, striving to understand their suffering, to enter their inner disposition; but

you are also creating a community around them, thus giving them an existence, an identity, a dignity.

This is undoubtedly the secret of happiness revealed to the pilgrims in our groups. They are the living stones of a chapel, a church still under construction. They are disciples and missionaries of Jesus who comes to create a new humanity. Once back home, they will be able to share, in specially organised meetings, or simply in their daily lives, the experience of a world, of a land that can be "the common home". The pilgrimage to Lourdes is not just a wonderful experience then to be archived, it is a step on a path that we must follow.

It is therefore a question of experiencing the secrets of Bernadette, the light of the Gospel. We need to prepare our pilgrimages in the company of the most vulnerable to whom we are sent. We learn to look at each other in the way that Jesus did at those he met on the road, in the way that Mary looked at Bernadette. Taking our bearings in Lourdes, supported by communities such as those already mentioned, or the Demeures des Sources Vives (Living Source Homes), or the John XXIII Community, helped by the meetings we are having over these few days, we are following a path of Mercy and discovering the forgiveness of our God. So, we are ready to set out again towards this chapel which is entrusted to us, this oasis of Mercy, the guardian of a new Breath for our world. In Lourdes, we lay the foundations for this daily Nevers, always in the company of Bernadette who takes us by the hand and will not let us go until we reach the entrance to this Kingdom that she has allowed us to glimpse. She continues to heal the garden of our soul.