

The Lourdes Apparitions

A Theological Analysis of St Bernadette Soubirous and the Marian Apparitions of 1858



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Preface

The apparitions of Our Lady of Lourdes to St Bernadette Soubirous in 1858 represent one of the most significant Marian events in Catholic history and underpin not only the many pilgrimages undertaken every year, but also the work of *Hospitalité Notre Dame de Lourdes*. This article, perhaps useful for first-time pilgrims or *stagiaires* with an interest in a deeper understanding, begins with a timeline for the apparitions and then analyses the theological themes of penance, conversion, prayer, and divine healing that emerged from Lourdes, demonstrating how these apparitions have strengthened core Catholic teachings on Mariology, sacramental theology, and the Church's understanding of suffering and redemption.

Introduction

Between 11 February and 16 July 1858, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared eighteen times to Bernadette Soubirous, a fourteen-year-old girl from the impoverished town of Lourdes in the Pyrenees region of southern France. These apparitions, which culminated in Mary's identification of herself as 'the Immaculate Conception' (*Que soy era Immaculada Concepciou*), occurred at the grotto of Massabielle and have since become one of the most widely recognised and theologically significant Marian apparitions in Catholic history (Laurentin, 1988). The local bishop, Bertrand-Sévère Laurence, declared the apparitions authentic on 18 January 1862, stating definitively: 'The Virgin Mary did appear indeed to Bernadette Soubirous' (Diocese of Tarbes, 1862).

The theological importance of Lourdes cannot be overstated. The apparitions provided what many theologians have interpreted as divine confirmation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which had been solemnly defined by Pope Pius IX just four years earlier in the Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854). The fact that an uneducated peasant girl, who spoke only the Gascon dialect and had no formal theological knowledge, repeated the precise theological formula 'I am the Immaculate Conception' has been viewed by the Church as a supernatural validation of this Marian dogma (O'Connor, 1958). Furthermore, the messages delivered at Lourdes—emphasising penance, prayer, conversion of sinners, and the construction of a chapel—have profoundly influenced Catholic spirituality, devotional practices, and the Church's understanding of Mary's continuing maternal role in salvation history.

This article will focus on five key areas: the confirmation of the Immaculate Conception dogma, the call to penance and conversion, the theology of healing and suffering, the role of the poor and humble in God's plan, and the ecclesiological dimensions of Lourdes as a site of pilgrimage and sacramental encounter.

Timeline of the Eighteen Apparitions

Between 11 February and 16 July 1858, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to Bernadette Soubirous on eighteen separate occasions at the grotto of Massabielle. These apparitions can be divided into three distinct phases: the inaugural visions (11-18 February), the 'Holy Fortnight'

(19 February-4 March), and the confirmatory apparitions (25 March-16 July). Each apparition had particular significance in conveying Mary's message of penance, prayer, and conversion, culminating in her revelation of identity as the Immaculate Conception.

Figure 1: Complete Timeline of the Lourdes Apparitions (1858)

| PHASE ONE: INAUGURAL VISIONS | PHASE ONE: INAUGURAL VISIONS | PHASE ONE: INAUGURAL VISIONS |
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| 1 | 11 February 1858 <i>Thursday before Ash Wednesday (Shrovetide)</i> | First apparition whilst gathering firewood. Bernadette sees 'uo petitio damizelo' (a small young lady) in white with blue girdle and golden roses on feet. They pray the Rosary together in silence. The Lady smiles and vanishes. |
| 2 | 14 February 1858 <i>Sunday (Shrove Sunday)</i> | Bernadette sprinkles holy water to test if the vision is from God. The Lady smiles and bows. Silent Rosary. Confirms supernatural origin through response to sacramental. |
| 3 | 18 February 1858 <i>Thursday after Ash Wednesday</i> | First words spoken: 'Would you do me the grace to come here for fifteen days?' Bernadette promises. Message: 'I do not promise to make you happy in this world, but in the next.' Eschatological dimension emphasised. |
| PHASE TWO: THE HOLY FORTNIGHT (Fifteen Days) | PHASE TWO: THE HOLY FORTNIGHT (Fifteen Days) | PHASE TWO: THE HOLY FORTNIGHT (Fifteen Days) |
| 4 | 19 February 1858 <i>Friday</i> | Silent apparition. Bernadette prays the Rosary. Her face transfigured and illuminated—witnessed by growing crowd. First documented signs of ecstasy. |
| 5 | 20 February 1858 <i>Saturday</i> | Secret prayer taught: Our Lady teaches Bernadette a personal prayer (never revealed). Instructed to always bring a blessed candle. Candles now burn perpetually at the shrine. Emphasises prayer and personal relationship with God. |
| 6 | 21 February 1858 | About 100 people present. Police Commissioner Jacomet interrogates |

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| | | <i>Sunday (First Sunday of Lent)</i> | Bernadette aggressively. Bernadette overcomes with sadness during apparition. Growing opposition from civil authorities begins. |
| 7 | 23 February 1858 <i>Tuesday</i> | Secret revealed: Our Lady reveals a secret 'only for her alone' (never disclosed by Bernadette). Personal, intimate dimension of divine communication. Over 150 people witness ecstasy. | |
| 8 | 24 February 1858 <i>Wednesday</i> | Call to penance: 'Penance! Penance! Penance! Pray to God for sinners! Kiss the ground as an act of penance for sinners!' Threefold repetition emphasises urgency. Doctrine of vicarious suffering and Communion of Saints. | |
| 9 | 25 February 1858 <i>Thursday</i> | THE SPRING APPEARS: 'Go, drink of the spring and wash in it.' Bernadette digs in muddy ground; spring flows. Sacramental principle—matter as channel of grace. First great sign. Connection to baptismal regeneration and water from Christ's side. | |
| 10 | 27 February 1858 <i>Saturday</i> | Silent apparition. Bernadette drinks from the spring and performs penances. About 800 people present. Spring continues flowing—permanent sign of divine intervention. | |
| 11 | 28 February 1858 <i>Sunday</i> | Over 1,000 people present. Bernadette prays, kisses the ground, moves on knees in penance. Taken to Judge Ribes who threatens imprisonment. Persecution intensifies. | |
| 12 | 1 March 1858 <i>Monday</i> | Silent apparition. Crowds continue growing. Catherine Latapie bathes her paralysed arm in the spring water—first documented healing. Medical investigation begins. | |
| 13 | 2 March 1858 <i>Tuesday</i> | Ecclesial mission: 'Go and tell the priests that people are to come here in procession and to build a chapel here.' Emphasises Church authority and liturgical worship. Fr Peyramale demands Lady's name. | |
| 14 | 3 March 1858 <i>Wednesday</i> | Message repeated about chapel and procession. Bernadette returns to Fr Peyramale. Parish priest remains sceptical, demands sign (rosebush to bloom) and Lady's name. | |

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| 15 | 4 March 1858 <i>Thursday (Last of Fifteen Days)</i> | About 8,000 people present expecting a miracle. Silent apparition. No external sign given—testing faith. Critics jubilant. Rosebush does not bloom. Period of waiting begins. |
| PHASE THREE: CONFIRMATORY APPARITIONS | PHASE THREE: CONFIRMATORY APPARITIONS | PHASE THREE: CONFIRMATORY APPARITIONS |
| 16 | 25 March 1858 <i>Thursday (Feast of the Annunciation)</i> | THE GREAT REVELATION: Our Lady reveals: 'Que soy era Immaculada Concepcion' With these words, which Bernadette does not understand, the divine confirmation of the 1854 dogma will be affirmed. This is, therefore the second great sign. |
| 17 | 7 April 1858 <i>Wednesday (Easter Week)</i> | Miracle of the candle: Bernadette unconsciously holds her hand over candle flame for 15 minutes without burning. Dr Dozous witnesses and documents. No pain, no injury. Medical attestation of supernatural event. |
| 18 | 16 July 1858 <i>Friday (Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel)</i> | Final apparition: Grotto barricaded; Bernadette views from across river. 'I have never seen her so beautiful before.' Silent, transcendent vision. No further apparitions. Bernadette's mission complete. Transition from private revelation to public pilgrimage. |

Theological Significance of the Timeline

The structure and timing of the apparitions reveal profound theological intentionality. The three-phase pattern mirrors the Trinitarian structure of divine revelation: the inaugural visions establish presence and relationship, the Holy Fortnight delivers urgent messages of conversion and healing, and the confirmatory apparitions provide supernatural authentication through the revelation of identity and miraculous signs.

The liturgical timing is particularly significant. The first apparition occurred during Shrovetide, immediately before Lent, emphasising the call to penance. The revelation 'I am the Immaculate Conception' took place on 25 March, the Feast of the Annunciation, linking Mary's Immaculate Conception to the Incarnation. The final apparition occurred on the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (16 July), traditionally associated with Mary's protection and deliverance of souls from purgatory, reinforcing the message of prayer for sinners (Laurentin, 1988).

The two great signs—the spring appearing on 25 February and the revelation of identity on 25 March—bracket a month of intensive apparitions during which the core messages of penance, prayer, chapel-building, and processions were delivered. This structure demonstrates the pedagogical wisdom of divine revelation, which proceeds gradually, building trust and understanding before delivering the most significant revelations (Benedict XVI, 2008).

Historical and ecclesial context

The definition of the Immaculate Conception (1854)

On 8 December 1854, Pope Pius IX promulgated the Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus*, formally defining the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The definition states: 'We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful' (Pius IX, 1854).

This dogma had been a subject of theological debate for centuries, particularly between Franciscan and Dominican schools of thought. Whilst the Dominican school, following Thomas Aquinas, had difficulties reconciling Mary's freedom from original sin with Christ's universal redemption, the Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus (1266-1308) argued that Christ's redemptive grace was applied to Mary preventatively, preserving her from sin from the first moment of her conception (Scotus, 1300/1987). The dogmatic definition of 1854 settled this debate authoritatively, declaring that Mary's preservation from original sin was indeed part of divine revelation (Catholic Encyclopaedia, 2011).

Bernadette Soubirous and the apparitions

Bernadette Soubirous (1844-1879) was born into extreme poverty in Lourdes. At the time of the first apparition on 11 February 1858, she was an illiterate fourteen-year-old who suffered from asthma and cholera. Her family lived in a former prison cell, and Bernadette had received minimal religious instruction beyond basic catechism (Laurentin, 1979). This background is theologically significant, as it emphasises the preferential option for the poor and humble that characterises divine revelation throughout salvation history.

During the eighteen apparitions, Mary appeared to Bernadette as *uo petitio damizelo* (a small young lady) in Occitan dialect. Mary was described as wearing a white veil, a blue girdle, and golden roses on her feet, with a rosary of pearls hanging from her arm. The messages delivered during these apparitions included calls to prayer, penance, and the conversion of sinners, as well as instructions to dig for a spring and to have a chapel built at the grotto (Soubirous, 1858/1935).

The most theologically momentous apparition occurred on 25 March 1858, the Feast of the Annunciation. When Bernadette asked the Lady her name for the fourth time, Mary replied: 'Que soy era Immaculada Concepcio' (I am the Immaculate Conception). Bernadette, who did not

understand the meaning of this phrase, ran to tell the parish priest, Father Dominique Peyramale, repeating the words over and over to ensure she would not forget them (Werfel, 1941).

Theological interpretation of the Lourdes apparitions

The Immaculate Conception: a divine confirmation of dogma

The theological significance of Mary's self-identification as 'the Immaculate Conception' has been analysed extensively by Catholic theologians. St Maximilian Kolbe drew a parallel between Mary's words at Lourdes and God's self-revelation to Moses at Horeb: 'I am who am' (Exodus 3:14). Kolbe argued that just as God revealed His essence as pure existence, Mary revealed her identity as the one who exists in the state of immaculate conception from the first moment of her being (Kolbe, 1933/2008).

Pope Pius XII, in his 1958 encyclical *Le pèlerinage de Lourdes*, commemorating the centenary of the apparitions, emphasised that Lourdes provided supernatural confirmation of the 1854 dogmatic definition. The Pope noted that an uneducated girl could not have known this theological term, let alone understood its profound meaning, making the apparition a clear sign of divine intervention (Pius XII, 1958).

The timing of the apparitions—four years after the dogmatic definition—has been interpreted as providential. As historian Roger Aubert noted, 'God was pleased to react against the positive rationalism of the epoch by multiplying the interventions of the supernatural' (Aubert, 1975, p. 234). The 19th century was marked by increasing secularisation, scientific materialism, and challenges to Church authority. The Lourdes apparitions, with their emphasis on supernatural reality, prayer, and penance, served as a powerful counter-witness to rationalist philosophy.

The call to penance and conversion

Throughout the apparitions, Mary repeatedly called for penance and prayer for the conversion of sinners. During the sixth apparition on 21 February 1858, Mary's first words to Bernadette were: 'I do not promise to make you happy in this world, but in the next' (Soubirous, 1858/1935). This statement directly contradicted the promises of worldly prosperity offered by contemporary ideologies and emphasised the eschatological dimension of Christian life.

On 24 February 1858, during the eighth apparition, Mary delivered her most urgent message: 'Penance! Penance! Penance! Pray to God for sinners! Kiss the ground as an act of penance for sinners!' (Diocese of Tarbes, 1862). This threefold repetition of 'penance' emphasises the gravity and urgency of conversion. The call echoes the message of Christ at the beginning of His public ministry: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Matthew 3:2).

Theologically, this message reinforces the Catholic understanding of penance as both a sacrament and a way of life. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that 'interior penance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart' (CCC, 1431). The Lourdes message emphasises that penance is not optional but essential for salvation,

both for oneself and for others, reflecting the doctrine of the Communion of Saints whereby the prayers and penances of the faithful can benefit sinners.

On your visit, you will see that the sacrament of reconciliation is readily available and in multiple languages. Often this is in the designated building on the esplanade, though often it may take place in differing, apparently random places, where penitents and priests – sometimes from the same pilgrimage – come together.

The Spring and the Theology of Healing

On 25 February 1858, during the ninth apparition, Mary instructed Bernadette: 'Go, drink of the spring and wash in it' (Soubirous, 1858/1935). When Bernadette found only muddy ground, she dug with her hands, and a spring began to flow. This spring has continued flowing to the present day and has been associated with thousands of reported healings.

The Lourdes Medical Bureau, established in 1883, has subjected claimed miracles to rigorous scientific investigation. As of 2025, seventy cures have been declared medically inexplicable after extensive examination (Lourdes Medical Bureau, 2025). The Church's approach to these healings reflects a sophisticated theology that neither dismisses scientific explanation nor reduces the supernatural to the natural.

Theologically, the healings at Lourdes must be understood within the context of Christ's redemptive work. As Pope Benedict XVI stated during his 2008 visit to Lourdes: 'At Lourdes, divine grace works through the sacramental life of the Church, particularly through the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation' (Benedict XVI, 2008). The healings are not magical but sacramental, occurring within the context of prayer, faith, and the Church's liturgical life.

Furthermore, Bernadette herself emphasised that the water's efficacy was not inherent but depended on faith: 'One must have faith and pray; the water will have no virtue without faith' (Soubirous, cited in Laurentin, 1988, p. 156). This teaching aligns with Catholic sacramental theology, which holds that sacraments require faith to be efficacious (*ex opere operantis*) whilst also acknowledging God's objective action (*ex opere operato*).

Before my current role in the Bureau, it was my privilege to serve in the Baths (*piscines*), where pilgrims of all faiths and none, and in all and every state of health – visible and invisible- prepare to encounter the water of Lourdes, whether as the *gesture*, by which water is gently administered, or, in some cases, through the traditional fuller immersion. This is such a rich experience for anyone visiting Lourdes for the first time.

Figure 1: Core theological themes of the Lourdes apparitions

| Doctrinal Confirmation |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 'I am the Immaculate Conception' – Validation of 1854 Dogma• Spoken by uneducated peasant girl with no theological training• Divine confirmation occurring 4 years after papal definition |
| Call to Conversion |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 'Penance! Penance! Penance!' – Urgent call to repentance• 'Pray to God for sinners' – Intercessory dimension• 'Kiss the ground as penance' – Acts of mortification |
| Sacramental Healing |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Spring as sign of divine healing power• 70 medically inexplicable cures verified (1858-2025)• Healing linked to faith, prayer, and sacraments |
| Ecclesial Dimension |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 'Go and tell the priests to build a chapel here'• Lourdes as major pilgrimage site (6 million annually)• Emphasis on Rosary, Eucharist, and Reconciliation |

Preferential option for the poor and humble

The choice of Bernadette Soubirous as the recipient of the apparitions carries profound theological significance. As L'Osservatore Romano noted: 'The Marian apparitions to the little shepherd girl Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes four years after the declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception were, moreover, like a further confirmation of the prominent role that the "simple", the "pure of heart", had played in the infinite story of God and those he holds dear' (L'Osservatore Romano, 2008).

This pattern echoes throughout salvation history: God chose shepherds to hear the angelic proclamation of Christ's birth, fishermen to be apostles, and Mary herself, a young woman of Nazareth with no worldly power or prestige. As Mary proclaimed in her Magnificat: 'He has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant... He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly' (Luke 1:48, 52).

Bernadette's response to those who questioned her extraordinary experiences demonstrated remarkable humility. She famously described herself as a tool in God's hands: 'The Virgin used me as a broom to remove the dust. When the work is done, the broom is put behind the door again' (Soubirous, cited in Werfel, 1941, p. 423). After the apparitions ended, Bernadette entered the Sisters of Charity of Nevers, where she lived a hidden life of prayer and suffering, dying at the age of thirty-five in 1879.

Ecclesiological dimensions: Lourdes and the Church

During the ninth apparition, Mary instructed Bernadette: 'Go and tell the priests to have a chapel built here' (Soubirous, 1858/1935). This command emphasises the ecclesial nature of the apparitions. Mary directs her requests not to individual piety alone but to the institutional Church, represented by the priesthood. The construction of the chapel—which developed into the magnificent Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes—demonstrates that authentic private revelation bears fruit within the Church's structure, not apart from it.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church addresses the role of private revelations: 'Throughout the ages, there have been so-called "private" revelations, some of which have been recognised by the authority of the Church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ's definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history' (CCC, 67). Lourdes exemplifies this principle perfectly: it adds nothing to revelation but illuminates and emphasises truths already contained in Scripture and Tradition.

The apparitions have strengthened Catholic devotional life, particularly devotion to the Rosary (Mary appeared with a rosary), the celebration of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, and pilgrimage as a form of prayer and penance. The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes now welcomes approximately six million pilgrims annually, making it the second most visited Catholic pilgrimage site after Rome (Sanctuary of Lourdes, 2024).

Figure 2: The Church's process of discernment for the Lourdes Apparitions

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| Initial Events | 18 apparitions between 11 February and 16 July 1858. Bernadette subjected to interrogation by civil and Church authorities. Growing crowds and opposition from local government. |
| Medical Examination | Commission of physicians examined Bernadette. Found her physically and mentally sound. Dr Dozous witnessed the 'miracle of the candle' where flame did not burn Bernadette's hand. |

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| Theological Investigation | Examination of doctrinal content. Mary's identification as 'Immaculate Conception' deemed impossible for Bernadette to have known. Messages consistent with Scripture and Tradition. No contradiction to Catholic teaching. |
| Moral Character | Assessment of Bernadette's credibility and virtue. Consistent testimony under pressure. Humility and obedience to Church authority. No seeking of personal gain or attention. |
| Spiritual Fruits | Examination of lasting effects. Conversions and renewed faith. Growth in sacramental practice. Healings reported at the spring. Development of authentic devotion and pilgrimage. |
| Episcopal Declaration | 18 January 1862: Bishop Bertrand-Sévère Laurence officially declared: 'The Virgin Mary did appear indeed to Bernadette Soubirous.' Apparitions deemed 'worthy of belief.' |

Magisterial reception and Papal teaching

Pope Pius XII and the Centenary Encyclical

On the centenary of the apparitions in 1958, Pope Pius XII issued the encyclical *Le pèlerinage de Lourdes*, which provided authoritative papal commentary on the theological significance of Lourdes. The encyclical emphasised three key points: the apparitions confirmed the Immaculate Conception dogma, demonstrated God's preferential love for the humble and poor, and called the faithful to conversion through prayer and penance (Pius XII, 1958).

Pope Benedict XVI's Pilgrimage (2008)

Pope Benedict XVI visited Lourdes on 15 September 2008 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the apparitions. In his homily, he reflected on the theological meaning of the Immaculate Conception: 'Christ, who is the author of divine life—that is, of grace in each person—through the Redemption he accomplished, must be especially generous with his Mother... This generosity of the Son toward the Mother goes back to the first moment of her existence. It is called the Immaculate Conception' (Benedict XVI, 2008).

Benedict XVI also emphasised that Lourdes calls Christians to recognise the dignity of suffering and the sick, noting that the sanctuary has become a place where the Church's preferential option for the poor and vulnerable is made manifest through service, prayer, and solidarity (Benedict XVI, 2008).

Pope John Paul II's Visits

Pope John Paul II visited Lourdes three times during his pontificate. His theological reflections on Lourdes centred on Mary's role as Mother of the Church and the importance of Marian

devotion in the life of the faithful. He particularly emphasised the connection between Lourdes and the sacraments, noting that authentic healing at Lourdes always occurs in the context of the Church's sacramental life, particularly the Eucharist and Reconciliation (John Paul II, 1983).

How Lourdes strengthens Catholic Teaching

Marian Doctrine and Devotion

The Lourdes apparitions have profoundly strengthened Catholic teaching on Mary in several ways:

Confirmation of the Immaculate Conception. The supernatural validation of this dogma, just four years after its definition provides compelling evidence of divine approval. As the Catholic Encyclopedia notes, 'The fact that an uneducated peasant girl could repeat with precision a theological formula she could not possibly have understood naturally is viewed by the Church as miraculous authentication' (Catholic Encyclopedia, 2011).

Mary as Mother and Intercessor. The apparitions demonstrate Mary's continuing maternal care for humanity. Her messages call sinners to conversion, showing her role as Mediatrix who brings souls to Christ. As Lumen Gentium teaches: 'Mary's function as mother of men in no way obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power' (Vatican II, 1964, §60).

Rosary devotion. Mary's appearance with a rosary at Lourdes reinforces the importance of this traditional Catholic prayer. The rosary, centred on the mysteries of Christ's life, unites believers with Mary's contemplation of her Son (Paul VI, 1974).

Sacramental theology

Lourdes reinforces Catholic sacramental theology in multiple dimensions. The spring represents God's use of material creation as a channel of grace, consistent with the sacramental principle that 'grace perfects nature.' The emphasis on the necessity of faith for healing aligns with the Catholic teaching that sacraments require proper disposition to be fruitful (Council of Trent, 1547).

The prominence of the Sacrament of Reconciliation at Lourdes—where thousands of confessions are heard daily—demonstrates the inseparability of physical and spiritual healing. As the Catechism teaches: 'The sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation with God brings about a true "spiritual resurrection," restoration of the dignity and blessings of the life of the children of God' (CCC, 1468).

The theology of suffering and redemption

Lourdes presents a sophisticated theology of suffering that avoids both triumphalism and despair. Whilst healings do occur, the vast majority of pilgrims are not physically cured. St Bernadette herself, though the visionary, lived with chronic illness until her early death. This paradox

illuminates the Catholic understanding that redemptive suffering united with Christ's passion has salvific value (Colossians 1:24).

Pope John Paul II, in his apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris* (1984), reflected on the meaning of Christian suffering, noting that Lourdes exemplifies the Gospel's transformation of suffering from meaningless burden to participation in Christ's redemptive work. The Pope wrote: 'In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption' (John Paul II, 1984, §19).

Ecclesiology and the communion of Saints

The apparitions strengthen Catholic ecclesiology in several ways. Mary's instruction to 'tell the priests to build a chapel' affirms the hierarchical structure of the Church and the importance of the ministerial priesthood. The development of Lourdes as a major pilgrimage site demonstrates the Church as a pilgrim people, journeying together toward the heavenly Jerusalem.

Furthermore, the call to 'pray for sinners' illustrates the doctrine of the Communion of Saints, whereby members of the Church—both living and dead—are united in prayer and can intercede for one another. This teaching, rooted in Scripture (1 Timothy 2:1-4; James 5:16), finds practical expression in the millions of prayers offered at Lourdes for the conversion of sinners and the healing of the sick.

Figure 3: Impact of Lourdes on Catholic faith and practice

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Validation of Immaculate Conception dogma• Strengthened Marian theology• Emphasis on Mary as Mediatrix• Reaffirmation of sacramental efficacy | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Renewed Rosary devotion• Increased pilgrimage practice• Growth in Marian consecration• Lourdes replicas worldwide | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ministry to the sick• Emphasis on Reconciliation• Evangelisation through witness• Call to conversion and penance |
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Conclusion

The apparitions of Our Lady of Lourdes to St Bernadette Soubirous represent a singular moment in Catholic history where divine revelation, doctrinal confirmation, and pastoral fruitfulness converge. The supernatural validation of the Immaculate Conception dogma through an uneducated peasant girl speaking theological language she could not possibly have understood constitutes powerful evidence of divine intervention. The messages delivered at Lourdes—emphasising penance, prayer, conversion, and the building of a chapel—have profoundly influenced Catholic spirituality and practice for over 165 years.

The Catholic Church's theological interpretation of Lourdes demonstrates how private revelation, whilst never adding to the deposit of faith, can illuminate and strengthen existing doctrine. The apparitions have reinforced Marian theology, sacramental theology, the theology of suffering and redemption, and ecclesiology. The sanctuary at Lourdes, welcoming millions of pilgrims annually, stands as a testament to the enduring power of these apparitions to inspire faith, foster conversion, and bring healing—both physical and spiritual.

St Bernadette's humility and holiness exemplify the truth that God chooses the weak and lowly to confound the wise and powerful (1 Corinthians 1:27). Her consistent witness under interrogation, her refusal to seek personal gain, and her hidden life of prayer and suffering after the apparitions all testify to the authenticity of her experiences. Her canonisation in 1933 by Pope Pius XI confirmed the Church's recognition of her heroic virtue and the spiritual fruits that flowed from her encounter with the Mother of God.

In an age marked by secularisation and religious scepticism, Lourdes continues to offer a powerful witness to the reality of the supernatural and the truth of Catholic teaching. The medically inexplicable healings, the countless conversions, the deepening of faith among pilgrims, and the enduring devotion centred on this site all point to divine action in human history. For those of us who have the privilege of volunteering, whether as part of organised pilgrimages, as Sanctuary volunteers or as part of HNDL, there is a reason why many of us return each year. As Pope Benedict XVI reflected during his 2008 pilgrimage: 'Lourdes is a place where God touches hearts, where faith is born and reborn, where prayer finds its most authentic expression' (Benedict XVI, 2008).

The theological richness of the Lourdes apparitions continues to unfold as new generations of believers encounter Mary's call to penance, prayer, and conversion. The apparitions strengthen Catholic teaching not by adding new doctrines but by confirming, illuminating, and applying the eternal truths of the Gospel to the particular needs of each age. In this way, Lourdes remains a living witness to the Church's faith and a source of grace for all who approach it with open hearts.

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