

## **“Saint Bernadette - Choosing a Childlike Heart over a Cynical Heart”**

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When Catholic men and women all over the world think of the grotto in Lourdes, France, they cannot help but be filled with peace, joy, and hope as they remember the apparitions of Our Lady and the many healings that have taken place since those days. It is sacred ground for all Catholics - but in a particular way, I think the members of our Order have a special fondness for this place. Here in the Milwaukee region as I began as associate chaplain, some of my earliest encounters with the Order came from visiting two of our now deceased members: Daniel Meehan, K.M. and William “Bill” Drew K.M. Even as their health began to fail, their rich memories of serving the *malades* while on pilgrimage at Lourdes were frequent topics of conversation.

To be a pilgrim and friend to Lourdes means that you also are a pilgrim and friend to the poor, humble, shepherdess, Saint Bernadette Soubirous. She offers a beautiful witness to choosing a *childlike heart*, over a *cynical heart*. Her sickness, poverty, and the sufferings she experienced in her life could have easily led to despair, hopelessness, over even cynicism. She chose again and again to become more *childlike* over becoming *cynical*. We are always faced with this same temptation, especially in these most unusual times, so we turn now to Bernadette’s example.

The story of Bernadette and the apparitions at Lourdes is well-known to many. February 11, 1858 began as a day unlike many others. Bernadette set out with her companions to gather wood and upon her return the Blessed Mother appeared to her in the first of the eighteen apparitions. Despite subsequent apparitions, it was only after the telling of the Lady’s name (“I am the Immaculate Conception”) in her Patois dialect that the heart of her local Pastor was changed.

The beautiful history of the grotto, the processions, and the building of the Shrine that followed has brought joy, peace, conversion, and healing to all those who have visited Lourdes.

What a gift that Bernadette received! But that did not mean she had an easy life. Quite the contrary, her life was marked by poverty, poor health, suffering, and even at times persecution. The first-born of Francois and Louise Soubirous, she grew up in a loving, faithful household, but one that was often marked by utter poverty. Because of financial hardships at her father's mill, as a young girl she was largely raised in the "Gaol", the abandoned room of the old town prison. Several times Bernadette had to live outside of the family home where she was not treated kindly and lived as a servant girl.

After the apparitions themselves, the number of Crosses and the amount of suffering actually increased, not decreased. Her accounts of the apparitions were met with disbelief by friends, her own family, and the strong-willed local Pastor. Famous too are the harsh interrogations she went through by the local police commissioner and medical examiners. When she finally entered religious life in the convent at Nevers, the mother superior's severity and coldness towards her personally caused much suffering before dying from tuberculosis at the age of thirty-five. There was much in Bernadette's life that could have led to her exclaiming, like Jeremiah the Prophet, "O Lord, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived" (Jeremiah 20:7, RSV). Were it not by God's grace and her faith, the purity of her childlike heart could have been overwhelmed by the poverty of her childhood, her physical suffering, and the lack of belief about the apparitions.

Friends, when we experience suffering, how easy it is for our own hearts to become hardened. To say like Jeremiah - you've tricked me God! This is your reward for my faithfulness? Especially in the present times so filled with hurt, anger, and division it can be easy to lose hope. The human heart is so sensitive and in these past months there is much to justify our hearts losing

faith, giving into despair, or even becoming cynical about the Church and the world. Our Gospel this Sunday (Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A) reminds us that our Lord reveals the mysteries of the Kingdom not to the “wise and the learned” but rather to His “little ones”. Becoming like “little children” before our heavenly Father is not a disconnect from reality or a return to immaturity, but rather a choosing over and over again of the pure childlike heart like that of Bernadette over a heart that has grown cold and cynical. Choosing a pure heart, a childlike heart isn’t just a “nicety” - it’s the way of the Beatitudes that allows us to paradoxically live charity and joy while being immersed in suffering. Bernadette’s life gives us a few practical helps of how to daily choose a childlike heart over a cynical heart.

First, be careful with our words! Our words - for better or for worse - share in the creative power of God’s Word. What we say affects others, but it also has an effect on our own hearts. Bernadette was not afraid to speak the truth, but also realized the effect it would have on her if it was not done in charity. The first time she met with Abbe Peyramale, her local Pastor, he began by saying “Ah, so it’s you! Queer stories are being told about you, my poor Bernadette”. Bernadette chose to not respond and their meeting ended by her giving a look that bore no grudge, and she bowed and left. Later in the convent at Nevers, another sister was speaking to her about the Mother’s harshness towards Bernadette. She simply said: “But I owe her great gratitude for the good she has done in my soul”. Friends, the list of things we are talking about, critiquing, and disagreeing about in these days is quite long. Bernadette invites us to charity always in conversation, because she knows how it can harden our hearts if we’re not careful.

Second, to pray for the grace to see the present times as part of God’s will. “When the good God permits it, one does not complain”. Bernadette invites us to always look for creative ways to better a situation, to bring about greater happiness. Yet, she also invites us to say “yes” to the Cross

when God has permitted a time of suffering. Lying in bed during one of the many times in which she was seriously ill, she simply said: “My duty is to be sick and to pray”. Bernadette invites us to pray for the grace daily to see even the Cross and the things we never would have asked for as part of God’s permissive will and places where He still can act.

Third, to give our hearts over to Mary daily. The Lady did not speak until the Third Apparition, but Bernadette would often say that she was the most beautiful Lady she had ever seen and that the Lady smiled at her. We turn to Mary as Catholics because her beauty, her smile, and her protection has the power to convert even the most hardened of hearts of sinners. She also has the same power to care for our weak and fragile hearts too, to keep them from growing cold and cynical.

Before I turn things over to Fra’ Tom, we close now in prayer: “Loving Mother of the Redeemer, gate of heaven, star of the sea, assist your people who have fallen yet strive to rise again. To the wonderment of nature you bore your Creator, yet remained a virgin after as before. You who received Gabriel's joyful greeting, have pity on us poor sinners”.