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Our Lady of Lourdes Chapel Dedication Homily

February 11, 2025

By Father Thomas More Garrett, O.P.

In strolling through the Mondor building, one cannot help but be dazzled by the state of the art technology. When first touring the space a few weeks back with Dr. McInnis, my impression of the interior was one of science exhibit meets carnival, complete with talking dolls and booths. But of course, the mannequins are not dolls, and replica hospital wards and medical offices are not carnival sites.

Maternity care is among the skills that will be taught in this building and so it is appropriate that this chapel bear the name of Jesus's own mother, under the title of Our Lady of Lourdes. What is Lourdes? Lourdes is a town in the Pyrenees mountain region in the south of France near the country's border with Spain. And parts of Lourdes, appear to visitors today as something like a carnival. I have even heard it described as 'Catholic Disney world.'

But people do not come to Lourdes for booths and games. Many people make the trip to Lourdes today for the same reason hospitals and doctors' offices are so often frequented. If you look past the lights and the attractions of the carnival atmosphere throughout Lourdes, you will notice the wheelchairs and crutches and the people, young and old, who must use them.

Lourdes was not a destination for the sick in 1858 when a 14 year-old girl named Bernadette Soubirous experienced visits from a woman, dressed in white and wearing a blue sash, who appeared in a niche above a rugged cave now called the grotto. Bernadette would claim that "a Lady" – she never shared the name Mary - appeared to her 18 times from February 11, 1858 through July 16 of that year. The events made the town of Lourdes famous.



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But Lourdes gathered popularity, not so much on account of what only Bernadette could see – only Bernadette ever saw the appearance of the Lady - but on account of what the Lady's visit accompanied. The same thing that makes hospitals and doctors' offices so sought after: healing. Both Lourdes and hospitals attract the same kind of people - those in need of healing.

The first healings came in March of that year, 1858. The earliest recorded was a young mother named Catherine Latapie who had suffered a fall and lost the use of her right hand – a significant deficiency for a young mother expected to carry children. Catherine lived only a few miles from Lourdes and news of the apparitions promptly reached her village. On a whim, Catherine went to Lourdes, knelt down next to Bernadette while Bernadette was praying in the grotto, and, on account of some mysterious inspiration, bathed her hand in the little hollow which had already collected water from a spring that flowed underneath the cave – the source of the water we will use today - and straightaway her hand returned to normal.

Other healings followed. So many, that by recent count – and there is a registry of claimed miracles in Lourdes – at least 7,000 miraculous physical cures have been attributed to the intercession of Our Lady of Lourdes from 1858 to this day. Only a small number however, meet the rigorous demands the scientific community sets for the unexplained. Lourdes is the only religious shrine for which there is a scientific body – first established in the early 20th century – of doctors and scientists whose function it is to examine claimed cures to 'rule out' natural or science-based explanatory causes. Most do not pass that threshold – this body – the Lourdes Medical Bureau – has found only 70 cures it cannot explain in some alternative fashion, the most recent dating to 2013.



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While Bernadette witnessed the first of the claimed miracles – she would come to know Catherine Latapie – she was not herself a miracle-worker. Nor would Bernadette experience personally any cure of her own. Bernadette was not healed of the asthma she had since childhood that would later contribute to her death at the age of 35. Shortly after the visitations concluded, Bernadette was whisked away from Lourdes. The popularity of the apparitions and the number of people coming in pursuit of cures made it impossible for her to remain in her parents' home. Bernadette left first for a church-sponsored boarding school, where she learned to read and write, and later joined the Sisters of Charity in the convent at Nevers where she would live the remainder of her life.

But there were other paths for Bernadette apart from the one she ultimately took. Before she left for the convent, at least one proposal of marriage was made, this one from a medical student. A future physician wrote to Bernadette's father, telling him that "I would like to marry Bernadette. If I were not to marry her, I think I would leave the world; I would ask God for the grace to go and die in seclusion." Scholars do not know whether Bernadette ever saw the letter. Her would-be suitor did not go off and die and seclusion. He did what most spurned lover's do – he moved on.

Bernadette was never formally trained as a nurse, but in the convent, it was only somewhat natural that she become its infirmarian, having the care over the sick and elderly sisters. As part of her duties, Bernadette had to learn pharmaceutical measurements, navigating a change from traditional French units to the metric system. There are notebooks where she writes, for example "Three scruples or one dram equals 4 grams." Bernadette kept detailed notes of her patients, like medical professionals today (just not covered by HIPAA). She left elaborate instructions for treating conditions like rheumatoid arthritis.



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Her contemporaries reported that Bernadette was so attached to her patients that she was actually somewhat sad when they were well enough to leave the infirmary. She sat for long hours with the elderly. One sister reported: "At 11 o'clock I called her. She came right away. I was amazed at the kindness and gentleness she showed her patient."

The physician who supervised the infirmary wrote the following evaluation of Bernadette: "An infirmarian who does her work to perfection. Possessing a calm and gentle nature, she cares for her patients with great intelligence, overlooking nothing required. Accordingly, she enjoys great authority and, for my part, my complete confidence."

But some of my favorite accounts of Bernadette are of her more playful, or even mischievous side. I'll give just one example -but there are several. Bernadette's order was not cloistered and one could encounter the sisters in the neighborhood. Bernadette was famous on account of the apparitions, but few knew what she looked like, giving her a kind of anonymity outside the community. Bernadette hated attention, and it bothered her to have to repeat her account of the visions over and over again. And there were many questions people had for her that she could not answer -like who was in heaven and who wasn't. One afternoon, a group of women approach Bernadette unaware of who she was. They told her that they had come to Nevers in hope of seeing the visionary. Bernadette told them that today was their lucky day. They would most certainly not leave Nevers without having laid eyes on the girl who had seen Our Lady. She pointed to one of the doors in the convent and told them that the next sister to come through that door would be the visionary Bernadette. They all started walking toward the door, then Bernadette herself took off running, passed through the door, shut and locked it behind her.



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Bernadette never returned to Lourdes after she left there for the convent. She died, in the infirmary at Nevers, at the age of 35, after having contracted cholera. She never saw the lines of people at the shrine.

And Bernadette never did live to see with her own eyes the chief request the Lady made of her finally fulfilled. What was that request? The Lady that appeared to Bernadette did not ask for a hospital or a hospice to be built (and yet there are several there today to house the many sick pilgrims). She never even asked that Bernadette enter a convent.

What the Lady asked Bernadette to do – and this is really the point of the Lourdes apparition - is to have a church built above the grotto. That was the Lady's main request to Bernadette - to build a church. When Bernadette explained to the bishop and priests the focus of her conversations with the miraculous Lady and the topic of their discussion and her one main demand, they laughed and mocked Bernadette. Lourdes was a backwater village, far from Paris, there simply was no money or even a practical need for what Bernadette was suggesting. The region was neither rich nor populous. Why another church when the village already possessed one? But the healings brought the attention; the people with money believed Bernadette, and the resources came. In a round-about way, the healings built the church and were the first stones of its construction.



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The mystery of Lourdes continues to spark curiosity today. Not too long ago, in 2014, scholars from the National Institutes of Health and a French professor of medicine undertook anew an investigation into the claimed miracles at Lourdes. They produced an academic paper on the topic, where they wrote the following:

The least that can be stated is that exposures to Lourdes and its representations (Lourdes water, mental images, replicas of the grotto, etc.), in a context of prayer, have induced exceptional, usually instantaneous, symptomatic, and at best physical, cures of widely different diseases. Although what follows is regarded by some as a hackneyed concept, any and all scholars of Lourdes have come to agree with one of two equally acceptable—but seemingly conflicting and irreconcilable—points of view on the core issue: are the Lourdes cures a matter of divine intervention or not? Faith is set against science.

The authors continue:

After many mental twists and turns, we reached the same conclusions as [an earlier researcher] some eighty to hundred years ago: “Instead of being a simple place of miracles, of interest only to the pious, Lourdes presents a considerable scientific interest,” and “Although uncommon, the miraculous cures are evidence of somatic and mental processes we do not know.”



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They continue “Upping the ante,” and this is the important part, “we dare write that understanding these processes could bring about new and effective therapeutic methods.”

What I wonder is whether we still have the inspiration in the medical sciences to take up that dare – to consider the possibilities beyond. We have greater, and more effective technology, than was commonly available even in 2014 when those words were written. Since then, AIDS is no longer a sentence of death, glucose monitoring is no longer the hassle it was even then, and we have prosthetics that work more and more like the body parts they replace. A Catherine Latapie of today would have no need for a miracle. Science can produce a new hand.

And also, of course, we are doing more with medical technology now than healing what has been lost. Since 2014 medical technology has been developed such that it can turn even the young into an experiment for a gender ideology that seeks to re-invent creation itself. And when medicine offers no hope, some in the profession seek to extinguish the need. A movement that started as ‘mercy killing’ for the elderly reaches further into the earliest stages of life itself in search of more categories of ‘lives that are not worth living.’



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At the same time, since 2014, there has been much talk about a loss in the interest of faith. The rise of the so-called ‘nones’ – not the Bernadette kind, but N-O-N-E-S. Those with no religion. What is at stake with the decline of Christianity in society is not the absence of churchgoers or less church weddings or baptisms; it is not the loss of a faith community. What is at stake is the loss of a kind of humanity; a humanity that no longer has a taste for the sacred. So much so that, like gender ideology, it has to invent new meanings for the term ‘sacred’ itself. And when we finally lose the sense of the sacred entirely, we will become first, in our professions, slaves, and then victims, of a rebellion against creation and life itself – as if to transform a carnival into a haunted house.

But we don’t have to do so. Contra the authors of the 2014 paper, “faith need not be set against science.” Bernadette’s own legacy challenges the claim.

And my hope is that this school does as well, inspired by Bernadette, someone who ran away from the pious fan ladies, but remained firmly attached to the sick. May this chapel in the heart of this building, keep us connected to some sense of the sacred, as humankind continues to explore the mysteries of its future, and how it might be healed.

Resources:

Francois, B., Sternberg, E.M. & Fee, E (2014). The Lourdes Medical Cures Revised. *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 69(1), 135-162 doi: 10.1093/jhmas/jrs041

Laurentin, R. (1999). *Bernadette speaks: A life of St. Bernadette Soubirous in her own words*. Pauline Books & Media.