



Meditation on Lourdes 2024

Go tell the priests to come [here] in procession

*The shrine which is the goal of that pilgrimage is to become “the Tent of Meeting”,
as the Bible calls the tabernacle of the covenant.*

(St. John Paul II)

1. Foreword:
2. Invitation to come:
A path of trust
3. Procession and pilgrimage:
A path of pilgrimage
4. Your presence in Lourdes:
A path of communion
5. Returning from Lourdes:
A path of hope

This is a meditation on the pastoral experience during the pilgrimage. Therefore, we should analyse it as a whole in order to better understand its different phases.

It is also possible to read each chapter separately in case you want to better understand it, deepen it or put it in practice.

Of course, what you will find here is nothing else but the extension of what was written in 2022 and in 2023. It is actually about the same request made by the Holy Virgin to Bernadette, the request that the Sanctuary divided in several parts in order to spread it over a period of three years.

I want you to come in procession

Bernadette was the only one to hear this instruction coming from the Lady. She was alone to transmit it. And now, the Church, as it obeys Bernadette, has been organizing pilgrimages to Massabielle for a century.

If Bernadette had not been Bernadette, Lourdes would not have become the meeting point of the Christian world.

Bernadette is the only one to have revealed Lourdes to us... God engages with a soul of choice but He opens himself only to her. For Him, she is sufficient.

Because of this young, despised girl, an enormous flow of people started moving and hasn't stopped coming from all around the world ever since. This little woman alone has become a trigger for an immense adventure.

Bishop Pierre-Marie Théas,
Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes (from 1947 to 1970)
International Marian Congress of Lourdes,
Speech of 15th September 1958

1. FOREWORD

Go tell the priests
to come [here] in procession

The title of this pastoral presentation, of this meditation proposed for the 2024 pilgrimages, corresponds to the end of one of the ten spoken words of Our Lady of Lourdes¹, transmitted to the Church by Saint Bernadette:

*Go tell the priests
to build a chapel here
and to come in procession*

In 2022,
the sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes suggested meditating on the first part of these words:
Go tell the priests.

In 2023,
the meditation was about the second part:
to build a chapel here.

And, finally, in 2024,
this triptych will end with the last words of the instruction:
and to come [here] in procession.

Thus, the 2024 meditation
starts naturally with:

- 1) The procession
- 2) The link between the procession and the chapel
- 3) The link between the priests, the chapel and the procession
- 4) But also with the initial « Go tell »

What makes the Lourdes 2024 meditation so particular, is to be focused on the word *procession* which, in this context, means also a *pilgrimage*.

But why are these two words so close ? Because the Immaculate Virgin used this word when she spoke to Bernadette Soubirous and it is a word from the Lourdes patois. However, as there were very few words in this language, the same term can have several meanings.

In the present case, this is particularly easy to understand because, as we can notice, **a procession is, in a way, nothing else but a pilgrimage, whereas a pilgrimage can be considered as a longer procession over a period of one or several days.**

¹ Bernadette received these spoken words from the Lady on 2 March 1858.

However, if the words for *procession* and *pilgrimage* are interchangeable, the term *pilgrimage* can have several meanings as it means at the same time:

- the place we go to
- the reason why we go to this place
- a group of people united by what they live in this holy place

On the pages to follow,

*Go tell the priests
to come [here] in procession*

the « procession-pilgrimage » part will be meditated in the light of:

- the common experience of the human condition
- the experience of the young Bernadette
- the Holy Scriptures
- the Tradition
- the Teaching of the Church

and, more specifically, in the light of several documents from the Magisterium:

- The pilgrimage for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, by Saint John Paul II, of April 25, 1998;
- *Deus Caritas est* (God is Love)
Encyclical Letter of Pope Benedict XVI of December 25, 2005;
- *Evangelii gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel)
Apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis of November 24, 2013;
- The speech of Pope Francis to the participants of the International congress of Rectors and Sanctuary Agents of November 29, 2018.

Among the texts closer to the sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes and its history, a reference will be made to:

- Guidelines for the Lourdes processions (in French: *Dispositions pour les processions de Lourdes*, a 122-page document for internal use, published by the sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes in October 2012.

Several excerpts from the books about Lourdes, written by a chaplain father of the sanctuary², will also be quoted.

²Régis-Marie de La Teyssonnière: 1. *La Grotte de Lourdes, un chemin d'Évangile* (*The Lourdes Grotto, a way of the Gospel*, Translator's note) Éditions CLD, 252 pages, 2008. 2. *Lourdes les mots de Marie* (*Lourdes the spoken Words of Mary*, Publisher: Ontau, 2019) Éditions CLD, 252 pages, 2008. 3. *Lourdes en procession* (*Lourdes in procession*, Translator's note), Éditions Artège, 168 pages, January 2014.

THE THEME FOR 2025

In 2025, at the initiative of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, the Holy Church will celebrate a Holy Year whose theme will be:

Pilgrims of Hope.

In this perspective, the Pope writes³:

In this time of preparations, I am very happy to know that the year preceding the Jubilee event, 2024, could be dedicated to a great symphony of prayer.

And the Holy Father concludes by qualifying 2024 as:

An intense year of praying, in which hearts may be opened to receive the abundance of grace, making “Our Father”, the prayer that Jesus taught us, the program of life for each of his disciples..

³ Letter of 11 February 2022 for the Jubilee of 2025 addressed to Mons. Rino FISICHELLA, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization

Everything for Heaven

What refers to me no longer concerns me,
I must be, as of now, entirely of God,
and of God alone. Never about myself.

O Holy Virgin !... O glorious Saint Joseph !
And you, Saint John, disciple of the Divine Heart,
Teach me the great science of love!
Let it draw me vigorously!...
So that I can finally flourish,
and fly away before I get lost and rush,
before I sink and unite myself with you into the adorable heart of Jesus,
and in the Crucified Jesus, divine centre of Charity, purity,
self-obliteration and perfect submission.

I will do everything for heaven, because heaven is my homeland;
I will find my Mother there in all the splendour of her glory,
and, with her, I will enjoy the happiness of Jesus himself
in perfect security.

Bernadette Soubirous
(Personal notebook, 1873)

2. INVITATION TO COME

A path of trust

WHY COME ON A PILGRIMAGE TO LOURDES?

Coming

means moving from one place to another which will permit you to arrive at a precise place.

Coming

is not linked to an explicit invitation but more to the moment when a person who doesn't necessarily feel internally challenged, but rather concerned, decides to leave and starts walking.

Hearing someone say: « Come to my house », is an invitation with a positive connotation.

At the Grotto of Lourdes, early in the morning of Thursday, February 18, 1858, Bernadette was deeply touched by the words of the Lady telling her:

Will you do me the grace of coming here for a fortnight?

Although these words questioned her own freedom, the young Bernadette took them very seriously and promised to commit herself to do it.

To all those who tried to prevent her from going to the Grotto, she replied with force and determination: I promised.

Thus, while receiving the grace of the invitation, Bernadette offers to the Lady of the Grotto of Lourdes the grace of her response.

In the Gospel, Jesus invites those who want to follow him:

Come and you will see (John, 1:39).

And to those who don't know or who are still hesitating, Jesus tells why:

*Come to me,
all you who are weary and burdened,
and I will give you rest
(Matthew, 11:28).*

In a parable, a person who represents Jesus pronounces these words on his behalf:

*Come, you who are blessed by my Father,
take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you
since the creation of the world
(Matthew, 25:34).*

COMING HERE

How should we, here in Lourdes, interpret this invitation to come here, to the Grotto? And how should we interpret this idea of coming here in procession-pilgrimage?

At the beginning of the history,
God spoke to his human creature, just the way he did to Abraham,
by inviting him to get up and start walking,
still, without indicating him the objective to reach,
without even explaining which means would be necessary for it.

As he proceeds in this way, God asks Abraham
to enter into a trust-based relationship.
Even before the Covenant is celebrated,
Abraham joins the mystery of God's covenant with him.

In the fullness of time,
Jesus knows how to speak frankly to those he has chosen:
He calls them and they immediately follow him (Matthew 4, 41:42)

However, the confidence he gives them in order to be able to accept his invitation
is undoubtedly a God's gift, the one we call faith,
that is to say, our relationship to God.

Both for Abraham and for the disciples of Jesus
the grace of God comes before the invitation they receive and it contains
the capacity to accept this call.

Jesus reveals in the Gospel what this grace contains:

*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth,
will draw all people to myself (John, 12:32).*

And to make us understand that this grace comes from the cross, and whose fruit it actually is, the evangelist promptly adds the following comment:

He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die (John, 12:33).

COMING TODAY

Today,
the Holy Virgin, the Immaculate Conception, united to her Son, born, died and risen, is, by the will of God, a merciful dispenser of all graces.

That's why Mary draws to herself all those who have been sent by Jesus so that they, once they have been enlivened by the Pascal Mystery, can enjoy the eternal life.

During the apparitions of 1858, the Immaculate Virgin makes Bernadette go through this experience by showing her the sign of the cross which immediately opens the young girl to the other world, that is to say to the kingdom of God present in our midst and within us (Luke, 17:21)

These few words say that "coming" to the Grotto of Lourdes, is a question of life and death for everyone, depending on how they respond to the received invitation.

The mere fact of "coming" makes them part of a story where a pilgrimage is both the visible part and the heart of a gradual process.

As a matter of fact, the procession-pilgrimage leads to an encounter with the One who is the way, the truth and the life (John, 14:6) and who came that we may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10)

The time of pilgrimage is completely different from the habitual Christian life. For some people it represents a particularly significant period of time. For the others, it will be a starting point, a moment of beginning again or a moment of coming back. For some other people, a pilgrimage means a full discovery of the Church, of the Gospels and of Jesus Christ ⁴.

MAKING A DECISION STEP BY STEP

There are three periods in a pilgrimage to Lourdes: the one before, the one during and the one after it.

Actually, the process of decision making starts when you **become aware of it**.
Why ?

⁴ *Lourdes en procession (Lourdes in procession, Translator's note)*, by Fr. Régis-Marie de la Teyssonnière

Because when he speaks to us,
 God does it discretely and even in silence.
 Just like the prophet Elijah, God is not in a hurricane
 or an earthquake but in a gentle whisper (1 Kings, 19:12)

God speaks to us:

- through his Word
- through events
- through people

During a pilgrimage to Lourdes,
 God can speak to us through a poster,
 a conversation we heard, a testimony,
 a time of praying or just at the moment someone mentions the name of this Marian city,
 as simple as that...

Eventually, these different events meet the desire
 that God planted in our hearts.

However, everything depends on our relationship with the Lord.
 Some people can recognize the voice of Jesus
 the same as a sheep recognizes the voice of his shepherd (John 10, 2:3, 14:15).

No matter how long it takes to become aware of it,
 as soon as a person understands it, the time for **reflection** comes.
 It is also the moment of a spiritual conflict
 where negative thoughts fight against our heart.

Afterwards, the moment of decision comes.
 Whether it is positive or negative, it regularly becomes obvious,
 because most of the time, it is the fruit of our reflection.

The very last step consists of putting everything into practice,
 that is to say, making our decisions come true.

PUTTING DECISIONS INTO PRACTICE

**In this preliminary phase you already meet people
 who organize the pilgrimage**
 or who have already participated in it or with whom you may leave.

These encounters are just a beginning
 of a long immersion into your own approach to the pilgrimage.

Even though you may feel weak or unexperienced,
you know you are welcomed and accompanied.
All this opens your heart both to confidence and
to an evangelical relationship which starts to make you
taste and see how good our Lord is (Psalm, 34:8).

Whether you are unaware or, on the contrary,
fully aware of what you have experienced
in the time of listening to the invitation
and responding to it,
you personally have already entered into the prayer,
that is to say, into this mysterious relationship to God.

And as we begin to walk on this **way of trust**,
surrounded by the obstacles and difficulties of our world,
we are already participating in what Pope Francis realistically calls
a great symphony of prayer.

Mary walks at our side

Mary is able to turn a simple stable into a home for Jesus, with poor swaddling clothes and an abundance of love...

She is the friend who is ever concerned that wine not be lacking in our lives.

She is the woman whose heart was pierced by a sword and who understands all our pain.

As mother of all, she is a sign of hope for peoples suffering the birth pangs of justice.

She is the missionary who draws near to us and accompanies us throughout life, opening our hearts to faith by her maternal love.

As a true mother, she walks at our side, she shares our struggles and she constantly surrounds us with God's love.

Pope Francis
Apostolic exhortation
The joy of the Gospel , n° 286
(*Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013)

3. PROCESSION AND PILGRIMAGE

A path of revelation

BERNADETTE'S WAY

Most often, a pilgrimage means leaving your own home in order to reach a holy place.

Therefore, the procession-pilgrimage wouldn't have any sense if you were not heading towards its place of convergence, that is to say towards the right destination.

Thus, when speaking about the pilgrimage to Lourdes, we mean:

- the sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception
- the group that goes there and stays there and
- the content of the project you have accomplished

More than anywhere else, the relationships that are created in Lourdes between pilgrims are essential, because the most important characteristic of the pilgrimage to the Grotto of Lourdes is that it has been there by the will of the Immaculate Virgin, expressed on March 2, 1858:

Build a chapel here and come in procession-pilgrimage.

So why is this request so simple and precise?

The reason is, everyone who was drawn to the Grotto by Mary should be able to pursue his experience there. Yet, Bernadette's procession-pilgrimage can be summed up in three words only:

- Being drawn there
- Being accompanied
- Being welcomed

The people of our time could be surprised by the fact that Bernadette did not take a specific initiative or, even more, that she seemed to be passive in her attitude.

In fact, **the first role**, is the role of Mary's: The Holy Virgin is the one who draws Bernadette to her.

The second role is not Bernadette's role either, but the role of the people chosen by Mary to accompany the young girl to the Grotto, where the Immaculate Virgin was waiting for her.

The third role is for the other people on whom Mary relies to make her encounter with Bernadette at the Grotto of Lourdes possible and effective.

Like Jesus himself, Mary always speaks to the humanity in each of us, so that the grace, and let's not forget that she is the dispenser of this grace, can reach the hearts of some of us through the actions of other people, that is to say of the volunteers who accompany and welcome.

These three concrete steps - attracting, accompanying and welcoming - not only prepare Bernadette for the encounter with the beautiful Lady of the Grotto, but they also open our hearts to **hope**. These steps are always there, at the beginning and at the end. It was the case in Bernadette's time and it is the case today, for all the pilgrims going to Lourdes.

That's why this meditation on the 2024 Lourdes pilgrimage concerns everybody: those who accompany and those who are accompanied, those who welcome and those who are welcomed. They are all walking on the path of revelation.

THE CHURCH EXPERIENCE

There are two remarks, both in relation to the encounter with God and with other people.

Remark one. The attraction of Lourdes, assistance and care and, finally, the reception of pilgrims, they all require the full participation of both sides. In fact, we cannot say that, on one side, there are those who work or volunteer and, on the other one, those who enjoy what has been done for them. As a matter of fact, a pilgrimage means living together whose final objective is meeting God. However, all encounters involve self-forgetfulness, paying more attention to other people and self-sacrifice.

So, this encounter, which is a pilgrimage in fact, starts always by meeting other people. Afterwards, it opens up to the encounter with the Immaculate Virgin. As soon as it occurs, Mary designates and gives her son, Jesus Christ. And, finally, the Savior of the world gives himself to God, his Father, while offering him the pilgrim.

This is the genuine Being of Jesus:

Yet not my will, but yours be done (Luke, 22:42).

It is the being of the only creature who says: I am the Immaculate Conception. Indeed, she prefers her Son Jesus to herself and shows it through the total self-giving when welcoming the Son of God made man in her heart and in her womb:

May your word to me be fulfilled (Luke, 1:38).

This is the path which was proposed to Bernadette when she received the sign of the cross when she first met the Lady. From that moment forward, she preferred the Mother of Jesus to herself, and lived in the hope of eternal life.

Cost whatever it costs, I need to talk to my Mother from Heaven.

Remark two concerns the experience of a pilgrim who is now turning his eyes towards the Grotto of Lourdes.

And what he sees here, makes him open his heart and keep it wide open. He fills it with the grace of the Spirit of God transmitted to him by the Immaculate Virgin.

In the Grotto, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, the pilgrim starts then a deeply personal path.

Yet, at the same moment, he realizes that he is not, despite everything, in a simple juxtaposition of individuals, but that he starts enjoying a certain closeness with pilgrims around him.

And this is for him a brand new experience. It is not something static, on the contrary, it leads him to other discoveries. So, here he is our pilgrim. Now, he feels affected by the others, almost in solidarity with them.

That's how, step by step, he discovers this community. He becomes fully aware that from now on he belongs to it, that he belongs to **the Church**.

It is not anymore a Church which frightens him or that he would like to attack or denigrate, but the holy and faithful People of God. The pilgrim eventually realizes that this Church is serving, loving and compassionate. It is the Church whose first member is Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the first among the humble, among the poor of the Lord. Mary is the person who is always protecting the children whom she draws to the Grotto of Lourdes.

That's how, at the rock of Massabielle, when they turn towards the Immaculate Virgin, the pilgrims to Lourdes discover their Church. And when they come out from the Grotto, they see the People of God reflected in the pure face of the Immaculate Virgin.

However, if we consider that the Grotto is the home of Mary's, it is because it is the sanctuary of her Son Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. It is also in the Grotto that he planted his cross, as he did it in the heart of each baptized person. In the Grotto, too, and through Mary, he never stops drawing all people to himself (John 12:32)

A VERY CONCRETE ECCLESIAL EXPERIENCE

**The pilgrimage-procession
is a path of encounters
with God and with others
with Mary and Christ
with the Church and with ourselves.**

For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them (Matthew, 18:20).

This is how the presence of **a spiritual guide** helps us to deepen our knowledge of the Church.

Its **ordained priests** exercise their priestly ministry to bring together the family of God and lead it through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, towards God the Father.

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you (Matthew, 28:19-20).

This is how **listening to the Word of God** becomes food for the soul. It strengthens and transforms each of us into living members of the body of Christ which is our Church.

The words I have spoken to you – they are full of the Spirit and life (John, 6:63).

The path taken to Lourdes becomes then the path to Divine revelation.

During the procession-pilgrimage, we can hear the response to the Word of God. It expresses itself spontaneously by **prayer** which, in Lourdes, takes many forms. It takes into account our personal and cultural situation, before expressing itself in a unique way by **community prayer**.

When the Word of God comes to dwell with a person, the presence of other people around is perceived like an invitation to do some evangelical charity for them, just the way God does for them.

Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me (Matthew, 25:40).

Therefore, when we start living this way, we eventually understand what **the Eucharist** means. It means a given, delivered and sacrificed life which eventually becomes **a reconciled life – even if it means through the celebration of the sacrament of confession – with God, with the others, with ourselves.**

*While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying:
« Take and eat: this is my body. »
(Matthew, 26:26)*

Mary, the handmaid of the Father

There is a Marian “style” to the Church’s work of evangelization.
Whenever we look to Mary, we come to believe once again in the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness...

Mary is able to recognize the traces of God’s Spirit in events great and small.

She constantly contemplates the mystery of God in our world, in human history and in our daily lives...

We implore her maternal intercession
that the Church may become a home for many peoples,
a mother for all peoples, and that the way may be opened
to the birth of a new world.

Pope Francis
Apostolic exhortation
The Joy of the Gospel, n° 288
(*Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013)

4. YOUR PRESENCE IN LOURDES

A path of communion

THE THREE DOORS

What makes the pilgrimage to Lourdes so special is not just the fact that you can participate in different celebrations on a daily basis. It's rather because of three different and complementary doors which help you to receive the extraordinary grace of Lourdes. Each of us will start with one of them... It doesn't matter by which one first, the main thing is to go through all three of them one day!

The first door leads to the very particular gestures of a pilgrimage to Lourdes: you get into the Grotto, you venerate the rock, you wash yourself with the spring water, you carry the light.

The second one opens to the devotions expressing the faith of the Church. You pray the rosary, you take part in processions, you follow the Stations of the Cross.

The third one opens to the sacraments: baptized Catholics who wish it, can confess and receive Holy Communion.

BERNADETTE'S EXPERIENCE

We noticed that Bernadette's faith – namely, her relationship to God – had three different forms in Mary's presence.

- First, the Lady asks her to approach the Rock until she enters the Grotto. Afterwards, she asks her to drink and wash herself with the water from the spring.
- Some gentle women give a lighted candle to the young girl, which she accepts, holding it in her hand with devotion.
- Later, after having prayed the Rosary with the Holy Virgin, Bernadette is asked to pray God for the conversion of sinners. Finally, Mary asks her to come in procession.

Thus Bernadette admits that:

*My big devotion is praying the rosary
and meditating on the way of the cross*

- And finally, at the beginning of the apparitions, Bernadette confesses for the first time, just before receiving her first Communion and shortly before the final apparition.

So why did she confess and receive Holy Communion? It was to go further with her conversion, to come closer to God.

Jesus, Mary, the Holy Cross, I want no other friends but these!

THE PILGRIMS' EXPERIENCE

The modern pilgrims do the same – everybody shows the same three ways of living and expressing his relationship to God.

- They all enter the Grotto, touch the Rock, drink and wash themselves with the Lourdes water. Then they light a candle.

These are the typical gestures of a Lourdes pilgrim, a traditional way of expressing faith.

- They all participate in traditional devotions of the Church, pray the Rosary, go on processions, meditate on the way of the cross.
- Concerning their sacramental life, they express it today through confession, the Eucharist and the adoration of the Holy Sacrament. Yet, many pilgrims admit they do not regularly go to confession or to Mass. Then they add:

Since we are in Lourdes, we will do it.

THE FRUIT OF THIS EXPERIENCE

Such behaviour opens your heart to **a change in attitude**. By the way, isn't a way to Lourdes a way of conversion? ... Those who lived it, show a desire to help, to be of service, to give their time, briefly - to volunteer.

This is how the elements of popular piety, the traditional devotions of the Church and the sacramental life are intertwined and visible at the same time.

Therefore, these three approaches are not only complementary, but they also reinforce each other.

In the very particular way of functioning of Lourdes, we can still feel Bernadette's personal experience. Because here, at Lourdes, the Church keeps on accompanying and welcoming those who are preparing for the encounter.

The main purpose of the sanctuary is to permit the pilgrims to fully live their pilgrimage. That's why, as soon as they arrive, it looks as if the sanctuary was not there: indeed, all the big celebrations celebrated by the sanctuary are celebrated by the pilgrims themselves. Thus, during an international Mass gathering thousands of people, there is only a dozen of active

participants who belong to the sanctuary staff, whether they are sacristans, sound technicians, organ players, cantors, masters of ceremonies or other.

Other pilgrims, most of the time, did not participate in the previous international Mass and won't participate in the next one either. Starting from the presiding bishop to the Lourdes volunteers, from the readers until the choir singers and, of course, to the entire assembly, they are all only ordinary pilgrims.

There is something nice, something ecclesiastical in there. Indeed, if we have access to the Source, it is always through the others. Still, each person remains the one who shows the Source but also the one to whom the Source is shown. He or she is the person who gives the water but also the one who receives it. The encounter with the Holy Virgin and, through her interception, with her Son Jesus Christ occurs during the encounter with the other, because it is exactly here that everything begins. Jesus clearly says in the Gospel: "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew, 18:20). Many people live it in their families or in their Christian community.

At Lourdes, this is naturally perceived as a sign, but the scale on which this sign is given, helps us to see something else: the new humanity⁵.

⁵ *La Grotte de Lourdes, un chemin d'Évangile (The Lourdes Grotto, a way of the Gospel, Translator's note), by Fr. Régis Marie de la Tessonnière*

*Holy Mary, Mother of God,
You have given the world its true light,
Jesus, your Son – the Son of God.
You abandoned yourself completely to God's call
And thus became a wellspring
Of the goodness which flows forth from him.
Show us Jesus. Lead us to him.
Teach us to know and love him,
So that we too can become
Capable of true love
And be fountains of living water
In the midst of a thirsting world.*

Prayer of Pope Benedict XVI
In Conclusion of his Encyclical letter
God is Love
(*Deus Caritas est*, 25 December 2005)

5. RETURNING FROM LOURDES

A path of hope

The pilgrimage is a time of grace. That's why our relationship to God and to others is more simple, more natural, more obvious in Lourdes.

Returning home from Lourdes is a moment of accomplishing what was experienced there. This is where a path of hope starts. It often begins with a story or a personal testimony. But it doesn't last long. Why? Because we have lost that feeling of grace. Of, more precisely, we are naive to think that the grace of Lourdes was left in Lourdes and not in our hearts.

However, thinking like this is wrong. Grace has not been given to us to remain but, on the contrary, to bear fruit, with us and through us.

We therefore must constantly take care of the grace received in Lourdes. We must keep it present in our hearts and do our best to make it grow until it bears fruit for the eternal life.

But to make it happen, what are we supposed to do? We should keep living our lives, just the way we did it in Lourdes. We should repeat everything we did there, action by action, and apply it in our everyday life.

WE HAVE BEEN TO THE GROTTTO

A good idea would be to keep tangible proof of our visit to the Lourdes Grotto in our everyday life, such as:

- a background on one of our screens
- a postcard in a particular place at home
- a key chain ...

Everybody should find a moment, a place, a way of recognizing the Holy Virgin in something tangible, something that will constantly make you think that the Immaculate Virgin is always in our heart.

WE HAVE DRUNK AND WASHED OURSELVES WITH THE GROTTTO WATER

Of course, we can return home with a small bottle of holy water, shown to the young Bernadette by the Holy Virgin. We can also share it with others, during a family prayer, or take it to a sick friend who cannot go to Lourdes, repeat this gesture with those who cannot do it by themselves. We must remember that the Grotto water was a sign of how thirsty we were for God's word, a sign of purification we needed from Jesus.

This experience connects us with millions of people throughout the world. Although they will never come to Lourdes, they live with the help of the grace from the Immaculate Virgin and express it with great passion while repeating the same water ritual.

WE HAVE LIGHTED CANDLES

Lighting candles plays an important role in our daily life. Like Bernadette herself while she was praying, we can light a candle. Or, in particular moments, we can also light a light stick in front of an icon, a picture or a crucifix.

This gesture recalls our baptism, the presence of Jesus among us since he is the Light of the world (see John, 8:12). Jesus guides us towards our last end and when our Savior appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is (see 1 John 3:2).

WE HAVE PRAYED THE ROSARY WITH OTHER PEOPLE

It is important to have a small rosary at home. As a matter of fact, seeing it helps us to hear the Virgin's call to prayer that she is whispering to us like a careful mother.

Carrying a rosary allows us to use it wherever we are. Indeed, Bernadette told us:

The Holy Virgin likes when we pray her.

After having returned from a Lourdes pilgrimage, many people start a daily meditation on the rosary of the Massabielle Grotto (on live TV channel or on streaming⁶). Many will enter a church to pray the rosary with other people. Many will discover the rosary with their partners, family or friends.

WE HAVE TAKEN CARE OF OTHERS AS WE SMILED, LISTENED AND HELPED

Whatever our condition may be, we will find in our everyday life what we saw in Lourdes and deep in our hearts we will know that our behaviour has changed softly.

In the face of suffering, sickness, hopelessness and all kinds of human affliction we realize how powerless and overwhelmed we are by other people's misery. Still, there is something we can do. But what? We can speak with confidence to our Heavenly Mother, the Immaculate Virgin, who will help us to gently heal where it hurts, to be present for those who are alone, to make a phone call to see if everything is fine, to give confidence and hope, to smile and encourage to turn together with Mary towards her Son.

⁶ Every day, rosary meditation is broadcast by numerous TV channels: KTO (in French), TV 2000 (in Italian), EWTN (in English, Spanish and some other languages).

WE HAVE BEEN TO PROCESSIONS

There are daily processions in Lourdes but also those which could be considered as a way of locomotion for the People of God. Groups of pilgrims move from one place to another, with calm and in silent prayer. Everybody is exactly where he or she should be and doing what he or she is supposed to do. Everybody is calm and ready to pray, during the adoration or during the Holy Mass.

In their free time, families walk around without paying attention at other people. Even if they go to the Church for their Sunday Mass, they can take this short walk as a time of procession. This is exactly how Bernadette felt about her procession to the Grotto: concentrated on her prayer, she was getting ready to meet the Lady.

WE HAVE STAYED THERE IN SILENCE TO MEET CHRIST AND HIS SACRAMENTS

Reading and meditating on the Word of God, keeping silent and listening to the voice of Christ are parts of a Lourdes pilgrimage because they are the most essential parts in the life of a believer, of all baptized people, of every disciple of Jesus Christ.

The Immaculate Virgin is our Mother. We must observe her and listen to her so that we can imitate her appropriate and beautiful relationship to her Son Jesus Christ.

Such a relationship is vital for our troubled life. We finally understand that it is vital because it persists in every single moment.

We have the possibility to go on a pilgrimage in order to find Christ, to welcome him there where he is: in our own life.

The process of pilgrimage that is experienced in a sanctuary will become part, for some people, of their ordinary Christian life. For some other people, it will allow them to join the life of the Christian community. In any case, for both of them, the sanctuary offers a powerful moment, a moment of starting again, a moment of a real departure ⁷.

⁷ *Lourdes, les mots de Marie* (Lourdes the spoken Words of Mary, Publisher: Ontau, 2019) by Fr. Régis-Marie de la Teyssonnière

Prayer of a poor beggar to Jesus

Oh, Jesus, give me,
I pray,...
the bread of humility...
... the bread of obedience...
...the bread of charity...
...the bread of patience...
... the bread of seeing you alone
in all things and
at all times.

Bernadette Soubirous
(Personal notebook, 1873)