

## Route 4: Bernadette's vocation – The statues in the sanctuary

### Stage 1: Bernadette in Bartrès

Location: Statue of Bernadette the shepherdess (to the left of the entrance to the Basilica of St Pie X)

In September 1857, Bernadette left the Cachot to return to Bartrès (5km from Lourdes) to her former wet-nurse Marie Laguës. She became a farm hand. For the Soubirous family, it was one less mouth to feed. She was 13 and a half years old.

Bernadette could neither read nor write. She had missed most of her schooling due to having to work and babysit her younger brothers and sister. Marie Laguës offered to teach Bernadette to read so that she could learn some catechism and prepare for her First Holy Communion. But Bernadette struggled to remember the complicated French words (she spoke the Bigourdan dialect) and the wet-nurse gave up. “Oh, you're too stupid. You will never be able to make your First Holy Communion.” Bernadette held on to her deep desire to receive Jesus in the Eucharist.

At the beginning of January 1858, the parish priest of Bartrès, Father Ader, entered a Benedictine monastery. He was not replaced. Bernadette understood that she would not be able to prepare herself to make her First Holy Communion in Bartrès. She made a fundamental decision in her life, to return to Lourdes. This was a difficult choice because in Bartrès, she was able to eat as much as she wanted, and she could breathe more easily than in Lourdes. Going back to the Cachot in Lourdes meant going back to poverty, hunger and the asthma attacks that made her suffer and annoyed others... But the desire to make her First Holy Communion was stronger! Of her own free will, she returned to Lourdes.

- Bernadette's words: “Your heart, your mind, your soul should be occupied with only one thought, that of making your heart a dwelling place of God.”
- Thanksgiving: Let us give thanks for the courageous and positive choices we have made in our lives, which bring us closer to God. Let us give thanks for our desire for God.
- Prayer intention: Let us pray for all those who seek the path of faith. Let us pray for those who are preparing to receive the Eucharist.
- Our Father and Hail Mary

### Step 2: Bernadette in ecstasy

Location: Statue of Bernadette in ecstasy (the prayer garden opposite the Grotto)

On 21<sup>st</sup> January 1858, Bernadette returned to Lourdes. Three weeks later, on 11<sup>th</sup> February 1858, she had her first encounter with “the Lady”. During the third apparition, “the Lady” spoke to Bernadette, saying, “I do not promise to make you happy in this world but in the other.” Bernadette understood that the Lady was promising that this happiness of the other world that she felt at the Grotto would remain in her heart. During the Apparitions, through Mary's smile, her gaze and her presence, Bernadette had an intense experience of God's love.

She made her First Holy Communion on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1858, in the nuns' chapel at the Lourdes hospice, before the last apparition at the Grotto (16<sup>th</sup> July 1858). The parish priest of Lourdes, Abbé Peyramale, readily admitted that “Bernadette learned her catechism... at the Grotto!”

- Bernadette's words: “Where else can we find a friend who knows how to sympathise and at the same time ease our pains like Jesus? It is Jesus and Jesus alone. Let us love him and cleave to him with all our heart.”
- Thanksgiving: Let us give thanks for the love God has for us. Let us give thanks for the times when we have felt or recognised this love, for the times when God has shown us his goodness.
- Prayer intention: Let us pray for all those who feel abandoned by God and by others. Let us pray for those who do not know God.
- Our Father and Hail Mary

### Step 3: Bernadette at prayer

Location: The Bernadette Mosaic – facade of the Saint Bernadette church

During the apparitions, the Virgin Mary did not tell Bernadette what she should do with her life. Like everyone else, Bernadette discerned the meaning of her life and the commitment she would make over several years. She felt loved and supported by the Virgin Mary, but her choices were not dictated to her. Identifying the stages of Bernadette's journey can help anyone who is looking for their own path.

In July 1860, two years after the apparitions, Bernadette was received at the Lourdes hospice run by the Sisters of Charity in Nevers. The hospice was the forerunner of the EHPAD (nursing home). The sick and dying were welcomed there, especially the poorest. It was in this context – that of service and concrete commitment – that Bernadette contemplated the question of apostolic life. Here she would discover her human and religious vocation.

What should I do with my life? Who will I love? Where will I serve? How will I live out the gospel? Marriage – Religious Life? For Bernadette, this search would be a long one: she would gradually become open to God's plan for her and recognise in it her deepest desire.

Quite quickly, she knew that she wanted to be a nun: “I know that I must be a nun, but I don't know where, the Blessed Virgin did not tell me: I am waiting.” By seeking the will of God, who wanted

her happiness, she allowed herself to be advised but never influenced. She prayed for God to enlighten her.

There are two decisive elements in Bernadette's discernment:

- Her discernment became clear through charity and service to the poor. It was there that she understood that she wanted to love and serve all her life.
- She had always shown a profound freedom. She was not afraid of what seemed impossible to her, and she never felt the need to be influenced by others – including religious communities.

In 1864, she took a further step: “I like caring for the poor and the sick. I will stay with the Sisters of Nevers.” “I’m going to Nevers because they didn’t try to persuade me!”

- Bernadette’s words: “So I looked up and saw only Jesus alone! Jesus alone for Purpose. Jesus alone for Master. Jesus alone for Model. Jesus alone for Guide. Jesus alone for Joy. Jesus alone for Riches. Jesus alone for Friend!
- Thanksgiving: Give thanks for the gift of spiritual freedom.
- Prayer intention: Let us pray for all those who are discerning the meaning of their existence and in particular those who are discerning a religious or priestly vocation.
- Our Father and Hail Mary

#### Step 4: Bernadette – a nun in Nevers

Location: Statue of Bernadette as a nun – between the Chapel of Reconciliation and the Bureau of Medical Observations.

On 4<sup>th</sup> July 1866 Bernadette left Lourdes and on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1866, she arrived in Nevers. She put all her trust in Jesus who said to her: “Come, follow me!” and who, during her 13 years of life in Nevers would become “Her Only Master” and “Her Only Friend”.

- Bernadette’s words: “Ask Our Lord repeatedly to make me a nun according to his heart.”
- Thanksgiving: Let us give thanks for the various states of life in the Church, for the treasure of conjugal love, for the witness of priests, contemplatives and consecrated persons.
- Prayer intention: Let us pray especially for nuns and women consecrated to the service of charity in the Church.
- Our Father and Hail Mary

## Step 5: Personal time and meditation

### Bible text

“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.” Luke 1:26-30

### Questions

- What does God expect of me here on earth, in this life? Have I ever thought about the meaning of my life, my vocation? Do these questions arouse fear in me?
- Who will I love? A family? A community? The poorest? To whom will I dedicate my heart and my time?
- How can I increase my spiritual freedom? How can I let myself be guided more by the Word of God?

