



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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Our Lady of Lourdes

In the year 1858, in the folds of the east-central Pyrenees, Lourdes was a little township with a total population of around four thousand people. An ancient story relates that a Saracen emir named Mirat occupied the fortress overlooking the city in the year 778. When he was afterwards converted to Christianity he took the baptismal name Lorus or Lourdus, which was bestowed on the town itself and later transformed into Lourdes.

In Lourdes there lived a girl called Marie-Bernarde Soubirous, known to all as Bernadette. She was the eldest of a large, very poor family, and, now aged fourteen, helped her mother with all the household chores. Thursday February 11 was a cold, wet day, and a veil of mist lay over the town and the surrounding mountains. Bernadette, her sister Toinette and a friend called Jeanne went out to collect wood on the hillside of Massabielle. At a certain point, their way crossed a little canal that flowed into the River Gave. On the other side, above a grotto, an oval niche could be seen in the rock. Many dry branches lay around. Bernadette herself recounted what happened. "One day I went to the banks of the River Gave to fetch wood with two other girls. I heard a noise like wind in the trees. I looked at the hillside, but the poplar trees were still. Then I looked up towards the grotto and I saw a woman dressed in white, with a sky-blue girdle and a golden rose on one of her feet, the same color as her rosary-beads.

I thought I was seeing things, and rubbed my eyes. I put my hand in my pocket to take hold of my rosary. I tried to make the sign of the Cross, but I couldn't lift my hand to my forehead. When the Lady made the sign of the Cross I tried again, and although my hand was shaking, I managed to make it. I began to say the rosary, while the Lady kept count on her beads, but without opening her lips. When I finished the rosary, the apparition disappeared."

Our Lady appeared to her eighteen times in all: twelve times in February, four times in March, once in April, and the last time on July 16 of that same year, 1858. Only Bernadette saw her. As the apparitions continued, more and more people came to the spot. They could see the great joy on her face, but could see and hear nothing themselves. The Lady did not speak until the third apparition, on

February 18. Then on that day, Bernadette offered her a paper and pen asking her to write down her name, and the Lady said to her in the local patois of the Béarn – Bigorre district, “It is not necessary... I do not promise to make you happy in this world, but in the next.” On February 24, at her eighth appearance, the Lady said, “Penance, penance, penance...” and added, “Pray for the conversion of sinners.” The next day, on our Lady’s express command, Bernadette dug with her hands until the Lourdes spring gushed out, whose water has worked and still works so many miracles. On March 2 the Lady asked her for a chapel to be built there, where people could come in procession. And finally, at her sixteenth appearance on March 25, the Lady revealed her name. Bernadette asked her for it three times over. To begin with she smiled but did not reply. Bernadette related, “The third time I asked, the Lady joined her hands and lifted them to her breast... looked up to Heaven... then, gently parting her hands and leaning down towards me she said: ‘*Que soy éra Immaculada Councepciou*, I am the Immaculate Conception’.”

Bernadette ran to tell the parish priest, Father Peyramale, what the Lady had said. At first he had been sceptical and did not believe in the apparitions, but what she now told him made a deep impression on him. He knew that she was ignorant in religious matters, not yet having made her First Holy Communion – she would make it on June 3 that year. She had never heard of the dogma proclaimed by Pope Pius IX four years earlier, that our Lady was conceived without sin.

The Bishop of Tarbes appointed a commission to study the matter, and in 1862 he accepted the apparitions of our Lady at Lourdes as true. Papal approval followed: in 1876, Pope Pius IX delegated the Archbishop of Paris to consecrate the church; Leo XIII approved the celebration of the Apparition of the Immaculate Virgin in Lourdes on February 11, and Pius X declared this a feast for the whole Church; and Pius XI beatified and then canonized Bernadette.

The presence of our Lady at Massabielle is manifested in the miracles, both spiritual and physical, that take place there.

In difficult times

Our Lady of Lourdes is especially linked to a passage in the history of Opus Dei which remains close to its heart: the end of the journey on foot across the Pyrenees undertaken by St Josemaría in 1937, together with several of his spiritual sons and other people, during the Spanish Civil War.

December 10 was the day fixed to leave Andorra and cross into France, so as to re-enter Spain at Hendaye. For St Josemaría it marked the end of a number of

intensive, unforgettable days, marked by extreme physical exhaustion and, in the early stages, anguish of mind, due to his uncertainty whether he had made the right decision. Then a caress from our Lady in the Rialp woods had confirmed that he was right to make the journey.

In Andorra the little party obtained a transit visa to enter and leave France within the space of twenty-four hours. Time was short, the road were unsafe, there was heavy snow and intense cold, and everyone was clearly exhausted. “Nevertheless,” wrote Pedro Casciaro, one of the people with St Josemaría, “we did not go directly to Hendaye. The Father wanted to stop off in Lourdes to give thanks to our Lady. There was a keen wind and we were soaked to the marrow, shivering with the cold. We set out for Lourdes very early in the morning. The Father went in silence, deeply recollected, preparing for Holy Mass. We prayed in silence for a time, and said the Rosary. When we arrived, after overcoming a minor difficulty in the sacristy of the Shrine (the Father had not been able to obtain a cassock, and they didn’t want to let him celebrate Mass) he was able to celebrate, properly vested in a white chasuble, at the second side-altar on the right of the nave, quite near the door into the crypt. I served his Mass. We didn’t spend more than two hours in Lourdes...” (Pedro Casciaro, *Dream and Your Dreams Will Fall Short*, [p. 129]).

At about half-past nine in the morning the Founder of Opus Dei celebrated Holy Mass just a few meters away from the grotto of Massabielle. The intensity of those moments may easily be imagined, and how hard St Josemaría prayed for his children, for peace in Spain and world peace, and for the expansion of Opus Dei.