

BERNADETTE: GROUNDED IN FAITH



In every sense of the word, Bernadette Soubirous was a woman of faith. The test of her faith began in the very earliest years of her life. Born to Catholic peasants, François and Louise Soubirous, on January 7, 1844, Bernadette's first test involved bouts with various illnesses. By the age of six, she had wrestled with stomach trouble, a spleen disorder, and chronic asthma, which made breathing difficult. By eleven, she had contracted cholera, which worsened her asthma and stunted her growth to a child-like stature of four-foot-eight.

As Bernadette struggled to recover from cholera, her parents struggled to make ends meet at the Boly flour mill, the first home to Bernadette and her three younger siblings. A depressed economy, recent drought, and the industrialization occurring in the larger cities of France all took their toll on the small family business in the mountainous town of Lourdes.

The family soon found themselves forced to close the mill and seek cramped quarters in the poorest section of town.

Bernadette was unable to attend formal school due to her illness, finances, and the need to help her family at home. Her lack of academic and religious education alienated her from children her own age and it was a great disappointment not to be able to receive her First Holy Communion with her peers.

By the time Bernadette turned thirteen, her family was evicted from the slum in which they had been living. François could not find work adequate to sustain his family. When the family was on the street with nowhere to turn, a relative took pity on them and offered the former one-room town jail, *le Cachot*, which was no longer considered fit, even for prisoners. The damp and musty hovel so aggravated Bernadette's asthma that her parents decided to send her to live with a family farther up in the Pyrenees in the town of Bartrès, where she would serve as nanny and shepherdess. It was hoped that the clean air, dry sleeping conditions, and ample food would improve the child's health and that she would have an opportunity to learn her catechism there. Besides, as François reasoned, it would mean one less mouth for him to feed.

Bartrès, however, presented its own difficulties. The woman of the household worked the young teen hard. While caring for the children, the house, and the sheep, she saw that there was no time to attend catechism class, the sole reason Bernadette had agreed to go to Bartrès in the first place. As a compromise, the woman attempted to teach Bernadette herself. This arrangement was most unpleasant because the Catechism was written in French and not the local dialect that Bernadette spoke. The young girl was simply unable to grasp it. The woman grew so impatient with her uneducated pupil

that she finally threw the book across the room and shouted, "You'll never know anything!"

Bernadette learned quickly to be silent in the face of harsh treatment, a character trait that would serve her well in life. When questioned about it later by a cousin, she replied simply, "I thought God wanted this. When we think, God permits this, we don't complain." At the same time, however, Bernadette had made up her mind not to allow Bartrès to stand in the way of her receiving First Holy Communion; her heart was set on this sacrament. Four months later, just after her fourteenth birthday, Bernadette returned to Lourdes to finish her catechesis, despite the hardship and poverty that awaited her. Little did she know that the one who would truly prepare her for the sacraments would be none other than the Mother of God herself.

A Vision at Massabielle

Bernadette certainly had reason to grumble about her severe state of health and poverty that winter, but it was not her nature to complain. She was generally cheerful and content with life. Even then, her philosophy was, "When we wish for nothing, we always have what we need."

On the morning of February 11, 1858, Bernadette, in typical fashion, was pleading with her mother to be given permission to collect firewood with her sister and a friend. Louise didn't like the idea of her asthmatic child going out into the cold rain, but she knew how Bernadette detested feeling useless. Reluctantly she gave her consent, instructing her daughter to wear her stockings and a hood. That bleak winter day would forever change Bernadette, Lourdes, and the world.