

Immaculate Mary, Our Guide to the Eucharist

Fr. Gary Holmes, Missionary of the Most Holy Eucharist

On February 11th 1858, Our Lady was sent by God to Lourdes to a young girl named Bernadette. Mary has been sent by God to lead us to Jesus. Nobody can come to the Son unless granted by the Father. Nobody can go to the Father except through Jesus. Mary is always leading us to her Son Jesus and she tells us anew to "Do whatever He tells you" (Jn 2:5).

In Lourdes she is calling for conversion for sinners. She asks for penance so that we can prepare the way for Jesus to come more into our lives and for sinners to come back to Him.

The Grotto of Massabielle, like the manger in Bethlehem, was a dirty, hidden, damp and cold place. It was known locally as the pigs shelter, and was also an area known for prostitution. It was in this place that the Virgin Mary came and revealed herself as the Immaculate Conception. Dressed in white as a sign of total purity, she showed how our God loves us and what he desires for each of us.

Massabielle translates as the Old Rock. This tells us that God comes to us in the midst of our poverty and failures. Here God reveals to us both His heart and our hearts. Here God comes to tell us that he loves us despite our failings. Likewise, in the Holy Eucharist, Jesus comes into hearts of stone and transforms them with His splendour and love.

During the 3rd Apparition, when Bernadette held out a sheet of paper and a pencil so that she might write down her name, Our Lady replied: "what I have to say to you does not have to be written down". This was because Mary wanted to enter into a relationship which is of the order of love, at the level of the heart. Bernadette from the start was invited to open the depths of her heart to this Message of Love. Jesus, in the Eucharist, desires this relationship of love in our hearts.

During the 8th to 12th Apparitions Bernadette, in response to requests by Our Lady, moves on her knees to the back of the Grotto. She kisses the dirty disgusting ground of the Grotto. She eats some bitter grass. She scrapes the ground three times trying to drink the muddy water, at the back of the Grotto, she tries sucking in a little and then throwing it away, she takes mud in her hands and she smears her face. Then the young girl turns to the crowd with her hands apart. They all say: "She's mad!" These actions are biblical actions. Because Our Lady asked her, Bernadette acts out the Incarnation, the Passion and the death of Christ.

The Grotto was choked with grass and mud. Bernadette frees this Grotto because it hides an immense treasure, which must be brought out into the open. Bernadette scrapes the ground, finds the spring and drinks from and washes with the muddy water which becomes clear.

By these actions, the mystery of the heart of Jesus is revealed for us: "A soldier pierced his heart with a lance and there immediately flowed out blood and water" (Jn 19:34). It is, as well, the depths of the mystery of the heart of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God: "The water that I shall give you will become, in you, a spring welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14). The grass and the mud signify the human heart, wounded by sin. But in the bottom of this heart, there is the life of God, as signified by the spring. Our Lady asks for conversion and penance. By penance we will cleanse our hearts from the mud caused by sin and then we can worthily receive the source of our lives, which is Jesus in the Eucharist.

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During the thirteenth Apparition Our Lady said to Bernadette: "Go, tell the priests to come here in procession and build a chapel here." Here is the real reason for Our Lady's coming - to give Jesus to the people and to lead people to Jesus. She brings all the pilgrims to the foot of the altar where Jesus is truly present and granting great graces. Eucharistic processions are a regular occurrence and often as a rule the Bishop blesses the sick. It is here that most of the documented miracles in Lourdes have occurred.

At the sixteenth Apparition, Bernadette went to the Grotto, and in obedience to the Parish Priest asked the Lady for her name. Mary reveals herself as the Immaculate Conception, thus confirming the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception 1854 (Pope Pius IX). The Immaculate Conception is, as the Church teaches, "Mary, conceived without sin, thanks to the merits of the Cross of Christ". Thus the Immaculate Conception is also the sign of what all people, recreated by God are called to be. St. Peter Julian Eymard, before he founded his Order, belonged to a Society that was especially dedicated to Mary in her Immaculate Conception (the Marianists).

Pope John Paul II describes Mary as a woman of the Eucharist in her whole life. One can thus see that in Lourdes there is a constant and strong reference to the Eucharist with daily celebrations of the Eucharist, with Adoration of the Most Holy Sacrament and with the blessing of the sick, which constitutes one of the strongest moments of the visit of pilgrims.

On the same night that Jesus instituted the Eucharist, he washed the feet of the Apostles. In Lourdes, as well as leading us to Jesus present in the Eucharist, Mary invites us to wash in the baths. Here, the many volunteers take Jesus' words to heart when he tells us to do the same. The real cleansing takes place when we have our sins washed away by Jesus and then the real healing. Our souls give life to our bodies (Jn 6:63). Jesus demonstrated that sickness is often caused by sin (Mt 9:2; Mc 2:5). He forgives, he heals and tells us not to sin again so that we won't be worse than before (Jn 5:14). Our Lady of Lourdes also asks for conversion before she unveils the spring and requests the chapel (Eucharist). After reconciliation we can approach the Eucharist with confidence.

When, on the day after her first communion, a friend of Bernadette asked her: "What made you happier: your first communion or the apparitions?", Bernadette replied, "they are two things that go together, but cannot be compared. I was happy in both". And her pastor made this testimony to the Bishop of Tarbes in regard to her first communion: "Bernadette behaved with immense concentration, with an attention that left nothing to be desired ... she appeared profoundly aware of the holy action that was taking place. Everything developed in her in an astonishing way."

Our Lady appeared once more after Bernadette had made her first Holy Communion. It was on the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Bernadette was on the other side of the River Gave and she saw the Virgin Mary more beautiful than ever.

With the Apparitions of Mary and the uncovering of the spring, the place locally known as the 'pigs shelter' was transformed from a dark, dirty, hidden, damp and cold place to place filled with light and life. Like the prodigal son, let us not remain in the darkness of sin and be content to feed on the pods given to the pigs. Let us heed the call of Mary and return to our true homeland with the Father where we will feast on the Eucharist. Let us reclaim our share of the inheritance which is none other than Jesus Christ Himself. Amen.