

LESSONS IN FAITH FROM BERNADETTE



My pilgrimage to Lourdes turned out to be a journey of discovery. I came to know not only the real Bernadette and the meaning of the apparitions, but I learned about myself in the process as well. In speaking with the experts of the sanctuary, I grew in understanding that Lourdes is not a quaint tourist destination or a historical museum. It is a living sanctuary with as much relevance today as it had a century and a half ago, because Lourdes is the message of the Gospel and therefore is a path to happiness. For so many people lost in a world of darkness, unsure of their bearings, Lourdes is a beacon of light. It helps people find their way and gives them strength for the journey. Lourdes provides an invitation for true conversion by allowing pilgrims to encounter Christ through sacraments and prayer, to make acts of penance, and

to turn their hearts and lives over to God. It is an opportunity to discover, define, and deepen their faith.

During my time in Lourdes, I had a chance to reflect on the appearance of the Virgin in a less-than-immaculate grotto to a child of lowly status and compromised health. I saw in this a great message for all people. While the apparitions are over, the message most certainly is not. God chose this unique encounter to speak powerfully through Mary to meet not just Bernadette, but all of us where we are in life, in the midst of our poverty and failures. He comes to tell us that he loves us just as we are, with our successes but also with our wounds, our weaknesses, and our limitations. He offers forgiveness for our sinfulness and invites us to turn from the world and its materialism and embrace instead a deep and meaningful spiritual life. This is wonderful and freeing news. God also asks of us something important, and that is to in turn love and serve our fellow humanity in their physical and spiritual poverty. We are called to increase our faithfulness and live a life dedicated to loving and serving God and his people, seeing him especially in the poor, sick, and marginalized. Lourdes, therefore, is a call to action.

A Sense of Compassion

As I got to know Bernadette, especially through the pages of her journal, I found I liked her instantly. I did not see her as a plastic figure kneeling in prayer with her hands folded at all times. There was genuineness and boldness about her that reminded me of Jo from *Little Women*, one of my favorite childhood literary heroines. Bernadette was of the earth, loving nature and preferring to be in the mountainous outdoors as a youngster; and she was down-to-earth as well, a trait she would never outgrow. There was nothing prissy or pretentious about this young girl; she simply told it like it was. While she certainly took her mission seriously, Bernadette

enjoyed life and looked for opportunities to introduce levity. She had a delightful sense of humor that she judiciously revealed to her family or the sisters in her community in an effort to lift their spirits. She was a true friend to those around her. I was struck at how life-giving Bernadette was in her interactions. Whether it was for the nosey visitors clamoring to see her or for the sick and dying, whom she tenderly cared for in the infirmary, Bernadette acted on their behalf and not her own. She was a giver, sustained by her love for God and the Blessed Mother, and that challenged me to give more generously of myself in my own circles of influence.

Bernadette helped me to be more compassionate in my giving as well. After my pilgrimage to Lourdes, I found a greater appreciation for the sick and suffering. I became more active in cooking meals for those in need, taking the Eucharist to shut-ins, and providing emotional support to those facing advanced age and death. Over the years, my husband and I have shared our Lourdes water (brought home from our pilgrimage) with numerous individuals, prayed with them, and even helped to send two different friends to the sanctuary for their special healing needs. Bernadette showed me the joy in serving others when done in a spirit of love.