

Fr. Horacio Brito
Fr. Regis-Marie
de La Teyssonniere



Lourdes, meditation 2023

***Go and tell the priests
to build
a chapel here***

Pastoral look at Lourdes today
to the attention of pilgrimage directors,
hospitality chairs, group leaders,
chaplains, employees and volunteers of the sanctuary

1. Meaning of these words

2. Transmitting these words

Go and tell the priests to build a chapel here

This pastoral presentation, this meditation which is suggested for the 2023 pilgrimages, is a little more developed than those of previous years. In addition, its recipients now include all those involved in the pastoral ministry designed for pilgrims by the “chapelains” of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes.

First, we are going to put some meaning to part of the 9th of the 10 utterances that Mary spoke to Bernadette, “Go and tell the priests to build a chapel here”. There are also some textboxes in which you’ll see some suggested questions that might guide a reflection for your pilgrims, as well as some lines of meditation.

Secondly, there is a reminder for us of the fundamentals of the Lourdes pilgrimage, which extends Bernadette’s experience for everyone and thus allows us to welcome the grace of Lourdes which Pope Pius XII wrote about, in his encyclical letter *The Lourdes Pilgrimage* (2nd July 1957, paragraph I). It was given “to restore the world in Christ through a new and incomparable outpouring of the Redemption”.

These few lines are of course useful, practical and functional since they were developed for Lourdes pilgrimages today.

But they are also an invitation for all those who read them:

- that they read and understand recent pontifical documents, in particular the Apostolic Letter *Motu Proprio, Sanctuarium in Ecclesia*, written by Pope Francis, given on 11th February 2017;
- that they discover or become more immersed in some of the sixteen fundamental works of Fr. René Laurentin (1917-2017), the historian and theologian of Lourdes: *Lourdes, the authentic account of the apparitions; Bernadette speaks to you; Logia de Bernadette* (3 volumes).

I would like to wish a beautiful, holy and fruitful pilgrimage to all pilgrims and to those who welcome and accompany them.



Father Michel Daubanes
Rector

***Go and tell the priests
to build a chapel here***

1. Meaning of these words

By coming to the Grotto of Lourdes to meet a very young girl, the Virgin Mary formed part of the moving story of God's love for humanity. And she herself is the chosen being of this story, since she is the only human person who is able to say, "I am the Immaculate Conception".

This is why this remarkable story of Mary and Bernadette is enlightened, more than any other, by the Holy Scriptures, and the Teachings of the Church, but also by the experience of the Lourdes pilgrims who live them out time and time again.

As in God's other interventions reported in the Bible, the meeting of Mary and Bernadette came from a place that showed the height of their humanity. It was by having love as their focus that the "Lady" and the young child were not only fully themselves, but that they also allowed Christ to be present with them.

Go and tell

It is a mission.

The mission that Mary passed on to Bernadette, she herself had received from God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Mary had participated in this mission since her Immaculate Conception but was also the object of it. In order to participate fully in the offering of her Son for the salvation of the world, Mary gave her whole life to God for her brothers and sisters in humanity, in her capacity as "the handmaid of the Lord" (Lk. 1:38).

From their first meeting, on 11th February 1858, in the privacy of their intense heart to heart encounter, Mary prepared Bernadette for what was to be her mission. She showed her the mystery of faith, teaching her to make the sign of the Cross well, then she made Bernadette part of her own prayer in the service of salvation brought by her Son Jesus: "Pray to God for the conversion of sinners".

On 2nd March 1858, during the 13th of the 18 apparitions, since Bernadette was now ready to receive and bear the words “Go and tell the priests to build a chapel here”, Mary entrusted her with the mission of passing it on to the priests. From then on, their relationship led to a very great fruitfulness in the Church across the whole world.

The stakes were high, since the aim of these words was the conversion of sinners. Like Mary, Bernadette also devoted her life to this end, with all the intensity of which she was capable.

For this mission to bear the fruit that God expected, Mary always **welcomed** Bernadette as she was. At the same time, Mary **accompanied** the young child, step by step and very gently, on what was a new path for her. She didn't force anything on her, but taught her what she needed to know.

This is how Bernadette learned from Mary to **discern** what was essential as regards God and what was not.

Finally, in this mission, the first fruit which was given to Bernadette, was to **enter into** the parish community of Lourdes, that is to say, into the Church, into the place which was waiting for her.

And then, Bernadette **shared** her experience, in Lourdes then in Nevers, testifying until her strength gave out, to what had been said to her.

Go and tell!

- What does 'being given a mission' mean to me?
- Have I ever taken the opportunity to spread the gospel, either on my own or with other people?
- What does it mean to me to be a missionary disciple of Christ?

Bernadette's Words

- “I am not here to make you believe me; but simply to tell you what I have seen and heard” said Bernadette to Abbé Fonteneau on 28th August 1858.

Biblical references

Jesus said to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, “Do not be afraid, go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee: there they will see me” (Matt. 28:10).

Jesus said to Mary Magdalene: “Go to my brothers and tell them that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (Jn. 20:17).

to the priests

Who are the priests?

There is only one priest, Jesus Christ the high priest (Hebrews 7).

All those who are baptised into his death to share in his resurrection (Rom 6:5) and who are called followers of Christ, or lay people, signifying their belonging to the people of God, are priests, prophets and kings. This is the grace we receive at baptism.

From among these people, some men are ordained priests, to exercise the ministerial priesthood as an extension of the baptismal priesthood, that is to say the common priesthood of the faithful. The ministerial priesthood therefore serves the baptismal priesthood and not the reverse. As ministers of the word and the sacraments, priests proclaim Christ Jesus and give him to the faithful through the sacraments so that each baptised person may be strengthened in this way. As servants of the Church, priests teach and sanctify the holy and faithful people of God.

Mary loves priests with a maternal and protective love, seeing in each of them a servant minister and a zealous collaborator in her Son's work for the salvation of the world.

And, as she does with Bernadette, Mary draws sinners to herself, to whom she then points out priests, so that they can go and confess their sins and receive sacramental forgiveness for all their faults and thrive in the overabundance of God's mercy.

But what was Bernadette's experience of priests? It was long and rich, if we consider the period starting from her short stay in Bartrès at the end of 1857, until her return to Lourdes at the beginning of 1858.

At 14, Bernadette knew Abbé Arravant, whom she had met several times in Bartrès. In Lourdes, she had just made the acquaintance of Father Pomian, who taught her catechism in preparation for her first communion.

One of the four fruits of the first apparition relates to priests. Bernadette went to meet Father Pomian to tell him what she had experienced at the Grotto. "I saw a little lady, about the same height as me, looking at me and smiling."

After the 13th apparition, to pass on Mary's request in her turn, Bernadette spoke to Father Peyramale, to whom she had never previously spoken. He was not just any priest, rather he was the parish priest of Lourdes. He therefore was responsible for and had authority over the entire parish of Lourdes.

This mission was difficult for Bernadette. At first, she was **welcomed** by Father Peyramale, as she was **accompanied** by Father Pomian. The priest demanded **discernment** saying, "Ask the Lady to tell you her name". Once they had been told the

“Lady’s ”name, the priest and Bernadette together **entered into** a new reality, which each of them began to **share** in their turn.

The priests!

- What do I expect from priests?
- How often do I take the opportunity to meet with a priest?

Bernadette’s Words

“The priest at the altar is always Jesus Christ on the cross”
(N 528).

In Nevers, Bernadette said of Abbé Pomian, “He is a priest” and she added, “He is a father for our sisters of Lourdes” (N 201).

Biblical references

Having taken bread and given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’”²⁰ And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk. 22:19-20).

“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn.20:22-23).

to build

A vital request.

Building requires foundations.

Here in Lourdes, the foundations already existed. On the material level, it was the Grotto. And it was on the Grotto that the chapel requested by Our Lady would be built, the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception. On the spiritual level, it was the essence of the relationship that Mary established with Bernadette, which constituted the foundation of the chapel and therefore of the pilgrimage to Lourdes.

This essence is the grace that God gives to Mary, which she in turn distributes freely at the Grotto of Lourdes. Healings and miracles are just the visible part of this grace. The great miracles of Lourdes are not found in the healings of individual people, but in the grace of acceptance, something that so many people receive from Mary, the Immaculate Virgin. The fruit of this is conversion, that is, a change in our lives and the acceptance of the salvation which Christ Jesus offers us.

It takes time to build a Christian life, and an ecclesial and Catholic community.

On a spiritual level, it is about building the Church of God by following the words of the Risen Christ, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20).

Building means working together with others, each person humbly taking up his or her specific place, working towards the same end, working in harmony.

Building extends God's first commandment, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28). It is the same action for everything that exists.

Building engages the whole human being, body, soul, spirit.

Through this experience which mobilises us, we are invited to **welcome** the Word of God and the demands of this Word. We are invited to let ourselves be **accompanied** by the Teaching of the Church today. We are invited to **discern** what is best for us and for our brothers and sisters according to God's will. If this work is done, the person and the community begin to **enter into** the spiritual dimension of their lives. Then everything we see and do becomes an opportunity to witness to the Gospel and to **share** the life of God with others.

To build!

- For me, what is important to build a community (family, parish, associations...)?
- How often do I take the opportunity to participate with others to build or develop together spiritually?

Bernadette's Words

In the chapel (of the Convent of Nevers) Bernadette liked to hide in her nun's veil by pulling it over each side of her face as far as possible. She said, "It's my own little chapel" (N 28).

Biblical reference

"You are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God" (Eph. 2:20-22).

here

A specific place.

Mary addressed this request to Bernadette while they were together inside the Grotto. *Here* therefore means at the Grotto. It is important to understand this because what is constructed around the Grotto therefore has the Grotto at its heart.

This clarification is important for two reasons.

The first one. In 1858, there had been a parish church in Lourdes for a very long time. And now the “Lady” was asking for a church to be built on the outskirts, in a place that nobody ever visited. This is significant in two ways.

On the one hand, it signifies a missionary dimension. We are sent to build, “Go therefore and make disciples” (Matt. 28:19). The Church is not here to be the centre but exists “to be sent”. Pope Saint Paul VI describes this missionary vocation as follows, “The Church exists to evangelise.”

On the other hand, to build where, in Lourdes, there was nothing, means to build with the grace of God, which is given to us through the Person of the Immaculate Virgin. Where there was nothing and no one, today there are buildings and millions of pilgrims. Without forgetting how the grace of Lourdes radiates throughout the world. This is the fruitfulness of grace – and each of us sees only its immediate effects.

The second reason. When we say, “the Grotto”, we should also think of the treasure (Matt. 13:44). The treasure is the presence of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which is the essence of the relationship between Mary and Bernadette, for the conversion of sinners and the salvation of the world. The sign of this treasure is the spring.

When we think of the building that was requested, we need to take into account the missionary dimension – we are sent – and the invitation addressed to us to sow the Gospel where there is nothing and no-one, so that we may reap a harvest that belongs only to God.

Today, accompaniment and welcome happen on a variety of levels. Priests, religious men and women, hospitaliers, volunteers and employees all play their part. However, welcome and accompaniment are the fruits of a pastoral ministry which must be at the heart of the way in which any pilgrimage is organised. The logistical aspect needs to be fit around the pastoral care put in place. In this way, the service given to the pilgrims at the Grotto allows them:

- to **discern**;
- to **enter**;
- to **share**.

Here!

- Can I see specific places around me where I could evangelise?
- What are the important areas of my life that have not yet been touched by the grace of the Gospel?

Bernadette's Words

"Let us seek only the glory of God and his will" (N 98).

Biblical reference

"If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe betide me if I do not proclaim the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission.", says Saint Paul (1 Cor 9:16-17).

a chapel

The place of the Alliance.

The term 'chapel' has two meanings. It can either be part of a church with its own altar for celebrating Mass, or a non-parochial church. The latter is the case for pilgrimage chapels, or sanctuaries.

The request, which Bernadette had to pass on, was therefore to build a chapel so that the Grotto would become a sanctuary, a place of pilgrimage where people could pray and celebrate the sacrament of the Covenant, the Eucharist, and the sacraments of Mercy.

If we put this request in the context of the relationship between Mary and Bernadette, we see that this Mother-daughter relationship was always lived out under the gaze of God. The "Lady" and the child were always focused on God.

Everything began with devotions of popular piety or, more precisely, the prayer of the rosary which Bernadette recited with Mary. We should also mention "the procession". For Bernadette, this was the walk she took with others, in meditation and silent prayer, from her home to the Grotto. It was a time of preparation for her meeting, then a moment of thanksgiving at the end of it.

All this continued when Mary (while she was preparing Bernadette for her First Holy Communion) added a gesture that has become specific to the Grotto of Lourdes: "Go to the spring, drink and wash yourself there". This gesture sheds light on the demonstrations of popular piety, but also refers to sacramental life. Two other gestures are linked to that of the water, one associated with the rock, and the other to the light.

These three gestures are “concrete” introductions to the paschal mystery, to the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Saviour of the world.

The request to build a chapel therefore opens up the celebration of the Church’s sacraments, which are all celebrations of the new and eternal Covenant sealed on the Cross in the blood of Christ Jesus, the Saviour of the world.

Through this request to build a sanctuary, the treasure of the Grotto, the spring, unfolds through the proclamation of the Word in what is the heart of the life of the sanctuary.

What is this heart made of?

Once the construction of the chapel was started, the Grotto of Lourdes became a sanctuary, that is to say:

- 1) The place where the Word is proclaimed,
- 2) The place where the proclaimed Word celebrated (sacraments and sacramentals);
- 3) The place where we experience, by putting it into practice, the proclaimed and celebrated Word.

This makes the sanctuary:

- 4) The chosen place of encounter, in prayer, mercy and charity;
- 5) The place of gathering and therefore of the visibility of the Church and, at her heart, of the Presence of Christ Jesus the Saviour.

But for this extraordinary deployment to be possible, the Church had to first recognise the authenticity of the apparitions of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette:

We judge that the Immaculate Mary, Mother of God, really appeared to Bernadette Soubirous [...]. In order to accede to the request of the Blessed Virgin expressed several times during the apparitions, we propose to construct a sanctuary on the terrain of the Grotto which has become the property of the Bishop of Tarbes. (Mgr. Laurence, decree of 18th January 1862).

This is how Lourdes, “the sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception” (Mgr. Pierre-Marie Théas) is for pilgrims, “the place where they experience the maternal face of the Church”, as Pope Francis reminded us, when he spoke about a sanctuary dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

However, it is not only the builders who build, since any pilgrim can also:

- participate in this permanent construction even today,
- by letting him or herself be built up interiorly and spiritually as a disciple of Christ Jesus, on the way to salvation,

- meaning that each pilgrim participates in the construction of the true chapel which is the Church, the Spouse of Christ and, therefore, of the visibility of Christ, because the sanctuary is Christ.

The Chapel!

- Who was it who spoke to me, who showed me the Grotto of Lourdes for the first time (in Lourdes or outside of Lourdes)?
- Why do I come to Lourdes on pilgrimage either on my own or with others?
- During a pilgrimage, what do I expect to be able to experience in the sanctuary?
- Why am I drawn to Lourdes?

Bernadette's Words

After the apparitions, Bernadette said, "I felt drawn towards the Lady, I don't know how or why; I cannot express the feelings that moved me at that moment" (N 215).

In Nevers, having become a nun, Bernadette said, "Every day, I go in spirit to the Grotto and I make my pilgrimage there" (N 616).

Biblical references

"The disciples devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

"I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Rev. 7:9).

***Go tell the priests
to build a chapel here***

2. Spreading the word

Coming to Lourdes, whether it's with just a few people or with a large group of pilgrims, always carries with it a responsibility. Welcoming in the sanctuary of Lourdes implies the same responsibility, because accompanying or welcoming can only be experienced in close connection with Our Lady.

How can we best live out and assume this responsibility in the best interests of others?

The best guide, the most reliable companion, the most credible host is not the one who simply quotes what he or she has heard, but the one who shares his or her own experience as a pilgrim by living it out and who, in sharing it, communicates it in truth.

Of course, one could say that so many pilgrims must have had so many different experiences.

However, in Lourdes, any true experience:

- extends Bernadette's own experience,
- and, therefore, bears the mark of Our Lady of Lourdes' teaching which, with Bernadette and with each pilgrim, reminds us of the unparalleled compassion that Jesus has for every person,
- making everyone in some way contemporaries of all the friends of God.

Here are five key words for those who accompany pilgrims to Lourdes and those who welcome them into the sanctuary, thus preparing them to meet Mary and, through her, her Son, Jesus, the Saviour.

- Welcoming
- Accompanying
- Discern
- Entering into
- Sharing

Welcoming today

This is why the “Breton Cross” is located at Saint Michael’s gate, in the sightline of the basilicas: The Crucified One welcomes the entering pilgrims by giving them his Mother and asking them to take her into their hearts. (Jn. 19:25-27).

It all starts with the welcome.

Welcoming is a fundamental human value since the act of welcoming opens up a relationship with other people. At the Grotto of Lourdes, the welcome that Bernadette enjoyed was both material and spiritual. This welcome was deeply rooted in the humanity of the two participants which, as it turned out, was quite extraordinary. “She was looking at me. She was smiling at me. She bowed to me. She called me “vous”. Such was the thoughtfulness that Our Lady showed to Bernadette.

“Mary is the one who knows how to transform a grotto into a house of Jesus,” remarked Pope Francis (E.G. no. 286). Now, “to all who received him, Jesus gave power to become children of God” (Jn. 1:12).

Today, anyone who comes to Our Lady of Lourdes at the Grotto is “Bernadette” to her. He or she therefore enjoys the same welcome, the purpose of which is an encounter with Jesus, the Saviour, as was always the case for the young child.

Today, even before being welcomed by Our Lady at the Grotto, anyone who signs up for a pilgrimage to Lourdes experiences hospitality through many different people: the people who organised the trip to Lourdes; the people who made the journey possible; the people working in the hotels in Lourdes; the people serving at the Sanctuary of Lourdes, ...

Through all these people, it is ultimately Our Lady of Lourdes who makes us welcome.

Anyone who meets a pilgrim anywhere between their home and the Grotto of Lourdes must therefore make themselves available and put themselves at the service of Our Lady. It is not about welcoming as in a commercial relationship, thinking of how one might benefit. On the contrary, the welcome we are talking about is focused entirely on the benefit of the other person, his or her spiritual profit with a view to eternal life.

For all pilgrims, therefore, their first experience of welcome should not be the implementation of logistics, but an extension of the welcome that Mary reserved for Bernadette.

However, the rule of the welcome that Bernadette experienced from the Virgin Mary was simple: put the needs of the other person before yourself and express this by giving yourself.

This way of welcoming is an expression of love, such a welcome likewise spreads. This is why, very quickly, it is practised naturally by those who witness it.

Because Mary welcomed Bernadette, because Mary welcomes all those who come to the Grotto, in Lourdes we enter into a new experience: we welcome each other.

At the Grotto, Bernadette's welcome immediately mobilised a few volunteers who became the first hospitaliers of Lourdes. Very quickly, this service became an institution, the Hospitality of Our Lady of Lourdes. And this hospitalier spirit is the benchmark for the different forms of hospitality that are seen today in Lourdes.

In this way, as the psalmist sings, we taste "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity" and we enter into the experience of a Presence.

Hospitality always has a purpose. When I welcome a pilgrim, it is always to enable his or her meeting with Our Lady of Lourdes. When Our Lady in turn welcomes him or her, it is so that he or she can meet Jesus, the Saviour, Christ, the Lord (Lk 2:11).

Accompanying today

- Where is the Grotto?
- Let's go together!

It all starts with accompanying.

For Our Lady of Lourdes, accompanying is inseparable from welcoming, just as welcoming is inseparable from accompanying. The one is at the service of the other, the one gives added value to the other. And so, welcoming and accompanying operate simultaneously. Whoever accompanies someone begins by welcoming them. Whoever welcomes someone would not hesitate to accompany them.

The patriarch Jacob began by welcoming those he accompanied from one camp to another. The proof? He walked in step with the youngest of those he accompanied (Gen. 33:14).

On the road to Emmaus, the risen Jesus welcomes the disciples who are overwhelmed with grief after the death of Jesus on the Cross. He accompanies them, walking with them and teaching them. Then he reveals the purpose of their meeting. "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him; and he vanished from their sight" (Lk. 24:30-31).

We should not forget that, in Lourdes, there is a very specific type of accompaniment which was also specific to Bernadette.

Bernadette herself benefited from numerous accompaniments. Several women walked with her to the Grotto and then back to her home. And from the very first apparition, a priest accompanied her spiritually.

Several members of her family and Father Pomian were thus contributors to the attentiveness of Our Lady who constantly accompanied Bernadette, but on a different level.

When we accompany someone, we should never lose sight of its purpose. We accompany people so that they might encounter Our Lady who, gives us Christ Jesus, the Saviour.

This is why, in the same way as it is for welcoming, in accompanying, the most important person is always the other person.

Whether we welcome or accompany, we are never alone. Firstly, because when we welcome or accompany, we are directed by a diocese, a congregation, an association, a company. Secondly, because welcome or accompaniment is not exclusive to one party. Each person is, in one way or another, necessary.

When we commit ourselves in this way in this service of welcoming and accompanying, our humanity is called into action. And because a number of people welcome and accompany in the name of Christ and of the Gospel, it is the Church – the whole Church – which welcomes and accompanies, each individual whom Our Lady of Lourdes has drawn to her in this blessed Grotto.

In Lourdes, for all pilgrims, the purpose of welcome and accompaniment is experienced at the Grotto where they are welcomed by the Immaculate Virgin who gives them access to the enduring sign that she left there.

This sign is the spring of pure water which, like the water flowing from the pierced side of Jesus on the Cross (Jn. 19:34), is an invitation to draw near to be washed and revived there. This gesture is itself an invitation to go further by meeting a priest to celebrate the sacrament of penance and reconciliation. By confessing our sins to the priest, that is, everything in our lives that damages our relationship with God, and by expressing our repentance, we open ourselves up to the forgiveness given to us by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and which makes us new beings.

Discerning today

- *What does 'discerning' mean?*
- *It means allowing ourselves to be led by our conscience and as Christians, by the Word of God.*

The discernment that each pilgrim is consequently able to make depends on the way in which he or she is welcomed and accompanied.

There is therefore a responsibility, firstly, on the part of those who welcome in Lourdes, from the bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes to the latest arrivals as employees or volunteers of the sanctuary; and, secondly, for those who accompany pilgrims to Lourdes, from the bishop of each diocese to the latest arrivals as volunteers or employees of the various pilgrimages, hospitalities or groups.

We need to take Bernadette Soubirous' own pilgrimage as our example.

Bernadette was not only the first ever pilgrim to Lourdes, but also the first sick pilgrim and the first disabled pilgrim.

By welcoming her at the Grotto for the first time late in the morning of Thursday 11th February 1858, Mary taught her straightaway how to make the sign of the Cross correctly.

Through this gesture, the Virgin Mary passed on to her the grace of Lourdes, which Pope Pius XII wrote about, on the centenary of the apparitions. He wrote that it was given to “restore the world, in Christ, in a new and incomparable outpouring of Redemption”.

Having received this grace, Bernadette immediately experienced it in four different ways.

She began by praying the rosary with the “Lady”. Immediately after the first apparition, in a spirit of charity, she came to the aid of her little sister Toinette. On the way back, she testified for the first time. On the third day, she would tell the priest about her experience of what we call the first apparition.

For Bernadette and for each pilgrim, the fruit of the Lourdes’ pilgrimage is therefore, in the light of faith: **prayer, charity, witness, relationship to the priest and to the Church.**

Today, the Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes is the sole Guardian of the Grotto.

This Grotto must always be accessible to everyone and constantly referred to in its spiritual dimension as being the key place in the sanctuary from which the organisation of a pilgrimage develops at each person’s own pace.

The pastoral ministry of the sanctuary, as carried out by the rector, the main assistant to the bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes, and by the other “chaplain” priests, encourages access to the grace of Lourdes so that everyone can benefit from “the outpouring of R Redemption”.

Today, each Catholic bishop appoints a person to oversee pilgrimages for his diocese. Religious congregations also organise pilgrimages and many of Christ’s faithful, who belong to an association, do the same.

For everyone, the programme of each pilgrimage should revolve around:

- proclamation of the Word of God;
- prayer and gestures of popular piety;
- the gestures of Lourdes;
- the sacramental dimension;
- an experience of life in the Church.

In the same way as it did for Bernadette, the grace of Lourdes, which pilgrims receive and experience during their pilgrimage, helps each of them to discern:

What changes should I make in my life

- for my own good?
- for the good of my family?
- for the good of those close to me?

We can begin to understand, then, that the pastoral choices made by the sanctuary and those that form our pilgrimage programmes are of crucial importance since they will either encourage or otherwise, through both experiential and spiritual approaches, the spiritual discernment of each pilgrim whose ultimate prize is eternal life.

Bernadette's first discernment was to remain faithful to what the "Lady" said to her. However, very quickly her choice led her to breaking point. The police commissioner had forbidden Bernadette to go to the Grotto and her father agreed. However, on 22nd February, the young child said to her parents, "It pains me a lot. I must either disobey you or that lady." A few hours later, she went to the Grotto.

Her mother's words are also recorded. "The little one is not a liar. I believe her incapable of deceiving us. I had forbidden her to go to the Grotto. She went anyway, yet she's not usually disobedient. But she tells me that she was compelled to go to this place by something that she cannot explain..."

That same evening, Bernadette met Father Pomian. Having listened to her, he said, "We have no right to prevent you from doing this". Back home, François and Louise Soubirous withdrew their ban.

In her discernment, Bernadette listened to her conscience, she obeyed the "Lady", she submitted to the church.

Each pilgrim discovers that true discernment can lead to difficult and even painful times, but that that the way always leads to the light.

Bernadette had to make another discernment. Very quickly, she heard the call to become a nun. For her, this call was, in a way, already present in the fruits of the first sign of the Cross she made at the very first apparition. However, it was not until 4th April 1864, six years after the apparitions, that she asked to be admitted to the Sisters (= **prayer**) of **charity** and Christian instruction (= **testimony**) of Nevers.

Even today, many pilgrims discern a life choice or respond to a call in the light of the grace of Lourdes.

How many men and women have met their future husband or wife in Lourdes!

How many young people have heard the call to the priesthood or to the religious life!

How many people in Lourdes have made a choice that has allowed them to bring new meaning to their lives!

How many pilgrims have been reconciled after years of enmity, rivalry or estrangement!

In Lourdes, the grace of discernment is given to pilgrims, who ask for it in prayer!

Entering today

- What does 'entering' mean?
- It means putting into practice.

Discernment leads to entry.

Entering means going from the outside to the inside, to move from a passive role to a more active role. The observer becomes an actor. The person who spoke, now acts. But this first step is first taken from where we are, since entering means opening the gift that we have received, discovering it by living it, putting it into practice and thus making it our own.

How did Bernadette enter into **prayer, charity, witness**, and a **relationship with the priest and the Church**? By staying where she was and living, in a way that was made new by grace, what she was already living.

So that Bernadette could experience the Grace of Lourdes at the Grotto, a few days after Mary had taught her how to make the sign of the Cross correctly, the "Lady" offered her a wonderful invitation, saying, "Will you do me the honour of coming here for fifteen days?"

This invitation teaches us that allowing ourselves to live by grace, by putting it into practice, takes time: this is what a time of pilgrimage is all about.

Prayer? Bernadette had a rosary that her mother had given to her, and she used it faithfully every day to pray. Yet after praying at the Grotto for the first time, she prayed in a way that she had never prayed before. Prayer had, for her, become an encounter with Jesus through Mary. This is the prayer of the rosary, the meditation of the Joyful (or Luminous), Sorrowful or Glorious mysteries of the Rosary.

Charity? Bernadette was by nature helpful. Being the eldest in her family, her mother put her to work all the time. However, she moved from the simple act of giving service with a good heart, to actually living out charity, that is, considering other people before herself and expressing it through the gift of herself.

Testimony? Bernadette knew how to speak to defend her little sister and her little brothers. However, by testifying to her relationship with the "Lady", she was "clothed with power from on high" (Lk. 24:49), which gave her the grace to speak with authority about what she had seen and heard. (1 Jn. 1:1-3).

Her **relationship to priests**? During her stay in Bartrès, Bernadette got along very well with the brother of her "wet-nurse", Abbé Arravant. However, when on the third day she went to the parish church of Lourdes and slipped into Father Pomian's confessional, opening her heart to him, she had never previously spoken to a priest like that.

For Bernadette and for any Lourdes pilgrim, **entering** first means **entering actively into** one's own life, letting oneself be affected by the reality of one's existence as it is and, after having recognised, it taking it on board.

In the second phase of the pilgrimage, reading and meditating on the word of God helps us to understand, as the parable of the Sower expresses so magnificently, that in my reality, there is good.

So, we can choose to reap what can be found on this good ground and use it so that it can yet bear much fruit.

This is like the Grotto: "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:20). It was from the heart of this then dirty Grotto that the spring of pure, clear water gushed forth. In our hearts, the Spirit we have received from God can be hidden by our sin. But the superabundance of God's grace is given to us to clear our hearts of what should not belong there.

In any pilgrimage, there are therefore two consecutive stages.

The first is to take up my life as a responsible person.

The second consists of finding a paschal dimension to my life, that is, entering into the mystery of faith, which is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I must die to everything that goes against God, so that the life of the Risen Christ may animate me and recreate me entirely.

The third stage of pilgrimage, when we have returned home, consists of making the choice to give ourselves. This is the vocation of every person who is baptised to holiness.

Bernadette experienced these three stages very simply. First, she responded to the "Lady's" call to come to the Grotto for fifteen days. Then by discovering the spring when she supposed herself wounded by sin. Finally, by discerning her vocation and responding to it, she chose to make her life a path of holiness.

Sharing today

- What does 'sharing' mean?
- It means giving all that we are.

For Bernadette, sharing consisted of making herself totally available to testify, despite the physical and moral suffering that this caused her. For Bernadette, bearing witness was the Cross she chose to bear almost daily. But it gave Mary's confidante an extraordinary fruitfulness "for the restoration of the world in Christ through a new and incomparable outpouring of Redemption" (Pope Pius XII).

In Lourdes, as elsewhere, we must be careful not to share in the way that the world shares. We are all tempted to do this. We must always remember that, like Jesus,

Bernadette shared her life. WE must be careful not to share by conforming with the world.

In Lourdes, every pilgrim is a witness to and a model of a sharing through conforming to “the other world”, to use the words that Mary spoke when she promised Bernadette “the happiness of the other world”.

We are all, therefore, both witnesses to and models of gestures of kindness, friendship, tenderness, and affection. These are expressed in the giving of oneself in welcoming the other, which allows Charity, that is Christ Jesus, a proper place.

Today, wheelchairs allow many sick, injured, disabled or elderly people to move around with someone to accompany them. In Lourdes many are moved to tears by witnessing this relationship.

What are they looking at? A brother who gives himself to another by accompanying him to enable him to reach the Grotto and another brother who, benefitting from this help, gives himself by welcoming the one who is accompanying him.

In this relationship, because each person considers the other before him or herself and expresses it through the gift of him or herself, Christ Jesus is present and enables both of them, through what they are living out, to enter the Kingdom of Heaven present in our midst (Lk. 17:21).

What do they see? They see the love of God for humanity manifested in the Cross of his Son, Jesus Christ. They see “the new and incomparable outpouring of redemption”.

When love is at the heart of our sharing, the fruit of this experience is peace.

It is the same peace that the pilgrims experience and share each evening at the end of the Marian torchlight procession.

It is this peace with which the pilgrims of Lourdes return home where they become, each in their own way, missionaries of Our Lady of Lourdes.

Many of them return to Lourdes, not on their own, but with those with whom they shared the experience of their pilgrimage to Lourdes at home.

Some who, because of distance, cannot return to Lourdes, make replicas of the Lourdes Grotto where they live, and make them a place of devotion, prayer, processions, and celebration. Places of love and charity.

Through all these initiatives, it is always the grace of Lourdes that “restores the world in Christ through a new and incomparable outpouring of Redemption”.

This is also an invitation for Lourdes pilgrims who live in France (or elsewhere) not to wait for the next Lourdes pilgrimage to get together, but to come together to experience a day which is “like Lourdes”, because it is experienced in the light of its grace.

Many pray the rosary each day at 3:30 p.m. by joining, through the various media, the pilgrims present at the Grotto of Lourdes.

We might ask ourselves this question: Is there a “Lourdes” way of sharing and witnessing? Yes, the Lourdes way is Christ’s way, which he himself illustrated with the parable of the Sower: the transmission of life, and therefore of grace, takes time. This is why, as first disciple of her Son, the one who said “I am the Immaculate Conception” welcomes us and accompanies us by walking with us at our own pace, that is with small steps to allow us to grow.



In Lourdes, we experience this constant back and forth between the concrete experience and the decoding that we need to do in the form of catechesis.

Whether it is experiential or spiritual, whether it takes the form of popular piety, the gestures of Lourdes or sacramental steps, this experience touches the pilgrim.

When we talk about **welcoming, accompanying, discerning, entering** and **sharing**, these are, of course, in a logical order and therefore usually practised in that way. However, these ideas are not fixed since they are experienced alongside each other, and serve each other.

When we welcome and accompany pilgrims therefore we can be flexible in the way we adapt to the people we accompany and welcome. The only criterion we need to remember is a simple one: That what is said and what is done should encourage each person to feel welcomed through “the new and incomparable outpouring of Redemption”.