



# A BRIEF HISTORY OF LOURDES

The famous town of Lourdes is situated in the Southwest of the Hautes-Pyrénées department, lying in the first Pyrenean foothills. It is overlooked from the south by the Pyrenean peaks of Aneto, Montaigu, Vignemale (3,298m), while around the town there are three summits reaching up to 1,000m, which are known as the Béout, the Petit Jer with its three crosses and the Grand Jer with its single cross which guard over the town lying below.

Lourdes was originally a small unremarkable market town lying in the foothills of the Pyrenees. At that time the most prominent feature was the fortified castle which rises up from the centre of the town on a rocky escarpment. Following the Apparitions of

Our Lady to Bernadette, Lourdes has developed into a major tourist destination as a Marian city. Today Lourdes has a population of some 17,000 inhabitants but is able to take in some 5,000,000 pilgrims and tourists every season. Lourdes has the second greatest number of hotels in France after Paris with some 270 establishments.

Lourdes lies at an altitude of 1,375 ft (420 m) and in a central position through which runs the Gave de Pau River from the south coming from Gavarnie, into which flow several smaller rivers from Barèges and Caunterets. The Gave then branches off to the west towards the Béarn, running past the banks of the grotto and on downstream to Pau and then Biarritz.



There is much evidence in the form of flint axes, and bones etc found in the “Espélugues” grottoes to indicate that this area of Bigorre was inhabited from the earliest times. Since that time the Gauls, the Romans who called the town Lapurda, and the Barbarians fortified the rock on which the castle stands. During the VIIIth century Lourdes became the focus of skirmishes between the Moors and Carolingians.

According to the legend in 778, Charlemagne, with his army, lay siege to the Fortified Castle, which was occupied by the Moors under their Saracen leader Mirat. The French army, attacked the castle on many occasions but were never able to breach its formidable defences. The Moorish army held out despite these attacks and famine.

#### King Charlemagne

The legend claims that an eagle unexpectedly appeared on the horizon and flew over the castle and dropped from its mouth an enormous trout, which landed at the feet of Mirat the leader of the Moors. In order to try and convince the French that his army was not starving, Mirat presented the trout to Charlemagne to persuade them that they still had plenty of food in store and were not about to surrender the castle. Charlemagne was himself about to lift the siege when his companion Turpin, the Bishop of Puy-en-Velay, had an inspired idea and persuaded Charlemagne to allow him to speak to the Moors in the besieged castle. He suggested to Mirat that he should surrender, not to Charlemagne but to the Queen of the sky. Mirat was impressed with the idea and he went to Black Virgin of Puy, to offer gifts and was converted to Christianity. On the day of his baptism, Mirat took on the name of Lorus, which was then given to the town and later became Lourdes. During the XIth and XIIth centuries the Counts of Bigorre lived in Lourdes castle and the town was the capital of the countship of Bigorre.

After being the residency of Bigorre counts, Lourdes was given to England by the Brétigny Treaty which bought a temporary peace to France during the course of the Hundred Years War with the result that the French lost the town to the English, from 1360. At the end of the fourteenth century despite the war and famines an extraordinary musical society flourished in southern France. One of the principle patrons of this music was Gaston Febus III, Count of Foix and Béarn, two small but wealthy territories in southern France. Febus's actions in dealing with the problems of that century demonstrated a shrewdness unmatched by many of his peers. Under a policy of careful neutrality, Febus navigated these difficult times miraculously well, thus sparing his people much turmoil. Such was his leadership that his power and court rivalled that of the French king.

At the time of Febus, the Lourdes castle was commanded by Pierre Arnaud de Béarn, and then Jean, his brother, both cousins to the Prince of Béarn. With the help of 39 mercenaries known as the Compagnons de Lourdes, they all signed in 1379, an agreement with the prince stipulating that any money and prizes in kind (wine, wheat etc) that might be received from the people of Bigorre had to be shared, in exchange for his protection.

In 1405, Charles V laid siege to the castle during the course of the Hundred Years War and eventually captured the town from the English following the 18 month siege.

Later on, during the late 16th century France was ravaged with the Wars of Religion between the Roman Catholics and the Huguenots (French protestants). In 1569 Count Gabriel de Montgomery attacked the nearby town of Tarbes when Queen Jeanne d'Albret of Navarre established Protestantism there. The town was overrun, in 1592, by forces of the Catholic League and the catholic faith re-established in the area.

In 1607 Lourdes finally became part of the Kingdom of France. The castle became an Estate jail under Louis XV but in 1789, the General Estates Assembly orders the liberation of prisoners. Following the rise of Napoleon in 1803, he again made the Castle an Estate jail. Towards the end of the Peninsular War between France, Spain and Britain in 1814, English forces, under the Duke of Wellington, entered France and took control of the region and followed Marshall Soult's French army and defeated the French near the adjoining town of Tarbes before the final battle took place outside Toulouse on 10th April 1814 which brought the war to an end.

At the beginning of the 1850s, just before the apparitions, Lourdes was a quiet modest sleepy county-town with a population of only some 4,000 inhabitants. The castle, was occupied by an infantry garrison. The town was a place people passed through on their way to the waters at Barèges, Cauterets, Luz-Saint-Sauveur and Bagnères-de-Bigorre, and for the first mountaineers on their way to Gavarnie, when the events which were to change its history took place.

#### Saint Bernadette

Bernadette was born on 7 January 1844 and was the first child of Francois Soubirous and Louise Casterot who were married in 1843. The little baby was baptised two days after her birth and was christened “Marie Bernarde” although she was soon known as Bernadette to her family and friends. She was the eldest child in the family and had a further six brothers and two sisters but as was not unusual for those times five of the brothers and a sister all died before they were to reach the age of ten. In November 1844 Louise suffered an accident and was no longer able to breast feed Bernadette and as a result of this Bernadette went to live with her foster mother Marie Aravant Lagues in Bartres which lies a few miles away from Lourdes. Bernadette was to stay with her foster mother for eighteen months before returning home.

In 1854 Francois was injured whilst working and lost his sight in one eye from a flying stone chip and this was to handicap him in his work. At this time a drought went on for two years and deprived the area of its wheat harvest with the follow on consequences for the millers who were already struggling in the face of competition from the new and more efficient steam powered mills. Bernadette's father was a kind and considerate man and gave away food and drink to those who were less fortunate and also would not enforce payment of his debts where it would harm another family and this eventually led to him being unable to pay the rent for the mill. Eventually the owner of the mill took back the Boly Mill and the Soubirous family were forced to leave what Bernadette had always known as the ‘Mill of good fortune’.

In 1855 a cholera epidemic broke out in this area of France and Bernadette caught the disease and was ill for some time before she recovered although she would always suffer with asthma and a general weakness for the rest of her life. Francois was unable to find any form of employment and the family descended into poverty. A relation Andre Sajous allowed them to live from 1857 in the Cachot which was an old disused prison which had been declared uninhabitable and allowed them to live there rent free. The family were excluded and looked down upon by the people of Lourdes and they were the but of malicious jokes etc and life was very hard for the family. The Soubirous Family were in utter poverty, with no food to eat Francois was accused of stealing two bags of flour, and was imprisoned for eight days. The charges against Francois were dismissed, but thereafter he had to suffer with the reputation of a thief. Due to the family's financial difficulties Bernadette did not attend at school very often and at the age of fourteen she was still unable to speak or write French, and was therefore unable to do her Catechism as this was only taught in French.



Monday 22 February

That Monday, Bernadette went to school as normal but her heart was sad as she did not want to be disobey her Father's instruction. However, by that afternoon she felt an almost irresistible force drawing her back to Massabielle. She slipped into the Grotto but this time the Lady did not appear.

### SEVENTH APPARITION – TUESDAY 23 FEBRUARY 1858

Bernadette returned to the Grotto once again, to the annoyance of Jacomet, the Police Commissioner, for the seventh time. At this apparition Bernadette is passed a secret by the Lady which was for her only. There was a small group of observers including some of the leading villagers who had come part out of curiosity but also a desire to mock the “ignorant fools” for their gullibility. The watchers included Jean-Baptiste Estrade, a tax inspector who was sent by Fr Peyramale the parish priest to see what was going on. He with some garrison officers, came to witness the “show.” However instead of being shocked, they were astonished by what they saw and turned into “believers and witnesses”.

### EIGHTH APPARITION – WEDNESDAY 24 FEBRUARY 1858

Bernadette re-attends at the Grotto and a crowd of some 250 people watch her having the apparition and it is clear that she is sad and tears run down her face. The message she was given:

Penance! Penance! Penance! Pray to God for sinners.  
Go, kiss the ground for the conversion of sinners.

### NINTH APPARITION – THURSDAY 25 FEBRUARY 1858

This day was cold misty and rainy and when Bernadette finally appeared the police recorded a crowd of more than 350 hoping to witness her ecstasy.

“(The Lady) told me that I should go and drink at the fountain and wash myself. Seeing no fountain I went to drink at the Gave. She said it was not there; she pointed with her finger that I was to go in under the rock. I went, and I found a puddle of water which was more like mud, and the quantity was so small that I could hardly gather a little in the hollow of my hand. Nevertheless I obeyed, and started scratching the ground; after doing that I was able to take some. The water was so dirty that three times I threw it away. The fourth time I was able to drink it. She made me eat grass growing in the same place where I had drunk; once only; I do not know why. Then the Vision disappeared and I went home.”

The crowd was surprised and shocked at her behaviour and when they saw her face it was almost unrecognisable, covered with mud, with a tuft of grass pulled up from the ground in her mouth. The observers soon became angry and others were appalled at the spectacle. The local press had a great time mocking Bernadette and proclaimed that “the gullible have been well and truly had ... and that Bernadette's real place should be in the asylum”.

Estrade, was to write in his diary that it was “An unforgettably gloomy day” as he now had to suffer the taunts of his colleagues at the Café Français. Furious at having let themselves be dragged into this misadventure, they discovered that Bernadette was a “filthy little upstart.” The local authorities sensed the changed mood in the town and acted quickly. That same evening, Bernadette was summoned to appear before Dutour, the Imperial Public Prosecutor. He was the same man responsible for landing Bernadette's father in prison.

For two long hours, Bernadette stood on her feet with her mother standing beside her. The fourteen-year-old girl endured a tough interrogation. She was questioned, accused, and threatened with all kinds of insinuations. The worry of the interrogation weakened her mother and she fainted. The inspector however was not to be deterred but did allow them to eventually have chairs to sit on. Bernadette took great care that her statements never exceed precisely what she had seen.

### TENTH APPARITION – SATURDAY 27 FEBRUARY 1858

Bernadette returned to the grotto in a disheartened frame of mind caused by the abuse she and her family had suffered the previous days. She questioned in her mind whether the apparitions were about to end. However she was overjoyed to find that the spring was no longer a muddy puddle and had begun to flow strongly and was now clean of the mud. She carries out her usual act of penance and the Lady again gives her the message of Penance and to pray for sinners.



### ELEVENTH APPARITION – SUNDAY 28 FEBRUARY 1858

This day the crowds returned in great numbers to watch Bernadette pray and she kisses the ground and moves onto her knees as a sign of penance. The Lady again gives her the message of Penance and to pray for sinners.

After the apparition she is taken to Judge Rides who threatens her with imprisonment.

### TWELFTH APPARITION – MONDAY 1 MARCH 1858

On this day some 1,150 onlookers from the town and surrounding area were present to observe Bernadette's apparitions in order to see the major events and miracles for themselves. That day Judge Ribes again summoned Bernadette for questioning and once again tried to persuade her to no longer go to the grotto. Bernadette was unable to comply as she had already made a promise to go there for fourteen days.

The first recognised miracle occurred to a Catherine Latapie, who was nine months pregnant, and who had walked 9 kilometres from the neighbouring village of Loubajac to bathe her paralysed arm in the “healing” spring. Healed immediately, she returned home to give birth to a son. Her cure was recognised in 1862 as the first approved miracle of Lourdes, her healing testified of the truth of the apparitions.



## THIRTEENTH APPARITION – TUESDAY 2 MARCH 1858

Bernadette attends at the Grotto and is again observed having the Apparition by nearly fifteen hundred people. As a result of the miracles that were taking place a large number of conversions were taking place, and the parish priest was not certain what to make of it all. Bernadette receives the following message from the Lady.

Go, tell the priests to bring people here in procession and have a Chapel built here.

### Fourteenth Apparition – Wednesday 3 March 1858

Bernadette attends at the Grotto again and a large crowd once more observe in her ecstasy. She again receives the same message she had been given by the Lady;

Go, tell the priests to bring people here in procession and have a Chapel built here.

Bernadette tells this to Fr Peyramale, the Parish Priest of Lourdes. He wants to know the Lady's name and demands another test as evidence, and he requests Bernadette to ask the Lady to make the rose bush in the Grotto flower.

## FIFTEENTH APPARITION – THURSDAY 4TH MARCH 1858

At 7 o'clock in the morning, in the presence of several thousand people, Bernadette arrived at the Grotto, but the vision did not appear. After school, she feels an inner calling of the Lady to return to the Grotto. She goes to the Grotto and asks her again for her name. The Lady's only response is a smile. The Lady repeats the previous message of:

Go, tell the priests to bring people here in procession and have a Chapel built here.

Bernadette accompanied by her two aunts for support went to the presbytery to see Fr Peyramale. She was turned away and called a liar by the furious priest and was forbidden from returning to the Grotto.

Bernadette was not to be so easily deterred and accompanied by a friend of the priest she returned to deliver her message. She was questioned thoroughly by the entire parish clergy. Fr Peyramale tells her again: "If the lady wants her chapel, let her tell you her name, and ask her to make the rosebush at the grotto flower"

Following this meeting Fr Peyramale then went to Tarbes to confer with the bishop, a Mgr Laurence who concluded that Fr Peyramale should avoid being seen at the grotto, as this might indicate an approval of the events that had taken place.

Bernadette was to return to Fr Peyramale on the following two days to re-deliver her message. During this time many thousands of people had flooded into Lourdes, and expectations of a spectacular sign had spread through the town. With the priest's approval, a guard was posted at the grotto through the night. He had responded to Bernadette.

"The third time I went to see M. le Curé, to tell him that a Lady had ordered me to go and say to the priests that they were to have a chapel built there, he looked at me for a moment, and then he said to me in a rather gruff tone, 'Who is this lady?' I answered that I did not know. Then he commissioned me to ask her name and to come and tell him. The next day when I arrived at the grotto I recited my rosary and then asked her, from M. le Curé what her name was, but all she did was to smile. When I got back I went to M. le Curé to tell him that I discharged his commission, and her only response was her smile; then he said she was laughing at me and that I would do well not to go to her again. But, I could not help going."

Life in the town of Lourdes began to return to normality after the fortnight ended. Bernadette returned to school and prepared for her first Communion. The priest, Fr Peyramale, was concerned and on March 18th Bernadette was ordered to attend for a further formal interrogation. She was questioned about the so-called miracles and her intentions, but Bernadette stated that she did not believe she had cured anyone. She was also examined by a doctor to prove her sanity.

## SIXTEENTH APPARITION – THURSDAY 25 MARCH 1858

In the early morning Bernadette awoke as usual but this time there was once again the familiar inner call to return to the grotto. The call of the Lady was strong and she could not resist it. Bernadette full of joy went to the grotto to meet the lady. It had been 3 weeks since she last saw the Lady and she did not know whether she would ever see her again. This time she was determined to obtain the lady's name, so that she could finally tell Fr Peyramale whom she was seeing in the Apparitions.

"Would you be so kind as to tell me who you are?"

There was no answer to the question. She repeated the question a further three times as she had practised so often, The answer finally came:

QUE SOY ERA IMMACULADA CONCEPTIOU. ("I am the Immaculate Conception.")

The Lady had finally revealed her name, but the wild rose bush, on which she stood during the Apparitions, did not bloom. Bernadette own account of this momentous moment is as follows ;

"I went every day for a fortnight, and each day I asked her who she was, and this petition always made her smile. After the fortnight I asked her three times consecutively. She always smiled. At last I tried for the fourth time. She stopped smiling. With her arms down, she raised her eyes to heaven and then, folding her hands over her breast she said, 'I am the Immaculate Conception.' Then I went back to M. le Curé to tell him that she had said she was the Immaculate Conception, and he asked was I absolutely certain. I said yes, and so as not to forget the words, I had repeated them all the way home."

Bernadette departed the Grotto immediately and ran to Fr Peyramale repeating continuously in her mind the words the Lady had said. She told Fr Peyramale what the Lady had said and he replied that the Lady could not have a name like that. The priest was now concerned and shaken, and was unable to talk to Bernadette and needed time to consider what he had been told. She left the Priests house without being told what the title meant.

Fr Peyramale wrote to the bishop that evening and advised him of what had happened that day and that he was of the opinion that this young ignorant girl could not have invented the story. It was only in 1854 four years earlier that the church had declared that Mary was the "Immaculate Conception" This term would have been unknown to Bernadette who still could not read or write and was only then learning her catechism to prepare for first Holy Communion. Lourdes was now in a state of unrest and near frenzy. The Bishop concerned at the unacceptable sight of the upheaval in the town intervened, denouncing the abuses and false visionaries etc. He arranged for the civil authority to barricade the grotto to prevent anyone having access. The crowds of believers however were to repeatedly to destroy the barricades which the local authority would re-erect. Meanwhile, Bernadette returned to a quieter life.



## Seventeenth Apparition – Wednesday 7 April 1858

Bernadette three days after Easter was again to feel an inner call to go once more to the grotto. She walked to the Grotto with a candle in her hand and the regular crowd of onlookers observed as Bernadette went into an ecstasy. There was silence until Dr Dozous, a sceptic, forced his way noisily through the crowd to be at the visionary's side "in the name of science."

Dr Dozous observed that the candle Bernadette held burned right down to the wick and that the flames flickered around Bernadette's fingers for some ten minutes. When the ecstasy was over, he carefully examined her fingers, and was astonished to find that she had not been harmed in any way and that she was never aware of the flames. Dr Dozous was converted from a sceptic to a believer and supporter of the apparitions not to mention an important witness. He departed for Commissioner Jacomet's office to record what he had seen in writing.

"Bernadette seemed to be even more absorbed than usual in the Appearance upon which her gaze was riveted. I witnessed, as did also every one else there present, the fact which I am about to narrate. She was on her knees saying with fervent devotion the prayers of her Rosary which she held in her left hand while in her right was a large blessed candle, alight. The child was just beginning to make the usual ascent on her knees when suddenly she stopped and, her right hand joining her left, the flame of the big candle passed between the fingers of the latter. Though fanned by a fairly strong breeze, the flame produced no effect upon the skin which it was touching. Astonished at this strange fact, I forbade anyone there to interfere, and taking my watch in my hand, I studied the phenomenon attentively for a quarter of an hour. At the end of this time Bernadette, still in her ecstasy, advanced to the upper part of the Grotto, separating her hands. The flame thus ceased to touch her left hand. Bernadette finished her prayer and the splendour of the transfiguration left her face. She rose and was about to quit the Grotto when I asked her to show me her left hand. I examined it most carefully, but could not find the least trace of burning anywhere upon it. I then asked the person who was holding the candle to light it again and give it to me. I put it several times in succession under Bernadette's left hand but she drew it away quickly, saying 'You are burning me!'. I record this fact just as I have seen it without attempting to explain it. Many persons who were present at the time can confirm what I have said." – Dr Dozous

The Bishop and the civil authorities again ordered Bernadette to keep away from the Grotto and she returned to a near as possible normal life away from the turbulence that existed all around her in Lourdes. Things were looking up for the Soubirous family, who at last were able to leave the Cachot and Bernadette carried on completing her catechism and finally received her first Holy Communion on June 3rd 1858.

Bernadette received many visitors during this time and repeated endlessly the events to the eager listeners.

## EIGHTEENTH AND LAST APPARITION – FRIDAY 16 JULY 1858

On the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Bernadette receives the mysterious call to the Grotto. Her way however to the Grotto is still blocked and closed off by a barrier. Bernadette gets as close as she can by crossing to the other side of the Gave River across from the Grotto. She was to recount later

"I felt that I was in front of the Grotto, at the same distance as before, I saw only the Blessed Virgin, never was she more beautiful!"

## AFTER THE APPARITIONS

Life for Bernadette was beginning to calm down and she eventually became a boarder at the Hospice and attended at the school for poor children run by the Sisters of Charity of Nevers during the six last years she spent in Lourdes before leaving for Nevers.

On 4th July 1866 Bernadette left Lourdes for Nevers. On the evening of 7th July 1866, Bernadette crossed the threshold of St Gildard, Mother House of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Nevers. On 29th July 1866 Bernadette received the Religious Habit of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Nevers and was given the name Sister Marie-Bernard. On 30th October 1867 she completes her Religious Profession in the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Nevers

For thirteen years Bernadette remained at St. Gildard, successively Assistant Infirmarian, in charge of the infirmary, and then Sacristan. In Nevers, through a humble life, she continued her devotion to Mary and the message she had been given. Often ill during the final stages of her life, Bernadette spent long periods of time in the infirmary.

Bernadette becomes ill once more and on 16th April 1879 finally passes away. Her body was exhumed in September 1909, in April 1919, then finally in April 1925, and on each occasion the body was found to be intact.

Since 3rd August 1925 her body has been held in a shrine, in the Chapel of the Convent of St. Gildard at Nevers. The body of Bernadette is, according to doctors, "mummified". Only a few relics have been removed. A very thin film of wax has been laid on her face and hands and moulded directly onto her features.



For more information on the Catholic Association and our work in Lourdes, please visit [www.catholicassociation.co.uk](http://www.catholicassociation.co.uk) or contact us at [contact@catholicassociation.co.uk](mailto:contact@catholicassociation.co.uk)

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