

The Message of
Bernadette



by Vernon Johnson & Donal Foley



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Message of Lourdes



Suffering is something which modern men and women, including many Catholics, find very difficult to endure, or even to understand. “What is the point of it?” they say. “Why would a good God allow us to suffer?” In the past people largely accepted suffering, and even today, in the developing world, suffering is a part of life for many. But the whole trend of modern Western civilisation is to want to do away with pain and suffering, to rebel against them, even though experience should have taught us by now that suffering is inevitable in our world.

The Christian answer to the problem of pain and suffering, however, is that suffering, while not a good thing in itself does have a meaning and a purpose, and that, rightly understood and accepted, it can be a powerful impetus in our journey towards God. This was one of the underlying messages which emerged from the apparitions at Lourdes in 1858, not least through the life of Bernadette

Soubirous, the seer of Lourdes, who endured so much suffering in her comparatively short life.

Lourdes, through the spring uncovered by Bernadette, became a great centre for pilgrimages for the sick, and was also the scene of many miraculous cures; but it is also an implicit reminder through the messages of Our Lady, and through Bernadette's heroic witness, of the fact that the sufferings of Christ during his crucifixion were an essential part of God's plan for the redemption of mankind. We should also realise too that St Paul had said that he was happy to suffer in his own body to make up for what still had to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his Church (*Col 1:24*), a statement which indicates that the Mystical Body of Christ, that is all Christians, must also expect to suffer if we are to be truly like Christ.

True healing and happiness

The vast majority of the sick people who have gone to Lourdes have not been cured, and yet the grace to accept their sufferings and offer them up lovingly to God will have been freely available to them: all that is necessary is to ask for it with faith. Despite the tremendous medical advances which have taken place since the nineteenth century, there are still many diseases which medical science is unable to

deal with adequately. And this is to say nothing of the huge growth in emotional problems which affect so many in the West today. Thus we have a situation where many people are still desperately in need of healing, and perhaps in most cases are more in need of emotional than physical healing. And it is undoubtedly the case that we are *all* in need of spiritual healing to some degree or other. Thus although medical science has found a way to deal with many illnesses, the essential message of Lourdes and St Bernadette, that only by turning to God with a humble and contrite heart can we find true healing and true happiness, is no less timely today than it was one hundred and fifty years ago.

The business of being ill

We can imagine that we have at last arrived as pilgrims at Lourdes. It has been a long and tiring journey, and for some it might have a painful one; but we have been supported by our eagerness to reach the Grotto where Our Blessed Lady appeared to Bernadette.

And now we are at the very spot where St Bernadette knelt and talked with Mary, looking up at the very Grotto where Our Lady herself appeared.

This is a good moment to review the story of these apparitions.

At Lourdes

Bernadette, a little girl intellectually backward and physically ill, left her home one day in Lourdes, in February 1858, to gather sticks by the side of the River Gave, because they were too poor at home to afford coal for their fire. In reality, her home was little more than a hovel; they lived in an old disused prison.

As she and her brother and sister came along the riverbank, they reached a canal. Bernadette, fearing the cold water, was afraid to cross. Her brother and sister laughed at her and left her behind. Bernadette stooped down to remove her stockings, when suddenly she heard the sound of wind in the trees and looking up she saw the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Grotto surrounded by a golden light. Bernadette fell on her knees. Our Lady appeared thus to Bernadette eighteen times and gave her a number of messages. She told her that she wished people to come there in procession and to do penance both for themselves and for others. She told her to make a hole in the sand, and water flowed forth.

Many years have passed, and this grotto, then unknown, is one of the best known and most loved places in the Catholic world. Miracles of healing have taken place through the spring of water which was unsealed at the touch of Bernadette's hand. The history of Lourdes has been one of uninterrupted glory. Millions have come here in procession to do penance. The world thinks only of the physical miracles, but the Church values as far more precious those supernatural healings of the soul which take place here: those marvelous workings of grace in the soul by which the sick who come here and are not cured return home accepting this and perhaps regarding their sufferings as their most precious treasure. This is Lourdes' greatest gift for those prepared to accept it. And the instrument chosen by Our Lord to bring all this about was little Bernadette, weak and frail.

At Nevers

While Lourdes was passing from glory to glory, however, where was Bernadette? Hidden in her convent at Nevers in central France: stricken with sickness. What was she doing? One day some visitors asked her if she had heard of some of the recent wonders of Lourdes. She answered no. The visitors could not understand how this could be. Bernadette replied, "You see, my business is to be ill."

Why was it her business? Because it was through sickness that Our Lord had ordained that Bernadette should save her soul. Bernadette did not become a saint because she saw Our Lady and talked with her. She became a saint through her willing acceptance of sickness and suffering in the silence of the convent of Nevers. It was her business to be ill because it was the business given to her directly from heaven. She suffered very greatly and died a painful death; and that suffering and death made her a saint and was her path straight to heaven, because she accepted it as her business, sent to her direct from her heavenly Father. And therefore it was her greatest treasure.

This was something Bernadette had understood from the beginning: the Blessed Virgin had said to her during one apparition that she was not promising her happiness in this world, but the next, while her admonitions on other occasions, including, “Pray for sinners,” “Penance! Penance! Penance!” and “Kiss the ground as a penance for sinners,” clearly indicated the path that Bernadette would have to take.

Illness

Towards the end of her life, in 1875, Bernadette had advised a young novice that she “must learn to love suffering. Our Lord gives His crown of thorns to his



Incorrupt body of St Bernadette at Nevers.

friends. Seek nothing better.” On another occasion she said, “the more I am crucified, the more I rejoice”.

In this she was only speaking from experience. From this time on she was almost constantly ill, confined to bed, and suffering greatly. Even from her earliest years at Nevers she had been a victim of a tubercular condition of the right knee, but this developed into an abscess in 1877 which left her in constant and agonizing pain. In 1879 she became much weaker, was hardly able to eat and became quite emaciated. She was also tormented by painful sores on all her limbs. On 28th March she was anointed for the fourth and final time, dying on 16th April after a long and painful last agony.

When we are ill

Sometimes, we too have to accept suffering and illness. Most of the sick who return home from Lourdes are not cured: it is also their “business” to be ill. Although we often find it hard to believe and even harder to accept, sickness and suffering are very precious, even though suffering is not something that is good in itself. Although she suffered a great deal, St Bernadette was not a masochist. In December 1878, a few months before her death, when she was

confined to bed, a fellow sister noticed an image of St Bernard, her patron, nearby, and asked her about it. Bernadette responded that she prayed to him, “but I don’t imitate him at all. St Bernard loved suffering. I avoid it as much as I can.”

Holiness

However, for those with very serious illnesses, it may well be that suffering is the way the heavenly Father means them to become saints and enter heaven. And that is the only thing that really matters. What is the whole world worth to us if we do not have the hope of heaven, with Our Lord, Our Lady and all the saints to welcome us? As St Therese of Lisieux, who was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pope John Paul II, said: “Sanctity lies not in saying beautiful things, or even in thinking them, or feeling them; it lies in truly being willing to suffer.”

So for some people it may well be their business is to be ill, to be like Bernadette or Therese, to suffer with Our Lord, to be caught up by their suffering into a tender and intimate communion with the pierced and broken heart of our Divine Saviour.

There is no other way to heaven except suffering, whether in this world or in purgatory. Our Blessed

Lord saved the world and opened heaven to us through suffering. The more we suffer with Him, the greater chance we have of becoming saints.

The teaching of the saints

This was the teaching of St Vincent de Paul, who said: “If we only knew the precious treasure hidden in infirmities, we would receive them with the same joy with which we receive the greatest benefits, and we would bear them without ever complaining or showing signs of weariness.” More recently, St Faustina in her *Diary* wrote: “Oh, if only the suffering soul knew how much God loves it, it would die of joy and excess of happiness! Someday, we will know the value of suffering, but then we will no longer be able to suffer. The present moment is ours.”

We may have a friend who has never suffered. What do we say of him? We say, “Oh, he is very charming, but everything has gone well with him so far.” And that little word *but* reveals the fact that all of us know deep down: that it is only in the hour of suffering and trial that the deepest things in men and women are called forth, either for good or for evil.

The Way of Love



Thus we have to try and understand that suffering taken from God as God's business for us will make us saints.

The Reverend Mother of the convent of Nevers was waiting at the convent door. In front of her stood little Bernadette, about whom the whole Catholic world at the time was talking. The Reverend Mother moved forward to receive her as a postulant to the community and questioned her as to her gifts. "What can you do?" she asked her. Bernadette looked up at her and made this exquisite reply: "Nothing very much." The sheer beauty of that answer! Think of it. "Nothing very much"!

That is how Bernadette became a saint, by doing nothing very much extraordinarily well; and that is how all saints are made.

Perhaps the supreme modern example of this has been St Therese of Lisieux. Her whole spirituality was built on her 'Little Way' of love, which involved nothing more than a full realisation that she was a child of the Heavenly Father, a little child totally dependent on Him for everything. A little child does not attempt to do great things which it knows are beyond its strength. Rather it is content to do small acts for its parents, but with much love. The Little Way is also the way of humility, which makes us recognise how much we depend on God, and opens us up to His grace. So St Therese offered up little acts of love to God, comprised of all the incidents, problems and difficulties of her life, as well as its joys; but she did this so well that this was enough for Pope Pius X to proclaim her the "greatest saint of modern times."

Little by little

Like Bernadette, Therese also had much to suffer towards the end of her life, but abandoned herself completely to God: "I thank you, O my God, for all the graces you have bestowed on me, and particularly for having made me pass through the crucible of suffering." Shortly before she died she said: "Never would I have believed it was possible to suffer so much!"

In all this she was only echoing the teaching of the great Carmelite Doctor of the Church, St John of the Cross, who said: “I would like to persuade spiritual persons that the way to perfection does not consist of many methods nor much thinking, but in denying oneself in everything and suffering for the love of Jesus Christ.”

It may well be that through our particular, perhaps severe, sufferings we have been called to become saints. We naturally ask: “How is it to be done?” Well, not by being ready-made magnificent martyrs of pain - no, but by just taking the little things and doing nothing very much extraordinarily well. This means that to become a saint is possible for anyone in such a situation. Even if they realise that they can do “nothing very much”, aided by grace, they can do this extraordinarily well.

How God works

Now look how God has done extraordinarily well through nothing very much. He wished to come down to earth as man. Whom did he choose? A royal queen, clothed in purple with a crown of gold on her head, surrounded by great magnificence and by men and women of great renown? No; he chose

a humble maiden of Nazareth, a little town hidden in the silence of the Galilean hills. He did not choose very much as the world counts its values.

He wanted to come into the world in our human nature. Was the Sacred Humanity fashioned in a moment, through the seraphim and cherubim, and mankind thus forced to its knees? No; he came as a tiny baby. Nothing very much, as the world would say.

He wants to feed you with himself - he wants to give you himself and all the power of his love - he has come down to earth, not only in Bethlehem but somewhere else. Where? In some mighty, glorious manifestation? No; in the Blessed Sacrament. Nothing very much to look at. God is apparently doing nothing very much when, at the words of the priest, he comes down to earth under the appearance of the frail white Host. And yet in that blessed mystery there is the whole of the Godhead.

Through nothing very much - that is how God works. He takes things that seem nothing and fills them with the supernatural, and makes the smallest thing he touches greater than the greatest things that are outside that supernatural touch. We may have magnificent health, but if we never think of God, it

is useless in God's eyes. We may have great gifts, but if they are not touched with the supernatural, they can do nothing in the supernatural order at all.

It is the little things, packed full of the supernatural love of God, that turn the world upside down. A baby in the cradle at Bethlehem, the Blessed Sacrament on the altar, little Bernadette kneeling in the grotto at Lourdes. These are the things God takes.

People rush to see the latest attraction, or to sit rapt before the television watching the latest media star. "He (or she) is so marvelous," they cry. The person who is suffering is often ignored, and yet that unimportant person, by offering their pain to Jesus, is doing more good in the world than all the most brilliant media stars can ever do. As St John of the Cross said in his *Spiritual Canticle*: "The smallest act of pure love is of greater value to the Church than all other works united together."

"Nothing very much," said Bernadette, and yet millions still go to Lourdes, finding it a place of life, healing and strength.

Accepting Suffering



For some people then, it may well be that it is their business is to be ill; that is the vocation God has given them, because that is the way God means them to be one of his saints.

We will become saints by learning the value of very little things. The little things make or break us. Suppose we were going back home uncured after Lourdes to the same difficulties, the same little irritations and annoyances. If seriously ill, the same people would be looking after us - who, although they love us dearly, often do little things that get on our nerves. Even minor illnesses can be very irritating.

But instead of these things worrying us and irritating us, we can *decide* to accept them quietly and gladly because they are amongst the things that are going to make us into saints.

Suffering and holiness

We can offer to Jesus every one of these countless little things which seem such thorns. We can make each one a little offering of our love, and he will take it and unite it to his Cross, and each thorn will become a rose. And Jesus may well take our offering and use it to make someone else's pain easier to bear.

That is how we can use pain and suffering to become saints. By being ill, by offering all our little pains with the pain of the Son of God and so becoming saints little by little. Nothing dramatic or startling, nothing very much as the world thinks, but in reality each one a little step by which we mount the ladder of holiness till we see God face to face. This ladder is the way to heaven for all of us at some time or other.

Fatima children

And in fact, this is a lesson which God, through the lives of the saints of recent times, seems to be particularly emphasising for the Church today. We can see this if we look at some examples. Jacinta and Francisco Marto, the two youngest of the three seers of the apparitions at Fatima in Portugal in 1917, who died while still children, certainly had to suffer a great deal. Even Sr Lucia, the oldest seer,

who became a Carmelite nun, suffered quite acutely towards the end of her very long life.

Francisco Marto

Following the apparitions, an influenza epidemic swept Europe in autumn of 1918, just as the First World War was ending, and both Jacinta and Francisco fell ill. Francisco recovered somewhat and there were hopes that he might become well, but his condition worsened again. He offered up all his sufferings as a way of consoling God for the sinfulness and ingratitude of mankind, becoming so weak that eventually he could not even pray. Lucia visited him noting that he always appeared joyful and content despite his illness. She asked him if he was suffering a lot, to which he replied: "Quite a lot, but never mind! I am suffering to console Our Lord, and afterwards, within a short time, I am going to heaven!" He received his first Holy Communion, and on the next day, 4th April 1919, he died, aged only ten.

Jacinta Marto

Jacinta too was confined to her bed, and although she recovered was struck down with bronchial pneumonia, while also developing a painful abscess in her chest. She was moved to a nearby hospital in

July 1919, where she underwent the painful treatment prescribed for her, but without much effect. Lucia likewise visited her, asking her if she was suffering a lot. She replied: “Yes, I am. But I offer everything for sinners and in reparation to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.” Lucia comments that Jacinta was “filled with enthusiasm” as she spoke of Our Lord and Our Lady: “Oh, how much I love to suffer for love of Them, just to give Them pleasure! They greatly love those who suffer for the conversion of sinners.”

Jacinta returned home in August with an open wound in her side, but it was decided that another attempt should be made to treat her, and so in January 1920 she was taken to Lisbon, where she was diagnosed as having purulent pleurisy and diseased ribs. Eventually in February she was admitted into hospital, where she underwent another painful operation to remove two ribs; this left her with a large wound in her side that had to be dressed daily, causing her agony. On the evening of 20th February the local priest was called and heard her Confession, but he insisted on waiting till the next day to bring her Communion, despite her protests that she felt worse; and so she died that night alone, aged only nine, and far from her family. Jacinta and Francisco were both beatified by Pope John Paul II in 2000.

Shoulder your Cross

It's striking how, like Bernadette, the children of Fatima suffered so much, and this indicates one of the underlying themes of the modern apparitions of Mary, that we do have to be prepared to suffer if we are to take up our cross every day, and follow in the footsteps of Christ and his Mother. And of course the sufferings of Jacinta and Francisco have borne marvelous fruit in the worldwide propagation of the Fatima message and particularly in the collegial consecration of Russia to Mary's Immaculate Heart which was carried out by John Paul II in 1984, in union with a moral totality of the world's bishops.

Alexandrina de Costa

Another person who suffered greatly for Christ during the twentieth century was Alexandrina da Costa, who like Jacinta and Francisco was Portuguese. Indeed her mission was so closely linked to theirs spiritually that she has been described as the "fourth seer of Fatima." She gradually became incapacitated and confined to bed after jumping from a window to escape from a man who wanted to molest her. She offered herself as a victim to Our Lord to make reparation for the sins of mankind, enduring great sufferings, and from March

1942 until her death in October 1955 she lived solely on daily Holy Communion. She was declared Venerable by Pope John Paul II in January 1996.

Marthe Robin

Likewise, Marthe Robin, who was born in 1902, and lived in southeastern France, gradually became paralysed as she grew older, and in October 1930, received the stigmata and began to undergo the Passion of Christ each Friday every week until her death in 1981. Like Alexandrina she was confined to bed, and offered up her sufferings in reparation. Despite being paralysed, she was able, with Fr Georges Finet, to become the co-foundress of the Foyers of Charity; these are communities of lay persons headed by a priest, the Father of the Foyer, who is responsible for preaching five day silent retreats.

Even as early as 1936, Marthe foresaw a new Pentecost of Love, which would be preceded by a renewal of the Church which would come about mainly through the laity. Thus she anticipated the Second Vatican Council and the work of the Popes since John XXIII. In addition, her Cause has been introduced at Rome, while there are now more than 70 Foyer communities around the world. This is

surely a great example of the how God can use suffering in a 'creative' and positive way, to build up the Church.

Like Bernadette, Marthe was a great lover of the rosary, and was also very much influenced by the Marian teachings of St Louis de Montfort. She also lived the 'Little Way' of St Therese, and in fact the Carmelite Saint, who had been canonised in 1925, actually appeared to her on three separate occasions telling her that she would carry on her mission and make it more universal. Around this time Marthe noted that "suffering is the best school in which to learn true love." She also said that, "Of all the forms of the apostolate, that of good works, that of prayer, that of example, that of suffering, this last apostolate is worth the most; and prayer, like good works, only acquires its fruitfulness in sacrifice." Like Alexandrina, Marthe lived solely on the Eucharist which she received only once a week, and similarly both were humble and anxious to avoid publicity or draw attention to themselves.

We might say that both Alexandrina and Marthe were 'extreme' cases and that the majority of Christians are not called to live such lives of suffering and this is true; but equally, if they could suffer a lot, can we not suffer a little for the love of Christ?

John Paul II

Many others have suffered greatly in modern times, including St Pio of Pietrelcina and St Maximilian Kolbe, to say nothing of all the martyrs under Communism and Nazism, but perhaps it is the life and sufferings of Pope John Paul II which have had the most impact recently. When he was elected Pope in 1978 he was a vigorous man of 58, an intellectual but also an athletic figure, in good health and keen on activities such as skiing and hiking. But gradually, as he grew older, the cares of Office began to take their toll, and this process accelerated following the attempt on his life in 1981.

In 1984 he wrote the encyclical letter *Salvifici Doloris* which was concerned with how the Church understood the meaning of suffering. It focused on three aspects: firstly, that suffering can be seen as having a creative value, that is that God can bring good even out of evil; secondly that it also has a saving or salvific value, that is that we can suffer for Christ and with Christ; and finally, it dealt with how believers should respond towards suffering, that is to see it as a way of living out their baptismal vocation, to become co-workers in the saving mission of Christ.

It could be said that John Paul II eventually lived out the teaching found in this letter, because towards the end of his life he was only a shadow of his former self; and yet he did not allow his sufferings, which included Parkinson's Disease, to cause him to swerve from his path of total dedication to Christ. Rather he saw them as the providential way by which he would give his final testimony to the world, that illness, pain, and even death have an ultimate meaning and are not useless in God's sight.

So these more modern saints and holy persons have echoed the teaching and example of St Bernadette, who, as we have seen, in her humility had said, "Nothing very much," when the Reverend Mother asked her what she could do. Like them, Bernadette was prepared to accept her sufferings as coming from the Hand of God, and this is something we mustn't forget.

What is Humility?



As Bernadette was dying and was about to receive the last sacraments, she turned to her sisters and said: “I ask my sisters to forgive me for the bad example I have set them.” The simple beauty of it! She who has seen Our Lady, she who was chosen by God as the instrument of all the glory of Lourdes, as she lies dying, turns to her sisters and apologises for her life. “I ask my sisters to forgive me for the bad example I have set them.”

The secret of holiness

Now, what is the meaning of these amazing words? Well, in them lies the secret of holiness. And the secret of holiness is humility. Surely, if anyone had the right to think herself fairly good, it was Bernadette, she who had seen Our Lady and to whom Our Lady herself had spoken. Yet she apologises for her bad example to her sisters.

It seems almost fantastic. Why? Because when we think of humility, we compare ourselves with somebody else, some of those around us, and we think: “Well, we’re not quite so bad after all.”

But in the case of Bernadette, the secret of her humility lay in the fact that she did not compare herself with any of her friends around her, but with the Lady who had appeared to her at the grotto. That is where she learned humility: in the presence of the spotless purity of Mary, she saw her own sinfulness; in the presence of Our Lady’s absolute humility, she saw her own self-will and pride. And ever afterwards, having enjoyed these wonderful privileges, she did not think: “How much better I am than others,” but she went through life apologising for her bad example.

Humility

What is humility? First of all, humility is seeing things as they really are, namely, that God is everything and that we, without him, are absolutely nothing. Our Blessed Lord has told us: “Cut off from me you can do nothing” (*Jn 15:5*).

But humility is more than this. Humility is seeing ourselves as we really are, namely, that we are a

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