

World Day of the Sick
Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes
Matthew 25: 316-46
SS. Peter & Paul Cathedral, Indianapolis
February 11, 2008

Lourdes, France, a little village in the Pyrenees foothills:

One hundred fifty years ago today, Our Lady first appeared to the teenager, Bernadette. Miraculous healings followed. One reason Saint Bernadette's visions of Our Lady at Lourdes are so well known is because of all places, Hollywood. In 1943, 20th Century Fox produced a film that really quite accurately tells the story, *The Song of Bernadette*. Imagine: a religious film that won four Academy Awards. The actress who portrayed Bernadette, Jennifer Jones, won an Academy Award. Lesser known is the book on which that movie is based. It has the same title: *The Song of Bernadette*. The book was written two years earlier by, of all people, an Austrian Jewish writer named Franz Werfel. He wrote the book to keep a promise. In 1940, the Jewish Franz Werfel and his wife, Alma, escaped the Nazis in Germany. They ended up in the little town of Lourdes, France.

While they were there in hiding—for seven weeks—the Jewish couple were so touched by the care, the concern, the love of the people at Lourdes. The author, Werfel, read everything he could about the apparitions, about Saint Bernadette. And he asked for his own miracle. Franz Werfel promised that if he ever escaped safely to the United States, he would—in his words—“*sing the song*” of the saint. He did escape. And he kept his promise. Franz Werfel wrote *The Song of Bernadette* in 1941, four years before he died of a heart attack in California. That book, that movie, helped make Lourdes the famous Marian Shrine that it is.

God’s compassion is the hallmark of Lourdes. God’s healing mercy is Our Lady’s message. The loving concern of God is what Our Lady brings. Lourdes reminds us that God is always with His People, especially those in need of healing—physical or spiritual. Six million people visit Lourdes every year. People are cured. At last count well over 7,000 unexplainable healings. But only about 70 who were willing to undergo the

rigorous testing to be certified by the Church as miraculous. Yet there are more than miracles. The compassion of God is alive there. The loving concern a refugee Jewish couple felt at Lourdes in 1940 is just one example. The renowned author and English convert, Robert Hugh Benson, went to Lourdes a skeptic. But Benson ended up with these words about what he felt there: *“I saw sights that would have saddened me elsewhere—apparent injustices, certain disappointments, dashed hopes that would almost have broken my heart; and yet that great Power was over all, to reconcile, to quiet, and to reassure....Lourdes is soaked, saturated, and kindled by the all but sensible presence of the Mother of God.”*¹ Mary is our advocate. No wonder the Litany gives her such titles as: *Health of the Sick, Refuge of Sinners, Comforter of the Afflicted.*² Little children, when they are hurting, want their mothers. And the hurting human race can turn to Mary. She is our mother. Mary is God’s instrument, God’s reminder of His healing power.

¹ Sister Agnes Mary, MICM, “The Miracle of Lourdes,” *From the Housetops*, Volume XLVII, Number 2, Serial number 92, p.1.

² The Litany of Loretto

Mary wants to lead us to her Son. Mary's purpose at Lourdes or anywhere else is to take us to Jesus. Mary, like the Church, is the way to Christ. When the Second Vatican Council taught about Mary, the Council did so in the document on the Church. The Council taught that "*Mary is a sign of sure hope and of solace for God's People in Pilgrimage.*"³ On May 13, 1992, the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima, Pope John Paul II declared that today's feast of Lourdes would also become the World Day of the Sick. He quoted that title for Our Lady, "Health of the Sick." He called her the "Mother of the Living."⁴ The Holy Father knew that Our Lady, the model disciple, leads us to God Who is Love. And she does. If you go to Lourdes at pilgrimage time, you experience vast Eucharistic Processions. Crowds over 50,000 people wind in procession with the Blessed Sacrament through the grotto grounds. It's like the whole population of the RCA Dome at a sold-out Colts game turning

³ *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter VIII, Section V

⁴ *Message of the Holy Father Pope John Paul II for the First Annual World Day of the Sick*, #6.

out to adore the Eucharistic Christ. At Lourdes, in a visible, concrete way, Our Lady leads people to her Divine Son. Mary knows that first we should come to know Jesus truly present in the Eucharist. That makes it all the easier to recognize Him elsewhere: in the hungry, the thirsty, in strangers, in the sick, in the imprisoned. Mary takes us to her Son.

Yet, seeing Christ in others is only a beginning. Once we encounter Christ in the less fortunate, we have to act. We have to “do something” for the suffering Christ. In proclaiming today World Day of the Sick, Pope John Paul II said that illness is not necessarily just a negative event. He called sickness “*an opportunity to release love, in order to give birth to works of love toward (our) neighbor.*”⁵ Actions speak louder than words. Timothy Dolan is the Archbishop of Milwaukee. Archbishop Dolan recently recounted the story of his friend, Patty. Patty was diagnosed with M.S. She told the archbishop her local parish checks in on her. They call to ask her how she’s doing;

⁵ *Ibid.* #3

she's on their prayer list. But one day, Patty confessed to Archbishop Dolan that now she goes to the Baptist Church. He was shocked! "Why?" "Well," Patty said, "my neighbors are Baptist. They take me to the store; they pick up my medicine at the pharmacy, cut my grass, shovel my snow; they take me to the doctor. Then they started taking me to their church. The actions of these good people mean more to me than just the words I get from my parish."⁶ Sad! That's no reason to abandon your Catholic Faith. But we can see where the poor woman is coming from. World Day of the Sick is more than talk. Christ in the suffering calls us to action, not just kind words.

One hundred fifty years ago today, Our Lady appeared to a simple French peasant girl, Saint Bernadette. And for one hundred fifty years people have come to her Shrine at Lourdes to experience the healing presence of God. Some episodes are quite dramatic; most of them are not. But all of them are Mary

⁶ Most Rev. Timothy M. Dolan, *Advent Reflections: Come, Lord Jesus!* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 2007), p. 44.

leading people to Jesus. Sixty-eight years ago, a German Jewish refugee found comfort there. And to thank God, he kept his promise to “sing a song” of the saint. He wrote *The Song of Bernadette*. That book, the movie that followed, told millions the story. If you ever get the chance, go to Lourdes. But even those who never go can find what goes on there in serving others: compassion, forgiveness, healing, mercy, understanding. Today is the World Day of the Sick. Recall those words of John Paul II: “Illness need not be just a negative event. Sickness can be a “visit by God”—an opportunity—to “release love, in order...to transform the whole of human civilization into a civilization of love.”⁷ Mary did it at Lourdes. And she used a Jewish author, then the Hollywood entertainment industry to help her. Those are two miracles in themselves! Mary is the model disciple. She will lead us to her Son. Wherever she goes, that’s what it’s all about. Follow her.

⁷ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Salvifici Doloris*, n.30