

Route 3: Bernadette and the sanctuary – The basilicas

Step 1: The Crypt

The Crypt was the first place of prayer to be built and inaugurated in response to Mary's request. Foundation work and the development of the rock began in 1862. Monsignor Laurence, Bishop of Tarbes, consecrated the Crypt on 19th May 1866. Bernadette was present that day, having postponed her departure for Nevers for the occasion. It is the only church in sanctuary where she prayed. That day, so as not to be recognised, she had hidden herself among the Children of Mary. Because Bernadette prayed here, her relics are present in the chapel on the right as you enter the Crypt.

The choir contains five chapels. In the centre, the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament is dedicated to Mary, Mother of the Saviour. The central chapel is deliberately grey to imitate the stone of the rock of Massabielle. In its centre, the Immaculate Virgin stands in the rays of the sun, an image of the Heaven, which opened for Bernadette at the Grotto. The first chapel on the left is dedicated to Saint Peter, the next to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. To the right of the central chapel, is the chapel of Saint Joseph. Finally, the chapel of Saint John is located exactly above the Grotto.

Praying at the Crypt is doing as Bernadette did, entering the intimacy of our soul, hiding in prayer, silence and meditation.

- Bernadette's words: "Love the good God during your life, it is the greatest happiness you can have on this earth, and the only one that will make us happy for eternity in heaven."
- Thanksgiving: Let us give thanks for the gift of prayer, for all the times we have experienced an intimate and burning encounter with God.
- Prayer intention: Let us pray for all those who do not know how to pray, that they find the way to inwardness and encounters with Jesus.
- Our Father and Hail Mary

Step 2: The Immaculate Conception Basilica

Just above the Crypt rises the Immaculate Conception Basilica, known as the "Upper Basilica". Its construction began just after the completion of the Crypt in 1866. Neo-Gothic in style, it is built on top of the rock and required the construction of a retaining wall some 20 metres high above the Gave. It measures 21 metres wide, 51 long, 19 high, and seats 500 people. It was consecrated on 1st July 1876 by Cardinal Guibert, Oblate of Mary Immaculate, Archbishop of Paris. 35 bishops, 3000 priests and 100,000 pilgrims attended the ceremonies.

The roundel above the entrance gate represents Pope Pius IX who promulgated the dogma of the Immaculate Conception on 8th December 1854: 4 years before the apparitions of Lourdes.

Inside, you might be surprised by the number of plaques and golden hearts lining the walls. These are gifts from pilgrimages from all regions of France and from all countries of the world. They testify to the influence of Lourdes throughout the world and recall the universality of the Church.

Praying in the Immaculate Conception Basilica built over the Grotto means realising that the Church is founded on mercy and love of neighbour. The Church does not rely on the strength of this world but on the grace of holiness. The poverty of its members is not an impediment to the growth of the Kingdom as long as they allow themselves to be infused by the grace and mercy of Christ.

- Bernadette's words: "Do not forget me near the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. This is where I will meet you."
- Thanksgiving: Let us give thanks for the Church, which is built through faith, forgiveness of wrongs and love of neighbour.
- Prayer intention: Let us pray for all sinners who would prefer to hide their inadequacies rather than lay them open to the mercy of the Lord.
- Our Father and Hail Mary

Step 3: The Rosary Basilica

From 1870, the crowd of pilgrims grew to such an extent that "The Chapel" high on the rock turned out to be too small. The project for the new church consisted of building "a vast symbolic rosary at the foot of the Basilica of Our Lady of Lourdes". On 8th February 1875, Pius IX approved "the project to erect a new church in which the expressive image of each of the mysteries of the Rosary will lead minds to a deeper meditation on these mysteries." Work began in 1883; more than 10,640 m³ of rock had to be extracted. The Basilica was consecrated on 6th October 1901, the feast day of Our Lady of the Rosary.

Shaped like a Greek cross, the Rosary Basilica is 52 metres long and can hold around 900 people. The architecture of this Basilica is highly symbolic: the central dome, spherical in shape, rests on four pillars arranged in a square. The circle of the dome represents the sky while the square base symbolises the earth. Now, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, which is celebrated there, the passage from earth to heaven takes place in the real presence of Jesus Christ.

All around the dome, fifteen chapels evoke the mysteries of the Rosary: the joyful mysteries (the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the Presentation of Jesus in the temple, the Finding of Jesus in the Temple), the Sorrowful mysteries (the Agony in the Garden, the Scourging at the Pillar, the Crowning With Thorns, the Carrying of the Cross, the Crucifixion) and the glorious mysteries (the Resurrection, the Ascension, the Coming of the Holy Spirit, the Assumption of Mary, the Coronation of Mary). The mosaics on the facade outside the Rosary Basilica represent the luminous mysteries, added by Pope John Paul II in 2000 (the Baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan, the Wedding Feast at Cana, the Proclamation of the Kingdom of God, the Transfiguration of Jesus, the Institution of the Eucharist).

By visiting and praying in the Rosary Basilica, we are asking the Virgin Mary in a special way to mould our life to the mysteries of the life of Jesus.

- Bernadette's words: "I have not forgotten you in front of our good Mother."
- Thanksgiving: Let us give thanks for the testimony of the saints through which the life of Jesus shines forth.
- Prayer intention: Let us pray that through our faith and our works of charity we may be witnesses to the life of Jesus.
- Our Father and ten Hail Marys

Step 4: The Basilica of Saint Pius X

If there is one building in Lourdes that can take people by surprise, it is the underground Basilica of Saint Pius X: on the one hand because of its dimensions, on the other hand, because of its architecture... It possesses a sober and grandiose beauty.

For more than fifty years after the completion of the Rosary Basilica, no other church was built in Lourdes, despite the constant influx of pilgrims. Also, all major celebrations took place outside, on the esplanade, whatever the weather. But in Lourdes the heat can often be as overwhelming, as the rain can be abundant. So, for the centenary of the apparitions in 1958, this new project was born, fully supported by Monsignor Théas, Bishop of Lourdes. During the inauguration of the works on 30th May 1956, he said, "Our Lady wants a large church."

The Basilica is a building with symbolic architecture. It is built in the shape of a large ellipse: traditional in Christian art, which reminds us of the ichthus (stylised fish) of the catacombs and the Glory of Christ in Majesty (Christ within a mandorla) of Romanesque churches and cathedrals. It has an immense nave, or perhaps more accurately, a boat, formed of a single hull of reinforced cement.

Like a call to holiness, many images of the saints, from all periods and from all walks of life, adorn the Basilica.

Praying in the Basilica of Saint Pius X means experiencing the Church in her universality on the way to the Kingdom of God.

- Bernadette's words: "Let us apply ourselves above all to studying the saints, by imitating their virtues of humility, obedience, charity and selflessness. [...] When something costs us, let us say right away, 'Everything to please you, oh my God, and nothing to satisfy me'".
- Thanksgiving: Let us give thanks for the universality of the Church. Let us give thanks for the mystery of Christian brotherhood which transcends time and space.
- Prayer intention: Let us pray for Christian unity that, in the Cross and resurrection of Jesus, all Christians may find the source of their concord and peace.

- Our Father and Hail Mary

Step 5: Personal time and meditation

- Bible text

“Mary Magdalen stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” John 20:11-17

Questions

- The Church is based on the act of faith in the resurrection of Jesus. The empty tomb is the sign of this faith. The Immaculate Conception Basilica is built over the Grotto. Do I understand that the Church is not an institution of this world that might base itself on human or political strength but that it is a reality of faith?
- The Church is the community of believers, the people of God on the way to the Kingdom. Do I want to involve as many people as possible? Am I a missionary?
- Jesus loved the Church and gave himself up for her. Do I understand the Church as the Body of Christ?

