

### The Miracles of Lourdes

With the 160<sup>th</sup> Anniversary last month of the first appearance of Our Lady to St Bernadette in 1858, I spoke about Our Lady of Lourdes and the different apparitions. Today we'll complete that by saying some more about the miraculous healings for which Lourdes is so famous.

We recall how at one of her appearances, Our Lady told Bernadette, 'Go, drink of the spring' – and this in a place where there was only a bit of muddy water. But on this spot where Bernadette drank from, a spring did flow, and has flowed ever since. On 1<sup>st</sup> March 1858, the first cure took place, when Catherine Latapie put her partially paralysed hand into the water of the spring, and it regained its movement. Not long after, Louis Bouriette was healed of complete blindness in one eye, again using the spring water. The Church investigation that approved the apparitions would authenticate seven genuine cures from 1858 alone.

Over the 160 years since then, 7000 claimed cures have been presented to the Medical Bureau that investigates the healings. Doctors of any religious belief can be part of the meetings of the Medical Bureau. To be accepted, any cure must be from a serious illness virtually impossible to cure; the cure must be sudden, complete and permanent, and unrelated to any prior medical treatment. There is assessment of the patient's personality in order to rule out trickery, acting, illusion, or a possible hysterical or delirious pathology. A study of the medical documents before and after the cure is made, to ensure that there was an indisputable change from a precise medical diagnosis of a known illness to a situation of restored health. Only if the International Medical Committee finds a cure to be unexplained by current medical science might the local bishop of the patient then declare the cure miraculous.

Even if a cure might (in itself) be hypothesised as one day maybe being explicable by *future* science, there is generally also the 'coincidence' of the sudden cure occurring at the very time, for example, of the use of the Lourdes water, or the Blessing of the Sick or Eucharistic Procession at Lourdes. Generally, the medical conditions in question are accepted as not being psychologically based, so such coincidences are not explained merely by the power of suggestion. (The Lourdes water itself has of course been tested, and is basically pure water, with no extraordinary chemical properties.)

Using the above rigorous standards, Church authority has declared only 70 of the 7000 cures to be *miraculous*. Last month, I said 69, but then on 11<sup>th</sup> February, the day of the Anniversary and the feast day of Our Lady of Lourdes, Church authorities announced that a 70<sup>th</sup> cure had been accepted as definitely miraculous, that of Sr Bernadette Moriau. It's worth speaking about some of the details of this, to give us a deeper concrete awareness of the healings Our Lady is still obtaining for us even in our present moment.

I'll quote some excerpts from the Associated Press news article: 'Bishop Jacques Benoit-Gonin of Beauvais proclaimed the miracle nearly a decade after Sr Moriau attended a blessing of the sick ceremony at the Lourdes sanctuary in southern France. Moriau's experience underwent extensive studies and tests by the International Medical Committee of Lourdes.

'Moriau had four operations on her spinal column between 1968 and 1975 and was declared fully disabled in 1980. One foot was permanently twisted, requiring her to wear a brace and use a wheelchair. She took what she said were significant doses of morphine for pain.

“I never asked for a miracle,” the nun, now 79, recounted of her July 2008 pilgrimage to Lourdes. After returning to her home convent near Beauvais and praying in the chapel, “I felt a (surge of) well-being throughout my body, a relaxation, warmth....I returned to my room and, there, a voice told me to ‘take off your braces,’ ” she said in a video posted on the Beauvais diocese web site. “Surprise. I could move.” Moriau said she immediately did away with all her aids, from braces to morphine – and took a 5 kilometre hike a few days later.

‘Alessandro de Franciscis of the Lourdes Office of Medical Observations said he led the investigation into her cure and is “totally convinced” that there is no medical explanation.’ (AP)

So, the seventieth proven miracle of Lourdes. Actually, even just one valid proof would indicate that Lourdes was genuine: 70 is abundance. And this acceptance by the Church of only seventy miracles doesn’t mean that none at all of the other thousands of claimed cures were truly miraculous – maybe only that the evidence and documentation presented were not sufficient to *prove* their miraculous nature with certainty. And yet, once we have already accepted the miraculous nature of all or at least many of the 70 ‘official’ cures, it’s a reasonable supposition that some proportion, at least, of the other thousands of cases may also be miraculous – even though this can’t be strictly proven in the particular individual instances.

On 13<sup>th</sup> May 1992, Pope John Paul II proclaimed 11<sup>th</sup> February (the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes) to be also World Day of the Sick, highlighting how in our times God has often chosen to heal the sick in clear connection with prayers to Mary. Obviously, God doesn’t give everyone a miraculous healing. Sometimes he might answer our prayers for healing just by ensuring that medical professionals employ their skills in the right way so as to bring about a *natural* healing.

St Bernadette herself had no miraculous healing here on earth. As Our Lady had said to her, ‘I do not promise you happiness in this life, but in the next’. She had a life of illness, as a girl and then in the convent, until her death from tuberculosis in 1879, at the age of 35.

But that was just the stepping stone to her life in heaven. A great sign of that was the amazing complete incorruption of her body, discovered on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1909 at the first exhumation, made in the presence of two doctors and other witnesses. Again, even the miracle of incorruption that has been given to so many saints doesn’t last forever in this world. At the last exhumation in 1925, doctors found the muscles atrophied and the skin shrivelled, but still no apparent decay. For purposes of public devotion a customary light wax coating was given, as seen in many photographs. But such images can still be seen as evocative of her original perfect preservation.

In the end, even the miracles – healings, incorruption – are only signs, temporary ones, of the true and eternal healing, the true and eternal resurrection, in the life to come: the healing and resurrection given to everyone, as long as we live and die in union with God.