

From Lourdes to Nevers ... and from Nevers to Lourdes



Like Bernadette, I was in Nevers...

On July 7, 1866, the little visionary of Massabielle, after years of reflection, meditation, and discernment, could finally depart... **to depart is to die a little**... to die to Lourdes, to Massabielle, to the cachot, to Bartrès... Yes, her life had lost the essence and beauty of the simple and humble existence she once knew. Bernadette could no longer play, stroll, attend school or church, gather wood, or even act as a “ragpicker,” without being followed, pursued, questioned, and disturbed... She had to hide... she had to leave... she had to die... Even the Hospice of Lourdes, though somewhat secluded, remained in Lourdes.

Moreover, it was not enough to have seen 'aquero'; she needed to give meaning to those 18 encounters—a meaning to the communion between Heaven and Earth, between the Immaculate Heart and Bernadette’s misery. The encounters at the grotto of Massabielle were to bear a vocation, a response to a call to consecrated life. Many congregations were keen to welcome her, but Bernadette chose to choose—not to be chosen. She avoided the pressure of recruitment. She chose the Sisters of Charity of Nevers, because they cared for the sick and had not tried to force her into their fold. Some sisters even considered her “good for nothing!”

Three days to 'die'

The visionary Bernadette had to die to Lourdes and be reborn/resurrected in Nevers. Leaving the Pyrenees, as she herself put it, was “*the greatest sacrifice of my life*”. She took with her three small stones, a sign of her determination; on one she wrote “Lourdes”, on another “the Grotto”, and on the last “Nevers, motherhouse.”

This transition took three days—a triduum allowing Bernadette to be reborn far from Lourdes, far from the curious who criticized, questioned, implored her, or asked her for miracles. **To depart is to die a little**... so she had to be reborn in Nevers, not only to distance herself from Lourdes, but above all, to respond to a call of love. Upon her arrival, she could read engraved in stone: “**DEUS CARITAS EST**” – “**God is Love**”.

Yet rebirth in Nevers was no easy task. Bernadette remained an object of curiosity. She had to recount “for the first and last time” in the novitiate hall before 300 sisters, many of whom doubted her testimony. Others simply wanted to see her, some were surprised: “*That’s Bernadette?*” Still others sought her out for healings... Amid all this, it was hard to place her within the community structure. But Bernadette was joyful—not only to answer questions and solicitations—but above all to respond to the Lord’s call. Anchored in hope, she clung to the promise of happiness in the world to come, given by the Immaculate Virgin.

“In Lourdes, you have the visionary; in Nevers, we have the Saint!”

In the hope of eternal life promised by the Beautiful Lady, Bernadette lived a perpetual **FIAT** that led her to accept her life and condition joyfully. Each day she communed with Our Lady of the Waters, found in Nevers, who reminded her of the Lady of Massabielle: *“She’s the one who reminds me most of the Lady I saw”*. Bernadette would go daily to pour out her heart to her. She found joy in a path of holiness made of sacrifice, effort, and daily love—given and received. Her path to sainthood was not marked by hope of healing (only 2 healthy years out of 13), but by loving abandonment through suffering, lived in such prayer that she refused to be treated as a patient. She preferred that the Sisters sleep while she bore her cross—her suffering. “He alone is enough for me”: she knew she was not alone, but with the Crucified One, who communicated His sacrificial strength so deeply that she desired to remain alone with Him and finally died before Him on April 16, 1879.

Yes, in Nevers, Bernadette was no longer the visionary, but the Saint who lived her journey of holiness and who forgets no one.

I believe in the resurrection of the body...

If it takes time to understand the Dormition of the Virgin Mary and her Assumption, one need only contemplate the body of Saint Bernadette in all its beauty and splendor at Nevers to grasp this truth of the Creed. After her birth into Heaven, her body, discreetly buried in the chapel of St. Joseph—whom she venerated deeply—was found incorrupt and exposed to the veneration of the faithful.

Yes! The human body is not a mask or a shell. It contributes and participates in the sanctity of the person, who is both body and soul. Bernadette’s body speaks to mine. Her body urges me to preserve my own body for eternity.

Unlike Bernadette, I have returned to Lourdes; I have come home... so what comes next?

Following Christ, who declared:

“Father, Lord of Heaven and Earth, I praise you: for what you have hidden from the wise and learned, you have revealed to the little ones. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.”
(Mt 11:25)

Upon returning from every pilgrimage, we must first give thanks. This year above all, we must praise God for this year of grace. The hope lived with Mary this year becomes our thanksgiving. We give thanks for the testimony of Saint Bernadette, who becomes a model of surrender, obedience, dedication, sacrifice, faith, selflessness, and consecration. In short: a model of faith, love, and hope.

Thank you, Bernadette, for your witness and for what you allow us to live by following you. Nevers, like every place of pilgrimage, sends us forth as missionaries of hope.

Yes! Returning from Nevers, like Bernadette, the members of the Family of Our Lady of Lourdes are called to be anchors—able to live and foster the stability and safety that one must possess amid turbulent waters when fully trusting in the Lord Jesus. Our lives are troubled by storms, but thanks to hope, we are capable—like Bernadette—of triumphing over fear, distress, suffering,

sin, and death. Through faith and by the grace of hope, which, “far greater than daily satisfactions and improvements in living conditions, carries us beyond trials and compels us to walk without losing sight of the greatness of our goal: Heaven” (Spes non Confundit n. 25).

So returning to our daily lives, and closing the month of Mary, let us be drawn—like and with Bernadette—by hope. Let it become contagious through us, for those who long for it. May our lives, like Saint Bernadette’s, proclaim to the world:

“Hope in the Lord, be strong and take heart; hope in the Lord.”

(Ps 27:14) (cf. SnC n. 25)

THANK YOU, LORD!
THANK YOU, IMMACULATE MOTHER, OUR LADY OF LOURDES!

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Our Lady of the Waters in Nevers (France)