

Our Lady of Lourdes: Consolation and healing for the sick

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On February 11, the Catholic Church marks the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, in commemoration of the Blessed Virgin Mary who in 1858 appeared multiple times to the 14-year old girl Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes, France.

Bernadette was from a poor family and from a young age suffered ill-health. On 11 February 1858, Bernadette was with her sister and friend playing and gathering wood along the local river when they reached a shallow cave. Bernadette's companions took their shoes off and entered the water while Bernadette remained, knowing her mother would be angry if she entered the icy water. After growing impatient, she entered the water and, moving towards the grotto, saw a vision of a young woman dressed in white with a blue sash. Her hands trembling, Bernadette stayed where she was and reached into her pocket and together with the lady, began to pray the Rosary.

The lady then vanished and Bernadette could not comprehend what she had seen. The young girl continued to visit the grotto and pray with the Blessed Virgin Mary, who asked Bernadette to convey the message of repentance and prayer. On one occasion she asked the girl to dig into the ground and drink from the spring she found there.

The Blessed Virgin Mary continued to appear to Bernadette and said to her, 'I am the Immaculate Conception.' Bernadette was a simple and devout Catholic from a poor village family. When she reported the visions to her local priest he was surprised and informed the bishop about it. Her description of the lady as the Immaculate Conception (which had been promulgated by Pope Pius IX only a few years earlier) helped convince the local authorities of the veracity of the apparitions.

Four years later, the local bishop recognised the legitimacy of the apparition and endorsed the veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Lourdes. Thousands of pilgrims have since flocked to the apparition site, which has become a major site of Marian pilgrimage together with Our Lady of Guadalupe (Mexico) and Our Lady of Fatima (Portugal).

The Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes was officially included in the Church's liturgical calendar in 1907. Over the years, there have been thousands of reports of healing from the spring water at Lourdes, but less than 100 have been recognised by the Church as miraculous.

World Day of the Sick

On the feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Lourdes, we also mark the World Day of the Sick, an opportunity to devote special attention to the sick and to those who provide them with care and assistance. In his [message for this year's World Day of the Sick](#), Pope Francis highlighted the stark inequality that exists in healthcare systems around the world, made worse during the worldwide coronavirus pandemic.

'Investing resources in the care and assistance of the sick is a priority linked to the fundamental principle that health is a primary common good,' writes Pope Francis.

The elderly, weak and vulnerable people are not always granted access to care, Pope Francis says. This he puts down to the result of political decisions, resource management and greater or lesser commitment on the part of those holding positions of responsibility.

The message of Our Lady of Lourdes is one that is central to the Catholic faith: she calls for repentance and trust in her Son, Jesus. The feast day is also a timely reminder of the universal call to be close to and extend our help to the poor and needy.

'Such closeness is a precious balm', Pope Francis says, 'that provides support and consolation to the sick in their suffering.'

'As Christians, we experience that closeness as a sign of the love of Jesus Christ, the *Good Samaritan*, who draws near with compassion to every man and woman wounded by sin. ... Indeed, fraternal love in Christ generates a community of healing, a community that leaves no one behind, a community that is inclusive and welcoming, especially to those most in need.'